Liana has spent much of this year with her head down in my class, actively trying to avoid me and prevent me from “bothering” her. She conducted herself in the same way with her peers. Her hair hung in her face, as if to shield her from her present reality, and was often dyed purple or pink. It contrasted wildly with her pale, white skin. Liana always had a book with her but never wanted to speak about it. Also, she received some of the highest test scores in her class in reading yet struggled to pass my class. Enter reading for engagement. Liana picked her head up. She began to tear through books, specifically fantasy books rooted in fairy tales like Meyer’s Cinder. Liana began to eat lunch in my room, and when she did, she found a group of friends with whom she could talk about books. This group came every day, and eventually we expanded to meet in our school commons. She told us about her parents, their relationship, and how it felt when they fought. She compared her position as a child to that of the main character in Cinder. This sparked a conversation with other kids in the lunch club about their parents and what it felt like when they fought. Another girl, Haylee, discussed how her parents were divorced, and it always felt like she was torn between them, a feeling complicated by her biracial identity, even though they did their best. Outside of school, Liana went on vacation with Haylee.

It’s April in a large urban district in the midwest. My middle-school students and I have taken our big test and received our preliminary scores. We have seen growth but not nearly enough, and especially not from our students of color. Throughout this year, my seventh graders have been examining issues of power, race, history, and lived experience. We have demonstrated and
furthered our learning using 21st century resources. We have referred to the learning target in each lesson. We have been active and student-centered in our work. I have designed my units to provide opportunities for students to examine issues of power and authority in texts, and I have given them opportunities for managed choice in both reading and assessments. Still, I have been more excited about our work so far this year than they have been. Our work has not been enough.

Enter a new way of thought and practice: reading for student engagement. As Ivey and Johnston (2013, 2015) recently demonstrated, truly engaged reading is not a strategy; instead, reading for engagement adds objectives beyond those outlined in the Common Core standards. As they found, the outcomes produced when we read for engagement validate the human experience of each student in the class, which is, arguably, the reason human beings read in the first place. It does this by returning agency to students: they choose what they read and what they learn. It looks like this: students choose books from titles vetted by other students and have been found to be addictive, compelling, and interesting. These books range from edgy, hard works like Sanchez’s *My Bloody Life* and Williams’s *Life in Prison* to the *Divergent* series. Next, students choose books to read, and then...they read them. And they like it. And then we talk about that.

What is the major difference between this “engaged reading” and “free independent reading time” (or D.E.A.R or SSR)? You know, “free, independent reading time,” that time during your curriculum where you mandate silent, independent reading? That time when your students, if your relationships and classroom culture warrant this behavior, dutifully hold books in front of their faces for the appointed amount of time? I did this for five years and felt like a teaching saint for “taking the time from our curriculum so students could read.” I told myself that if I just kept consistent and helped students find the right titles, that eventually they would apply all of the other “explicit teaching of reading strategies” that I had been doing elsewhere in my curriculum. And, to their credit, my lovely students tried to do what I had asked. Every now and again, a student or two who normally had trouble engaging with our class material would sit down and read something they found relevant. They might proudly announce their learning to our class community as we put our books away and got down to business. The other students and I would nod our heads and thank them for sharing. I told myself that this was the level of engagement I could expect.
I did not realize how wrong I had been until I implemented this radical, new way of thinking and learning. I lobbied my principal and librarian to find money to buy the books on Ivey’s engaged reading list, which had been vetted by middle school students during her research study of engaged reading. By some miracle, my principal, school secretary, and media specialist found the money, and surprisingly, we already had many of the books on the list. On the day the books arrived, I happened to be covering for my colleague, the special ed teacher. I had five students in my room, all of whom self-identified as reluctant readers. Four of them were students of color. Three of them were identified as having an emotional-behavior disorder. One of them had a probation officer at the age of twelve. One of them was identified as an English Language Learner and had been administratively-transferred from another school in the district, which is what happened to students who can’t be expelled but are not succeeding in their current environment. I had a decent relationship with these students; they did not mind being in my room. That day, I asked them to help me unpack the boxes of books, and as a reward, we could spend the rest of the time playing a literacy game together, like Scrabble. Scrabble never happened that day. As the students unpacked the new books, they began to read the back of each of them. One by one, they grabbed titles that they just couldn’t resist, sat down, and read them. They read for the entire hour. I thought perhaps there was something to this whole idea of deep engagement.

As I introduced this unit to my entire class the next day, these students were already situated to be leaders in engagement. Our class was structured like this: each day, we would start with ten or fifteen minutes of reading aloud from a book that the class chose based upon the recommendation of someone in the class. After that reading, I would ask if there were any connections the students wanted to share or questions they wanted to ask. There were days when we didn’t get further than this discussion, and those were some of the best days of my teaching career. After our read-aloud, our schedule varied. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, students were to read their books, discuss issues connected to their books with their peers, or write something in response to their books. While they did this, I conferred with them individually about their reading and writing. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, read-aloud was followed by book talks, when students sat in front of the class and led a discussion about their reading and, most importantly, the personal, textual, and global connections to what they were reading.
Our stated objective was to create a social network around reading. When I launched the unit, we discussed why stories of all kinds, in all media, were so important. We wrote the names of stories we loved on post-it notes and placed them around the room. Then, we talked to each other about those stories and why we loved them. We orally reflected upon how sharing the stories we loved with one another surprised us and taught us things we didn’t know about one another. Our views of one another began to change.

