

Experiences With Shared Reading for Promoting Reading Engagement in a Swedish Upper-Secondary School

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Abstract

This article considers students' and teachers' perceptions of shared reading (SR) in promoting reading engagement. It provides a thematic analysis of focus groups with students and teachers at a Swedish upper-secondary school who participated in an intervention consisting of SR sessions. The findings are triangulated with a student pre-intervention questionnaire that included reading habits.

The study is theoretically informed by research about aspects of the multidimensional concept of reading engagement, by aesthetic theories about interpretation's interrelation with presence and by psychological theories of joint attention and its effects on social cohesion, reflective reasoning and perspective-taking.

The students' and teachers' descriptions of their SR experiences show that they conceive of SR as a reading practice that may promote reading engagement. Reading engagement is found to have several dimensions, ranging from the behavioural and cognitive to the social and affective, which in turn are intertwined and reinforce one another.

Keywords: *reading aloud; social dimensions of reading; interpretation; presence; breathing space*

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Introduction

As the *PISA 2018 Assessment and Analytical Framework* (OECD, 2019a) states reading literacy is crucial to students' personal development and for their involvement in society. In 2009, *engagement* was added to its definition of reading literacy, which now reads, 'Reading literacy is understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society' (OECD, 2019a, p. 27). The concept of *reading engagement* is defined as 'the motivation to read', comprised of 'a cluster of affective and behavioural characteristics that include an interest in and enjoyment of reading, a sense

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of control over what one reads, involvement in the social dimension of reading and diverse and frequent reading practices' (p. 29).

One reason for the expanded definition of reading literacy is the correlation between reading engagement and performance (Guthrie, 2004; Guthrie et al., 2012; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Lee et al., 2021; OECD, 2019a). Engagement may compensate for factors such as gender, parental education and income, which are traditional 'barriers to reading achievement' (Guthrie, 2004, p. 5).

Research about how to promote reading engagement is growing (Lee et al., 2021). This article reports findings from a practice-based research project that used shared reading (SR) to promote reading engagement among students at a Swedish upper-secondary school offering vocational qualifications.

SR is a group-based reading practice pioneered by the British charity *The Reader Organisation*. SR groups of up to 12 people are led by trained facilitators or 'reader leaders' (RLs) gather weekly to read and discuss literary fiction and poetry for approximately 90 minutes. No previous knowledge or homework is required. On arrival, participants are provided with texts that are chosen based on their 'relevance to the human condition' (Gray et al., 2016, p. 249) and whose content and form may challenge participants' experiences. The RL is responsible for reading texts aloud and stops regularly to invite participants to share their immediate thoughts and emotions using open-ended questions regarding the passage of the text read. Furthermore, RLs strive to make links between the individual, the group and the text to deepen the joint meaning-making. They may also point to certain text passages that deserve deepened joint exploration. SR offers an open space where group members can jointly explore their understanding of literature, without aiming at pre-conceived interpretations.

Our decision to explore SR's power to promote reading engagement was prompted by some of its affordances – fiction texts read aloud in small groups who engage together in literary meaning-making – and the evidence in prior research. First, exploring data from 250,000 teenagers in the 2009 PISA test, Jerrim and Moss (2019) identified a 'sizeable "fiction effect"' (p. 19): those who often read fiction scored significantly higher on PISA reading comprehension tests, even though it used non-fiction texts, while achievement did not correlate with frequent reading of other text types (magazines, non-fiction, newspapers or comics). Second, previous studies indicate that pupil collaboration promotes their reading performance and engagement (Applebee et al., 2003; Guthrie et al., 2007). Third, a small experimental study by Liu et al. (2019) suggests that university students who simultaneously read *and* listened to a fiction text performed significantly better on a reading comprehension test than students who either read silently or listened to the text.

