Journal of Research in Reading
UKLA
The United Kingdom Literacy Association

Journal of Research in Reading, ISSN 0141-0423
Volume 41, Issue 4, 2018, pp 732–739
DOI:10.1111/1467-9817.12262

Engagement and literacy: reading between the lines

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In this commentary, several core principles underlying the editorial and articles comprising the Special Issue on improving literacy engagement are identified and discussed. Those principles pertain to the multidimensional nature of literacy engagement, the explicit or implicit definitions offered for the construct, the positive contributions that engagement makes to improve reading and writing, the positive characteristics of engaged readers and writers and the consequences that academic or economic disadvantages have on engagement and literacy development. There are also lingering questions that are posed about literacy engagement and about engaged readers and writers. Those questions inquire as to whether one definition of literacy engagement suffices, if the forms of literacy engagement are truly separable in practice and measurable in research, whether totally disengaged students actually exist and what precise nature of the relation between literacy engagement and literacy competence is.

Keywords: reading, writing, engagement, motivation, socioeconomic differences

Highlights

Guiding principles underlying literacy engagement

- There are behavioural, cognitive, motivational, emotional and social dimensions to literacy engagement.
- To be engaged in reading and writing means to actively participate in one's own learning.
- Engaged readers and writers manifest many positive academic, motivational and social attributes.
- There are challenges to being engage for those who are academically or economically disadvantaged.

Linger questions about literacy engagement

- Should there be multiple definitions of literacy engagement?
- Are the different dimensions of literacy engagement really distinct?
- Is there such a thing as a totally disengaged reader and writer?
- Does literacy engagement lead to literacy competence or vice versa?

Engagement and literacy: reading between the lines

As the designated commentator for the Special Issue, I have the distinct pleasure of immersing myself in the writings of international scholars sharing their insights on the topic of literacy engagement. For this commentary, I have made it my purpose to uncover the common ground occupied by the contributing authors. This common ground largely takes the form of shared perceptions of literacy engagement, engaged readers and writers and literacy environments conducive to engagement. For that reason, I have cast these shared perceptions as guiding principles that can inform future research and instructional practice. Although these guiding principles are echoed in each article, their manifestations vary to some extent as a result of the authors' purposes, methodologies and the data upon which they rely. When warranted, I have taken note of particular variations that help to exemplify these guiding principles.

Yet, what I regard as my foremost obligation as a commentator is to reveal the story of literacy engagement that cannot be found in the specific words or phrases these authors put to paper. This is the story of engagement and literacy that exists *between the lines*, in what is not said or in the questions not asked. I, by no means, wish to imply anything nefarious on the authors' part in this regard. Quite to the contrary, this is a natural and unavoidable occurrence in writing, especially in the case of the well-organised and cohesive collection of articles that this Special Issue represents. You see, whenever authors highlight specific ideas and practices about a construct, like literacy engagement, they inevitably cast shadows over other ideas and practices. As the commentator to this issue, I have the luxury of exploring those unlit spaces, and the lingering questions they engender. It is my hope that these lingering questions, combined with the insights offered by the thoughtful and informative articles that comprise this issue, will provoke thought or spark inquiry.

Guiding principles

As the coeditors of this Special Issue describe in their opening editorial, the contributing authors were expressly chosen with a vision of what this compilation would accomplish. This overarching vision perhaps explains the alignment of these individual articles around certain fundamental principles about engagement and about engaged readers and writers. Here, I summarise those principles and briefly describe how they manifest in individual articles.

- Engagement is a multidimensional construct that can manifest behaviourally, cognitively, emotionally or socially.

Within this Special Issue, there is concurrence around the idea that engagement is not a single, unified construct, but rather a complex of behaviours, thoughts, feelings and social interactions that signify an individual's willingness to be an actor in his or her own learning. This encompassing view means that there are various paths that students may pursue when seeking to be engaged in literacy learning and development, just as there are different approaches that educators and educational researchers can enact to foster students' engagement or to gauge its manifestation in students. Although engagement is conceptualised as multidimensional, its operationalisation is typically more constrained. For instance, it can be presumed that the behavioural markers of engagement, which are by nature more overt and directly observable, are what frequently gets acknowledged in instructional practice

and often in empirical research. The other dimensions of engagement must often be inferred from what is seen or heard or self-reported. Indeed, self-reports of students' or teachers' cognitive processes, beliefs, motivations and emotions are common data sources for researchers, including those contributing to this Special Issue.

