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12. SSR (Sustained Silent Reading) or SSRE (Silence Stops Reading Engagement)?

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The practice of sustained silent reading (SSR) is borne of a model of literacy that deprives students of the social influence they generally experience during school literacy events. For much of the day, reading is a socially-shaped, -inspired, and -impacted activity. Students are given opportunities to collaborate with one another. Through interactions with a teacher and peers, students are assisted in their comprehension of the text and in developing enthusiasm for reading. During the daily twenty or thirty minutes set aside for SSR, however, students are required to adjust to the silent and solitary autonomous requirements of SSR. While most students are able to accommodate the change from 'normal' social reading practice, some students lack the flexibility, motivation and/or ability to do so. In denying students opportunities to interact, an inadvertent off-shoot of SSR practice are conditions that, for some students, foster non-engagement. This chapter reports case study research on a grade six boy who generally failed to engage in SSR reading, yet remained an enthusiastic, engaged reader in other settings.

Despite the popularity of sustained silent reading (SSR), one wonders if, for some students, it creates an environment in which efforts to engage in reading are inhibited. Indeed, given the impact that insistence upon

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silence has on some children, a more appropriate acronym may well be SSRE (Silence Stops Reading Engagement).

Sustained silent reading is embraced because it is seen to provide students with an opportunity to participate in the 'total reading act' – putting into practice, all at one time, those skills and strategies students have been taught about how to read and how to become better readers (Efta, 1984: 388). Indeed, the act of 'sustaining silent reading over long stretches of print without interruption and without breaks' has been described as the greatest of all reading skills (Hunt, 1984: 193). Hunt (1984) has even suggested that, insofar as teachers are concerned, SSR should be considered 'the pinnacle of achievement with regard to teaching skilful reading' (192).

The practice of SSR is borne of what Street (1984; 1993) describes as an 'autonomous' model of literacy. In this model, the text and the reader can be viewed as distinct, separate, autonomous entities. Reading is seen as a solitary activity – devoid of the need for, or influence of, interactions. Under such a view, reading takes place in the head. It is a cognitive skill that an individual performs in isolation. Indeed, 'readers are treated as though they are autonomous,' complains Street (1993), 'as though they can be separated from the society that gives meaning to their uses of literacy' (82). With SSR, the insistence on silence and autonomy is to minimise the possibility of distraction. While this goal is not without merit, it does ignore the role of persons beyond the individual and, in this case, the social dimensions of literacy.

Bruner (1996) claims that the idea of individuals learning separately and in isolation from their surroundings is consistent with the individualistic ideology of the Western world. Such a notion, however, is inconsistent with current views on literacy acquisition, development, practice and enjoyment. Literacy use and learning is founded in, and dependent upon, social influences.

Where an autonomous model exists, there is little need for a reader to interact with peers or 'significant others'. Yet, such interaction is central to Vygotsky's (1978) ideas about the importance of the social

environment to learning or Bruner's (1986) and Wood's (1980) concept of scaffolding. Vygotsky's celebrated zone of proximal development is based upon the idea of individuals benefiting from collaboration with others. This notion is consistent with social constructivist theory, where emphasis is placed upon learning as a social process (Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1991).

Autonomous notions of literacy ignore the role that society plays in shaping reading practices and, indeed, ignore the fact that these practices are embedded within social contexts. For much of the school day, reading is a socially-shaped, -inspired, and -impacted activity. Students are given opportunities to collaborate with one another. Through interactions with a teacher and peers, students are assisted in text comprehension and in developing enthusiasm for reading.