Previous research on SR has primarily focused on positive health outcomes among participants (see, for example, Billington et al., 2016, 2017; Billington & Steenberg 2021; Longden et al., 2015, 2016). Furthermore, SR's personal, social and emotional benefits have been identified (Billington et al., 2016, 2017; Dowrick et al., 2012; Gray et al., 2016; Hodge et al., 2007; Longden et al., 2015). Additionally, research has

explored the joint interpretation of literary texts (Gustafsson et al., 2023; Longden et al., 2015; Skjerdingsstad & Tangerås, 2019). Educational studies of SR are rare (Forslid et al., 2022), and while Steenberg et al. (2021) single out the RL's role in promoting reading engagement in an SR group of young adults, to our knowledge there are no studies of the use of SR to promote reading engagement in upper-secondary schools.

The aim of this study is to advance the understanding of student and teacher perceptions of SR for promoting reading engagement in the literature classroom by answering three research questions:

1. What signs of reading engagement can be traced in students' and teachers' reflections on SR?
2. How do students and teachers value the salient affordances of SR such as reading aloud and the opportunities for joint, open-ended, literary meaning-making?
3. What factors influence students' and teachers' experiences with SR?

Theory

To advance the understanding of pupil and teacher views of SR to promote reading engagement, we depart from the reading engagement model proposed by Lee et al. (2021) in a survey of 60 articles. This model consists of four distinct but potentially interacting dimensions. *Behavioural engagement* relates to how pupils act and includes their effort and persistence with reading assignment and the time they spend reading, meaning frequency and duration (Lee et al., 2021, p. 545). *Cognitive engagement* is the extent to which pupils invest the mental energy needed to comprehend a text, meaning concentration and effort. *Affective engagement* refers to the feelings and emotions – positive or negative – that motivate or demotivate pupils during a reading assignment and their emotional reactions during and afterwards. While these three dimensions are individual, *social engagement* focuses on interaction among pupils, between pupil and teacher, and between pupil and character when discussing literature. These four dimensions are 'naturally intertwined' (Lee et al., 2021, p. 546).

Previous research concentrates on the factors which facilitate and indicate reading engagement. It highlights the outcomes (Lee et al., 2021, p. 547) by taking reading engagement to be a 'situated activity', dependent on a set of frame factors such as reading a certain text. It also looks at reading engagement in terms of an event or aptitude, meaning a personal trait that changes over time (p. 547). Here, we focus on the gaps in the research identified by Lee et al. (2021), because, having established the behavioural dimension as the dominant research perspective (pp. 561–565), they call for studies of how the four 'dimensions of reading engagement work reciprocally' (pp. 546, 565) without forgetting the 'social dimension' of reading engagement (p. 562), and especially the event or aptitude perspective. They suggest that researchers should be more explicit about which of the two perspectives – reading engagement

as an event or as aptitude – they bring into play (p. 563) and call for studies using a mixture of the two, which only one out of the 60 papers they review does (p. 564).

To elaborate on affective engagement, we turn to Gumbrecht's concept of *presence* (2004). It refers to the aspects of aesthetic experience which lie beyond interpretation and meaning. We may experience that we lose ourselves in 'focused intensity' while striving to make sense of aesthetic objects – aesthetic experiences always entail 'an oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects' (p. 107). Gumbrecht's concept of presence has been applied by Skjerdingsstad (2022) to analyse interaction and meaning-making in an SR group. Skjerdingsstad, though, extends the time frame from moments to longer periods of intensity (2022, p. 89).

We have outlined a theory of SR as a literary practice affording 'joint attention to mental content' (Gustafsson et al., 2023), which is based on the concept of joint attention used in developmental psychology to describe and analyse infants' ability to interact with others preverbally (Eilan, 2005; O'Madagain & Tomasello, 2021, pp. 4058–4059; Tomasello, 1995, p. 107). The positive effect of joint attention has also been found between adult interactants: knowledge of the shared attention alone was enough to create affinity (Wolf et al., 2016), while joint attention specifically on mental content entails focusing with others on the content of 'mental states – beliefs, reasons, plans and the like' (O'Madagain & Tomasello, 2021, p. 4058). Joint attention on mental content has been shown to promote both cognitive abilities and social bonding: first, mind-reading or perspective-taking, meaning the ability to think about the content of others' minds (pp. 4066–4068); and, second, reflective reasoning, meaning the ability 'to evaluate the quality of the reasons we have for holding our beliefs' (p. 4071).

