

Toward Understanding an Engaged Singaporean Reader and His School's Extensive Reading Program

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Abstract

The primary goal of this paper is to flesh out the dynamic interplay of one individual's literacy worlds, movements within domains, and their relation to his engagement in extensive reading. The context from which this case study emerged was a formative evaluation of an extensive reading program in a Singapore secondary school. Through use of the multidimensional constructs related to engagement in reading (e.g., Guthrie, 2008; Pintrich & Schunk, 2001) and engagement in learning, (Ministry of Education, 2007; Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004) one adolescent's engagement in extensive reading is analyzed. Findings from classroom observations, interviews and attitude toward reading surveys indicate missed opportunities and unfulfilled engagement for Shah Mustaffa², both at home and at school, and an ever present societal need to monitor and measure outcomes (Cheah, 1998). The study concludes with the potential of an engagement framework for understanding extensive readers and challenges in researching engagement in and out-of-school. The case is also made that more expansive views of literacies and engagement can become starting points for the creation of an infectious reading culture.

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2 All identifying information is fictitious to protect the identity of participants and their school.

Introduction

In a conversation with Shah, a Secondary One school student, I asked him, "Why do you think it is important to read?" He responded rapidly: "Because we can improve English and know more. From kindergarten, we are told to read more books. It is very important in Singapore, Jeanne." Early interest in reading is evident in this very typical Singaporean answer, along with a strong focus on the academic benefits of reading and literacy practices. This is the environment within which extensive reading (ER) programs operate in Singapore.

Singapore's education system is at the top of many international comparative measures of educational achievement, and there is a strong consensus that the system is a success (Luke, Freebody, et al., 2005). At the same time, high-stakes exams, early streaming, and a widespread after school tutoring industry characterize the educational system. In many homes, despite evidence that engagement in reading is associated with academic achievement and personal enjoyment, the utility value of pleasure reading is low and the value of textbook reading is high. Accordingly, these behaviors and events can mediate literacy engagement.

Shah is twelve years old. This reticent, trim, Indian Muslim boy belongs to the school leadership club. He lives with his parents and two sisters in a government flat. His father is a travel agent, and his mother is a homemaker. English is the main language spoken at home, although Shah occasionally watches Malay television and reads Malay books. The family is very close, and they spend much of their free time together. Shah and his father go to the mosque together once a week.

In his government-aided, Christian-focused secondary school, teachers and the principal were concerned that the students were not reading extensively, and they invited researchers from Singapore's National Institute of Education to conduct an evaluation of their program.

The first section in this paper provides an overview of the extensive reading and engagement literatures. In section two, a summary of the evaluation findings is presented as background to understand section three, the findings from this reanalysis. The final section explores implications for nurturing engaged, extensive reading. What emerges is a critical need for a more expansive view of literacies that links students' practices with their multiliterate worlds and affords them more holistic opportunities to become fully engaged extensive readers, including choices of activities, texts, literacy modes and modalities.

Engagement and Singapore Education

Traditionally, education in Singapore has “mirrored” Singaporean society, with the ubiquitous presence of “the exam” in schools and its life-path consequences (Cheah & Ng, 1998). According to some scholars (Luke, et. al., 2005; Tan, 2005), the system functions largely to generate high test scores and to disseminate empirically-derived performance indicators. On the other hand, educational reform in Singapore has been ubiquitous and contributed to a changing education paradigm. In 1997, for example, when the Prime Minister introduced an initiative entitled “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation,” the aim was to revamp education by encouraging students to become more entrepreneurial and innovative, by developing active learners with critical thinking skills (Lee, 2004). He described this as essential to creating an education system geared to the needs of the 21st century. Many new initiatives followed, including “Teach Less, Learn More” – a call to promote openness and flexibility in the teaching-learning environment and to “re-examine the fundamentals of teaching and learning, teaching for understanding and not just to pass exams but to engage both the hearts and minds of the students” (MOE, 2004a). This work is based, in part, on the 2005 policy decision to continue to “engage learners and prepare them for life,

rather than for more teaching, tests and examinations “(Tharman Shanmugaratnam, 2005). It is also based on the 2001 English Language syllabus, which puts literacy development at the heart of the English Language instructional program. The vision includes helping

pupils become independent lifelong learners, creative thinkers and problem solvers who can communicate effectively in English. To achieve this, pupils will read widely... (Ministry of Education. 2001:p.2).

One of the programs recommended to reach this goal is extensive reading.