The stringently enforced silent and solitary nature of reading during SSR, however, requires students to attend individually to the reading task, independent of whatever assistance peers or teachers might otherwise offer. During SSR, students are left to flourish or flounder on their own. During the daily twenty or thirty minutes of SSR time, the child is required to revert to an alternate reading practice, disparate from the reading activities students generally participate in during school hours. While my own observations and experience suggest that most students are able to accommodate the change from 'normal' social reading practice, some students lack the flexibility, motivation and/or ability to adjust to the silent, solitary, autonomous requirements of SSR. These students often derive little benefit and no pleasure from that time regularly set aside for SSR. Deprived of the assistance and social influence that students often experience during school literacy events or literacy practices outside of school, some students fail to become engaged during SSR. These non-engaged readers lack the support they need to be the motivated, strategic, and confident readers they otherwise might be and, indeed, otherwise often are in different settings.

ENGAGEMENT

The notion of engagement is an area attracting increased educational attention because it is seen as a means for combating on-going problems

such as academic failure, student disinterest and high drop-out rates (Fredricks et al., 2004). Fredricks et al. (2004) identify three types of engagement: behavioural, cognitive, and emotional. Behavioural engagement refers to positive, 'correct' conduct, such as obeying rules. A student who is behaviourally engaged will avoid disruptive actions, but will willingly contribute to class discussions and respond to teachers' questions. Finn (1989; Finn & Rock, 1997) interchangeably uses the terms 'participation' and 'engagement behaviours.' At the elementary school level, participation is largely restricted to students' adherence to rules, including school attendance and punctuality, and responding to teachers' directions and questions. Behavioural engagement also refers to participation in extracurricular activities, including academic and social events. Behaviourally engaged students might take on leadership roles through involvement in school councils.

Cognitive engagement refers to an investment in learning, including being strategic and self-regulatory, in endeavours to learn as much as one can. These qualities contribute to flexibility as problem solvers. Cognitively-engaged students have an array of options through which they might tackle difficult tasks. Cognitive engagement also includes a willingness to 'go the extra mile' or go beyond minimum requirements. As with behavioural engagement, cognitive engagement includes trying hard, even to the point of seeking out challenges. Given their desire to face challenges, these students generally maintain a positive attitude, even in the face of difficulty or failure.

Emotional engagement refers to the affective domain and includes student reactions to the classroom setting such as being interested or bored, and being happy or sad. It refers also to positive and negative reactions to school personnel, including teachers and classmates. This third category of engagement is sometimes referred to as motivational engagement (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003) or affective engagement (Schraw et al., 1998).

Social engagement

The literature suggests that engagement requires social interaction. Engaged readers apply various strategies as they read within what can be

described as a literacy community. They are enthusiastic about exchanging ideas with others while fulfilling their own personal reading goals (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Indeed, ‘they elect a wide range of literacy activities for aesthetic enjoyment, gaining knowledge, and interacting with friends’ (Guthrie et al., 1996: 309).

In light of the New Literacy Studies of Barton (1994), Gee (2000), Street (1993) and others, literacy is recognised as a situated phenomenon – the ways that people use and understand literacy vary according to the situation. The New Literacy Studies provide increased awareness and sensitivity toward the social and cultural role of literacy, and how these social and cultural interactions influence readers. Literacy is culturally situated and indicative of the broader social practices that sustain, and are sustained by, literacy practices (Bruner, 1996). Just what literacy is depends upon the context in which it occurs. Thus, we recognise the potential for a student to be an engaged reader in some settings, but not in others.

Contradictions

It is evident that in the SSR setting, some manifestations of engagement may inhibit or prohibit other manifestations of engagement. Behavioural engagement, including obeying the rule of silent and solitary reading, may be at odds with notions of cognitive engagement and emotional engagement. These may best be facilitated by social interaction and the philosophy of communal learning – notions that are at odds with the widely practised framework for SSR. Some seemingly off-task behaviours (or manifestations of behavioural non-engagement), such as staring out the window or talking to a classmate, may be the epitome of cognitive or emotional engagement.