Data and method

The present study takes its data from an SR intervention designed jointly by teachers and researchers. The project was started by two teachers of Swedish, who had for many years developed their reading practices in the literature classroom. The intervention ran for six weeks and entailed one weekly SR session per group, lasting about 70 minutes.

Seven classes in the first year of an upper-secondary school took part, the classes ranging in size from 7 to 25 students ($N = 140$). Most classes were divided into smaller groups of 6 to 12 students. Thus, the intervention comprised 16 SR groups. In each class, one group was facilitated by their Swedish class teacher and the remaining group or groups either by external RLs paid for by the research project or by two of the researchers (AO, AWG).

The RLs' preparation included choosing a short story and a poem for each SR session (Appendix 1). The poems were written by Swedish authors and the short stories – four written in Swedish and two translated into Swedish from English – were (popular) literary fiction not specifically targeted to young adults. In line with SR principles, the literature was chosen to challenge participants' reading experiences, thus inviting

them to explorative literary meaning-making. Texts were selected on the basis of their literary form (poetry from the modernist tradition, short stories with textual gaps) and content (literature thematising topics that students may not have had first-hand experience of, such as migration, parental loss and violence in close relationships).

Of the 140 students included in the intervention, 40 gave their written consent to participate in the research study. Participation included: answering a pre-intervention questionnaire with 13 questions selected from the 2018 PISA survey to gauge background information and attitudes to literature and reading; participating in two video-recorded SR sessions; and participating in an audio-recorded, post-intervention focus group about their experiences and opinions regarding the SR sessions.

Groups were formed based on students' informed, written consent to participate. Since participation included video recording of two SR lessons, the 40 student participants formed four separate groups. Each group included students from one and the same Swedish class. At the start of the intervention, the students had known one another for four weeks.

All RLs ($N = 12$) consented to join the study. Participation included: keeping an RL diary, updated after each SR session; participating in two video-recorded SR sessions; and participating in an audio-recorded, post-intervention focus group about their experiences and opinions regarding the SR sessions.

The data thus consists of: (a) 40 student questionnaires; (b) 12 RL diaries totalling about 20,000 words; (c) eight video-recorded SR sessions; and (d) seven audio-recorded student focus groups of about 20 minutes each and two audio-recorded RL focus group discussions of about 40 minutes each. In this article, we use data type (a) and transcriptions of type (d), made by three research assistants, originally using a simplified and modified version of the Jefferson transcription system (Jefferson, 2004), but, for the purpose of this article, translated and edited for readability.

The focus group data have been analysed thematically (Gareth et al., 2017). We have constructed the themes while working individually and together through the suggested steps – familiarising with the data and coding (p. 14–15), theme development (p. 21), and reviewing and defining themes (p. 25) in several phases. Working with a 'critical realist/contextualist' paradigm (p. 9), we have taken an inductive, data-driven approach to coding and themes, while moving between a semantic and latent procedure (p. 11). Ethical approval was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2023-06-26; decision 2023-02086-01).

Results

The study has resulted in a range of empirical data. Drawing on the student questionnaire, we address students' linguistic backgrounds, cultural capital, attitudes to reading, reading habits and assessments of themselves as readers. We then present a thematic analysis of the seven student and two teacher focus groups and their views on being involved in SR.

Students' attitudes towards reading

The students in the study were mostly from a Swedish-speaking background: 85% usually spoke Swedish at home. Some 50% of the students estimated the number of books in the family home to be fewer than 25. As many as 31% claimed that in secondary school, teachers had never read aloud in class and it was even more unusual for teachers to have asked the students to do so.

The students displayed attitudes to reading that corresponded to the results of the PISA questionnaire (OECD, 2019b). They were slightly more positive towards reading (especially the girls), which might have been an effect of selection bias and age (they were a year older than the PISA respondents). Yet 31% of students said reading was a waste of time, 50% read only if they had to and 49% seldom or never read books (only 5% listened to books), while 39% claimed to read nothing for pleasure (including blogs, news, books, etc.).