This is particularly compelling in a nation where the Ministry of Education distributed a toolkit to enhance engaged learning in all schools. This toolkit, PETALS™, is described briefly in the next section (Ministry of Education, 2007). The focus of the paper is on the engagement of the heart and mind of one extensive reader.

PETALS was pilot tested and a toolkit was distributed to all schools in 2008. Engagement is described in terms of five components: **P**edagogies that consider students’ readiness to learn and their learning styles, **E**xperiences of learning - where teachers design learning experiences that stretch thinking, interconnectedness and independent learning, **T**one of environment - where teachers create a safe, stimulating & productive environment, **A**ssessment of learning - where teachers give students regular feedback and **L**earning content - where teachers use relevant and authentic learning (PETALS™ Primer: p.40). In keeping with PETALS™, there is a clear commitment to the broad objectives of extensive reading.

Background: Extensive Reading (ER) and Engagement

Extensive reading programs aim to increase student access to books and to provide opportunities for them to read widely and in quantity. Krashen (1993) contends that reading is the only way we become good readers, while others stress diverse factors, including the development of positive attitudes in both first (L1) and second language (L2) readers (Yoon, 2003). Numerous studies and excellent literature reviews are available. (e.g. Susser & Robb 1990; Day & Bamford 1998, website at www.extensivereading.org), along with research that highlights a positive relationship between motivation and engagement and reading comprehension (Guthrie, Wigfield, et al., 2004). Similarly, other scholars cite a growing recent body of second language motivation research that includes a variety of new models and approaches and indicates a relationship between second language (L2) development and diverse types of motivational constructs (e.g., Gardner, et al., 2004; Kondo, 1999; Noels, Clement, & Pelletier, 2001; Brown, 2006).

Recently, in Japan, there has been a proliferation of new ER or *tadoku* guides with high school and university teachers increasingly requiring students to read extensively (Bradford-Watts & O'Brien, 2007). Findings from robust ER implementation studies (see Jacobs, et al., 2006; Rosswell, 2006), along with some hybrid studies cite diverse benefits (Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass & Gorsuch, 2004; Day & Bamford, 1997). Central to this investigation is the notion that good performance in extensive reading is related to "positive feelings towards reading" and "self-perception" (Yamashita, 2004), which includes a positive relationship between affective factors and reading comprehension (Kondo-Brown, 2006).

There are, however, indications of a global decline in individuals who choose to devote their leisure time to reading (Strommen & Maters, 2004). There have often been reports of implementation problems and limited results in some Japanese high schools and

universities where students are accustomed to translating every word from English into Japanese, and as a result, cannot read books quickly (Furukawa, 2006). The findings are similar in Singapore where some diverse ER program benefits have been reported and where other studies have made it clear that more research is needed to assess ER program outcomes (see Wolf, et al., 2005, 2007).

Engagement and ER

What is engagement? Some authors consider engagement and motivation as synonymous and site diverse reasons why students become and stay deeply engaged over time (Fredericks et al., 2004; Meyer & Rose, 1999). Individual's engagement is researched from specific intrinsic or extrinsic perspectives as well as a mix of these factors, of which an individual may or may not be aware. Identified extrinsic factors affecting student engagement include perspective, curiosity, aesthetic involvement, challenge, feelings of competence, and enjoyment. From an intrinsic perspective, researchers have studied compliance, recognition, and grades (Guthrie, McGough, Bennett, & Rice, 1996). Research has also stressed that an overemphasis on extrinsic rewards can diminish a student's motivation to engage in learning and may reduce the quality of learning outcomes (Condry, 1977; Corno, 1993; Kohn, 1993; Lepper & Greene, 1978; Malone, 1981). In contrast, intrinsically motivated students are likely to persist longer, work harder, actively apply strategies, and retain key information more consistently (Guthrie, McGough, et al., 1996; Piaget, 1951; Shulman & Keislar, 1966: Cited in Meyers and Rose, 1999). Others focus on school-based in contrast to individual factors such as: understanding is more important than simply answering correctly; real world interaction; autonomous support; interesting learner centered texts; multidisciplinary challenging instructional strategies, varied pedagogical approaches, the importance of collaboration to develop a learning community;

praise and reward; evaluation; teacher involvement in students' funds of knowledge and coherence of instructional processes (Guthrie & Alao, 1997; NCREL, 1995). Kondo Brown (2006) also notes the influence of socially-grounded motivational constructs in the field of L2 learning, while a recent Singapore thesis supports the inclusion of individual factors, including students' need for relatedness, need for autonomy and need for competence (Abdulla, 2006). In many ways, this diverse literature has identified what might be termed a laundry list of essential variables.

