STUDENTS’ ENGAGEMENT IN LITERACY TASKS

Seth A. Parsons ▪ Jacquelynn A. Malloy ▪ Allison Ward Parsons ▪ Sarah Cohen Burrowbridge

Teachers would prefer a classroom of students who are engaged—actively and thoughtfully participating in literacy instruction. But what is it about instructional tasks that make them engaging or disengaging?

In a 2013 Gallup poll, 70% of United States respondents reported that they are disengaged at work, which Gallup estimated to cost between $450 billion and $550 billion in lost productivity each year. This finding is ironic because U.S. workers are thought to “work” much more than people in other countries (Prescott, 2004). This same plague of disengagement exists in our classrooms. Teachers are constantly pressed for time, and all precious instructional minutes must be productive. As adults, we recall disengaged moments in the classroom when we were students: The teacher is at the front of the class lecturing while you and your friend pass notes. A boy nearby doodles while his buddy pokes his shoulder. These memories are abundant. The teacher worked diligently to plan instruction and carefully presented the material, but disengaged students did not absorb the lesson’s content.

Now, let’s take a look at what could be—and what is happening in some classrooms across the U.S. You enter a classroom where students are learning about the Boston Massacre in an integrated literacy-social studies unit. The class is split into two groups examining primary source artistic depictions of the Massacre. Each group is collaboratively crafting a written account of what happened: “No, look, those soldiers were brutally attacking the colonists. That needs to be in our account,” says one student. “Make sure you write about the blood and guts,” says another to his group’s designated writer. On the other side of the room, students are buzzing about their artistic rendering: “Those colonists started it—look right here, they are throwing rocks at the British soldiers! The soldiers had to protect themselves,” exclaims a student. The teacher then reconvenes the class to share their depictions of the Boston Tea Party. As planned, an in-class debate ensues. In fact, it extends into lunch, where students argue over who instigated the Boston Massacre. This is the sound of students engaged in an interdisciplinary task: the joyful sound of meaningful learning.

Engaging students in academic work can be challenging, though. Teachers must address curriculum in ways that encourage students to participate with interest and thoughtfulness. The daily dilemma of engaging students in necessary content is further complicated when they differ in ability level, cultural background, and interests. In this article, we first describe what engagement is, its importance for literacy teachers and researchers, and its direct relationship to the tasks teachers assign students. We then describe our study of student engagement, in which we sought to better understand how academic tasks engage or disengage students.

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What Is Engagement?
Engagement has most recently been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct, consisting of affective, behavioral, and cognitive components (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Malloy, Parsons, & Parsons, 2013; Parsons, Nuland, & Parsons, 2014; Shernoff, 2013). Affective engagement emphasizes interest, enjoyment, and enthusiasm. Behavioral engagement relates to effortful participation. Cognitive engagement encompasses strategic behavior, persistence, and metacognition. In addition, engagement is currently conceptualized as a dynamic, malleable construct (Shernoff, 2013). Over the course of a lesson, students do not remain engaged or disengaged; instead, students’ engagement fluctuates across and within lessons (Fredricks et al., 2004). To illustrate, we borrow from the related construct of self-regulated learning. Winne and Perry (2000) discuss self-regulation as an aptitude and as an event. Self-regulation as an aptitude is a stagnant quality. However, self-regulation can also be conceptualized as an event, where it is dynamic, fluctuating throughout the course of instruction. This view is parallel to the construct of engagement: It can be conceptualized as an aptitude, where students are generally engaged in academic work, but it can also be viewed as an event, varying throughout the school day.

