

Reading engagement, achievement, and moral development in adolescence

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Reading engagement, that is, reading as a sustained, self-motivated, and strategic act, has a powerful influence on literate development (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) and on literate achievement (Kirsch et al., 2002). It is possible to make an argument that engagement results in greater volume of reading, thus greater automaticity, thus greater comprehension. Our view is that, while this is probably true to a degree, the argument trivializes the nature of literate engagement. We view reading, individually and collaboratively, as a motivated, relational, dialogic activity of the self. Consequently, teaching reading is inherently concerned with the development of the human being. We assume that language events like reading, writing, and the conversations in which they are embedded become the raw materials for the construction of self including the capacity for social imagination and the construction of 'other'. As such, it provides the foundation for the relational properties of communities and relational capacities of community members (Fernyhough, 2008; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Nettle & Liddle, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978).

Engagement with texts whose narratives have relevance for their readers' lives requires readers to take up the lives of the characters in those texts (Rosenblatt, 1983). In the process, readers create mental representations of others' intentions, emotions, and social logic thus potentially sensitizing young adults to features of social experience in ways that expand their

capacity for social imagination in their own lives and changing their social behavior (Lysaker, Tonge, Gauson, & Miller, 2009). In other words, the engagement is not simply with the text but with the imagined mental and relational lives of others (Rosenblatt, 1983).

In our experience, the texts to which young adults are drawn are often edgy, offering characters in morally complex contexts with consequential decisions, thus inviting readers to take up the moral challenges of the characters. Many of these texts also provide examples of personal change or the potential for personal change through recognition of moral agency. The books offer no moral certainties. This lack of certainty resists intellectual closure, requiring readers to persistently return to try to understand characters' social-emotional-moral lives. In the process, they are nudged to persist in clarifying their experience through conversations that offer the multiple perspectives of their peers – conversations they ultimately find as engaging as the texts that provoked them. The engaged reading of such texts thus enables both the immediate lived-through experience and the possibility of reflection on that experience, with some distance and through multiple perspectives.

There is considerable research exploring the development of social imagination and its implications for social relationships and empathy (Baird & Astington, 2004; Fernyhough, 2008; Whiteley, 2008). People with an increased understanding of social-emotional life and of the possibility of personal change, are less likely to stereotype and judge others or themselves or to develop problems of internalization resulting in depression and suicide (Dweck, 1999). In other words, research suggests the possibility of links in a network involving simple engagement and highly consequential dimensions of the social-emotional-relational lives of young adults.

Our premise, then, is that literacy development is not merely academic, but is closely tied to identities, capacities for relational intimacy, social sensitivity, and moral development. Indeed,

we argue that simply focusing on full engagement in books that bear relevance to young adults' lives will have consequential implications beyond reading words faster and increased comprehension. This study explores those implications.

### Research Method

All 8<sup>th</sup> grade English classes in a middle school located in a small mid-Atlantic city (45% of students on free/reduced-priced lunch) participated in a formative experiment (Jacob, 1992) designed to increase engaged reading. The intervention centered on self-selected reading of a wide range of texts with themes related to the concepts of personal struggle, perseverance, justice, and relationships, all of which were previously identified as interesting to 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. Teachers devoted time and expertise to building engagement, reducing whole-class teaching of reading skills and strategies, using daily read-alouds of student-preferred texts for brief strategy conversations.

Student interviews, classroom observations, reading logs, and student writing were collected across the school year to determine the effectiveness of the intervention and to identify ways to modify instruction towards meeting the pedagogical goal of increased engaged reading for all students.

The framework for formative experiments that guided this study, borrowed from Reinking and Bradley (2008), included an examination of the unanticipated effects of the intervention. In this context, it became clear that students were not only reading more and reading strategically, but also that they were engaged in sorting through the complex moral issues presented in the texts they selected. The focus of this paper is an analysis of students' moral reasoning and problem solving mediated by engaged reading.

### Results

During the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 academic years:

- Average reading volume increased from three to 42 books per year with students reporting a shift to active, strategic reading.
- Students reported an increase in student-to-student conversation about the books inside and outside of class.
- In the four preceding years, between 66% and 73% of students met state minimum competency standards. During the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 years, pass rates increased to 83% and 86% respectively.
- In the current year after one month of school some students had already read over 20 books.