A strategic, cognitively engaged student might turn to a peer for an alternate interpretation of a text. Under the constraints of SSR, that student would be considered off-task, or appear behaviourally non-engaged. An emotionally engaged student may be gazing out the window and appear to be simply staring into space, not attending to reading. Whilst s/he would, thus, appear behaviourally non-engaged, it is possible that s/he is deeply emotionally engaged, reflecting upon the

feelings of joy or sadness evoked by the text. Further, the student who is not permitted to converse with a peer, because of the confines of the SSR rules, may very much be inhibited in her/his efforts to become engaged. What about the child who is talking during SSR – so deeply emotionally engaged that she cannot contain her enthusiasm for what she is reading and cannot constrain the urge to share her reading with a close friend? What of the student who is out of place, not reading at his desk? Perhaps, however, he is in search of a friend's dictionary to look up an unknown or intriguing word, employing a comprehension strategy reflective of cognitive engagement.

In denying students opportunities to interact, an inadvertent offshoot of SSR practice may be conditions that, for some students, foster non-engagement. The practice may see some children squander what is critical time for reading development. Children disengaged during SSR may waste what can add up to a significant portion of classroom time.

THE STUDY

I have previously demonstrated the positive impact of conversations with non-engaged grade four readers during sustained silent reading (Bryan et al., 2003). My focus at that time was largely on behavioural engagement and I demonstrated with an across-subjects single subject research design that included the introduction of one-on-one conversations between a researcher and child, that the number of off-task behaviours can be reduced dramatically. As a part of the present study, the same data gathering technique was employed and similar results were achieved. My focus in this study, however, was primarily to do with why it is that a student might be non-engaged during SSR and why it is that introducing discussions might help a child in their efforts to engage.

Description of study setting

The present study was conducted in a grade six classroom in a large multicultural metropolitan area in Western Canada. The school housed 501 students from kindergarten through to grade seven. The student body consisted of 44 different student birth countries, amongst which there were 28 different languages spoken in student homes. Only 183 (36.5%)

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of the students were born in Canada. Two hundred and eighty-two students (56.3%) were English as Additional Language (EAL) students.

The study classroom reflected the overall multicultural nature of the school in that 26 of the 30 students were EAL students. The classroom housed nine Korean-born students, nine Chinese, three Indian, two Kenyan, and one Iranian-born student. Of the six Canadian-born students, two had First Nation ancestry and spoke their Aboriginal language. Three of the students in the class had been formally identified as having a learning disability.

The experienced classroom teacher, Ms. Rogers (all names are pseudonyms), described her class as, 'Not a particularly bright group.' She described them as a 'literal group' who had trouble transferring and applying information.

Ms. Rogers had worked in the current school for eight years. In that time she had always taught in either grade six or grade seven classrooms. Over the course of her career, however, she had taught grade six, grade seven, or split-level grade 6/7 classes for 17 years. Overall, she had 31 years of public school teaching experience. Ms. Rogers held special certificates and qualifications in the areas of English and Physical Education instruction. She had also taught Physical Education methods courses at the nearby university and had been enrolled as a supervisor to oversee teacher candidate practicum (student teaching) experiences.

In addition to interviews and informal discussions with the teacher, seven interviews of up to 24 minutes duration were conducted with a student named Jobe, for a total of approximately two hours. Twenty-eight classroom observations were conducted during the class SSR time over a seven-week period toward the end of the school year. Further, full-day observations were conducted intermittently throughout the data collection phase of the study.

Description of study participant

During the course of the study, Jobe celebrated his 12th birthday. Jobe was a generally strong, capable reader. Jobe's description of himself as a reader was characterised by his high self-esteem. Jobe described himself as 'a very good reader,' saying, 'I read above my level.' Jobe also said

that reading was 'very easy' for him. In an almost uncharacteristic display of humility, when Jobe was talking about his ability to read aloud, Jobe conceded, 'I'm still not quite perfect at it,' but he then added, 'But I'm really quite good at it.' Jobe was clearly proud of what he called 'a very good vocabulary.' Jobe also said that he reads at home 'pretty much every day.' These comments were consistent with Jobe's responses to the Motivation to Read Profile (MRP) questionnaire (Gambrell et al., 1996). Jobe's raw score for the MRP was 68/80, a full survey score of 85%. Interestingly, his self-concept score, reflecting his view of himself as a reader, was as high as 92.5%, whereas his task value score, reflecting the value Jobe places on reading, was significantly less, being 77.5%.