Why Is Engagement Important?
Engagement is a vital component of classroom instruction because it is explicitly associated with reading achievement (Ivey & Johnston, 2013). For example, Skinner and Pitzer (2012) explained that engagement is “a robust predictor of students’ learning, grades, achievement test scores, retention, and graduation” (p. 21). They continue, “Engagement is the direct (and only) pathway to cumulative learning, long-term achievement, and eventual academic success” (pp. 23–24). In their analysis of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, for example, Brozo, Shiel, and Topping (2008) identified reading engagement as one of the most powerful factors affecting students’ reading achievement. PISA researchers described engagement as the “student characteristic [that] has the largest correlation with achievement in reading literacy” (p. 124; Kirsch et al., 2003). These international data as well as U.S. data (Campbell, Voelkl, & Donahue, 1997) have shown that reading engagement could compensate for—and even overcome—low socioeconomic status and family educational backgrounds. Moreover, research on exemplary reading teachers has determined that high levels of engagement distinguish higher performing classrooms from lower performing classrooms (Pressley & Allington, 2015).

Tasks and Engagement
Fredricks and McColskey (2012) explain that students are “engaged in something (i.e., task, activity, and relationship), and their engagement cannot be separated from their environment. This means that engagement is malleable and is responsive to variations in the context that schools can target in interventions” (p. 765). Researchers have presented the tasks that students complete as the central feature of classroom instruction (Doyle, 1983; Parsons & Scales, 2013; Perry, Turner, & Meyer, 2006). Doyle presented the task as the fundamental unit of analysis in the classroom because students acquire the knowledge that is necessary to complete the task: “Students will learn what a task leads them to do; that is, they will acquire information and operations that are necessary to accomplish the tasks they encounter” (p. 162). Blumenfeld, Mergendoller, and Swarthout (1987) expressed concern about the preponderance of simple tasks in schools: “We may be creating workers desirous of doing the least possible in an individualist fashion” (p. 144). Subsequent research has demonstrated that particular aspects of tasks are associated with student engagement: authenticity, collaboration, choice, appropriate challenge, and sustained learning. Authentic tasks are assignments that mimic activities completed outside of school settings (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006). Authentic tasks have real purpose and, therefore, encourage student engagement (Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, & Igo, 2011; Guthrie, 2015). For example,
Pearson, Raphael, Benson, and Madda (2007) stated,

The argument underlying the promotion of authenticity is that too many school tasks are unauthentic, unrealistic, and, by implication, not useful for engaging in real-world literacy activities; that is, instead of teaching kids how to “do school,” we should be teaching them how to “do life.” (p. 36)

**Collaborative** activities where students are given choices are motivating for students (Guthrie, 2015). In a meta-analysis of scientifically based research, Guthrie and Humenick (2004) found collaboration and choice as two of only four components of classroom instruction to have significant empirical support for motivating students to read. Perry, Phillips, and Dowler’s (2004) research demonstrates the benefits of collaboration: “Our observations indicate that children not only enjoy working together in supportive contexts but their collaborations enhance their understanding, confidence, and regulation of learning” (p. 1873). Related to choice, Paris, Wasik, and Turner (1991) noted the importance of encouraging students to choose instructional goals and decide how to meet them.

In addition, engaging academic tasks are appropriately challenging: neither too difficult nor too easy. Pressley and Allington (2015) explained, “The data are overwhelming that tasks a little bit beyond the learner’s current competence level are motivating. Tasks that are a little bit challenging cause students to work hard and feel good about what they are doing” (p. 395). The final component of academic tasks that has strong empirical support for student engagement is sustained learning (Guthrie, 2015). Barron and Darling-Hammond (2008) argued that tasks sustained over time are beneficial for student engagement.

As students become engaged as producers of complex products and organizers of long-term projects, they begin to recognize within themselves capacities that lead them to identify as authors, designers, critical consumers, and analysts. These identities, or possible selves, in turn can lead to development of learning goals that support continued engagement. (pp. 68–69)

**Our Perspective**

The research reported here is grounded in self-determination theory, which suggests there are three needs that guide human behavior: relatedness, competence, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2002). In the classroom, relatedness refers to the degree to which students feel connected to others, or their sense of belongingness. Students who perceive themselves as competent feel they will be successful in completing academic tasks, and autonomy suggests a sense of control over one’s actions (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Meeting these three needs influences the degree to which students engage in classroom tasks (Reeve & Jang, 2006).