However, in a recent seminal study, Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris (2004) conducted a meta-analysis of the literature and identified three key dimensions of engagement: cognitive, emotional and behavioral.

- *Cognitive* - investment in and commitment to academic work, and the willingness to exert themselves to master complex ideas and difficult skills;
- *Emotional* - reactions to others and connections with the school community; and
- *Behavioral* - participation in school and academic work.

More than likely, engagement is multi-faceted, and these three dimensions are correlated (Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2002). That is, highly engaged learners are likely to be cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally engaged.

A separate body of literature looks specifically at engaged readers, who are defined as individuals who seek to understand, enjoy learning and believe in their reading abilities. In extensive reading, it is assumed that readers who have access to a wide range of interesting materials will read them without difficulty and that these individuals will approach reading with enthusiasm and confidence, which will then promote successful learning, energize learners and

ultimately lead to a lifelong passion for learning (NCREL, 1995). These individuals are also mastery oriented, intrinsically motivated, and they have a sense of self-efficacy (Guthrie, 2000).

As mentioned previously, the Singaporean Ministry of Education developed PETALS to enhance engagement of learners. In this paper, I draw loosely upon two bodies of literature: PETALS (which was derived largely from Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) typology) and the engaged reading literature (e.g., Guthrie, 2008). These frameworks were selected because of their close links and parsimoniousness, and in the case of PETALS, because it was developed for Singaporean schools.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants in this study include Shah, his novice teacher, his parents, the principal, English Department Head and two teacher librarians in the secondary school. Shah volunteered to participate because he thought it would be interesting. The author conducted the case study, and thus, she is well acquainted with Shah. This reanalysis of the case data aims to answer three questions:

- What is the nature of Shah's literacy engagement in and out-of-school?
- How do his attitudes, beliefs and habits, along with those of his parents and the school, directly or indirectly impede or support his extensive reading engagement and literacies?
- What are the broader implications for engaging readers?

In order to answer these questions, many forms of data were re-examined, including interview transcripts of discussions with Shah, his mother and his teachers. These semi- structured interviews were conducted at the beginning and end of the evaluation; while informal interviews were ongoing. Similarly, classroom observational field

notes from 11 observations were reviewed. In keeping with established traditions of data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Berg, 2004), data were coded and recoded in terms of patterns that elicited or did not elicit cognitive, behavioral and affective engagement in extensive reading. The emerging themes were also grounded in a socio-cultural perspective, in part, to ensure focus on construction of meaning in social events and to facilitate exploration of the roles of contextual influences regarding ER in Singapore schools, and, on more limited basis, in out-of-school contexts.

The literature served as a checking device regarding the fit of codes generated from the data and the nature of ER engagement. Some emergent findings were checked with Shah's teachers and school leaders. To enhance credibility, findings presented here are triangulated with evaluation data from Shah's online reading logs and his attitude toward reading pre-post surveys, both of which were analyzed mainly by using descriptive statistics. ANOVA tests were computed to analyze changes in attitudes.

A few caveats are in order. First, overt assessment of engagement is difficult (Almasi, et al., 1997). Second, engagement was not the original research topic; thus, the analyses are limited to available data and are not as extensive as many literacy case studies. Third, the case (and the evaluation) was not able to capture the full nature of Shah's literacies or engagement in or out-of-school. This paper, however, contributes to an understanding of the nature of his engagement across diverse venues, events and practices. It also embraces Shah's voice as a co-researcher and subject of discussion -- which are important to understand factors that constrain or enhance development of student literacies and nurture engagement (Rudduck & Demetrious, 2003).

Findings

At the end of the evaluation, findings indicated that the ER program worked when the whole school read together. In contrast, it did not work well for all students, all the time (Wolf, et al., 2007). Moreover, while both teachers and students enjoyed reading together three times a week, ER did not impact student reading habits in any significant ways. In fact, while most students who entered the school had moderately positive attitudes, over the course of the year, these attitudes became more negative. Moreover, the greatest decline was evident in the attitudes among the highest stream students, particularly male readers. A sobering finding was that the better students and more avid readers held more negative attitudes toward reading in some areas at the end of the year than they did at the beginning. Significant differences were also evident by gender and across the three streams (Wolf, et al., 2007).