Besides showing significant increases in reading volume and standardized test scores, several trends in students' thinking and interactions have been evident. There were changes in their social imagination, their identities, their relationships to others and to the world, their social behavior, their moral agency and their moral reach. Although these changes can be pointed to in interviews and in discussions, in general, they are thoroughly interwoven so that evidence of one commonly offers evidence of another. The following interview segment, for example, captures the nature of engagement and how it links to shifts in personal and social attention:

This year I've branched out with disturbing books. *Living dead girl* (Scott, 2008), I could not put down, I started it in [English teacher's] class and finished it an hour later...In the end, I looked up and saw things clearer. It was a different feeling, one of gratitude and thankfulness that that wasn't my life. I was just like, "Oh my gosh," [to English teacher], "Oh my gosh." It does - haunts you. It haunts you for a long time. It's been two weeks and it's still on my mind. It gives you a new perspective. I remember

opening my eyes and I was like, “Whoa.” My eyes are bigger. It was a different feeling...*Living dead girl* is the first book I’ve read that changed my perspective on the world. That’s a really powerful book. I read it, [my English teacher] read it, Lydia took it, Phoebe took it. Shea read it and she finished it the next day in Civics. I watched her finish the book. (Addie)

The last sentence shows the attention to others and their interests, the intense desire to see how others experience the same event – which ultimately leads to the spontaneous formation of affiliation groups (Gee, 2003) to explore these different experiences.

### *Social imagination*

Social imagination is the ability to imagine the mental experiences of others and their implications. It is the foundation of a number of important cognitive capacities, particularly moral decision-making and moral judgment. The engagement with personally relevant, and often disturbing books, regularly led to an expansion of the students’ social imaginations. Their social imaginations expanded as they considered, individually and collaboratively, the thoughts and feelings of characters representing unfamiliar lifestyles and perspectives. As Shannon observed:

With reading, you can understand some people better. The books we’re reading about people who go through bulimia, drugs, you get their perspective. I just finished reading *Far from Xanadu* (Peters, 2005). It’s about a lesbian. Some of my friends freaked out, but I liked reading it. It helped me understand, she’s not different from me. She just didn’t like guys. She said sometimes she wished she could have been born a guy. She liked a straight girl, who would never like her. It’s the same thing that could happen between a girl and a boy. They’re no different from us.

Shannon's comment also makes clear the link between the expansion of social imagination and the extension of moral reach. Moral requirements that Shannon previously may have extended only to straight peers must now be extended to gay peers. It will now be difficult for Shannon to "other" such peers because of their sexual orientation.

This expansion of social imagination cuts both ways in that it allows greater understanding and acceptance of the self. Madeline notes:

All of the books have had something to do with death and relationships and I've had a bunch of that go on lately. You hear that somebody died and it's like, that's like my book. My friends don't get me at all, and I feel like I'm the person in the book. I grew up in seven different houses so far. I don't have money. I feel like I can relate to the people in half of the books I've read in some way.

Together, the books and the ensuing discussions expand the imagination of the range of possible lives. In the process, they offer opportunities for sharing self-narratives that previously would have been out of reach. When Frank shared that the author of *Long way gone: Memoirs of a boy soldier* (Beah, 2007) grew up in a home in Sierra Leone with no water or electricity, Tommy offered a confession that drew unprecedented attention to him:

Simon: How can someone in this day and time still not have water and power in their house?

Tommy: We don't have water, me and my mom.

(silence)

Ginny: You have water.

Tommy: We have water, but when me and my mom need it I go to the well down from the house and bring some in.

Frank: The guy in the book had to get it from a river.

(everyone is looking at Tommy)

Ginny: How do you do the laundry?

Marco: Or take a bath?

Tommy: We have to make a lot of trips to the well. We can't waste any water.

Simon: Did the guy in the book become a soldier because he could get like water and a better life?

Frank: No, it was other stuff.

Tommy: Not having running water wouldn't make you do bad things, I don't think.

Ben: No, he had a good family. They told old family stories, and they got killed by some soldiers and that's why he got left alone.