**Our Study**

The setting for our research was a sixth-grade classroom in a Title I elementary school. The students in this classroom reflected the general demographics of the school, which served a significant number of English learners (76%) and students from lower socioeconomic status families (83% receiving free or reduced lunch). Study participants included six students and one teacher, Sarah, who served as a co-researcher and is the fourth author of this article. Sarah selected student participants based on their representation of three performance levels: two low-, two average-, and two high-performing students.

We used classroom observations to document the tasks assigned to students and to document students’ behavioral engagement. We used postobservation interviews with students to document their affective and cognitive engagement. We then used a rubric to rate the academic tasks, classifying them as closed, moderately open, or open (see Appendix A). We used rating scales to rate students’ behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement (see Appendix B). Full details of the methods used in our research can be found in Malloy et al. (2013). In the present article, we highlight the 10 tasks that produced the highest student engagement and the 10 tasks that produced the lowest student engagement to further investigate student engagement in literacy tasks.

**So What Makes a Literacy Task Engaging?**

The task rubric measures the degrees to which activities are authentic, collaborative, challenging, student-directed, and sustained. These components have been identified in the literature as essential to enhancing engagement (Gambrell et al., 2011; Guthrie, 2015; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Pressley & Allington, 2015). Therefore, it was unsurprising

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that 7 of the 10 most engaging tasks were moderately open or open (see Table 1) and 9 of the 10 least engaging tasks were closed (see Table 2). A review of the tasks listed in Tables 1 and 2 indicates that the most engaging tasks included authenticity, collaboration, and choice. Conversely, students viewed the least engaging tasks as too difficult or too reliant on worksheets, and a majority of these tasks occurred as whole-class activities. Nonetheless, there were anomalies, such as three tasks that were rated as closed but appeared in the list of most engaging tasks. One such task involved viewing a video with a teacher-led discussion (Task 4.1). In this activity, Sarah provided interesting asides regarding the Sioux tribe, and students were given a graphic organizer to arrange important information. In reviewing their comments regarding this task, students noted the video’s appeal—the average-performing student observed that she put herself in the role of the tribal women, and high- and low-performing students noted that the graphic organizer was useful for consolidating learning.

In another activity, students independently read a handout and underlined the most important information (Task 10.2). The high- and average-performing students commented that they strategically chose the important information (cognitive engagement) and maintained their attention to the task (behavioral engagement). The low-performing student, on the other hand, was in a teacher-led group focused on gleaning important information from the passage. In this closed task, students who were already strategic in determining the important elements of the text were provided with practice that encouraged metacognition, while Sarah supported the low-performing student’s successful task completion.

In the third of the engaging closed tasks (Task 17.1), students were asked to complete an agree/disagree handout, which was discussed in groups and then shared as a whole class. Student comments indicated that this task provided elements of choice (agree or disagree) and the promise of follow-up opportunities to debate their choices. The opportunities for informed discussion—taking a stance and then defending it—were appealing, as these students were cognitively and affectively engaged as they exchanged ideas. The low-performing student was provided
Students’ Engagement in Literacy Tasks

multiple levels of support during individual response, group discussion, and teacher-supported class discussion.

One open task was included in the list of least engaging tasks. Task 6.1 was brief (three minutes) and involved final group preparations for class presentations of their Native American tribe research. In this task, the high-performing student was prepared and ready to go but bored with the wait. The average- and low-performing students were concerned with their upcoming oral presentations and reported little thinking and worried affect. However, the actual presentation (Task 6.2) was ranked the ninth most engaging task.

**Elements of Tasks That Engaged Students**

In reviewing the 10 most engaging tasks, students often mentioned opportunities for collaboration and appropriate support for completing tasks.

**Collaboration.** Students collaborated in groups to unlock the meanings of archaically worded phrases, to write a news article, to create a play based on explorers they researched, and to present information about Native American tribes. These tasks also provided opportunities for choice, creativity, and student-directedness—elements that also increased the tasks’ openness.