The students had extensive experience from school of group discussions of books (75%) and sharing their reading experiences with others (95%). However, 23 students (58%) disliked talking to others about books. Even though most were not avid readers, the majority saw themselves as 'good readers' – probably an effect of selection bias. More girls than boys (62% vs 50%) reported struggling to understand complicated texts, needing to read a text several times to grasp its meaning (50% vs 33%), or finding it difficult to answer questions about texts (41% vs 25%). This may have been a sign that the girls had higher expectations about what qualified as understanding a text – and that they had strategies to achieve it.

Students' and teachers' perceptions of SR

Six themes were constructed in the thematic analysis of the student and teacher focus groups: understanding, social dimensions, listening, breathing space, the literary text and organisational aspects of SR. The ambition to understand a literary text was the most prominent among students, although all six themes were closely interconnected, as selected quotations from the transcripts illustrate.

Understanding

Reflecting on their SR experiences, students often touched on the importance of understanding the literary texts. It was a recurrent theme in all seven student focus groups.

Well, the discussions have still made you understand [...] what's in the poem, and what the message is, rather than you sitting on your own reading a poem.

Presented with a poem in the literature classroom, students assume that theirs is a hermeneutic mission: there is a 'job' to be done with the texts. They consider it their duty to come up with acceptable interpretations that transcend literal meanings:

Me, I thought about what I had to do with that text or what'd happen, and then of course when we were in our groups so that also [...] together in a group found an answer.

A text was conceived of as a riddle, demanding a solution. Occasionally, students struggled to understand the lexical meaning of words or expressions, especially second language speakers. However, reaching a ‘correct’ and complex interpretation was not only considered a responsibility, but also a rewarding experience that left students feeling relieved:

I got a different perspective on what I’d understood completely wrong.

Understanding correctly was important. Discussions helped students ‘understand more’, and towards the end of the SR intervention, they reported going deeper into the texts:

- A: Yes, we went more into the depth in, um...
B: Towards the end.
A: Yes, exactly, had deeper and more...
B: More open discussions.

The effort to understand was also evident when students grappled with the meaning of entire texts. The short story ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’ by Adichie (1999) put their interpretive efforts to the test. The student focus groups seem to have agreed it was ‘confusing’ and students were puzzled by Adichie’s description of anxiety being like a snake coiled around one’s neck. However, according to the teacher who facilitated one group, such challenges to students’ interpretive efforts helped them remember the text better:

...but then there was that one about the snake, so then that snake came again which made them remember the text, but it was tricky for them to understand.

Social dimensions

The social dimensions of SR were prominent in all student focus groups. First, the discussions functioned as social learning of a kind. One teacher described how students reflected on the texts, thinking and working together. Listening to others’ views spurred new thoughts about the texts, as one of the students said:

...and then you got to hear the others’ points of view, which helped to perhaps understand the text in a different way.

Taking active part in the discussion about the texts was important for students’ learning, as that was what promoted understanding.

I think you understand much better than when you read on your own, because then you don’t miss anything if you, yes, if you have a chance to talk about it.

One teacher noted that even if students consumed a great deal (likely referring to texts, films or social media), they seldom talked about it, but in SR they talked together about something they were sharing. The students thought the discussions helped them grasp what was implied, as well as the explicit meanings (connecting this theme to understanding):

The discussions were not simply kind of what was in the text, but that you also read between the lines and even beyond the lines.

Second, SR also encouraged a sense of togetherness. Students got to know one another. Even if the SR sessions were not alone in this, they played a part. Students described becoming ‘more comfortable with one another’ over time, which affected the quality of the discussions. Togetherness was also visible in the way students supported one another during sessions, or, as one teacher put it, they ‘backed one another up in the conversations with nods and mms’.

A third social dimension was participation. Students and teachers adhered to the normative expectation that everyone should be active in the SR sessions. The teacher RL diaries frequently noted student activity and participation. However, in SR, it is important not to force participation on anyone, which the teachers discussed as contrasting to normal classroom behaviour. They had to restrain themselves from putting pressure on students:

...sometimes it’s been a bit difficult to not, you know, to refrain from asking like what do you think, what’s your opinion about it, if there’s someone who’s been sitting very quiet, like, I really have to hold back [...] not make everyone express their opinion.