For example, in their secondary analysis of PISA2009 data, Ho and Lau (2018) used three indices to capture reading engagement: reading enjoyment, reading diversity and online reading. All three of these indices were based on self-report items from the PISA database. Rosenzweig, Wigfield, Gaspard, and Guthrie (2018) focused on behavioural engagement in her examination of motivation-enhancing practices within classrooms. The measure of behavioural engagement in this study again took the form of self-report. One unique orientation to representing engagement in this Special Issue was found in the work of Ng, (2018, this issue), who approached engagement as a social act embedded in a specific literacy context. Ng sought evidence of change in "the manner in which the teacher responded to the concerns voiced by the students regarding their silent reading", which represents the use of behavioural data to illuminate social engagement.

Thus, even within this Special Issue with the diversity of data sources, it was interesting to note that there remained a reliance on the words spoken or written by students and teachers as part of school experiences, or the views they expressed on the array of self-report measures they completed. Thus, it would seem that the broad, multidimensional character of literacy engagement to which the contributing authors ascribe was constrained by the methods of data collection that would not allow for the students' or teachers' beliefs, thinking, motivations and emotions to be directly accessed.

- Engagement in the context of literacy is understood as students' intentional involvement in processes and experiences that are facilitative to their development as readers and writers.

In the opening sentence of their editorial introducing this Special Issue, Ng and Graham (this issue) unequivocally state that literacy engagement represents "students' involvement in activities and processes that develop their knowledge, skills and attitudes for comprehending and composing a variety of texts in oral, print, visual and digital formats" (p.615, this issue). This view was either explicitly or implicitly shared by other authors. On the explicit side, Bråten, Brante, and Strømsø (2018) refer to engagement as "processes that indicate productive participation in learning activities" (p.682, this issue) – a definition that largely mirrors that offered by Ng and Graham (this issue). On the implicit side, authors of the two articles involving secondary data analyses relied on the conceptualisations reflected in their data sources, which were largely complementary to the editors' definition. For example, Rosenzweig et al. (2018) referenced the definition in the CORI framework of an engaged reader as a student "motivated, strategic, knowledgeable, and actively involved in reading" (p.627, this issue). Similarly, Ho and Lau (2018) reiterated the definition of reading engagement from PISA2009 that equated to "the motivation to read" (p.657, this issue).

For remaining articles, there was no explicit definition of literacy engagement to which the authors' ascribed. However, given that two of those articles were authored by the editors for this Special Issue, we can assume that the conceptualisations they shared in the opening editorial would remain consistent in their individual contributions. Thus, it is fair to conclude that literacy engagement, as represented in this issue, is a wholly positive force in reading and writing development that is marked by students' willing participation in processes, activities or experiences that promote literacy learning.

- Those who are engaged readers and writers are held to have significant academic, motivational, emotional and social advantages over those who are not willing participants in their own literacy development.

What was most striking to me in my review of these thought-provoking articles was the wholly positive view of literacy engagement and of engaged readers and writers being conveyed. Whether the authors were describing engagement at the level of student (Graham, Daley, Aitken, Harris, & Robinson, 2018), classroom (Rosenzweig, 2018), schools (Kennedy, 2018) or the nation (Ho & Lau, 2018), such a consistently positive portrayal is nothing short of ideal. Specifically, engaged readers and writers were described as strategic, motivated, socially active and knowledgeable (Graham et al., 2018; Ng & Graham, this issue). They are also cast as self-efficacious, better readers and writers, persistent, effortful and self-regulatory (Rosenzweig et al., 2018). Moreover, we are told that these engaged students come from homes with more educated parents, who are themselves engaged in literate practices and who are also financially able to provide their children with resources such as reading materials that facilitate literacy development (Ho & Lau, 2018). So, it would almost appear that those labelled as engaged readers and writers are already academic primed to succeed, even when the immediate learning environment is not particularly facilitative.

- Students who are disadvantaged academically or economically or attend schools serving the economically disadvantaged populations often lack the personal or fiscal resources that enable literacy engagement.