The classroom teacher described Jobe as having 'a need to be in control.' She said that, at the start of the year, Jobe had a bad habit of being bossy and telling other people what to do. This observation was not inconsistent with the teacher's overall view of her class. The group was said to have a hard time speaking to, and interacting with, one another in an appropriate manner. In saying that the group contained a number of bossy individuals, Ms. Rogers elaborated by saying that, 'cultural things come into play with the interactions with people from other cultures.'

Ms. Rogers described Jobe as an 'academically average student.' She said that Jobe's strengths included his verbal skills, his vocabulary, and his self-confidence. Interestingly, however, she also insisted that one of Jobe's primary weaknesses was his self-confidence. Ms. Rogers stated that Jobe was 'bent on being the first and the best' but, in the teacher's words, 'he is not the biggest and best.' Jobe was also described as having poor work habits and difficulty in articulating his ideas in writing.

OUTCOMES

Evidence of Jobe's social nature

Classroom observations and interviews with Jobe revealed ample evidence of the strong social element of Jobe's nature. Jobe is a socially active boy with a large circle of friends. His social activity during the

course of data collection included hosting a birthday party, staying at a friend's house for a sleepover, and involvement in a variety of games, including a popular lunchtime/recess time role-playing game where Jobe took upon himself the central role, organising the game for his friends. 'I have a lot of friends that play it,' Jobe said. 'Probably about ten, eleven, twelve....I'm like ref[eree], basically. The one that tells you how everything works.'

Significantly, Jobe's social activity also included literacy pursuits such as talking about books and enjoying group reading activities. He was well aware of what books are popular or, as he put it, famous. Talking about the Artemis Fowl series of books he was reading, Jobe informed me, 'They're really famous.' Similarly, when discussing his reading of Brian Jacques' Redwall books, Jobe said, 'These books are unique. That's why there's so many people reading them....Because they're very famous books.'

Jobe wished his teacher would read aloud to the class every day. Although he had trouble articulating his reasoning, it is clear that Jobe had a strong preference for whole-class novel reading experiences over those reading experiences where he was required to read alone. As far as Jobe was concerned, when the whole class came together for the purpose of reading and discussing the class novel, it was simply 'all round better' than reading alone.

In addition to the above evidence, the interview transcripts also reveal significant information about the social nature of Jobe's literacy. As the following transcript extract reveals, Jobe claimed to have picked up his sizeable vocabulary from a friend:

Jobe: I have a very good vocabulary. When Miss Rogers is calling them out, I'm always the one that is putting up my hand. Along with Francis.

Greg (this report's author): Along with whom?

Jobe: Francis. My friend...

Greg: So, you have a good vocabulary?

Jobe: Mmm-hmm [nodding in the affirmative].

Greg: So, where do you think you picked up a good vocabulary?

Jobe: Mainly at my friend's house.

Greg: Really?

Jobe: Yeah. He has a way better vocabulary than me.

Greg: Oh, yeah?

Jobe: He's constantly saying words I don't know and I'm supposed to have a good vocabulary, but I wonder what the hell he has.

The following transcript extract demonstrates that, like so many others, Jobe was also caught up in the 'Harry Potter craze.' Jobe's involvement, however, was not without reservations. At one early point, Jobe conceded, 'I don't especially like those.' Nonetheless, as this later conversation reveals, Jobe was not about to be left out:

Jobe: ...the new Harry Potter, there's just posters everywhere saying *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*.

Greg: Okay.

Jobe: So, yeah. It's crazy.