In a similar vein, this normative expectation was in evidence when students said that they appreciated how the RLs steered the discussion to create opportunities so that everyone could participate.

Listening

Many students considered listening to the RL or a fellow student read the text aloud which everyone had in front of them to be an advantage of SR. It was a reading practice that supported them in their ambition to understand the literary texts:

...and it’s also as if you understood more when you’re listening.

The theme of listening was thus connected to understanding. The opportunity to read with their eyes and ears simultaneously helped students interpret the text:

I think it is a bit better, kind of, to do this reading aloud thing, because then [...] I think you understand much better than when you’re reading on your own because then you don’t miss anything.

Listening while following the text helped students stay focused, linking the understanding and listening themes. Being left on their own with a literary text was challenging for many students; distractions that stopped students from paying close attention abounded.

A: You can’t focus when you’re reading silently.

B: No, because often there’s something else that the brain is drawn to that is more fun.

In contrast to silent reading, listening is associated with positive feelings. It is considered a pleasurable way of engaging with literature:

- A: I hate to read so.
B: It was more fun to listen.

Reading alone could prevent students from engaging with literature. Equally, one of the teachers enjoyed reading aloud and considered it ‘super lovely’:

We do it for our kids and then we stop doing it and I think many have been inspired by that, like it’s lovely, like it creates a kind of togetherness when you sit and listen to someone reading, so I think it’s beautiful.

To assimilate the content of the text while listening adds an extra dimension to the literary experience that goes beyond pure understanding. It adds an aesthetic dimension (‘beautiful’) to an activity associated with positive feelings and a sense of pleasure.

Finally, some of the students with Swedish as a second language found that listening and following the text not only gave them a deeper understanding, but also provided an opportunity to practise their language skills:

I thought it was good [...] to practise my pronunciation.

Breathing space

Another theme concerned the SR sessions as a breathing space, providing a respite from the pace, stress and demands of an ordinary school day:

...it was only, like, a nice feeling just to sit and read, like, you don’t have to put that much effort in, [...] and anyway they were kind of, they were kind of funny texts to read, like, interesting.

Many students described the sessions as soothing and as a relaxing break when they listened and talked with their friends, and did not need to worry (see *Social dimensions*). They often connected them to freedom from pressure or grades:

I felt no pressure, like, I felt, like, now if I say something wrong it is, like, it doesn’t matter, in that sense it felt pretty good.

Saying things without worrying about being graded was contrasted with ordinary school, when students tailored their answers to please the teacher rather than speaking their mind about the texts:

You might not say exactly what you think either, you might say something else that the teacher would like more.

Others said that the freedom of not being marked made for ‘better and more honest discussions’. However, one student thought more would participate in the conversations if they were motivated by grades. The students’ remarks about the SR sessions as a breathing space touched on the concept of mindful presence, as if respite from the pressures and stresses of the school day created a space where they could

understand the texts, or, as one student put it, where ‘you thought more when you read’. Some even said that they lost track of time when discussing the texts and were more present in the moment:

...when you had those breaks and talked then perhaps you didn’t pay much notice to the time or the length of a text.

Like the students, the teachers appreciated the SR sessions because they were free from the usual expectations of performance, achievement and assessment. One teacher even described the experience as an act of resistance, a ‘slap in the face of our times’:

It goes against everything typical of our times really, with us consuming lots of things fast, we are pretty lonely when we do that, I think it’s nice, it is a nice kind of, like, ah, slap in the face of our times that we’re sitting here together and reading a little [...] we’ve lost that a bit and I think it, it’s beautiful.

The literary text

Many students said that they generally liked the texts: they were interesting to discuss, they were socially relevant and they spoke to the students’ own lives. Some even wanted the stories to be longer to find out what happened next. There were also negative reactions to the texts, though. For example, some students thought all the texts were depressing and only bad things happened.