Students in the upper and middle streams who performed on par with the mean national scores on the University of New South Wales (UNSW) English International Competitions for the Schools test at the beginning of the year had only small positive gains at the end of the year³. Students in the lowest stream, in contrast, started with mean scores lower than comparable students, and, at the end of the year, had significantly negative gains. This is not to imply, however, any explicit relationship between reading achievement and the extensive reading program. However, it reflects the very strong assessment-consciousness of the school and gestures towards the school's re-interpretation of ER. In sum, there was little evidence to suggest that the ER program had a direct impact on improving Secondary One students' reading abilities, reading attitudes or reading habits.

Moreover, it did not inculcate an "infectious" reading culture in the

3 The school requested pre-post reading testing as part of the ER evaluation; causality is not implied.

school (Wolf, et al., 2007). Over the course of the year, the average student spent 35 hours reading for pleasure and information (news). Findings indicated that 20 percent of the Secondary One students did not read two books per term, while only 20 percent of the students met the department's quota of 20 books per year. Students from the lowest streams were significantly less likely to read for pleasure, while peers in the highest stream were most likely to read.

According to Shah's self-reported data, he read a total of 12.5 hours during the school year, from the following:

Table 1: Summary of Total Texts Read Summary Data, from 4 Terms

Text Type	Number Read
Books	7
Comics	8
Newspaper Articles	6
Magazine Articles	4

Clearly, Shah did not meet the required book quota. However, these data must be interpreted with care because they may not be reliable. Shah did not update his reading log routinely. Questions also remain about measurement errors in the logs and ways in which reading was colonized by the school. As will become evident in the following sections, there were tensions between an outcome focused 'doing school' paradigm and the importance of individuals reading for pleasure inside and outside of school.

Overview of the School's Extensive Reading Program With Unfulfilled Engagement

Following is an introduction to this school-wide extensive reading program.

Start!” booms the discipline master. It is 7:45a.m., and the 20-minute period of Extensive Reading (ER) has begun. All of the students sit on the outdoor concrete sports courtyard in their secondary school, with the exception of students who forgot their books and who have been asked to leave the courtyard. Their classmates, in tidy blue and white school uniforms sit on the floor in neat rows, class by class, girls followed by boys.

The temperature is approaching 90 degrees but everyone is quiet and reading their English books (or newspaper on Mondays), with their teachers alternatively reading with them and monitoring their reading behavior. At exactly 8:05a.m., the discipline master ends the reading session with “Stop!” and starts the daily announcements. This event occurs three times a week, rain or shine.

Consistently, teachers, student and school leaders indicated during interviews that they enjoyed participating in this ER community. In fact, some teachers hoped that this event could be extended to five days of week. Shah, too, enjoyed reading with his classmates, but he “did not like the centipedes in the Parade Square” (Interview, 25 April, 2005). Teachers reported that the program was working better than the previous year because there were no interruptions and everyone read for 20 minutes. During these sessions, our observations indicted that about 95 percent of the students read independently and were on task (Wolf, et al., 2007).

Behavioral engagement was also evident in the biweekly ER classroom activities, and both students and teachers reported enjoying these classes. A contrasting strong negative theme emerged regarded affective engagement. To be more specific, Shah and many of his

peers expressed the view that they did not like to have to choose and exchange pre-selected books (which were vetted by teachers). Texts that did engage them, such as the globally popular Harry Potter series and ghost stories, for example, were restricted. In addition, most teachers discouraged or prohibited reading of comics, popular magazines and internet texts. They perceived many of the diverse text types often read by the students outside of school as impediments to 'real' reading. Students cited practices that discouraged them from reading: exchanging books every three weeks, keeping a daily online reading log, writing news summaries, submitting book-related assignments and meeting school reading quotas.

Shah's Cognitive, Affective and Behavioral Engagement Out-Of-School

When Shah was young, his mother often read to him and brought him to the library, contributing to a rich, text filled world and establishing a close literacy interpersonal relationship (Fredericks, et al., 2004). These connections, according to Shah, nurtured positive feelings about books and reading (Interview, 25 April, 2005). These days, he enjoys reading magazines, books and comics that his sisters bring home and the information books and stories in his room, as well as the Islamic religious books and newspapers in his home. His favorite book is the *Prisoner of Azkaban*. His mother adds that he likes to read about aliens and "boy style materials."

An emphasis on cognitive engagement is evident in Shah's home, where, according to his mother, education is monitored and regulated daily. "Once my husband comes home, he starts his sermon on education. His main concerns are education and discipline. He says you should not waste talent. Sometimes they are influenced by friends and hand phones. Why make your mind lazy? It is very important to put in the extra effort (Interview, 7 August 2005)."

