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Employing Engagement to Enhance Literacy Learning

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Sacred Heart University

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ISABELLE FARRINGTON COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

April 24, 2018

This is to certify that the action research study by

Kerry Zrenda

KerryZrenda@gmail.com

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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CT Literacy Specialist Program have been made.

College of Education

Department of Leadership and Literacy

EDR 692 - Applied Reading and Language Arts Research

Employing Engagement to Enhance Literacy Learning

Advisor: Dr. Karen C. Waters

Abstract

Numerous studies have identified a symbiotic relationship between student engagement and academic achievement. However, over the last three years, nearly half of Connecticut's students have failed to meet the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts. Social constructivism and metacognitive theories frame this study, which aimed to examine instructional techniques that positively impacted student engagement. Specifically, we used engagement inventories to record student behaviors before, during, and after a six-week instructional period, throughout which we implemented several different engagement techniques. We coded student behaviors in order to analyze the effects that heightened student choice, structured peer discourse tools, and collaborative tasks had on literacy activities, including independent reading, group activities, and written responses to text. In a sample of 20 fourth grade students, we found that allowing students more choice in their literacy work, implementing direct instruction in conversational sentence stems, and including regular opportunities for collaboration around text significantly improved student engagement. Using both quantitative and qualitative analysis, we also found that the combination of direct instruction in discourse strategies and frequent, scaffolded opportunities for peer collaboration produced the greatest impact on engagement. These results are discussed in relation to prior findings as well as possibilities for future engagement research.

Keywords: engagement, literacy achievement, student discourse, choice, collaboration

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Section 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

For years, experts in the field have argued that children of all ages must read continually and deeply from a wide variety of complex texts in order to build the skills required to meet the expectations now outlined for them in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Students must be fully engaged in literary tasks if they are to make systematic gains in reading achievement (Brozo, Shiel, & Topping, 2008; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Kim et al., 2016; Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2007), because student engagement has been directly linked to the ability to construct meaning while reading (Adams, 1998; Guthrie & Wigfield, 1999; Morrison & Wlodarczyk, 2009; Parsons, Malloy, Pasons, & Burrowbridge, 2015; Wigfield, et al., 2008). Further, a lack of motivation and engagement actually acts as a “barrier” to literary success (Adams, 1988; Kamil et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2016; Solis, Miciak, Vaughn, & Fletcher, 2014). Despite its eminent importance, reading engagement does not come to all students naturally, and teachers must develop a deeper understanding of engagement, as well as utilize specific instructional strategies, to help students identify and explore their literary passions (Guthrie, 2004; Jang, Conradi, McKenna, & Jones, 2015; Parsons et al., 2015).

Although the definition appears to be simple and straightforward, in truth, the term *engagement* is quite complex. In its simplest sense, engagement refers to a student’s motivation to read frequently, as well as his or her ability to read for sustained amounts of time (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Serravallo, 2015; Tracey & Morrow, 2017). However, engagement is a multifaceted construct, which incorporates emotional, behavioral, and cognitive processes concurrently during the act of reading (Fredricks, Blumenfield, & Paris, 2004; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Parsons et al., 2015; Shernoff, 2013; Unrau & Quirk, 2014). Emotional engagement, also known as affective engagement, includes a student’s interest, enjoyment, and enthusiasm in specific reading materials. Behavioral engagement, on the other hand, relates to the amount of

effort and participation a student exerts, while cognitive engagement encompasses “strategic behavior, persistence, and metacognition” (Shernoff, 2013, as cited in Parsons, et al., 2015, p. 224; Wigfield et al., 2008).

Fortunately, even with its complex nature, *engagement* is “malleable construct” (Shernoff, 2013, as cited in Parsons, et al., 2015, p. 224; Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004), which implies that students’ engagement in and motivation around reading varies throughout the day and can be influenced by educators. In fact, many studies have uncovered instructional techniques that correlate with higher levels of engagement (Gambrell, 2011; Guthrie, 2011, as cited in Tracey & Morrow, 2017; Jang et al., 2015; Parsons et al., 2015; Serravallo, 2015; Springer, Harris, & Dole, 2017). Among a variety of classroom strategies, providing opportunities for collaboration around text is one of the most effective means by which teachers can help students become more engaged (Hudson, 2016; Ivey, 2014; Gambrell, 2011; Guthrie, 2011, as cited in Tracey & Morrow, 2017; Jang et al., 2015). Consequently, student-led discussions within readers workshop not only enhance classroom discourse—a key component of the CCSS speaking and listening expectations—but also drastically increases the level of student engagement and achievement in the classroom (Hudson, 2016; Ivey, 2014; Mahiri & Maniates, 2013; Reeve & Tseng 2011, as cited in Kim et al., 2016).

Background

Seven years after the implementation of the Common Core State Standards in 2010, many educators are still grappling with how to adjust their instruction to ensure that their students are equipped with the skills considered essential in becoming “college and career ready” in today’s global economy (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 3). Additionally, with the introduction of many new Common Core-aligned assessments across the country over the last few years, the current national climate around education is focused primarily on testing (Springer et al., 2017). As a result, teachers are concentrating their efforts on delivering fast-

paced instruction, increasing levels of rigor, and preparing students for state tests with urgency (Springer et al., 2017).

The Connecticut State Department of Education recently released its report of student performance on the Smarter Balanced Assessments (SBA), Connecticut's choice of CCSS-aligned state examinations. In the 2016-2017 school year, only 52.4% of students across the state of Connecticut met or exceeded the standards in English Language Arts. During the previous two school years, the percentage of students in Connecticut who met or exceeded the English Language Arts standards fell around that same range, at 55.6% and 55.3% (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2017). These results convey that over the last three years, roughly 45-48% of Connecticut's students have fallen short of the expected standards. In other words, while our nation's educators are striving to prepare their students for success, nearly half of those students are not meeting national expectations.

Rationale

The CCSS College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading include expectations for determining key ideas of a text, making inferences using supportive text evidence, analyzing characters and events, interpreting a text's craft and structure, and integrating knowledge of multiple texts (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). Additionally, the Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening explain that students should be able to "participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively" (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 48). In order to develop the skills necessary to infer, analyze, interpret, and discuss the content being read, the Common Core Standards Initiative believes that students must utilize a "broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts" (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 10). In fact, access to this variety of complex texts is so important that the Common Core Standards Initiative listed "Range of Reading and Level of Complexity" as the heading for

the tenth anchor standard (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 10). Yet, though the Common Core Standards Initiative has outlined a clear progression of cumulative literacy expectations for all grades from kindergarten to grade twelve, the juxtaposition of these standards with the previously-mentioned SBA scores implies that there must be a key factor missing.

A growing body of researchers claims that if students are not motivated and engaged in reading, they will not achieve their full literacy potential (Gambrell, 2011; Serravallo 2015; Warner, 2014; Irvin et al., 2007; Parsons et al., 2015). How and why would students read a “broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging” texts if they are not interested? Consequently, research now shows the presence of a symbiotic relationship between engagement and reading achievement, meaning they must exist simultaneously (Guthrie, 2004; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, as cited in Springer et al., 2017). As students become more engaged in reading, they develop an increased level of competence, which supports their literacy achievement (Irvin et al., 2007; Springer et al., 2017). Moreover, as students’ reading abilities increase, they hold a greater desire to continue reading, along with a greater motivation to engage in future texts (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997, as cited in Springer et al., 2017; Irvin et al., 2007; Jang et al., 2015). Thus, engagement is a crucial component of learning because it is the “vehicle through which classroom instruction influences student outcomes” and the catalyst that sparks a cycle of “sustained interaction and practice,” which leads to success (Irvin et al., 2007, p. 29 & 31).