Most discussions in the focus groups revolved around the short stories. The students were mostly interested in the plot. As one student explained, ‘There was always a twist, and the texts were filled with events’. Style was also mentioned:

I thought it was a good description of people’s thinking, but, like, I didn’t think it was an interesting story.

The students had greater problems with the poems, some of which were seemingly too hard to understand, despite being discussed:

Yes, they don’t say straight out what they want to say, they use different kinds of words that are like those they want to say but they don’t say them.

Still, the students thought the discussions helped them understand the poems better.

Reception varied. For some students, the short story ‘Lamb to the Slaughter’ by Roald Dahl was what first came to mind when asked to comment on the literature.

That text had a negative side with a murder and that’s what people mostly remember, so it’s the one we remember most of the texts, it’s the ones we react to most rather than the ones that don’t have so many negative sides, I think.

It might have been because the students were used to crime stories in popular culture. Others said the plot twist at the end of the story made them remember it. The story was also considered hard to predict, because ‘you sort of get fooled’. According to several students, one positive thing was that the story was surprising, even shocking – probably because of how the man is murdered (his wife clubs him with a leg of lamb).

Other stories met with a more mixed response. A short story by Norlin (2020) made some uncomfortable because of the explicit references to sex. Adichie's short story was mentioned as being difficult to understand, possibly because students could not recognise themselves in it. However, quite a few students seem to have identified with the Jewish woman who is the protagonist of a short story by Goldman (1997). A group of Nazis enter the tube carriage where she is sitting. Although they do not act menacingly, their mere appearance causes her to recall her mother's story of the family traumas during the Second World War and fear for her own safety.

Organisational aspects of SR

In the students' discussions, their attitudes to SR were determined by the organisational aspects, which we identified in the data as the RL, the group, the absence of assessment and time.

The RL was emphasised as crucial for making SR a pleasant, rewarding practice, especially in the role of discussion leader, keeping the conversation going:

...and really engages us, I thought, I mean if you were about to say something but hesitated, she noticed you wanted something.

Some students also mentioned how their RL ensured the discussions ranged beyond the text, but was good at bringing them back to the text again. Apart from leading the discussion, the RL was also important as a facilitator for understanding the text.

I mean she was pretty good because she explained words even we, we didn't need to ask, if she noticed we perhaps thought a word was difficult she explained it.

An RL should be able to intuit who is willing to participate in the conversation and when to explain words, implying that pedagogical tact is a requirement. Some students thought the fact their class teacher was the RL could help revive a flagging discussion; others liked the fact that their RL was *not* their class teacher. Either way, the relational aspect was important. The students could experience it as a safe space. Not that a safe space was easy to engineer, however. As explained in one of the teacher RL diaries, there were times when students made irrelevant remarks or laughed at someone else's comments, so the teacher felt the need to point out that everyone's ideas were valuable.

A second organisational aspect was the groups, and specifically that they were small, which was appreciated because it meant more students dared to voice their thoughts and ask questions, even though they were at a stage in their education when they were still positioning themselves and were being positioned by their peers. The small size of the groups also made the students more active.

Third, the absence of assessment was also important for how discussions went. Instead of trying to speak formally in a school idiom to suit the teacher, the students could use their ordinary language and focus on reacting to the story (see *Breathing space*). According to the students in one focus group, it mattered that they had an

external RL because it meant they did not have to play the game of pleasing the teacher by having the correct opinions:

- E: You perhaps don't say exactly what you think, perhaps you say something else the teacher would like more than what you think.
- D: Yeah, like, you know what'll sound right.

Finally, timing played a part. The timetabling of the SR sessions affected students' attitudes – in one group, the students complained about having their session just before lunch. Others appreciated SR's pauses for discussion since it gave them a chance to relax and recharge (see *Breathing space*).

Discussion

How do the themes in the data on students' and teachers' perceptions of SR relate to our theoretical framework, with its four dimensions of reading engagement: behavioural, cognitive, affective and social? The overall impression from students' and teachers' reflections is that SR is a rewarding experience. Even though there were some dissenting views, those students still valued its affordances – the reading aloud and the joint, open-ended, literary meaning-making. This is perhaps explained by selection bias, since only 40 (29%) of the 140 students in the intervention consented to participate in the study. However, of those 40, only 11 students (28%) said that reading was one of their favourite hobbies and the majority (58%) disliked talking about books.