Ginny: I want to know how the well works. It's probably good you know how to get your own water. I wouldn't know what to do if my faucet stopped working.

Tommy: Me and my mom know how to do a lot of things around the house.

In this exchange, Tommy is able to legitimize and accept part of himself that he had previously hidden. Seeing that it was possible for his classmates to talk about such experiences in sympathetic ways, he was able to offer an opportunity of acceptance to himself, and to his classmates an opportunity for further expansion of their social imaginations. The conversation not only helped to normalize his home life but also elevated his experiences. Tommy appeared to reframe for himself his own situation in light of the discussion. At the same time, we see here a development of social trust. By sharing this self-narrative, Tommy both recognizes a degree of social trust, and expands it.

*Moral agency*

Students lived within stories in ways that allowed them to assume the moral dilemmas of characters, analyzing the reasons, alternatives and implications of characters' decisions. One student having noted that she preferred "intense" and "disturbing" books added that she preferred them to be written in first person because "I like to make the decisions" She was making clear what other students consistently implied, that she liked to take up a position of moral agency. As another student, Daniela, observed:

...me and Shea and Aubrey and [teacher] have a group discussion about the book we're reading...what we think about the main character... and if the main character is making the right decisions, and that's tough.

Daniela and her peers voluntarily struggle with 'tough' moral decisions in order to test and assert their own moral agency.

This imaginative rehearsal of moral choices through the eyes of the characters and a range of different readers links engagement, relevance, identity, and moral agency. These entanglements are evident in Michaela's comments:

I picked up *Burned* (Hopkins, 2006), that big book, and thought it would take the whole year to read it. But it took me one night. I didn't go to sleep until 4 in the morning. I ate one thing that day because I was too busy reading. I took it to the bathroom with me and everything...I read all of the series. Then I just started reading different books. Then I started visiting the library and getting more books. My mom and dad get mad at me for getting so many books because they think I'm going to lose them. My grandpa doesn't get home until 2 in the morning and I read until then... I like *Crank* (Hopkins, 2001) and *Burned*. My mom, she does drugs and she's going to jail for selling drugs. Reading those books makes me think I don't want to do anything like that to ruin my life or anyone

else's or let my mom take care of my kids. Reading *Three little words* (Rhodes-Courter, 2008), though, I realized my mom was right not to give me up to foster care. I read *A child called It* (Pelzer, 1995). I'm not going to hit my kids when I grow up.

And the moral choices are being informed by the expanded social imagination and its reciprocal implications for self and others. Reflecting Michaela's sentiment, April comments:

I'm reading *Walking on glass* (Fullerton, 2007) and it got me thinking about how people do things to themselves and how it hurts people and hurts themselves.

### *Personal maturity*

In interviews, many students were conscious of the implications of these complex transformations for their own evolving identities and moral maturity. They became aware of the transformations in themselves, and they observed them in others.

Some books I've read are true in life. Tupac. *Life in prison* (Williams, 2001). Things about how they are. I wonder if I was this person, the character, in real life. I'd be real bad... I know one dude. Well he's like the same thing with me. He's like bad in school, but now he's reading a lot. He acted bad in school, but the way he reads, about what happens when you're in gangs, like what I read, like he just doesn't get in trouble anymore. (Dennis)

These transformations weren't lost on teachers and parents either. Quinton, an inexperienced reader who was in special education and who had not previously passed any state tests commented:

I read books about peoples' lives. *Homeboyz* (Sitomer, 2007). *Rucker park setup* (Volponi, 2007). *War of the blood in my veins* (Morris, 2008). They're in gangs and they seek redemption. That word comes up a lot in the book I'm reading now...My mom was

shocked when I asked her for books. She said, “Quinton, I don’t know if you’ve matured or what.” I’ve told her it’s a new lifestyle. It makes me think about things that I do before I do them. I used to do things before thinking. Now I think about the consequences.

Quinton’s observation that he now thinks about the consequences of his actions in advance is in part anticipated by the expansion of social imagination. It is at the heart of moral agency. They now live in a community in which they can imagine in advance the consequences of their actions for others’ well being and because of their changing relationships, actually taking responsibility for preventing problematic consequences.