In order to create engagement in literacy, a teacher must understand the many facets of engagement and the research-based strategies that accompany them. Conversely, many teachers have basic ideas of ways to increase student engagement, but struggle to implement those ideas efficiently, consistently, and in tandem with rigorous instruction. This research project will examine the complex construct of *engagement* and provide research-based strategies for generating more of it in children’s classrooms. In this way, teachers can effectively commence a cycle of literary success in each of their students (Irvin et al., 2007), so that many

more of Connecticut's students are prepared and willing to build the skills they need to meet our nation's literacy expectations.

Problem Statement

As Connecticut's educators work to create students that are "college and career ready" (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 3), they are faced with CCSS-aligned assessment results that convey a bleak reality: only about half of their students are actually demonstrating the skills necessary to fit that description (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2017). These results have led teachers to feel increased pressure to carry out "test-prep" in their classrooms, so much so that many have begun to deprioritize engagement, motivation, and interest (Springer et al., 2017). While educators have "two equally important reading goals: to teach our students to read and to teach our students to *want* to read" (Gambrell, 2015, as cited in Springer et al., 2017, p. 43), it is the latter that is too often ignored in efforts to promote rigor and boost achievement. Engagement allows readers to access the metacognitive strategies needed to build understanding of texts (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Yet, as it becomes a more commonly neglected component of teaching and learning, educators present to their students the task of reading and comprehending a wide range of complex texts with "no point of entry" (Irvin et al., 2007, p. 31).

Since engagement is arguably the leading predictor of student achievement in literacy (Brozo et al., 2008; Parsons et al., 2015; Morrison & Wlodarczyk, 2009), teachers in public, private, urban, and suburban schools alike must ponder the question: How can I engage my students in reading so that they can begin to develop the skills they need to meet today's standards? Sustained student engagement is contingent upon educators who are knowledgeable about the particular qualities of literacy tasks that have demonstrated a positive correlation with engagement (Gambrell, 2011; Parsons et al., 2015). These qualities include, but are not limited to: authenticity, collaboration, choice, and an appropriate level of challenge

(Gambrell, 2011; Parsons et al., 2015). Moreover, educators must not just be knowledgeable of these qualities, but also adept at incorporating them into their instruction.

Furthermore, research shows that “dialogue fosters active engagement with meaningful elements in a text” (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009, as cited in Lightner & Wilkinson, 2016, p. 436). Not only will high-quality discussions push readers to more deeply explore a text, but simultaneously support the skills addressed in the CCSS Anchor Standards for Reading, as well as for Speaking and Listening. Therefore, student-led conversations around text may be just the answer teachers are looking for, as they allow teachers to increase engagement, improve comprehension, and develop stronger oral language skills all at once (Hudson, 2016; Lightner & Wilkinson, 2016). In order to know this with certainty, this study aims to address specific research questions.

Research Questions

1. How can teachers facilitate student collaboration?
2. To what extent does student collaboration affect student motivation and engagement?
3. What are effective instructional strategies to increase student-to-student discourse around text?
4. Which research-based methods can teachers use to monitor student engagement in reading?

Theoretical Perspectives

Dr. John Guthrie, leading scholar and researcher in the area of reading engagement and motivation, in collaboration with the National Reading Research Center (NRRC), developed the *engagement perspective* (1992). This theory posits that engaged readers are intrinsically motivated to read, use metacognitive strategies while reading, and frequently talk with others about what they are reading and learning (Baumann & Duffy, 1997; Tracey & Morrow, 2017).

Guthrie's ideology incorporates key elements of the *metacognitive theory* (Flavell, 1979) and *social constructivist theory* (Vygotsky, 1978). Flavell (1979) believed that children use a variety of metacognitive strategies while learning, especially while reading, to monitor and increase their comprehension (Heller, 2006; Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Meanwhile, Vygotsky (1978) supported the notion that "children learn as a result of their social interactions with others," (Tracey & Morrow, 2017, p.166) and that the relationship that exists between dialogue and unspoken thought promotes cognitive achievement (Lightner & Wilkinson, 2016; McLeod, 2014). Agreeing that both metacognition and social interactions are vitally important to one's learning, Guthrie and the NRRC (1992) founded the notion that together they comprise an even larger, more important influence on literacy learning: student engagement.

Section 2: Literature Review

Historical Perspectives: From Insipid to Intriguing

Debates around the “best” pedagogical practices in literacy instruction and *engagement* have a longstanding history in the United States. To the surprise of many, these discussions even precede the first American presidency! In fact, they date back to the late 1700s, when Noah Webster, American lexicographer and educator, published his *American Spelling Book* (1783) and the *Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* (1806) (Blinderman, 1976; Hruby et al., 2016).

Before Webster, children’s reading lessons and materials centered around their religious development (Guthrie, 2004). However, Webster believed that children should read “classic” American tales that depicted patriotic heroes and were written using the distinct characteristics of American English, as opposed to British English (Blinderman, 1976). He dedicated his life to “free[ing] America from her sense of intellectual inferiority... [and] promot[ing] English courses in the curriculum,” (Blinderman, 1976, p. 32). Webster is also thought to have published the first American school reader (Huey, 1908). His creation of various dictionaries, spellers, and textbooks, including the widely used *Grammatical Institutes*, promoted a traditional method of reading and learning, which emphasized tedious, rote memorization (Blinderman, 1976). Needless to say, this was far from exciting for young students.

Webster’s works, along with other early reading materials, generally took “little account of method in teaching beginners to read,” (Huey, 1908, p. 65). In the early 19th century, primers generally contained an illustrated alphabet and still held tight to religious content, but were considered “uninteresting” to children (Huey, 1908). In fact, Horace Mann, the secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education from 1837-1848, observed that children often appeared bored and “death-like” during isolated phonics instruction that simply required memorization (Adams, 1998). He argued for an emphasis on “meaningful reading” (Hruby et al., 2016).

It wasn't until the mid-1800s that a new series of reading materials created by Lyman Cobb was designed with the interests of students in mind (Huey, 1908). Following Cobb's publications, McGuffey's book series also captured the attention of millions of boys and girls, as it became the most widely-distributed set of reading materials produced in America to date (Huey, 1908). The works of Cobb and McGuffey mark some of the earliest signs of awareness that engaging children in available reading materials was crucial if they were to actually read. These texts sparked questions around the nation as psychologists, pedagogists, and educators began to show concern for how to instill in students a *desire* to read and learn (Adams, 1998). At this time, they began to realize that students must have a "personal hunger for what is read," (Huey, 1908, p. 121-122).

Engagement: A Multifaceted Construct

The immense amount of research around the concept of educational *engagement* denotes the complex intricacies that the term *engagement* actually entails. In order to fully understand it, one must think back to the work of American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformist John Dewey. Dewey (1913) argued that a child's capacity to be engaged by and learn from his or her environment, whether physical or social, is an innate ability. Moreover, he believed that children develop various learning behaviors in response to their environment (Dewey, 1913). Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) pulled on Dewey's ideologies when he posited that children learn through their social environment and interactions, and that their effort in learning is directly related to their interests. Building upon one another, Dewey's and Vygotsky's work revealed the value of "teaching children in developmentally appropriate ways and through engaging activities and environments" (Hruby et al., 2016, p. 605).