In this section, we relate the themes constructed to cover students' and teachers' perceptions of SR to the theoretical framework and prior research, and provide answers to our research questions.

What signs of reading engagement can be traced in students' and teachers' reflections on SR? Behavioural and cognitive engagement was evident in the students' and teachers' reflections on SR. On several occasions, students said that they wanted to understand and make sense of the literary texts. This ambition and willingness to understand was equally evident in their frustration at their failed meaning-making. From a teacher perspective, such interpretative challenges helped the students remember the texts better. Students occasionally reported trying hard to interpret challenging texts, which called for them to 'excel the mental effort needed to comprehend' (Guthrie et al., 2012, p. 602). This was the case even though they knew contributing to the literary meaning-making in an SR session was voluntary. Despite it not contributing to their grades, they reported being committed to the task and having contributed to the discussions. They seemed to consider it their duty to understand the texts. This was indicative of their reading engagement in the behavioural and cognitive senses (Lee et al., 2021). Students had internalised the normative expectation to contribute to the SR group's joint meaning-making. For students, however, SR was just one of a series of activities in a school system characterised by performance and assessment (Ball, 2003), and they complied with their RL's assumption that they would join in in

the discussions. Although SR was new to them, students had had similar assignments, reading and interpreting literary texts.

The social engagement in SR lessons was indicated by students highlighting the importance of the groups (meaning their peers and the RLs). They valued working with their classmates to understand the texts, as borne out by the teachers who remarked on students thinking together during the SR sessions. According to Lee et al. (2021, p. 546), both ‘the exchange of interpretations of texts with peers’ and ‘appropriate interactions with the teachers and peers, and compliance with implicit and explicit classroom rules of behavior’ are key aspects of social engagement. Thus, the social dimension is an indicator of reading engagement with connections to its behavioural and cognitive aspects. This supports Lee et al.’s claim that the ‘dimensions of reading engagement are naturally intertwined’ (p. 546).

The students displayed affective engagement – the third dimension of reading engagement – in their positive emotional reaction to the SR experience per se, while some found SR a breathing space. Even if at times they struggled to make sense of the literature, students still testified to experiences that went beyond pure understanding. Their view of SR as soothing and a respite from ordinary school echoes Gumbrecht’s concept of ‘presence’ (2004). Gumbrecht relates our desire for presence to ‘our own everyday environment’, which for him is ‘insuperably consciousness-centred’ (p. 106). The sense of freedom and loss of time with SR stems from moments of intensity and the experience of losing oneself while involved in aesthetic activities, which Gumbrecht holds to be fundamental to presence. The ‘things in the world’ (p. 109) that evoked such feelings in the students were the absence of assessment and the experience of doing something with their peers – relaxing and talking – which was quite different to their ordinary school activities. Teachers also valued that SR posed an opportunity to read and discuss literature without having to grade student performances.

This distance from the ‘everyday world’ (p. 100) is Gumbrecht’s prerequisite for presence. Simultaneously, while experiencing presence, students take a more creative role in the joint literary meaning-making, thus paving the way for cognitive engagement. Respite from school life also gave students space, leading to a deeper understanding of the texts. Following Gumbrecht (p. 98), we conclude that the students’ SR experiences oscillated between meaning and presence. Presence and other positive feelings about SR are both ‘indicators’ and ‘facilitators’ of engagement (Lee et al., 2021, p. 547).

How do students and teachers value the salient affordances of SR such as reading aloud and the opportunities for joint, open-ended, literary meaning-making?

Students stressed that it was crucial the texts were read aloud while they read along because they found it easier to stay focused. Their appreciation of listening and thus of reading aloud has been observed in earlier studies of SR (Hodge et al., 2007). Furthermore, teachers appreciated the opportunity to read aloud.