#### *Social and behavioral change*

As Quinton’s observation suggests, there is ample evidence of social and behavioral change in interviews, teacher reports and videos. On a very simple level, the engaged reading probably takes some pressure off social relationships. Because the books are engaging, the students are less often at a loose end when problematic behaviors might occur incidentally, sending unfortunate relational ripples through the community. More importantly, because the students are engaged in the books, they find they have something in common to talk about with people they would not normally engage. Because the books they are reading are morally ambiguous and often intellectually tricky, they find the need to explore the possible meanings with others who bring different perspectives. Engaging with students who are different from themselves expands those perspectives and the likelihood of discrepant views. These discrepancies invoke the need to persuade and in the process reveal one’s thinking and feeling, thus expanding the available comprehension strategies but also the available emotional and relational language.

To show this we offer a segment of the first public discussion among a group of lower achieving students around books they had read. The fact that they had not yet learned how to have such conversations led to some initial performance displays and defensiveness. For instance, Skylar took charge initially, asking conventional questions she had written down (What is the main idea? How old is Alice?), and was visibly frustrated as others chimed in uninvited and as the discussion jumped from book to book. The video shows uncomfortable relationships and what would appear to many as relatively poor behavior. However, once they stumbled upon a topic that they all found engaging, important transformations took place. Several students had read the memoir *A child called It* (Pelzer,1995), and described the physical abuse the author reports that his mother inflicted upon him, raising questions about why no one at school noticed:

Monika: But they didn't relate to the Mom about that?

Wyatt: Like he'd have a scar right here (pointing to arm). It was crazy. This was how the teacher found out. He'd have bruises and cuts all over him and he's like, "Well it happened to me skating," say, if he said something like that. And next week the same thing, he said, "It happened to me skating," and she said, "You said that last week."

Kendall: But why wouldn't he tell anybody?

Mason: Because he knew his mom...

Wyatt: It's like *Living dead girl*. Why didn't *she* run away?

Monika: But if you tell them they could just call the cops and they could just get the mom....

Mason: She's got to get out some time or another and...

[lots of talk]

Skylar: No, no, no! As soon as you say that at school, they're not gonna just leave you at school, cause I've been in the same situation. They're not gonna leave you at school. They gonna take you straight back home and they're gonna end up calling your parents.

Kendall: Not if...

Skylar: Yuh huh, 'cause you gotta go somewhere. They can't keep you at school. You gotta go back home and they're gonna call.

Cooper: He don't want to tell 'cause his mom will beat him.

[lots of talk]

Mason: If he tells he knows he's gonna have to go in a foster home, and if he does go home his mom's gonna be mad.

Monika: Can't he just stay in a foster home for the rest of his life?

Mason: No...

[lots of talk]

Skylar: Somebody's gonna end up adopting you out of the foster home.

Kendall: Isn't that what he wants, someone else?

Mason: No. Yeah, but...

Skylar: Yeah, but if his mom ends up getting out in a couple of years he knows she'll come back...

[lots of talk]

Mason: Like Wyatt said, she said, "I will find you."

Wyatt: Yeah, that's the last thing she said to him. [3 sec pause]

What had begun as asymmetrical power relationships with two students dominating what could not properly be called a conversation has evolved into productive talk. Power differences have been flattened. Although sometimes everyone is talking at once, they are nonetheless listening to each other and taking each other seriously. Everyone is engaged. They struggle together to understand the minds behind the behaviors of the characters and the thoughts that some cannot initially grasp. Skylar, however, makes it clear that she can because she understands full well the implications of choices that might be made. In doing so, she reveals something about herself, rendering herself vulnerable. The 3 seconds of silence following Mason's reiteration of Wyatt's point is the first break in the conversation, as students realize the point's significance—they revisit the character's mind through the context of Skylar's information and its implications. Skylar then moves the conversation to the larger world. Her voice has shifted from shrill and demanding to calm and exploratory. She is talking to herself as well as to the others.

Skylar: You know this is happening somewhere else in the world too.

Wyatt: More than just one spot one time in the world.... It happens every day.

Mason: Yeah like... When you hear on the news there could be like...

Wyatt: There could be a kid in the school having this same thing, and we won't know.