By the end of the 20th century, *engagement* was a popular topic in the literacy realm. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement founded

the National Reading Research Center (NRRC) in 1992 (Baumann & Duffy, 1997). After conducting a national poll of teachers, which asked respondents to identify and rank problems warranting future research, Alvermann & Guthrie (1993)—co-directors of the NRRC—found that teachers desperately sought ways to motivate students and create an interest in reading. NRRC researchers thereby deemed this a priority in their five-year endeavor to determine best practices for reading instruction for students of all ages. They conducted their research using an *engagement perspective*, noting that “the goal of reading instruction [is] developing motivated and strategic readers” (Alvermann & Guthrie, 1993; Baumann & Duffy, 1997, p. 5).

As the “conceptual cornerstone” of the NRRC, the *engagement perspective* describes *engagement* not as one characteristic of reading, such as sustained time on task. Rather, this perspective outlines four separate key elements that work together to create the larger concept of *engagement* (Baumann & Duffy, 1997, p. 9; Guthrie, 2004). Those elements are motivation, strategy, knowledge, and social interaction (Alvermann & Guthrie, 1993; Baker, Dreher, & Guthrie, 2000; Baumann & Duffy, 1997; Guthrie, 2004).

While Guthrie and the NRRC described four main components of *engagement*, other researchers explain the concept differently. Another common viewpoint suggests that *engagement* consists of three interrelated dimensions: emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement (Fisher, Frey, & Quaglia, 2018; Fredricks et al., 2004; Parsons et al., 2015; Shernoff, 2013; Unrau & Quirk, 2014). Emotional engagement refers to how students feel about their relationship with all aspects of school: their teachers, peers, and academic content (Fisher et al., 2018). This type of engagement directly impacts one’s affect when learning, and corresponds to a student’s level of interest and enjoyment in a task (Fisher et al., 2018; Parsons et al., 2015). Behavioral engagement, on the other hand, reflects physical actions rather than feelings, making it the area of engagement most easily observed. It includes participation in tasks or discussions, obligation by school rules, completion of classroom assignments, and body posture while learning (Fisher et al., 2018; Hruby et al., 2016).

Cognitive engagement is arguably the most important of all three dimensions. It denotes the “psychological effort that students put into learning and mastering content” (Fisher et al., 2018, p. 135). In other words, when students “desire challenge, self-regulate their learning, and enact metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating their thinking and learning experience,” they are cognitively engaged in their academic tasks (Fisher et al., 2018, p. 135). This level of *engagement* is generally only accessible when the other two dimensions—emotional (interest) and behavioral (physical)—have been achieved.

In noting all of these dimensions, Fisher et al. (2018) posited that the term *engagement* is often “overused and misunderstood” (p. 133). However, no matter which way one looks at it, *engagement* is multi-dimensional, complex, and critical for student learning (Fisher et al., 2018; Fredricks et al., 2004; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Parsons et al., 2015; Shernoff, 2013; Unrau & Quirk, 2014). As shown in Appendix A, it can be summarized by an overlapping visual model called “The Balanced Model for Optimal Learning” (Fisher et al., 2018, p. 137).

This balanced model emphasizes the important roles that the teacher, student, and classroom content have in contributing to *engagement*, and suggests that *true engagement* cannot exist without each of these critical components. Moreover, each of these three areas is complex within itself, including other key variables, such as relationships, clarity, challenge, self-worth, purpose, and voice (Fisher et al., 2018). It is no wonder that our nation’s educators need support and strategies with which to craft this delicate balance of factors. Therefore, the remainder of this literature review aims to highlight studies that focused specifically on one or more of the contributors of *engagement* in attempt to reduce the “lack of refined, empirical understanding about classroom practices that promote engagement,” (Guthrie, 2004, p. 1).

Role of the Educator: Relationships, Expectations, & Feedback

Teachers have a powerful role in student achievement. Adams (1998) posited that student *engagement* was largely dependent on the “atmosphere—the momentum, support, and

expectations—created by the classroom teacher” (p. 35). Analogously, in their meta-analysis of over 70,000 individual studies that included over 300 million students, Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2016) deeply analyzed “what works” in literacy instruction. Notably, factors that connected to the teacher were highly impactful in student learning. For example, Fisher et al. (2016) found that teacher credibility—including qualities of trust, competence, and positive energy—has an effect size of 0.90 on student achievement. Likewise, teacher clarity has an effect size of 0.75, and teacher-student relationships, with an effect size of 0.72, follow close behind.

Vollet, Kindermann, and Skinner (2017) also analyzed the impact of teacher involvement on student *engagement*. Predicting that *engagement* depends upon high-quality student-teacher relationships, specifically those characterized by involvement, support, and affection, Vollett and colleagues (2017) examined the social-emotional quality of 340 sixth graders’ relationships with teachers. They evaluated the relationship by assessing teacher involvement—defined as “the extent to which students’ showed affection, the extent of availability, and the extent of dependability” (Vollett et al., 2017, p. 641)—using an 11-item Likert-type scale. Additionally, they measured teachers’ perceptions of students’ *engagement* using a 14-item Likert-type scale. Vollett et al. (2017) discovered that students of highly involved teachers, or those who had strong student-teacher relationships, were more engaged in their learning throughout the school year. Moreover, they found that these students also affiliated themselves with more engaged peers (Vollett et al., 2017).

Concurrently, Pantaleo (2016) studied a different aspect of the educator: their expectations for, rather than relationships with, their students. She analyzed teachers’ expectations for narrative reading and writing tasks that were presented to 21 second and third grade students in British Columbia, Canada. She hypothesized that a positive correlation exists between teacher expectations and student *engagement*. Consistent with prior research findings from Rubie-Davies, Hattie, and Hamilton (2006), and Fisher et al. (2016), Pantaleo (2016) found that when content expectations were developmentally appropriate, challenging, and supported

with a gradual release of responsibility, students were engaged and perseverant in their work. She consequently emphasized that “all schools need competent, caring, and high-expectation teachers... who expect the best of and for their students” (Pantaleo, 2016, p. 90-91).

Additional studies show that teachers can improve student *engagement*, and therefore student achievement, by providing specific, rather than general, feedback to learners (Fisher et al., 2016). For example, Strati, Schmidt, and Maier (2016) explored the relationship between students’ perceptions of teacher support through feedback and their *engagement* in academic tasks. They analyzed data collected from student surveys, classroom video footage, and student self-reports from 223 high school pupils. Strati and colleagues (2016) found that when teachers scaffolded students’ efforts through structured questions and specific, developmental feedback, their *engagement* increased.

Similarly, Fisher et al. (2016) discovered that feedback characterized as timely, specific, understandable, and actionable, has an effect size of 0.75 on student learning. High quality feedback contributes to students’ sense of identity, agency, and ability to persist until reaching success (Fisher et al., 2016). In other words, feedback can actually encourage effort and *engagement* because students sense the teacher is paying close attention to their individual work (Dweck, 2006; Fisher et al., 2016).

Role of Content: Task Design

Many studies emphasize the importance of task design when seeking to increase student literacy *engagement* (Friend, 2017; Guthrie, 2004; Parsons et al., 2015; Strati et al., 2016). Researchers urge that academic tasks include elements of choice, rigor, discussion, and pertinence to everyday life (Friend, 2017; Guthrie et al., 1996; Hruby et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2015; Strati et al., 2016). Additionally, Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) warned that “the importance of choice and volume cannot be overstated here: students who have more choices in what they read will read more” (Fisher et al., 2018, p. 56).

Arguably the most indepth research in the area of task design and *engagement* came from the many studies carried out by Guthrie and his colleagues at the NRRC. Guthrie et al. (1996), strove to uncover the relationship between *engagement* and teachers' presentation of specific reading strategies while focusing on substantive concepts, as opposed to the reading skills themselves. Guthrie et al. (1996) studied 140 third and fifth grade students from two elementary schools along the mid-Atlantic coast. Specifically, these students were taught by teachers whom the NRRC trained in Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI).