Conforming to the norms and intentions of SR, students reported listening attentively when the texts were read aloud, which indicates behavioural engagement

(Lee et al., 2021). Listening led to what they and their teachers considered a profound engagement with literature in this reading practice, resulting in joint attention to mental content, paving the way for social bonding (Eilan, 2005; O'Madagain & Tomasello, 2021, pp. 4058–4059; Tomasello, 1995, p. 107).

Listening facilitates behavioural, cognitive and social reading engagement (Lee et al., 2021, p. 546), which we find to be intertwined. For both students and teachers, the practice of reading aloud elicits a positive emotional reaction – the fourth dimension of reading engagement. The corollary, a positive 'affective engagement' (pp. 545–546), implies that both listening and oral reading indicate and help with reading engagement. The four dimensions of reading engagement coexist in students' and teachers' views about reading aloud in SR sessions.

For students who displayed behavioural and cognitive engagement, the group and joint literary meaning-making was an asset. Discussions of the texts helped them read between the lines and gain a better understanding, especially of the poetry.

Students plainly took on board others' perspectives in the SR sessions, paying joint attention not only to the texts in front of them, but also to what other people were thinking – the point where joint attention to mental content (O'Madagain & Tomasello, 2021, pp. 4066–4068) presents an opportunity for mind-reading and perspective-taking. At the same time, students evaluated their own textual understanding and beliefs (p. 4071). The result, as they reported it, was a sense of togetherness, the importance of which may at times have exceeded their efforts to understand. Against that, the students had only known one another for a short time. Togetherness, participation and a sense of community were important to them. Again, this was where students paid joint attention to mental content, which can often have a positive effect on social bonding (Gustafsson et al., 2023).

What factors influence student and teacher experiences with SR?

In addition to reading aloud and the group structure, there are other frame factors, primarily the texts themselves. The overall impression from the focus groups is that the students appreciated the texts – literary fiction and 'quality' poetry – especially if they were plot- and character-driven (Brooks, 1984). Reading aloud and joint literary meaning-making engaged them in texts that might otherwise have been challenging if the students had read them by themselves and then taken a written comprehension test.

Gradually, students realised that many texts dealt with serious issues without a happy ending. Some texts, like Adichie's short story and several of the poems, challenged the students' literary and general repertoire (McCormick, 1994), and were considered obstacles to engagement. Dahl's ironic short story, however, about a wife getting away with murdering her husband, drew them in because of its plot-driven character and the twists in the storyline. It should be noted, though, that Dahl's story was the text in the students' first ever SR session.

Students appreciated the RLs because they facilitated reading engagement by keeping the dialogue going, inviting hesitant students to say what they thought, and explaining unknown words and expressions. This aligns with prior research that finds RLs to be crucial in facilitating engagement and ‘emergent thinking’ among group members (Steenberg et al., 2021, p. 238). Teachers, on the other hand, display awareness of not putting pressure on students while doing SR. Opinions differ about whether it is an advantage to be in a group facilitated by a class teacher.

Concluding remarks

This article is limited to students’ and teachers’ perceptions of SR in promoting reading engagement. Future research would benefit from an extensive investigation of students’ reading engagement in SR sessions. Elsewhere we will analyse literary meaning-making among students in SR sessions, but we can already conclude that students and teachers perceive SR as a reading practice that may promote reading engagement. Drawing on Lee et al. (2021, p. 547), we consider this engagement to be a ‘situated reading activity that includes a set of dynamic context-dependent elements’. In contrast to the handful of students who were already avid readers and whose reading engagement could be viewed as ‘an aptitude’, the kind of reading engagement that students and teachers described in the focus groups was that of an ‘event’ (p. 547), steered by the affordances of SR and other factors framing the sessions.

We demonstrate that understanding has a prominent place in the students’ reflections on their SR experiences, aligning with the behavioural and cognitive aspects of reading engagement, while listening, the social dimension and breathing space are the SR affordances connected to the social and affective dimensions of reading engagement. The four different dimensions of reading engagement are intertwined and reinforce one another, so that the individual’s experience of presence in a group setting ultimately paves the way for intense cognitive engagement.

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