During an interview, when Shah was asked what about the impact

on his life if he could not read, his answer focused on academic work and cognitive engagement, "It would not be good to understand other things. Someone who reads a lot is someone who understands stuff well. People need to read well, because then they can understand things in an emergency." Reading is associated with achievement, expectations and pleasure. A perfect day for Shah includes playing computer games and Play Station and reading. His mother's three wishes for her son are "Go to university; have a good tutor; and come up in life" (Interview, 7 August 2005).

Yet, more often than not, he is likely to read books that are too easy for him or to reread texts from his primary school days because it is "hard to find good books." He determines difficulty level by the thickness of the book. He also spends a lot of time avoiding difficult materials by rereading easy books, comics and Play Station magazines. He never finished the *Complete Sherlock Holmes*, which his uncle had given him as a gift because it was too difficult. This avoidance of difficult books indicates that he may not have a strong sense of self-efficacy (Guthrie, 2008).

What Shah reads in his free time depends on his mood: "If I am in a good mood, I read happy books." His favorite author is J.K. Rowlings. At least one of his favorite books was discouraged by the school - J.K. Rowling's *Goblet of Fire*. When a new Harry Potter book was released, Shah hoped that his parents would buy it for him. They did not and he had to put his name on the public library waiting list, where he waited for over two months before he could read the book.

While Shah is part of a world in which he does not challenge himself, he aspires to be a scientist. He explains that "they expect me to do well. They want me to go to college. All parents want their children to go to college." He routinely spends about two hours a day on homework and on preparing for his private math tuition lessons. When he reads, it is largely for the information and the understanding

that he gains from it. Shah considers himself a good reader, a view shared by his parents. His teacher describes him as "one of the few best ones in the class. He likes to read. He is articulate."

A highly desired outcome of the extensive reading program is a lifelong love of reading. Thus, as part of the evaluation, we conducted a survey to assess the Secondary 1 students' attitudes toward reading and how it changed over the course of the school year. Finding from the analysis of Shah's beginning of the year survey indicated that he liked to read a wide variety of texts--album covers, comics, email, encyclopedias, letters, manuals, newspapers, novel, person homepages, picture books, SMS, song lyrics and teenage magazines. Analyses of his pre-post attitude toward reading surveys indicated a slight decline in attitude over the course of the school year. For example, he described himself as a very good English reader at the beginning of the year, but a good reader at the end. Shah's explanation is that he is reading "much less than last year." In his end of year survey, he strongly agreed with the statement that the exchange of books was a waste of time. A great zeal was not suggested in other post attitudes toward reading, in that he indicated that reading played a limited role in his everyday life. He felt that reading does not have any impact on shaping his opinions, nor does he see it as a means to escape his problems. Interestingly, when we consider emotional engagement, Shah liked to talk to his friends about what he read at the beginning of the year, but, at the end of the year, he disagreed with this statement. Interview transcripts also indicated that Shah did not read at all during exam periods.

His mother relates ER behavioral engagement to the Singapore life-style because she thinks that students "do not have time to read books due to homework and projects. They have no time to relax." When asked if she thought the school is a supportive environment for her son's literacy learning and practices (and by definition, one that would also be engaging), she replied, "Sometimes, but not really."

The family has considered moving to Canada to get away from Singapore's intense competition and to seek opportunities for more engaged learning.

Engaged reading can be increased by practices that energize students, including time and effort spent on diverse, interesting out-of-school readings (Guthrie, Wigfield, et al., 2004). Shah is very IT savvy, with computer featuring predominantly in his life for research, homework and email. Yet, in his home, there is no computer. His mother says that "We do not want children to go onto the internet. We want them to have that slowly, but we cannot avoid it." Sometimes, when Shah's father brings home his office laptop, he and his sisters can use it. Providing this choice may validate his literacies and increase his motivation to read.

In an ideal world, measuring the nature and degree of engagement, at home and in the community, and gathering evidence about ways in which they impact his ER engagement, would be easy. However, as the preceding sections show, data to assess the full extent of ER outside of school, and more specifically, engaged reading, are both sparse. On the other hand, many factors relating to his engagement and disengagement were evident including participation in diverse reading and writing practices, multiple written text types, enjoyment of multi-literacies, along with commitment to academic work but little willingness or desire to read "difficult materials" and restricted computer access. While his parents claimed to encourage reading, they also had a strong focus on exam preparation, one similar to other Singaporean parents who buy workbooks, assign revision exercises, impose study periods during vacations and send their children to tuition lessons, all which may obscure the pleasures of reading. This finding was also consistent with two barriers cited by Lok (1999): a perceived teacher need to focus on skills to prepare students for tests and home-related factors.