The CORI framework consisted of four instructional phases. First, CORI teachers provided students with opportunities to observe concrete objects and events in various academic content areas, and then brainstorm questions about various concepts. This made the learning personal for students (Guthrie et al., 1996). Teachers then explicitly taught students how to search for the answers to their questions by locating tradebooks (not basal readers) in both the school and classroom libraries, and utilizing the table of contents, index, headings, etc. (Guthrie et al., 1996). Next, teachers facilitated the synthesis and integration of texts with students' prior knowledge by teaching strategies for summarizing, determining key details, and making comparisons (Guthrie et al., 1996). Lastly, once students were "experts" on their chosen concept, teachers provided instruction around options for presenting one's learning through oral, written, and visual formats tailored with their audience in mind (Guthrie et al., 1996).

Guthrie and colleagues (1996) concluded that the literacy *engagement* of the elementary school students who experienced CORI increased significantly throughout the school year. They attributed this increase to the "engaging qualities" of the CORI classroom, which included: a primary focus on substantive concepts rather than reading skills, student initiation of learning through generating questions, ongoing opportunities for student autonomy and choice, and the collaborative, social construction of meaning (Guthrie et al., 1996).

Guthrie (2004) delved further into his research to analyze the specific texts chosen for instruction. He found that students recognize teachers as credible educators when they use

authentic, interesting texts rather than basal readers or texts that mirror high stakes tests (Guthrie, 2004). Using authentic texts not only conveys a teacher's own enthusiasm and love of reading, but also promotes *engagement*, especially when teachers share those texts aloud. While there are many cognitive benefits of reading aloud, there are also motivational and *engagement* advantages (Jang et al., 2015; Morrison & Wlodarczyk, 2009). When teachers strategically choose books they enjoy, many times students will likewise develop an interest in the chosen text too, as well as in similar texts. This starts what Jang et al. (2009) called a "motivational domino effect" (p. 242). To account for this, teachers should make sure they have a variety of similar books or series sequels available for students to choose from.

In another study of *engagement* in literacy tasks, Parsons and colleagues (2015) documented the tasks assigned to sixth grade students of mixed performance levels over the course of one year. They noted behavioral engagement through observations, measured affective and cognitive engagement through interviews, and gathered students' perceptions of academic tasks using rating scales. After analyzing the anecdotal notes and rating scales, Parsons et al. (2015) concluded that the most engaging tasks included authenticity and choice, as well as student collaboration. Teachers' strategic design of student groupings facilitated the most successful collaboration (Parsons et al., 2015). Furthermore, providing differentiated support to those groups also positively influenced *engagement* (Parsons et al., 2015).

Conversely, Parsons and colleagues (2015) also discovered commonalities among the least engaging tasks. Specifically, tasks that produced low *engagement* included those that students felt were too difficult or that were based on worksheets. This supports Adams' (1998) earlier suggestion that "seatwork" was associated with lower levels of *engagement* and achievement. In such cases, the disparity between perceived task complexity and students' abilities actually interfered with *engagement* and instead created feelings of confusion, frustration, and boredom.

Role of Student: Collaboration & Discussion

The last group of studies considered in this literature review examined the impact that student collaboration has on *engagement*. Alvermann and Guthrie (1993) initially posited that “introduc[ing] innovative social participation structures,” such as student-led conversations, can lead to higher order thinking and sustained motivation for reading” (p. 8). McLeod (2014) later argued that “cognitive development stems from social interactions... as children and their partner’s co-construct knowledge” (p. 1). In the years between Alvermann and Guthrie’s (1993) and McLeod’s (2014) studies, several others hypothesized, and consequently found, that students who have the opportunity to process their learning through peer discussion and social interaction will be more engaged in reading and will thereby benefit from improved learning (Alvermann & Guthrie, 1993; Friend, 2017; Guthrie, 2004; Guthrie et al., 1996; Hruby et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2016).

Similarly to the study of CORI (Guthrie et al., 1996), Kim and colleagues (2016) established the Strategic Adolescent Reading Intervention (STARI) to use in assessing the influence that peer talk can have on *engagement*, as well as how teachers’ perceptions of their students’ *engagement* can contribute to pupils’ reading achievement. They designed STARI to promote social interactions through four main modes of student discourse: partner assisted fluency practice, reciprocal teaching of comprehension strategies, partner reading, and peer debate in response to various texts (Kim et al., 2016). Their goal was to create a literacy intervention program that differed considerably from typical intervention practices (Kim et al., 2016).

With the hypothesis that students’ contributions to organized discussions in STARI would increase *engagement*, and consequently achievement, Kim and colleagues (2016) trained 12 teachers across eight participating middle schools to implement STARI lessons. Compared with the control group students, STARI students showed greater gains in reading comprehension, word recognition, and morphological awareness (Kim et al., 2016). Specifically,

Kim et al. (2016) found that “frequent opportunities to express personal stances on the texts read, particularly in discussion and debate,” had an overwhelmingly positive impact on students’ *engagement*. They claimed that STARI students were not only able to remain on task during their intervention sessions, but were further motivated by opportunities to reason with challenging texts.

Comparably, Friend (2017) studied 16 struggling high school students. She also found that when classroom talk shifted from teacher-led to more balanced, student-run conversations—which were only guided by, rather than led by, the teacher—students took on more purposeful, engaged roles in their learning (Friend, 2017). Jang et al. (2015) concluded that students who participated in small group book discussions improved their comprehension and self-efficacy in reading, which symbiotically increased their *engagement*. Alternately, when “no social interchange is allowed, students’ cognitive efforts to read and understand evaporate quickly” (Guthrie, 2004, p. 10).

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the existing research conclusions, the Education Trust (2015) found that a mere 2% of the assignments analyzed over a two-week period offered meaningful choice or were relevant to students’ lives (Fisher et al., 2018). While there exists a plethora of scholarly journals and peer-reviewed research studies focusing on the correlation between engagement-prone activities and students’ literacy achievement, deeper investigation needs to be conducted around how teachers should actually implement cognitive engagement strategies. For instance, questions like *How many strategies should be taught? In what sequence should they be taught?* and *Should these strategies be taught together or in isolation?* remain unanswered (Guthrie, 2004).

Guthrie (2004) noted, “it’s like we have a potentially valuable set of ingredients but little evidence on how to combine them.” High-engagement instructional models like CORI and

STARI provide educators with a foundation of information to use to create more engaged, higher achieving readers. However, few sources describe *how* one might actually begin to transform his or her classroom into a more engaging one. Consequently, the challenge will be to design and enact a platform that will most assuredly yield the highest level of *engagement*, while imbuing a sense of ownership and an increase in student literacy achievement.

Section 3: Methodology

For decades, researchers have repeatedly attested to the importance of student engagement in literacy learning (Adams, 1998; Alvermann & Guthrie, 1993; Baumann & Duffy, 1997; Fisher et al., 2018; Fredricks et al., 2004; Friend, 2017; Guthrie, 1996; Guthrie, 2004; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Kim et al., 2016; Pantaleo, 2016; Parsons et al., 2015; Rubie-Davies et al., 2006; Shernoff, 2013; Strati et al., 2016; Unrau & Quirk, 2014; Vollett et al., 2017). In particular, various studies emphasized the significance of teacher involvement in student work, rigorous and authentic academic tasks, student choice, and peer discussion and collaboration. This action research project specifically investigated the role of discourse and collaboration in promoting literacy engagement in an elementary school setting. The goal was two-fold: to determine the effectiveness of student discourse as an engagement strategy, and to confirm that increasing student engagement in reading improves student literacy achievement. In doing so, this project also aimed to provide more clarity to educators regarding how to effectively implement this method of increasing engagement in their own classrooms.