Greg: You're going to read that one over the summer? That comes out, I think, in the middle of July, so that's probably just under a month now.

Jobe: Hhh-hmm [nodding].

Greg: So, you're looking forward to that?

Jobe: Yep.

Greg: Will you get that one straight away?

Jobe: I've already got it pre-ordered.

Greg: Oh, do you? You already have it – already have it ordered?

Jobe: Yeah.

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Greg: Oh, well, that's really good.

Jobe: Even though I'm not a true Harry Potter fan and I think the movies are really quite bad, I always watch the movies anyway, and I don't like – the books are not my favourite books in the world. I'm not a huge fan, but I still get them because everyone else likes them so much...if I don't read it, I won't have anything to talk about with everyone else. I'll be like, 'Well, uuum, yeah, *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*. My favourite part was when he said hello to Hermione.'

This interesting admission is consistent with data from a recent study (Scholastic, 2006), in which one finding was that the majority of boys say it is important to read the Harry Potter books in order to feel 'in' with their friends. In Jobe's case, his desire to have things to 'talk about with everyone else' outweighed the fact that he is clearly 'not a huge fan.'

Another conversation piece containing strong evidence of Jobe's social nature relates to Jobe seeing the prevalence and importance of reading in society. In Jobe's opinion, an inability to read can have dire consequences:

Greg: ...talking about home and the fact that you can read, and you have a brother and a sister who can't...do you think that it is important that they learn how to read?

Jobe: Yes. Reading is a – you need reading to be part of our society.

Greg: Oh, yeah? What do you mean by that, Jobe?

Jobe: Everything is put in words. If you can't read, you're pretty much screwed.

Greg: Oh?

Jobe: You can't go to school 'cause you can't read the worksheets. Can't read instructions. Can't do anything.

Greg: So what would happen to you in that sort of situation?

Jobe: You'd get killed. You'd just die.

Greg: You would?

Jobe: Ah, yeah. You'd stay in the hot tub too long if [?? unintelligible??] doesn't give you a warning.

Greg: [laughs].

Jobe: You can't realise it's burning so, ah, it says, 'Do not touch. Dangerous.'

Greg: Right.

Jobe: Blaaah [presumably, the final utterance of somebody boiling in a hot tub]!

Evidence of Jobe's engagement outside SSR time

It is significant to note that classroom field notes also revealed considerable evidence of Jobe as an engaged student and an engaged reader outside of the SSR setting. Jobe seemed often to be an active, willing participant in classroom activities and in a variety of learning opportunities. For instance, amongst other things, Jobe was observed:

- ❑ volunteering correct math answers as the teacher guided the class through the math textbook example about working with percentages;
- ❑ working quietly and well during independent work;
- ❑ contributing to his group's success during small group work;
- ❑ following along in his own copy of the text while the teacher read aloud;
- ❑ volunteering to go to the front of the room during French instruction and correctly matching French phrases with corresponding illustrations;
- ❑ participating in class read alouds;
- ❑ seemingly fully attentive during the teacher's oral instructions;
- ❑ raising his hand in response to teacher questions during a variety of content lessons;

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- ❑ participating in small group, hands-on science experiments on the topic of matter;
- ❑ transitioning without verbal instructions from one assignment to another (following the teacher's directions written on the blackboard);
- ❑ voluntarily contributing to the class current affairs / early morning news discussions;
- ❑ successfully completing a lengthy mystery writing assignment, including the stages of the writing process, providing illustrations, painting a cover design, stitching the book binding, etc., to create a finished book product.

Struggling in the silence

Despite Jobe's engagement in learning and the engagement in reading and literacy events apparent in the observations and discussion content presented as evidence of Jobe's social nature, Jobe's SSR experiences were a struggle. He appeared often to waste time and to derive little benefit from the four times per week during which the teacher devoted thirty minutes to SSR.