Sarah knows that group selection leads to collaboration’s success or failure, so she considered a number of factors when placing students in collaborative teams. For example, she heterogeneously placed students so there were a variety of learning levels in each group. Students’ level of interest in the topic was also considered. A low-performing student who loves the topic can be a huge asset to any group. Additionally, Sarah determined the skills that were of particular importance to the planned task. When a project had an artistic component, she ensured that each group contained a class artist. Finally, she balanced student personalities to ensure a mix of students in each group. In sum, she holistically considered each learner to create successful collaboration.

**Appropriate Support.** A second prominent element of engaging tasks was Sarah’s differentiated support, which was possible because she knew her students well. For example, when she assigned students a difficult text to read, she provided small-group scaffolding for some and individual practice in determining importance for others (Task 10.2). Sarah also served as a facilitator, circulating among groups to provide questions and guidance as they collaborated. In this way, she was able to positively influence student engagement, blending her knowledge of students’ needs with new information gleaned from students’ conversations. She used this time to clear up misconceptions and ask challenging questions.

Sarah recognized that students need explicit guidance to successfully work in collaborative groups. She taught students how to share responsibility and how to encourage struggling teammates. She also used group times to gently home in on behavioral challenges; for example, she would sit with a group and help them navigate a personality conflict. This is a role that requires a great deal of teacher responsiveness—that is, knowing when to intervene in a discussion in a manner that leads students to work through the content while building knowledge and critical thinking skills.

Sarah also offered support through graphic organizers that helped students retain information presented in videos and PowerPoint presentations. Students reported engagement in her interesting comments about the historical contexts and figures. By providing students with an infrastructure to organize, synthesize, and consolidate knowledge, Sarah was able to scaffold students in constructing models of content that encouraged them to discuss, expand, and critique what they were learning. Preplanning and organizing one’s thinking before starting are skills that all students must develop. Therefore, Sarah offered a variety of ways for students to organize their thinking. For example, she conducted a minilesson on using a web to organize and synthesize learning one day, and she taught students how to use an outline another day. Students require extended guided practice for each strategy and must learn to select the organizational method that works best for them. In this manner, students build an arsenal of strategies for use in their future collaborative and independent projects.

**Elements of Tasks That Were Not Engaging**

Unsurprisingly, students reported disengagement when tasks were difficult or confusing. In particular, a mismatch between text complexity and student ability was often mentioned as interfering with engagement. In Task 21.2,
“Students were not engaged in tasks that required little involvement.”

for example, the high-performing student noted that the text did not support comprehension and that it was uninteresting. The low-performing student commented that the text was too difficult to understand and sought the teacher’s help. Similar comments were recorded regarding the texts used in Tasks 24.2 and 21.3. Avoiding this engagement obstacle requires a clear understanding of student abilities and interests as well as a willingness to gather a variety of text sources to teach content. In preparing a topical unit of study, a text set that includes a variety of reading levels, as well as digital and online resources, can be invaluable in providing access to content for a diverse student population.

Students were not engaged in tasks that required little involvement. Task 22.1, for example, asked students to name states as the teacher labeled them on a map. Students who knew states’ names participated, but otherwise, students could disengage and wait for the states to be labeled. Tasks that required filling out worksheets (Tasks 8.1, 7.1, and 24.2) were rated as low-engagement; some students commented about needing to think very little, while others noted that these tasks were repetitious. Low-involvement, worksheet-type tasks fail to engage students because they violate students’ need for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Finding the right answer, when seemingly done just to please the teacher, presents little enticement for students to think, and new learning is unlikely to occur.

Interestingly, an open task designed to engage students, a Jeopardy-style game (Task 23.2), was among the least engaging tasks. Although Sarah considered the aspect of competition to be intrinsically engaging, students disagreed, commenting that the competitive game led them to focus on the performance-oriented aspect of winning or losing, second-guessing each other’s answers and relying on more knowledgeable students to lead. When the stakes seemed high, the low-performing student felt out of his depth, and the high- and average-performing students focused on strategies for gaining points rather than deepening their understanding.