Participants & Setting

The participants in the study attended a public, elementary school district located in a small, affluent town in the Northeast region of the United States. The school district contained approximately 1,800 elementary school students divided among three elementary schools. The population of students within the district was 87% White, 5.6% Asian, 3.9% Hispanic or Latino, and 1.3% Black or African American (CSDE, 2017). 1.9% of the students identified with two or more races, and 1.1% were considered English Learners (CSDE, 2017).

From a national perspective, the school district was considered to be high-achieving, with a performance index of 82.2 in English Language Arts for the 2015-16 school year (CSDE, 2017). This surpassed the district's statewide goal of 75 by more than seven points (CSDE, 2017). Similarly, on the 2015-16 Smarter Balanced Assessments (SBA), 83.3% of the students

in the school district met or exceeded the goal in English Language Arts, compared to 55.6% of students across the state (CSDE, 2017).

As the facilitator of this study, I am a certified K-6 educator in my sixth year of teaching, with a Masters Degree and state certification in remedial reading. I used convenience sampling to select a classroom of 20 fourth grade students, 10 boys and 10 girls, to participate in this study. Prior to the start of the school year, school administrators formed the class heterogeneously by both gender and academic ability, and all students were between the ages of nine and 10. The class also included one English Learner.

The study occurred over an eight-week period in the middle of the school year. By that point in the year, students were familiar with their teacher, their classroom routines, and their learning environment. Although the small sample of 20 fourth grade students was not of sufficient size for me to generalize my results, it satisfied the intent of this action research project, which was to determine the effectiveness of student discourse as a means of increasing student engagement and achievement in the sample classroom using research-based strategies. Consequently, if I were successful, I would be better positioned to conduct staff development and professional learning around engagement strategies in the future, and perhaps to replicate the study using a greater sample.

Instrumentation

Throughout the study, I used an engagement inventory to gather data pertaining to students' literacy engagement. The inventory, adapted from Serravallo (2014), allows observers to code student behaviors in a consistent manner at regular intervals (see Appendix B). The codes correspond to categories of observable behaviors, including chatting, engagement, smiling, switching books, looking at the teacher, looking out the window, and zoning out. I used the inventory to measure students' behavioral engagement during different literacy activities in the classroom. I also utilized the inventory as a tool with which to gauge individual students'

patterns of engagement before, during, and after the study in a minimally-invasive way. Though the inventory only measured behavioral, rather than emotional and cognitive engagement, it was beneficial for recording general engagement trends.

At the conclusion of the study, participants also completed a portion of the DRA2, a criterion-referenced assessment for evaluating students' reading engagement, oral reading, and reading comprehension through the use of leveled texts (Pearson Education, 2017). When completed in full, the DRA2 requires students to complete a reading engagement survey, read a portion of text aloud, and craft written comprehension responses. During the oral reading component, teachers complete a running record to note the student's accuracy, phrasing, rate, and fluency. Students read the rest of the text silently and complete written comprehension responses, which include predictions, a summary, literal recollections, and inferences. Teachers then use the DRA2 rubric to analyze students' engagement, oral reading performance, and comprehension responses in order to determine their independent and instructional reading levels (Pearson Education, 2017). For the purposes of the study, participants completed the DRA2 reading engagement survey after instruction in engagement strategies.

Materials

After the collection of baseline data, students learned several Accountable Talk® (AT) techniques to improve discussions around chosen texts and, in turn, increase student engagement. I utilized the *AT Sourcebook* (Michaels, O'Connor, Hall, & Resnick, 2010) and *Questioning the Author* (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997) to familiarize myself with the different types of "talk formats" that can exist in the classroom and to plan instruction. Accordingly, I found that the formats that encouraged student contributions to conversation included teacher-guided whole class discussion, teacher-guided small group discussion, teacher-student conferences, student-led group work, peer conferences, and hybrid talk formats such as the "turn and talk" or "fishbowl" techniques (Beck et al., 1997; Michaels et al., 2010).

I also studied specific “teacher moves” that were proven to promote student discussion (Beck et al., 1997; Michaels et al., 2010). Such techniques consisted of: modeling a thought process or skill, “marking” or emphasizing a particular student’s contribution, challenging students to consider their own opinions, and recapping what had been discussed or learned (Beck et al., 1997; Michaels et al., 2010). Additional teacher moves supported me in learning how to hold students accountable for active listening and participation, because they required students to utilize textual evidence, explain their reasoning, and build upon prior knowledge to enhance classroom conversations (Beck et al., 1997; Michaels et al., 2010). Moreover, the techniques provided by Beck (1997), Michael (2010), and colleagues suggested language for both teachers and students to use to link ideas across a conversation, respectfully press for accuracy, or disagree. I posted this language on an anchor chart for students to refer to throughout the school day (see Appendix C).

Further, I established AT norms within the classroom by emphasizing the importance for students to have opportunities to speak uninterruptedly, which could help participants recognize the value in each other’s contributions (Danielson, 2007; Michaels et al., 2010). Norms included procedures for turn-taking (without raising hands) and wait time. I posted the agreed-upon norms within the classroom so that students could begin to take ownership over classroom discussions, initiate new conversations, and make unsolicited contributions in a risk-free environment (Danielson, 2007). Additional materials included high-quality texts across various genres that were adequately accessible to all students.

Procedures

Before the implementation of any AT norms or strategies that could consequently increase students’ literacy engagement, I used Serravallo’s (2014) engagement inventory to collect pre-assessment data during three different literacy activities in the classroom: independent reading, collaborative group work, and a written response to text. I observed

students' behaviors at five-minute intervals for a total of five times during each activity.

Additionally, I completed the engagement inventory three weeks into the six-week study, and once again at the end of the six weeks. The last of these data sets served as the post-assessment for the study.

Once pre-assessment data had been collected, I began to explicitly instruct students in the use of language stems and conversation starters provided by Beck et al. (1997) and Michaels et al. (2010). Instruction took place two or three times per week using a gradual release model that slowly placed more responsibility on the students to manage conversations on their own, with the teacher simply facilitating. Discussions occurred after I read aloud a picture book or a chapter from the classroom novel. Students also had an opportunity to practice discussion techniques during daily morning meetings, although the content of the conversations was not necessarily literacy-based at that time of day. The language stems were modeled for use in small-group discussions as well, during which I provided specific feedback to students on their conversations, including what they did well and how they could strengthen their responses to one another.

Once students learned the language stems, I provided instruction around conducting "book talks," or "brief, enthusiastic oral descriptions of a book that a student has read... given with the intention of enticing others to read the book" (Atwell, 2007, as cited in Hudson, 2016, p. 221). This was done two or three times per week as well, in place of the AT instruction, with the goal of increasing students' engagement in books chosen for independent reading, in addition to the texts read together as a class. Book talks, which are generally between one and two minutes in length, are not only proven to increase students' interest in a new book, but to build a community of readers who are exposed to a wide array of texts (Hudson, 2016; Miller, 2014; Wozniak, 2011). I began with several models, after which students launched their own book talks to the class.

Section 4: Data Collection & Analysis

Data Collection

Throughout the six-week course of this action research project, I collected data on student engagement during independent reading, collaborative group work, and written responses to text. I used an engagement inventory (Appendix B) to collect data on student engagement three times during each of the three different literacy activities, resulting in a total of nine sets of data. The first set of engagement inventories provided baseline data for each literacy activity, while the last served as a post-assessment of student engagement during each literacy activity. The data collected at the three-week mark was used to gauge changes or trends in student engagement mid-way through the instruction and implementation of new engagement strategies.