In many ways, Shah is typical of his peers. He comes from a home

where he is encouraged to succeed in school. His family regards education as a very serious matter and places a premium on school values (Fredericks, et al., 2004). He identifies with these expectations, but we know that he is also a typical adolescent who enjoys gaming and watching television. Yet, there is no computer in his home. The story that emerges is one of rich complexities in his life and literacy practices, some of which contribute to missed opportunities to create a passion for reading and missed opportunities to nurture multiliteracies at home.

Thus far, the paper had presented a brief overview of the ER program and findings from the formative evaluation. These two layers of analysis suggest reasons why the program was not meeting the Ministry of Education objective of developing life-long learners. We now turn to Shah's classroom and school and to a similar story of missed engagement.

Literacy Practices at School: Unfulfilled Engagement in ER and English Language Classrooms

Traditionally, Singaporean teachers have employed didactic teaching methods. In contrast, Shah's novice teacher, Ms. Raj, aims to build student confidence and arouse their interest and desire to learn. She describes her teaching philosophy as follows:

I think the main thing is to engage students first - even when it counters the school's policy on comics and ghost stories. Some students when they read comics, okay, engaging....Some students are repulsed by reading because they cannot understand. So you must engage them first...I would love it if they would read comics. I think they are great. I don't discourage ghost stories. The school is discouraging ghost stories (Interview 1 April 2005).

To nurture engagement in extensive reading, one of her pedagogical goals, she routinely utilizes multiliteracies in the classroom. She routinely introduces contemporary issues to nurture authentic learning experiences. Emotional engagement is encouraged, as well, through opportunities to work as a class and in groups. Students have opportunities to give presentations, write different text forms, and read diverse texts. Creating a “worry free” environment is important, along with encouragement of questioning, which, by definition, can spawn engagement (Almasi, et al., 1996).

The following snapshot indicates ways in which Shah’s energetic teacher weaves in and out of engaged pedagogical moments in one ER biweekly activity classes. The Monday morning in which all the students in the school read the *Straits Times* newspaper in the courtyard, she assigned an article and showed a video clip about Terri Shiavo.⁴ The teacher told the class “She passed away on March 3. What happened to her? Let’s look at the website.” Students then silently read the information from a website on the large screen in the front of the classroom. She then told them to “get into groups of three, and answer a question posted on the white board: Is it right for her husband to let her go like that?” In Shah’s group, attentiveness was high. Shah is smiling, and from time to time, he laughs. However, today, students in his group are not as engaged in sustained conversation as in some of the other groups, indicated by less eagerness to talk about this article or to agree or disagree actively with each other, perhaps showing slight withdrawal (O’Brien, et al., 2007. Almasi, et al., 1996).

The rest of this typical ER lesson proceeded in a more traditional manner, with diverse literacy practices and events. The teacher then

4 Shiavo suffered extensive brain damage in 1990, and went into a permanent vegetative state. What followed was a battle between her parents, who wanted her to be kept alive, and her husband who wanted her life support to be removed. She died in 2005 when the life support was removed.

asked one student where his group stands on the issue of euthanasia. He says it is not right because Shiavo was on the road to recovery. She then moves to another group and asks someone else to share the group opinion. Then, Ms. Raj tells the class to turn to page four in the newspaper and find the word euthanasia. Shah follows directions and finds the word. He then shows the girl next to him where it is while the teacher is writing the definition on the board. Soon, students are told to write their opinion of mercy killing for homework, a topic which may have few links to their background experiences and which may (or may) not be intrinsically motivating (Guthrie, 2008).

It is interesting to note that assessment, a component of the PETAL framework, was more often tied to a writing than a reading assignment. Moreover, we did not observe regular student feedback in class or on many student ER activity assignments. It is also important to note the overall effect of the class from a subsequent interview. When Shah was asked if he enjoyed the lesson, he said that he did and gave numerous reasons for his enjoyment, indicating that he was an engaged participant.