Lessons Learned
To design literacy tasks that engage students, we suggest including content-laden visual and printed texts and offering tasks that invite student interest and collaboration. These activities accent all three types of engagement: behavioral, cognitive, and affective.

Sarah started many of her social studies lessons with PowerPoint presentations, which provided content reference points, before expanding into other forms of content delivery. She often used primary source documents in her PowerPoint presentations to encourage student observation, conversation, and engagement. For example, in one lesson, she shared two portraits of George Washington. In the first, Washington was regally depicted in a red velvet cloak. In the second, he was somberly dressed in a black jacket. With the goal of demonstrating how period paintings depicted political goals, she had students note their observations about the pictures. Next, she engaged students with a Think-Pair-Share activity in which students independently wrote why they thought each artist portrayed Washington in the chosen clothing. Time for independent thought helped Sarah’s reflective students prepare to enter collaborative discussion with something specific to share, thus encouraging better participation. Students next discussed their observations with partners and then the class.

We often observed Sarah using visuals to unify her lessons. They served as an equalizer in a class that had huge discrepancies in students’ language and literacy levels. The use of paintings, maps, and pictures invited all students to access the material. She rarely chose to just give students information; instead, she worked to build their knowledge. In another example, after students looked at an illustration of slaves picking cotton, she showed a graph depicting the increase in slave labor with the introduction of the cotton gin. Sarah encouraged students to draw conclusions about the graph based on the primary source picture of slaves picking the cotton. Again, even her most struggling students were able to share that the machine separated cotton more quickly than people could

“To design literacy tasks that engage students, we suggest including content-laden visual and printed texts and offering tasks that invite student interest and collaboration.”
and that, therefore, cotton needed to be picked more quickly to keep up with production.

In PowerPoint presentations of this type, affective engagement is enhanced by the excitement and energy that the students feel when the lesson is introduced. The visuals maintained students’ attention while Sarah added informational tidbits that improved lesson interest. By offering multiple levels of challenge, Sarah enhanced behavioral and cognitive engagement. Struggling students with very little background knowledge could look at the pictures and participate through simple observations such as “[Washington] is wearing a red coat.” At the same time, students were pushed to deepen their critical thinking skills and to explore challenging questions whose answers required expanding background knowledge with new knowledge.

When these activities included differentiated support for students at varying levels of need, either by providing well-designed organizers or direct teacher facilitation, cognitive engagement increased. Engaging tasks were also those that encouraged student choice of either the topic or the manner of presentation in activities, such as group presentations. Tasks that invited students to create plays, write news articles, or produce artistic renderings of famous people, for example, appealed to their sense of creativity, providing a real audience for their work. Sarah invited the entire school to her students’ project presentations. Students exhibited pride when they shared their work and answered visitors’ questions. Students enjoyed opportunities to show off their successes, thereby increasing enthusiasm and engagement in future projects.

Aspects of task design that should be avoided include those that are considered to be “hoop-jumps”—worksheets and low-thinking activities, such as the call-out activity for labeling states (Task 22.1). These activities have little sense of purpose for students and are easy to disengage from. When thinking is not adequately included in task design, it is tempting for students to opt out. Students accepted thinking challenges where there was topic interest or support for completing them but disengaged when the task seemed difficult or confusing. In light of this finding, task complexity requires careful consideration and clear instruction. In addition, teachers must notice students’ confusion or frustration and check in with them early in the task to make sure they understand, providing support where it is needed or restructuring the task to increase engagement and productivity (Parsons, 2012).