Acknowledging the need to remain impartial during the study, I did not intervene when students were tasked with various activities. Thus, my own role as a the researcher was preserved. This is also referred to as “kid-watching” by Serravallo (2014). While observing, I noted the time in five-minute intervals along the top of the engagement inventory, and recorded each student’s engagement (or another behavior) next to his/her name at the allotted time. Serravallo’s (2014) engagement inventory provided a key for coding the behaviors observed during student activities (see Appendix B). Codes pertained to seven behaviors, including C for chatting, SB for switching books, and Z for zoning out. With permission, I modified the key by adding a few more codes for efficiency, which included BR for leaving to use the bathroom, M for moving spots, OTD for off-task discussion, and WA for getting a drink of water.

Data Analysis

After gathering data from the engagement inventories used throughout the study, I analyzed the data in several ways: at specific times throughout each literacy activity, during the literacy activity overall, and by individual student. First, I looked for patterns in engagement

presented by the class at various times throughout each activity. In other words, I calculated the total instances of engaged behaviors exhibited by the students in the class during each specific data collection point. I did this by tallying the occurrences of engagement noted during each of the five-minute intervals. This allowed me to determine the number of students who demonstrated engagement at each data point, or every five minutes, throughout the literacy workshop. Because of inconsistencies in the number of students present on any given day due to illness or students' varied schedules—which consist of intervention, gifted and talented services, and/or musical instrument lessons—I converted numbers into percentages so that they could be compared across the duration of the study.

Next, I calculated the number of instances of student engagement throughout each entire activity, as opposed to at each specific five-minute interval. This was done by adding the occurrences of engagement during all five five-minute intervals in order to determine the mean engagement level for each literacy workshop overall. The results were also represented in percentages for comparison purposes. Further, identifying how many students out of the whole class demonstrated engagement at all five intervals recorded, or for the full duration of the 25-minute workshop, was a useful data point. Calculating the number of students who demonstrated engagement at four OR five of the intervals, meaning 80% or higher engagement during the entire activity, enhanced the data analysis as well.

Finally, I calculated each participants' total number of engaged versus disengaged behaviors that had been recorded during the five-minute increments. This particular analysis provided insight into individual students' behavioral patterns and engagement levels during literacy tasks. Behaviors that were considered to reflect engagement included, but were not limited to, smiling while reading, sustained focus on the text, active participation in collaborative group work, looking back to the text for specific details, and ongoing writing during a written response activity. Disengaged behaviors included, but were not limited to, leaving the

classroom, talking to a peer when not appropriate, looking out the window, switching books, not participating in group work, talking off task during group work, or putting one's head down.

After data analysis, I identified student engagement trends for each of the three literacy activities (independent reading, collaborative group work, and written response to text) from pre- to posttesting.

Presentation of the Findings

Independent Reading

Table 1 shows the results of the three engagement inventories conducted during independent reading at the beginning, middle, and end of the study. At the start of the action research project, the mean percentage of students who demonstrated behaviors representative of engagement overall was 71%. Specifically, during the first pretesting data collection point, 81% of students demonstrated engagement. For the next three collection points during that lesson, engagement decreased slightly and plateaued at 75%. During the last collection point, roughly 25 minutes into independent reading, only 50% of students were noted as being engaged. This indicates that students' stamina began to waver after students had been reading for about 20 minutes. Consequently, 31% of students were fully engaged during the entire independent reading task and 56% of students were engaged during four or more of the data collection points. This suggests that nearly half of the students were off task or disengaged at multiple points during the literacy block.

By the end of the study, the percentage of students' engagement during independent reading within the literacy block had increased from 71% to 77%. While the number of students engaged during the entire independent reading block remained the same, the percentage of students who were engaged during four or more of the data collection points at posttesting increased from 56% to 60%. Additionally, student engagement at the 25-minute mark at posttesting rose to 80%. This is a significant increase from 50% at pretesting, suggesting that

students' independent reading stamina was bolstered by the engagement strategies conducted during the study.

Collaborative Group Work

Table 2 shows the results of the three engagement inventories conducted during collaborative group work at the beginning, middle, and end of the study. Collaborative group work activities included book clubs and peer-editing activities. At the start of the action research project, 72% of the students demonstrated engagement behaviors during a collaborative literacy activity. Further, 30% of the students present demonstrated engagement behaviors throughout the entire 25-minute work session, which evidenced considerable room for growth. Specifically, during the first three pretesting data collection points, 79% or more of the students present demonstrated engagement. However, at the fourth data point, roughly 20 minutes into the group activity, engagement dropped to 64%. At the last collection point, 43% of students were noted as being engaged. At this time, student behaviors were recorded as talking off-topic, arguing, drawing, making silly noises, and rolling on the carpet. In other words, most students were engaged at the start of their collaborative task, but their engagement quickly began to decrease sometime after 15 minutes of group work.

By the middle of the study, students' engagement during collaborative group work had increased to a mean of 78%, and by the end of the study, it had risen to 90%. Therefore, in the six weeks from pre- to posttesting, students' engagement during collaborative literacy activities increased by 18 percentage points. Moreover, 56% of students at posttesting were engaged from the start to the finish of the group activity, and 100% demonstrated behaviors indicative of engagement during four or more of the data collection points. This indicates that, after explicit instruction in discourse techniques and sentence stems, most students were able to maintain engagement throughout the large majority of the group activity, only veering off task at one data collection point. Further, at the fourth and fifth data collection points (roughly 20 and 25 minutes

into the group activity, respectively), engagement remained at or above 75%. Compared with pretesting results, this is a significant increase in prolonged stamina, and suggests that students were better able to conduct lengthy, engaging group activities as a result of the action research project.

Written Response to Text

Table 3 shows the results of the three engagement inventories conducted during a written response to text at the beginning, middle, and end of the study. At pretesting, the percentage of students who demonstrated behaviors representative of engagement during a written response was 81%. Fifty percent of the students demonstrated engagement during the entire writing task. Student engagement during a written response remained fairly consistent at different times throughout the activity, with a range of student engagement of 75% to 85% for each of the five data collection points.

After the first three weeks of the action research project, student engagement during writing prompts remained at 81%. However, in the six weeks from pre- to posttesting, the percentage of students' engagement during a written response to text had increased from 81% to 85%. Further, the amount of students who demonstrated behaviors indicative of engagement during the entire 25-minute writing task increased from 50% to 62%. This means more students were able to maintain engagement in their written responses throughout the entire writing task compared with before the study.

Triangulation: Benchmark Reading Assessments

Triangulation of the engagement results was achieved through analysis of the eight-point engagement survey given as part of the Developmental Reading Assessment 2 (DRA2). On the survey, which considers both wide reading habits and students' self-awareness of their reading

strengths and goals, a score of six or seven is indicative of independence. A score of eight is considered advanced.

Table 4 shows the specific scores on the engagement portion of the DRA2 rubric at the winter benchmark. After experiencing the instructional activities of the action research project, 95% of students (n=20) scored in the independent or advanced range. Specifically, 4/20 scored six points, 11/20 scored seven points, and 4/20 students were considered advanced with a score of eight points. Only 1/20 students, or 5%, remained below the independent range.

Section 5: Discussion, Recommendations, & Conclusions

Since reading engagement and reading achievement are “mutually causal” (Guthrie, 2004, p. 6), the purpose of the study was to explore the effects of various instructional strategies on student engagement as a means of increasing literacy achievement. Four research questions guided the implementation of the study. The questions focused on effective tools for facilitating both student collaboration and student discourse around text, the effect of collaboration on student engagement, and research-based methods for monitoring student engagement in literacy.