Skylar: 'Cause they probably get picked at. They probably...

Monika: And there's no need to pick on somebody about that.

Wyatt: Exactly.

Monika: It's not their fault.

Wyatt: No

Skylar: The only reason they do that is to get laughed at just, you know, to feel better but also I mean the reason they do that is because it makes them stronger, you know, like it makes everybody, “Ha ha,” you know, and it’s been on the news before you know like people get bullied so much that they kill themselves...

Mason: Yeah that was like... [thoughtful .. quiet]

Skylar: And you never know what’s going on because like right now I pick on some people. I pick on some people and you know what I don’t know what happens in like in their home and like you actually you know....

[lots of talk]

Monika: It’s like think twice before you actually pick on somebody.

Kendall: And like that book *Thirteen reasons why*, how even a little thing made her commit suicide.

Wyatt: *Thirteen reasons why*. Even the littlest thing...

Skylar: ...’cause that’s why this year I don’t.... I don’t mess with people...

In this last segment of talk, many events and transformations have taken place, particularly for Skylar. Her admission that she has bullied is big and renders her vulnerable, particularly as she elaborates the logic. By making transparent the tools of her trade, she makes picking them up in the future more difficult. Her last comment, that she doesn’t mess with people this year, is in a voice that is quiet and directed to herself. She is looking at the table. It is not a statement of fact, but one of commitment.

In the process of this conversation Skylar began quietly crying while continuing to participate. The others notice but do not draw attention to it any more than they would another

contribution to the conversation. After a few minutes, Kendall gets up and brings Skylar a box of tissues. Aside from a nod of thanks from Skylar, nobody comments on it, and there is no break in the ongoing conversation. The conversation and its participants are important. The social trust among the group members has expanded considerably. Skylar has transformed herself in the process, changing the way that she relates to the others. Later in the conversation, feeling recognized and cared for, she actually raises her hand to speak rather than raising her voice and dominating the conversation as she had done at the outset. Such shifts in self-regulation have been found by others as a consequence of expanded social imagination (McKown, Gumbiner, Russo, & Lipton, 2009).

### Conclusions

The teachers in these eighth grade classrooms made one central change to their instruction. They focused on engaging their students in literature that the students would find relevant and made space in the class for them to engage. The students responded by reading, on average, 42 books in a year. The teachers spent less time ‘teaching’ in order to make room for the reading. When they did teach about strategies it was in the context of the students’ reading. But possibly the majority of the strategies the students used in the process of their reading were self-generated, and not exactly the ones they were being taught. Being fully engaged and facing problems, they became strategic. In other words, they acted with agency in their academic lives. However, the agency they exhibited in the process of reading went beyond the academic. They took up an agentive stance toward their social and moral lives.

Research with younger children, shows that those who have more developed social imaginations are more cooperative and helpful. Teachers rate them as having more positive social skills (Watson, Nixon, Wilson, & Capage, 1999) and peers rate them as more popular

(Baird & Astington, 2004). Students with better social imaginations also show more developed moral reasoning (Wainryb & Ford, 1998). This sort of research is not generally done in the field of literacy and it is not generally done with young adults. However, we believe that the transformations we have encountered are similar and are similarly clear in the data we offer.

The fact that the conversations the students were having were not about character traits but about mental processes, choices, and moral and social complexities might be important, as might the fact that many of these books offer stories of personal transformation. These narratives shift conversational frames away from fixed traits and toward more agentive self-narratives (Johnston, in prep). Shifting away from a fixed frame has other important social consequences. For example, Dweck and her colleagues (Dweck, 1999; Levy & Dweck, 1999) found that students who believe that people can change were also more likely to see similarities between themselves and disadvantaged groups and were less likely to stereotype. They were also more likely to volunteer. These are correlates of social trust, an important societal dimension that has been in decline for the last 30 years (McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010).

Our study shows that engaged reading leads to more reading and higher test scores. However, simply attending to the students' improved test scores may distract us from the more important developments taking place. Indeed, our study shows that taking young adults' interests seriously in their reading lives can result in widespread and intense engagement with books, with transformative consequences (Rosenblatt, 1983). By doing so, it also suggests the human and social cost of not doing so.

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