If the picture these articles paint of engaged readers and writers is truly uplifting, then a far less encouraging portrayal emerges for those who do not merit that label. Those who are considered 'disadvantaged', either due to identified literacy or learning problems (Graham et al., 2018) or as a consequence of the socioeconomic conditions in which they reside (Kennedy, 2018), or simply due to their cultural-ethnic backgrounds, which are ill-matched to the instructional contexts in which they are situated (Ng, 2018), are to some degree the antithesis of the engaged reader or writer. That is, these academically or economically in-need students have been characterised as relatively non-strategic and unmotivated, as well as less self-efficacious self-regulatory, and effortful in their performance. While there is no claim that these attributes can be erased by enhancing students' engagement, it is the underlying assumption of this Special Issue that these disadvantaging conditions can be offset, at least in part, with greater focus on the enabling factors the authors have identified. For example, increased attention to these students' motivations for reading and writing, more attention to their interests within the literacy curriculum (Graham et al., 2018), a personally meaningful reason for them to read and write (Bräten et al., 2018), an instructional program that recognises their sociocultural backgrounds and opportunities for frequent interactions with peers that involve reading and writing (Ng, 2018), can help to counter the unwanted consequences associated with academic or economic disadvantages.

Lingering questions

Despite the wealth of information and the underlying principles that this Special Issue affords, or perhaps because of them, there were questions about literacy engagement and about engaged readers and writers lingering within those in-between spaces. These are questions

that remain unsettled for me even now. My goal is to use this commentary to put those questions into the public discourse in hopes that others will provide the answers I seek or will undertake the empirical research or classroom studies that lead to their resolution.

- Is the general term 'engagement' or 'literacy engagement' actually being used to describe a rather specific form of willing participation?

The message conveyed within these articles is that engagement, and more precisely literacy engagement, is an expression of students' volition or willingness to be mentally or physically active participants in experiences that support their literacy learning and development. What is not as transparent, however, is that those literacy acts are quite infrequently of students' own choosing. Rather, these are tasks that students are directed to do within the context of school instruction. If there is choice, it may come in the form of certain freedoms students have within the task parameters such as the choice of specific book or article from a given reading list (Bräten et al., 2018; Rosenzweig et al., 2018), or selection of a particular writing topic (e.g. whales) for an assigned subject (e.g. sea animals). In effect, it falls to students to find some glimmer of personal value in whatever they are being asked to read or write. At best, teachers may speak about the general utility of literacy tasks or experiences they assign in their classes. Consequently, if there is personal relevance or meaningfulness to these assigned literacy tasks for the individual student, it will often be left to him or her to suss that out (Canning & Harackiewicz, 2015). More likely, they will operate under the presumption that the literacy assignment is just another duty they must perform as part of their jobs as students.

If this is, in fact, the conception of literacy engagement framing this Special Issue or the literature on engagement, then what do we call the form of engagement that reflects very different motivations, like what I am experiencing in writing this commentary? In effect, what do we call engagement directed toward a task that matches students' interests and goals, that excites or pleases them, and for which they feel efficacious? For instance, preparing this commentary may represent a challenge, but I perceive it as within my abilities to meet that challenge. The benefits I reap include increased knowledge about the topic literacy engagement, and self-satisfaction with meeting the challenge to the best of my abilities.

Thankfully, individuals do not have to be of similar age (thank goodness) or background to experience some version of this mode of literacy engagement. I have, on occasion, witnessed it among my elementary, high school, college and graduate students, although in developmentally different ways. What I am questioning here is whether the singular term, literacy engagement, fits all iterations that can emerge over students' academic maturation, or if there are developmental distinctions and varied instructional responses that need to be made in the conceptualisation and operationalisation of literacy engagement. As Graham et al. (2018) suggested, there may be something akin to a developmental model that exists for literacy engagement, as he and colleagues (Graham, Gillespie, & McKeown, 2013) have described for writing competence. If that is so, then one size (or definition) may not fit all the iterations of literacy engagement that manifest at any time or over time.

- To what degree are the dimensions of engagement truly separable and validly measurable when enacted in everyday practice?

Overall, I found the arguments for the multidimensional nature of literacy engagement forwarded in this Special Issue to be quite convincing. As Bräten et al. (2018) overviewed

their research on students' use of multiple documents as the bases for writing a letter to the editor on climate change, I could see why behavioural engagement was the target of their analysis. Similarly, I could appreciate Ng's (2018) focus on social engagement. Yet, when I read between the lines, it seemed that efforts to deconstruct engagement into its constituent forms demand further interrogation on that grounds that any single behaviour identified as 'engagement' is likely the externalisation of other engagement forms invisible to the naked eye.