Observations indicated that the teacher then asked students to read a news article about home schooling. To construct meaning, the teacher wrote the words "advantages" and "disadvantages" on the white board. Students called out pros and cons, and lots of bantering was heard as they interacted with each other, shared views and received teacher support. The overall effect was a class that was energetic and relaxed. Students are comfortable with their teacher, and she is comfortable with them. However, as in the previous activity, discussion is teacher managed and the teacher rarely challenges students towards higher forms of critical thinking. Often, she blends homework into the ER tapestry, today, by asking students to express their opinion about home schooling. It was evident that assignments may not have been intrinsically motivating from the large number of questions that the students asked about ways in

which the assignment will be assessed. A story of restricted engagement emerges, full of promise, but failing to reach the full potential of engaged readers.

During time spent in class, we observed students in activities unrelated to the learning task. In the scenario just described, the challenge of getting starting was serious for Shah and non-task engagement occupied much of his time. First, he took out a paper and pencil, sharpened the pencil and gave a pen to the girl next to him. Then, he chatted with her. Next, he spent additional empty time looking out the window before starting the assigned task and working diligently. In a subsequent interview, he says that it is difficult to write in school and indicated a state of low efficacy about this type of writing assignment.

When the bell rang, no one moved. One might interpret this behaviour in diverse ways: a measure of active behavioral engagement, cooperation with teachers and classroom routines or perhaps in terms of 'doing school.' As noted by many scholars, it is difficult for teachers to know if students are cognitively engaged (Almasi, 1997; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003), an issue that is also faced by researchers. Unfortunately, we could not probe further.

In many English language lessons, pro-forma fill-in-the-blank and comprehension worksheets were ubiquitous. Skill based approaches dominate classroom literacy practices with many worksheets showing little connection to student lives. Analysis of Shah's papers indicated sloppy work, numerous crossed-out words but largely accurate answers. Dutifully filled out papers did not show pride in the work or capture an engaged learner (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). In contrast, Shah could be engaged at a deep level when an assignment was interesting, such as designing an ideal classroom, where meticulous detail and creativity characterized his neat work. These graphic literacy practices also served to validate multiliteracies.

Shah felt that it was rare for reading to stimulate his thinking.

Analysis of his school reading journal indicated very short entries. When questioned about this, Shah stated that I often write very little in my reading journal because "I have few ideas (Interview 18 April 2005)." However, there was one experience recounted in his required weekly summary of a news article where he illustrated both his compassion and powerfully articulated the ubiquitous connection between "doing school" and student daily lives. He wrote, "I feel sad for the young girl, Wan Yiang, who fell four stories. She wants to go to school to study. Her family and friends care for her (2 March 2005, School Journal)." The journal becomes a literate practice that gives a student opportunities to shape his identity and share concerns, but he cannot escape the demands of school.

Many findings are consistent with the principles of engagement advocated in PETALS: a productive, supportive environment, relevant, authentic texts, and a teacher who encourages social interaction and connection among students. Teacher Raj claims to use pedagogical strategies that allow students to become engaged and to feel that they control their own learning (NCREL, 2004; Guthrie, 2008). According to her, diverse pedagogies provide a rationale for encouraging students to use and build on their competence in a range of representational practices.

Nonetheless, in this safe and relatively productive engagement, the classroom follows a traditional structure: the teacher's desk at the front in one of the corners by the white board, and students' desks arranged in four parallel rows of desk pairs. When she calls on a student, he or she stands to respond. One infrequent activity is "time to just read" newspapers or books. Moreover, in spite of teacher Raj's purported emphasis on engagement, her implicit definition of literacy engagement is narrow. During many of our observations, high levels of cognitive engagement, interconnectiveness and deep learning for reading engagement were absent (O'Brien, Beach & Scharber, 2007). On the other hand, in the lesson about Shiao, the extent to which

students could relate and which student's out-of-school interests could be addressed could not be ascertained. Rather, when classes described earlier are stripped down, one finds the predominance of an assembly line of teacher directed multiliteracies – teacher selected texts discussed by students in terms of diverse teacher proposed reading activities, followed by a writing assignment and homework in which little attention is paid to adolescent needs to make choice (Guthrie, 2008). At the very basic level, these pedagogical practices do not nurture the full potential of engagement.

The School ER and Literacy Environment

While all the Secondary One teachers viewed literacy as an essential tool and the ER program as their quintessential reading program, there was also a well-established belief that multi-literacies, especially those used outside of the classroom, competed with extensive reading time. In an evaluation team meeting, for example, during a long discussion about ways in which student time spent on computers and gaming were competing with students' home and schools' classroom literacy practices, one teacher was adamant that they "don't read a lot; they are more into computer games. That sort of thing...There are lots more distractions. The computer is one." This so called "displacement hypothesis" (Luke, 2002) is a common theme in many nations where TV, computer games and other media are seen as taking time away from middle school students' study and dominating their spare time. Ironically, teachers know that multiliteracies engage students out-of-school but these reading practices are invalidated and dismissed in school where they are viewed as undermining the purposes of extensive reading, as opposed to valued cultural capital.