Restatement of Research Questions

Collaboration cannot happen without student discourse, and, likewise, student discourse requires collaboration (Alvermann & Guthrie, 1993; McLeod, 2014; Guthrie, 2004; Kim et al., 2016). Therefore, throughout the study, I began to see a connection between my first and third research questions, which asked, “How can teachers facilitate student collaboration?” and “What are effective instructional strategies to increase student-to-student discourse around text?” To facilitate student collaboration, I implemented book clubs and peer editing with clear expectations, strategic groupings, and a gradual release of responsibility. Meanwhile, I introduced AT techniques and a variety of new talk formats, including fishbowls and book talks, with the intention of improving student discussions during those tasks (Beck et al., 1997; Michaels et al., 2010). Consistent with prior research findings, this study affirmed that small group and partner activities designed to promote peer-discourse are, in fact, effective in creating greater levels of student self-efficacy and engagement in literacy (Fisher et al., 2016; Friend, 2017; Jang et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2016; Pantaleo, 2016; Parsons et al., 2015; Rubie-Davies et al., 2006).

For the second research question, “To what extent does student collaboration affect student motivation and engagement,” I looked at group work techniques, which tended to have

a significant impact on student engagement (Alvermann & Guthrie, 1993; Friend, 2017; Guthrie, 2004; Guthrie et al., 1996; Hruby et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2016). Specifically, the number of students who demonstrated engaged behaviors during collaborative activities increased by 18 percentage points from pre- to posttesting (Table 2). Compared with the data collected during independent reading and written responses to text (Tables 1 and 3, respectively), instruction around collaborative group work produced the greatest increase in engagement.

The final research question considered “Which research-based methods can teachers use to monitor student engagement in reading?” While several tools exist for monitoring student engagement, the Serravallo (2014) engagement inventory was an adequate, user-friendly tool for measuring engagement during a variety of literacy activities. Serravallo’s (2014) instrument also provided an effective medium for analyzing the extent to which students’ engagement shifted over the length of the study.

Additional Thoughts

Action research is an inquiry process that involves teachers in professional learning around shared, real-life problems (Risko & Vogt, 2016). While teacher research implies personalized professional development, the process of gathering and analyzing data requires systematic self-reflection on one’s practice. Ultimately, action research fosters analytical thinking around classroom dilemmas, which in turn leads teachers to transform their practices as they learn (Risko & Vogot, 2016).

The original intent of this action research project was to extoll the benefits of book talks, specifically, on student engagement and literacy achievement. However, throughout the action research process, particularly as the connection between engagement and achievement became blindingly clear (Brozo et al., 2008; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Kim et al., 2016; Irvin et al., 2007), I recognized that my narrow focus and initial research questions were part of a larger, more important inquiry. The more I probed into previous studies

on engagement, the more I became interested in a *variety* of instructional techniques, including book clubs, peer editing, AT norms, AT sentence stems, fishbowl discussion structures, and student choice, which were recommended for increasing student engagement during literacy activities,

Many of the strategies, such as book clubs, peer editing, and fishbowl demonstrations, imbricated the constructs of choice, discourse, and task authenticity—three core themes that emerged from the analysis of previous research. For example, book clubs provide students with learning opportunities that cut across the three themes. To form book clubs, students choose their text out of several options, and then they experience ample opportunities to discuss and write about their text with their peers. Throughout this process, students assimilate to the trials and tribulations of real-life book groups and discussion platforms, including how to work together to create a timeline for finishing the book. Upon internalizing the intertwining relationships between the aforementioned strategies and the three themes, I broadened the action research study to comprise a multitude of engagement and discourse strategies. Not only did I seek to examine the effectiveness of these strategies, but I also strove to decipher their impact on several different aspects of literacy workshops: independent reading, collaborative group work, and written responses to text.

Results of the study verified that strategies concerning student choice, discourse, and collaboration had a positive impact on student engagement across independent reading, collaborative group work, and written responses to text (Appendix D). Providing students with AT sentence stems and discussion norms for their group tasks was also extremely empowering, as evidenced by 100% of students maintaining engagement in collaborative posttesting activities. Moreover, during a formal observation, the school's principal observed and provided feedback around high levels of student engagement, "heavy-lifting," and higher-level thinking during a fishbowl activity and book club discussions. This confirmed the visible, positive impact that collaborative discourse had on student learning.

Alvermann & Guthrie (1993) exclaimed: “Too many Americans lack the ability and *desire* to read and write” (p. 1). Yet, there exists a plethora of instructional techniques and strategies that demonstrate positive correlations with motivation and engagement. If educators can implement routines and procedures for increasing student engagement, they might become a catalyst for boosting literacy achievement across the state of Connecticut.

Practical Application of the Findings

Because this study involved only one fourth grade class, results cannot yet be generalized. Future research should encompass a larger participant pool across multiple grade levels in order to confirm the effects of choice, discourse, and collaboration on student engagement in literacy. The strategies highlighted in this paper can easily be adapted for use at different grade levels. Further research should consider students with diverse socio-economic levels as well, or students with achievement scores that are closer to the state norm than those of the participants in this pilot study. While some studies claim that “the correlation between the indicator of engaged reading and reading comprehension achievement [is] higher than any demographic characteristic such as gender, income, or ethnicity,” (Guthrie, 2004, p.5; Tracey & Morrow, 2017), it would be beneficial to gather supplemental data in this area.

In the meantime, I will share these results at the Sacred Heart University Literacy Conference in April, 2018, as well as on the university’s Digital Commons, a repository for literacy specialist candidates’ action research projects. Finally, I will discuss the results with other elementary educators at my school to spread awareness around the benefits of, and strategies useful for, creating greater opportunities for choice, discourse, and collaboration in their own classrooms.

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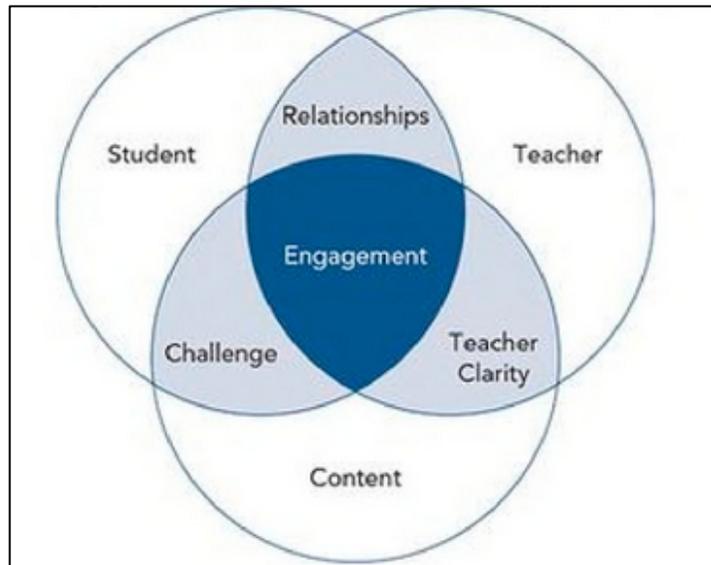
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Appendix A
Balanced Model for Optimal Learning



(Fisher, Frey, & Quaglia, 2018, p. 137)

Appendix C

Language for AT Conversations

What do you think about _____'s idea?

Who can add on to _____?

Tell me more.

What makes you think that?

So what I hear you saying is _____.

I agree/disagree with you because _____.