For example, assume a researcher was observing in a classroom and noted a second grader raising her hand to ask a question (behavioural). What that researcher could not see was the confluence of internal conditions that this simple behaviour encompassed. The researcher coding for behavioural engagement could not know that this young girl had been wrestling with the teacher's declaration that Jack was foolish to sell his family's cow for magic beans (cognitive). Nor could that researcher know that the very word 'foolish' for believing in magic sparked an emotional response in that student (emotional), who is from a culture where the power of magic is accepted and valued (social). The cognitive dissonance and emotional reaction this young girl felt compelled her to overcome her typically quiet demeanour and reticence to speak (disposition) in order to seek clarification from her teacher (motivation).

As this illustrative case suggests, there are inevitably students who may display few instances of the behavioural indicators of engagement in the classroom, but whose level of internal engagement remains high. Perhaps due to their personalities or their cultural heritage, these students are more reticent to verbally or socially engage. The true depth of their engagement is only recognised when such reserved students elect to speak or put their thoughts on paper. Consequently, researchers and teachers who focus on observable indicators of literacy engagement may misread or misinterpret these students' involvement in their own literacy development. Likewise, researchers who attempt to deconstruct engagement into discrete categories may overlook the degree to which the behavioural, cognitive, motivational, emotional and social dimensions of this construct are naturally intertwined.

- Is it possible that those regarded as 'disengaged' are simply engaged in reading and writing activities that are not part of the traditional or sanctioned curriculum?

I have been known to argue that, contrary to what others may claim, there is no such thing as an unmotivated student. Rather, there are those students who are simply not motivated by what their teachers (or educational researchers) want them to find motivating. I believe the same can be said of literacy engagement. Who gets characterised as unengaged may more accurately be students who are unengaged in the academic content or activities typical of formal instruction. Yet, these students may be actively engaged in reading and writing activities outside of the classroom that do not conform to what is prized by the educational system. This has been the consistent message of literacy scholars like Carol Lee (1992), Allan Luke (2003) and Elizabeth Moje (with Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, & Collazo, 2004), who seek to awaken sensitivities toward cultural diversity in reading and writing practices. By understanding the literate lives that culturally or ethnically diverse students may lead outside the classroom and by finding places for those life experiences to be woven into the curriculum, educators may well open the door to these learners' more willing participation in their own literacy development.

- Are the positive behavioural, motivational, emotional and social characteristics associated with literacy engagement the consequence of engagement or the catalyst for engagement?

The last question I wish to proffer in this commentary continues my ontological struggles with the nature of literacy engagement. The issue here is not whether engagement iterates differently for readers and writers at various stages of their academic development or for those who are regarded as academically or economically disadvantaged. Nor does this question deal with the separability of literacy engagement's multiple dimensions or the cultural flexibility it allows. This inquiry is about causality. When I read the articles that comprise this Special Issue, I came away with the sense that by fostering students' engagement in relevant activities and experiences, improved reading and writing performance should result; that is, engagement begets competence. On the other hand, there was the message that those who are already fairly competent readers and writers will more often be those who manifest literacy engagement; in effect, competence begets engagement. So where does the 'truth' lie?

It would seem that my question about the true nature of the relation of literacy engagement and literacy competence remains unsettled by this Special Issue. It is certainly not enough to demonstrate by means of empirical models that interventions targeting engagement or focusing on enabling conditions produce significant paths from engagement to competence. There are, after all, alternative models depicting different paths between engagement and literacy that could prove statistically significant. There are also antecedents that cannot be specified or that were not measured that significantly shape the course of literacy development, just as there are potential moderating and mediating factors that go unrecognised or unaddressed in the theoretical and empirical model generated. Still, it may be that the true nature of this relation between literacy engagement and literacy competence does not matter all that much in everyday practice. As long as educators and educational researchers can be secure in their belief that students' willingness to participate actively in their own literacy learning travels the same path as improvements in their reading and writing, then perhaps the question of which of them leads and which follows matters little.

Concluding thought

I thank Clarence Ng and Steve Graham for allowing me the opportunity to engage in this worthwhile literacy experience. I know that I have benefitted as a result of my participation, and I am sure that those who are privileged to read the articles in the Special Issue will benefit as well.

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