In the beginning of this unit, I had no idea what I was doing. This was not an unfamiliar place for me as a teacher; I prided myself on my risk-taking. I had read much of the literature on engagement, and I knew that this intervention incorporated all of these components (Guthrie, Wigfield, and You, 2012; Hinchman and Sheridan, 2008; O’Brien and Dillon, 2008; Turner and Paris, 1995). Still, I had no idea if this unit would simply be a long, extended daily slog through ineffective, compliant seat work or if it would bring the change I sought. I really didn’t know what would happen. I knew, though, that I had always wondered what would happen if students were truly in the driver’s seat of their learning.

Here’s what did happen: I learned that when students are truly engaged in learning, it feels like I am following them, like they are leading me where they need to go, and I’m just there to help them get there. Students enthusiastically chose books and read them. Students who had, by their own announcement, never finished a book, marched proudly into my class before and after school and during lunch to place finished books on my desk. They made appointments outside of our class time to discuss these books with me, and they kept these appointments. Students were disappointed if they didn’t get to conference with me that day. During our conferences, students analyzed the books from several literary aspects, like point-of-view, plot, character, theme, only instead of me asking them about these things, THE STUDENTS BROUGHT THESE THINGS UP ON THEIR OWN. They didn’t always use the correct vocabulary, so I sometimes named it for them after our conferences had ended, but it didn’t matter because the purpose of the use of literary elements was not to impress their English teacher; the purpose of the literary elements was to deepen their understanding of a book that they desperately wanted to understand, simply because the act of understanding that story made them feel more human, alive, and connected.

From a practical perspective, the beginning of the unit felt odd. I felt like I was being a lazy teacher! I felt like I had to explain
to other teachers in my building what exactly I was doing all day in there while my students were reading. I did get to have some “fun” conversations with my colleagues when we attempted to solve the problem of the 7th graders sneakily reading their ELA books during other classes. The subtext of these conversations was that students were engaged in my class, but because I was “letting them do what they want.” I am not sure, but I imagine my critics thought I had it easy. At first, I agreed with them. I felt less busy than I usually did as an English teacher. I wasn’t taking home essays to grade. I wasn’t making copies. I didn’t have to write warm-ups. What on the earth was my work?

The class had chosen Sanchez’s My Bloody Life as our shared text for read aloud time. In the first chapter, Sanchez recounts sexual abuse from his childhood in Puerto Rico. One of my students, a boy named Roger, from his post at the back of the classroom where he often paced during read aloud time, asked, “Wait a minute...I thought the author was a man.” Another student said quietly, “Boys can get raped.” Heavy silence hung in the air until Roger burst out, “Ew, so like those homos doing some ‘Surfboard’?” Cordell was referring to the Beyonce song, which contains explicit references to consensual sex. As a human, I was repulsed, and as a teacher, I was panicking. These were other people’s children; how would I want this sensitive topic handled if my adolescent child were in the room? I decided to lean into the discomfort, and our class had a discussion about how we can talk about sexual abuse and homophobia as a group, and the proper tone to adopt and assumptions to make. We concluded that the only way to talk about sexual abuse in a group would be to assume you were talking to people who had experienced it and to conduct our public speech with the same care we would offer if we knew we were speaking to someone who was actively suffering. We resolved to try to recognize that our own discomfort with the topics might compel us to make jokes to bring levity, but that the consequence of making ourselves comfortable was that tremendous pain would remain stigmatized, misunderstood, and/or invisible.

I soon learned that my work was far more difficult than anything I had done before as a teacher. My work was to facilitate and participate in the social-emotional development that happens when humans read stories. My work was to help my students participate in the human experience by helping them connect to one another in a world that fosters and rewards disconnection. I facilitated discussions that grappled with
topics such as the proper tone to adopt when discussing sexual abuse; how to respond when you are offended by discussion participants who make homophobic, racist, or ignorant comments; and, conversely, how to orally lean toward classmates who share something that makes them very vulnerable. Students made each other cry from empathy, and then asked to come and eat lunch in my classroom so we could keep talking. They used their writing to share stories of their own abuse, of siblings and parents who were currently in prison, of their own homelessness, and of common adolescent challenges like peer pressure to use drugs, engage in sexual activity, and bully less popular classmates. I found myself trying to formulate answers to questions that most humans spend their lives trying to understand, and the most rewarding, exciting, and challenging part of this process was that I, as the teacher and authority, was not the person asking these questions.

I honestly have so many anecdotes that prove the impact of this curricular change that I could write another piece just to share those. Since this experience, I have had a difficult time keeping myself from spewing these stories at anyone who might care to listen. In one consequential instance of this, I found myself in front of an associate superintendent from my district, who asked me how the district-mandated curriculum affected engagement in my classroom. I shared with him the story of Jamal and Jaime, two of the EBD, ELL, troubled students who had been in my room when the books were delivered. Throughout the quarter, these students were regularly focused, engaged, and active contributors to class discussions. They read books together, both during my class time and during any other free time they might have had in other classes. They came at lunch to discuss these books, formed their own book club, and carefully chose titles that interested them. Both students maintained alternate texts to read in case one of them was absent, so that they didn't read ahead and accidentally spoil the story. They read *Yummy, Life in Prison,* and *Homeboyz,* and those are just the stories they finished. They were also savvy and analytical consumers of information; they put down books like *Response* that tried to “hook them with something really crazy happening in the beginning and then getting more into some kind of teacher book after that.” To my associate superintendent’s dismay, all of this progress occurred when students were given the freedom to determine the curriculum. As I explained to him, I had learned that if we were to teach only the Common Core standards, we would not be doing enough for our students. I would know, because I had
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done that for most of my career. Instead, we have to teach students how to discover their humanity in a world that tells them their humanity is less important than their cognition, which is a lie. It is not anti-intellectual, or lazy, or easy to use literacy to facilitate the true, engaged social-emotional development of adolescents. But, as I learned, it is essential.

References

Literature References

Emily Schindler is a doctoral candidate in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education; email eaward@wisc.edu.

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