Conclusions

This research involved a yearlong study of students’ engagement in literacy tasks in one sixth-grade classroom. For the purposes of this research, engagement was conceptualized as a multidimensional construct including behavioral engagement (time on task), cognitive engagement (strategic effort), and affective engagement (interest in the topic or task). We observed literacy instruction in the classroom each week across the school year for a total of 26 observations, documenting (a) the tasks students were assigned and (b) focal students’ behavioral engagement in the tasks. After each observation, focal students were interviewed to document their affective and cognitive engagement in the tasks. The “openness” of each task (Parsons, 2008, 2012) was rated for authenticity, collaboration, challenge, choice, and sustained learning, and a cumulative engagement score was calculated for each student for each task.

In this article, we took a nuanced look at the 10 tasks in which students were most engaged and the 10 tasks in which students were least engaged. We identified these tasks and asked, “What was going on in these activities that made them so engaging or so disengaging?” We found distinct differences between the most and least engaging activities. For example, collaboration and teacher support seemed to be aspects of academic work that were particularly engaging for students. Alternately, tasks that were too difficult or that lacked opportunities to cognitively connect in meaningful ways were not engaging. This analysis of the 10 most engaging and 10 least engaging tasks from one teacher’s integrated literacy-social studies instruction over the course of a school year provides confirmation of those elements of engagement that are highlighted in the literature (Gambrell et al., 2011; Guthrie, 2015; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Pressley & Allington, 2015).

This research underscores the importance of task design, noting that both open and closed tasks can be engaging. Closed tasks that are interesting can appeal to students where thinking is enhanced through the use of details that enlarge students’ understanding of a topic or that provide well-structured
TAKE ACTION!

1. Review three literacy tasks that you recently presented to your students. Consider ways to restructure them to increase their engaging elements based on the findings of this study.

2. When presenting content to students through multimodal displays, think of interesting elements of the content that you can use to connect with students or that provide interesting asides to help to fill out the context of the content.

3. Consider ways that you can incorporate graphic organizers to help students arrange and unify complex information.

4. Give careful attention to the interest and complexity of texts you require students to read. Using a well-constructed content-related text set composed of trade books, websites, and easier or harder basal texts allows you to vary the complexity of the texts provided for learning as well as multimodal options for understanding. This is important for filling in background information for both struggling learners and learners who come from differing cultural or linguistic backgrounds.

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REFERENCES


Appendix A

Rubric for Rating Openness of Tasks

Date:
Describe the task and its product:

**Authenticity** (adapted from Duke et al., 2006)
1 – The task is limited to tasks that are completed primarily in school.
2 – The task mimics outside-of-school tasks but has features of school-based activities.
3 – The task closely replicates tasks completed in day-to-day lives outside of school.

**Collaboration**
1 – Students work alone on the task.
2 – Students collaborate minimally in the task.
3 – Students collaborate throughout the task.

**Challenge**
1 – The task requires letter- or word-level writing.
2 – The task requires sentence-level writing.
3 – The task requires paragraph-level writing.

**Student-Directed**
1 – Students have no input on the task.
2 – Students have input, but their choices have minimal influence on the task.
3 – Students have input into many substantial aspects of the task.

**Sustained**
1 – The task takes place in one sitting.
2 – The task takes place over one or two days.
3 – The task spans three or more days.

*Note.* Adapted from Parsons (2008). Scoring: Total scores of 15–12 indicate an open task, 11–9 a moderately open task, and 9–5 a closed task (Parsons, 2012).

Appendix B

Engagement Rating Scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Behavioral</th>
<th>Affective</th>
<th>Cognitive</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Clearly not engaged</td>
<td>Not interested in topic or task and/or low efficacy</td>
<td>No awareness of thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Difficult to tell</td>
<td>Some interest in topic or task, few details regarding interest</td>
<td>Surface-level thinking or awareness of challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>Reports efficacy in topics or task and/or many details regarding interest</td>
<td>Focusing on the content or the task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Highly engaged</td>
<td>Enthusiastic or curious about topic or task</td>
<td>Thinking beyond the content or task, making connections, and/or using strategies to complete the task</td>
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*Note.* Adapted from Lutz, Guthrie, and Davis (2006); piloted and revised.