Field notes of Jobe's behaviour during SSR time reveal a number of instances when he was obviously not engaged. These field notes reveal a less than desirable record of behaviour during SSR time, including instances when he was seen:

- ❑ swinging his sweater around his head;
- ❑ arm-wrestling with classmates;
- ❑ playing with his cap;
- ❑ picking at grass and throwing it in the air;
- ❑ throwing stones;
- ❑ playing 'Truth or Dare' in a large and noisy group;
- ❑ balancing his book on his head;
- ❑ playing noughts and crosses with a friend.

Each of these examples of Jobe's behaviour during SSR suggest he was not only wasting his own time, but was a distracting influence who may have inhibited others' efforts to engage in reading during SSR.

Jobe's lack of SSR engagement is also suggested by the struggle it was for him to finish his SSR books. In a one-month period, Jobe said he was reading all of the following books during SSR, but he never finished any of them: *Hells Faire*; *Loamhedge*; *The Crown Disarmed*; *The Eternity Code*; *The Opal Deception*; *The Weapons Book*; and *Triss*. In all of these cases, Jobe put the book aside (returning it to the library or the bookshelf) before he had completed reading the text. After discarding all of these books, Jobe commented that he had not lately had many good books to read. This comment came despite the enthusiasm with which he had earlier discussed many of the books.

Interestingly, Jobe stated that he does a different type of reading during SSR than what he does at home. Despite the above-mentioned selections, Jobe's comments suggested that he understood SSR time should be more about reading informational texts. He said that he only sometimes read informational books at home, but that he usually read novels. He also stated that at home he often enjoyed reading comic books. Not until nearing the end of the collection of study data was Jobe observed reading comics during SSR time. This despite the fact that the teacher did allow children considerable freedom in students' self-selection of SSR material and that, apart from what was an unspoken restriction on obviously inappropriate-for-school texts like pornographic material, the teacher did not overtly impose limitations upon the students' SSR text choices.

On a day when Jobe was observed reading a *Jughead Jones* comic book, he was asked if there were any differences about the way he went about comic book reading as compared to other types of reading. Jobe replied, 'Sometimes I read a comic [strip] and then I stop and talk to someone and then I read them [the next comic strips] again.' One can see that this 'method' would create problems in the SSR setting.

Despite the fact that Jobe did say that he discussed books and reading with his friends, it was interesting to note that he specifically stated that he rarely talks with friends about the material he reads during SSR. ‘I don’t usually talk about them,’ Jobe said, ‘Sometimes I do, but not usually.’”

When asked about reading engagement, Jobe replied that it involves deep concentration and transportation elsewhere:

Jobe: Just completely concentrating on your book. You’re not, you don’t really care about your surroundings. You’re just reading a book....It’s like you’re talking to someone. You’re not looking at the other people and what they’re doing. You’re just talking...

Greg: When you have those sorts of experiences – where you can really concentrate and you’re really enjoying the book and it’s a good book – can you describe for me what it feels like?

Jobe: Just, you’re reading a book. You’re in the book’s world. You’re not in your own world. You’re just in the book’s world....You’re not in your normal world. You’re in the book’s world that they create for you and you’re half reading and half imagining what’s going on. And you may read it, but it paints a picture in your mind and you know what’s going on. You imagine people’s faces and you imagine what’s going on. Imagine what they look like. Imagine how everything’s happening. It’s not like you’re just sort of reading it and reading a story but you’re literally there.

Given Jobe’s strong social nature and how apparent it is that much of the motivation, strategy and confidence that he has as a reader is socially-shaped, -inspired, and -impacted, one wonders if Jobe can ever enjoy such engagement sensations during SSR. It is clear that, as with most things in life, with SSR one size does not fit all. For those children, like Jobe, who clearly flounder in the SSR setting but who, in other settings, demonstrate the potential to thrive, accommodations must be made. As things currently stand, where children like Jobe are concerned, is it

perhaps time to ask the question: SSR (Sustained Silent Reading) or SSRE (Silence Stops Reading Engagement)?

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