My idea is somewhat different than _____'s. I think _____.

What do you mean by _____?

I don't think I understand. Can you explain?

I didn't hear _____. Can you repeat that?

Accountable Talk Phrases

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I agree, because... • To add on to what _____ said... <p style="text-align: center; color: green; border: 1px solid green; border-radius: 50%; padding: 5px;">AGREE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't understand • Can you explain what you mean? • Can you please speak up? • Can you repeat that? <p style="text-align: center; color: purple; border: 1px solid purple; border-radius: 50%; padding: 5px;">CONFUSED</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I disagree with _____ because... • I see what you're saying, but... • Could it also be that... <p style="text-align: center; color: red; border: 1px solid red; border-radius: 50%; padding: 5px;">DISAGREE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I notice... • I wonder... • I think... • The text says _____, so I think... <p style="text-align: center; color: orange; border: 1px solid orange; border-radius: 50%; padding: 5px;">INITIAL STATEMENTS</p>

Appendix D
Graph of Pre- & Posttesting Engagement Levels

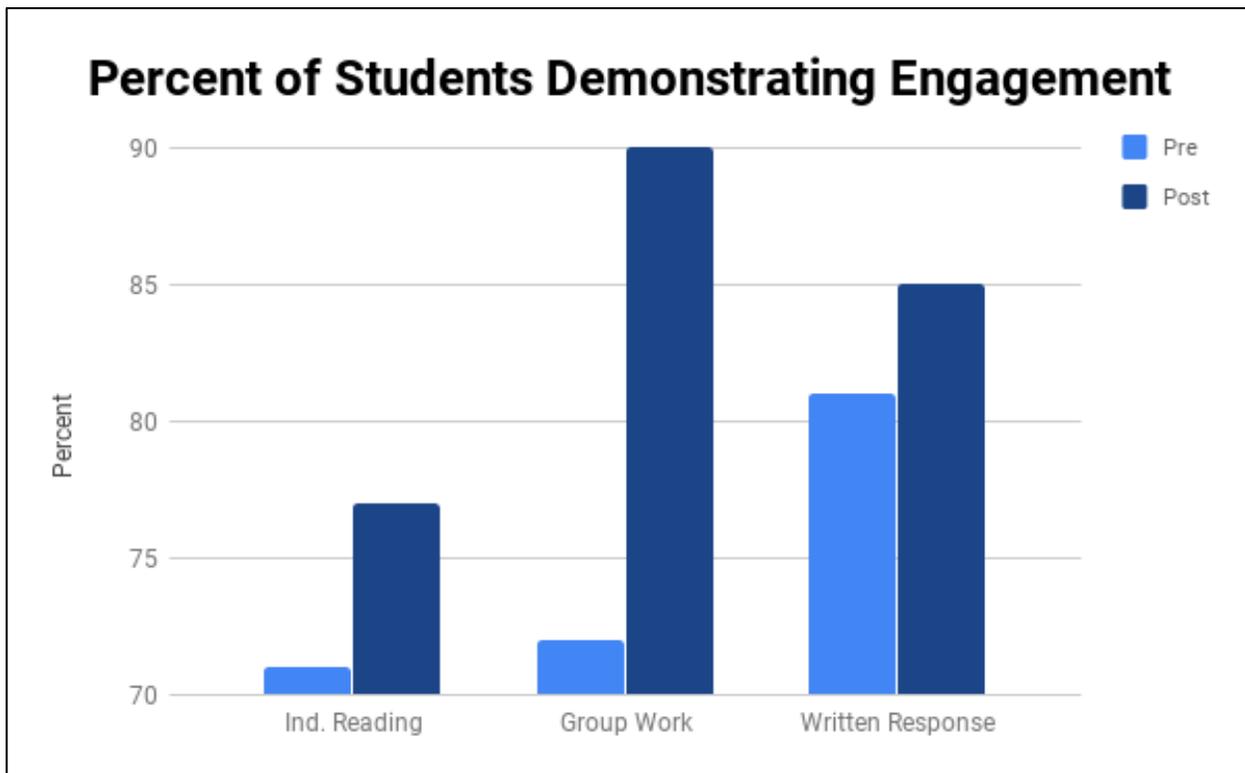


Table 1
Engagement During Independent Reading

Pretesting								
	Collection Point 1	Collection Point 2	Collection Point 3	Collection Point 4	Collection Point 5	TOTAL	Students fully engaged the entire time	Students engaged at least 4 out of 5 times
Mean Percentage of Students Demonstrating Engagement	81%	75%	75%	75%	59%	71%	31%	56%
Mid-Way								
	Collection Point 1	Collection Point 2	Collection Point 3	Collection Point 4	Collection Point 5	TOTAL	Students fully engaged the entire time	Students engaged at least 4 out of 5 times
Mean Percentage of Students Demonstrating Engagement	84%	68%	74%	79%	74%	76%	32%	68%
Posttesting								
	Collection Point 1	Collection Point 2	Collection Point 3	Collection Point 4	Collection Point 5	TOTAL	Students fully engaged the entire time	Students engaged at least 4 out of 5 times
Mean Percentage of Students Demonstrating Engagement	60%	80%	87%	80%	80%	77%	27%	60%

Table 2
Engagement During Collaborative Group Work

Pretesting								
	Collection Point 1	Collection Point 2	Collection Point 3	Collection Point 4	Collection Point 5	TOTAL	Students fully engaged the entire time	Students engaged at least 4 out of 5 times
Mean Percentage of Students Demonstrating Engagement	79%	93%	79%	64%	43%	72%	30%	43%
Mid-Way								
	Collection Point 1	Collection Point 2	Collection Point 3	Collection Point 4	Collection Point 5	TOTAL	Students fully engaged the entire time	Students engaged at least 4 out of 5 times
Mean Percentage of Students Demonstrating Engagement	79%	95%	68%	74%	74%	78%	42%	68%
Posttesting								
	Collection Point 1	Collection Point 2	Collection Point 3	Collection Point 4	Collection Point 5	TOTAL	Students fully engaged the entire time	Students engaged at least 4 out of 5 times
Mean Percentage of Students Demonstrating Engagement	100%	94%	89%	75%	94%	90%	56%	100%

Table 3
Engagement During Written Response to Text

Pretesting								
	Collection Point 1	Collection Point 2	Collection Point 3	Collection Point 4	Collection Point 5	TOTAL	Students fully engaged the entire time	Students engaged at least 4 out of 5 times
Mean Percentage of Students Demonstrating Engagement	81%	75%	88%	81%	81%	81%	50%	75%
Mid-Way								
	Collection Point 1	Collection Point 2	Collection Point 3	Collection Point 4	Collection Point 5	TOTAL	Students fully engaged the entire time	Students engaged at least 4 out of 5 times
Mean Percentage of Students Demonstrating Engagement	80%	80%	75%	85%	80%	81%	45%	68%
Posttesting								
	Collection Point 1	Collection Point 2	Collection Point 3	Collection Point 4	Collection Point 5	TOTAL	Students fully engaged the entire time	Students engaged at least 4 out of 5 times
Mean Percentage of Students Demonstrating Engagement	86%	90%	87%	83%	81%	85%	62%	77%

Table 4
DRA2 Engagement Rubric

	Instructional (< 6 out of 8)	Independent (6 out of 8)	Independent (7 out of 8)	Advanced (8 out of 8)
Winter DRA2	1/20 (5%)	4/20 (20%)	11/20 (55%)	4/20 (20%)

Legend: 8-Point Scale

- Intervention: 1-3
- Instructional: 4-5
- Independent: 6-8
- Advanced: 8