"The exam" was always looming and framed learning objectives. One day when I arrived, a large signboard placed at the school entrance had a 37-day 'countdown' to the final exams, serving as a

constant and unambiguous reminder. That morning, Shah's teacher started the lesson with the question "How many days to your exam?" These high-stakes exams excluded extensive reading because it is not a tested subject. Some teachers told their students not to read extensively during exam preparation periods.

Some teachers attempt to control students with threats of frequent grades and by demanding compliance (Guthrie, 2008). In this program, numerous controls were evident, including graded ER assignments, ER quotas, logs and tri-weekly book exchanges. Shah was clear that his teacher does not encourage him to read for enjoyment. Similarly, his mother feels that teachers are "under pressure. They want them to do projects and homework...The child is in between. They are not balanced in meeting the demands of 'doing school' and in promoting reading (Interview, 7 August 2005)." As for the Head of Department, "you need to push kids to get them engaged and entice them (Interview, 14 July 2005)." Revealingly, by taking a 'deficit' view of students as disinterested and unmotivated, and by monitoring students carefully, engaged learning is not encouraged. It requires pedagogical strategies that encourage students to feel they can control their own learning (NCREL, 2004). The features of the program just cited seem to have contributed to unfulfilled engagement.

When we interviewed the principal, she stated that "Reading is very, very important (Interview, 26 December 2005)." Yet, the ER evaluation revealed that the school literacy culture was not infectious and the library did not play a vital role in the literate lives of the students. As soon as when one climbs the steps to the second floor and studies the low book circulation statistics posted on the bulletin board outside of the multimedia center, it is clear that books are not widely borrowed. The first observation is that students use this venue largely to email friends and complete homework assignments. Other activities include chatting quietly with friends and, at the same time,

enjoying the air conditioning. The next observation is that new fiction or popular culture books and multi-media materials are hard to come by. In the new books section, mainly self-help and non-fiction, spiritually focused materials can be found. The multimedia centers' collection echoed restricted literacies and text practices evident in the extensive reading program.

According to Shah, there is "nothing much" in the library, and his teacher agrees, saying she would not borrow books from the school library if she were a student either, and suggesting significant barriers to engagement. Similarly, according to a teacher who was a member of the school library "we have a lot of books in the library, not being utilized at all." Another teacher described the current state of the library as follows: "is not something we desire. Books are quite old. Some books especially fiction – too simple. Now trying to build up nonfiction (Interview, 25 October, 2005).

Different definitions of literacy and reading emerged. According to a teacher librarian "parents think reading is a waste of time unless students are reading their textbooks or related books;" while another one added that the students "have yet to see the beauty, the value, of reading. When she was asked her one wish, the answer was "A complete facelift! Make it more inviting (Interview, 25 October, 2005)."

The evaluation further suggested an overwhelming dominance of the exam culture with residual overtones of a top-down educational model that continues to limit the full extent of engaged learning in this school (Wolf et. al., 2007). However, when the Head of Department asked us to set up a system to track extensive reading outcomes, she indicated a need to help students take responsibility for their reading and to "be able to monitor progress." Students did not use the online system as intended. Rather, Shah and his peers rebelled against daily logging by infrequently logging in and by providing incomplete data. They maintained that logging was a painful, tedious task. Another key finding from the evaluation was that Shah's teacher (and others)

struggled with the purposes of the log and infrequently monitored student ER progress or provided feedback to students. Many of them preferred last year's assessment practice of end-of-book tests because it "compelled adolescents to read and get good marks."

It was not until the middle of the year that an indirect effect of the online logs became clear. During a discussion with the principal, she indicated clear support for the logs despite the fact that "Logging on is not exciting for them. No big deal. It is only for us, they are not interested (Interview, 26 December, 2004)." Similarly, the Head of Department elaborated upon the importance of evidence based extensive reading data in their annual self-assessment report, despite indications that students "do not see it as useful" (Interview, 14 July 2005). These comments suggest that the leaders are aware of the difficulties of motivating teachers and students to monitor ER progress. The implications of these concerns are, unfortunately, beyond the scope of the present study.

Stated differently, a theme that emerges is that the engagement policies promoted by the Ministry of Education and this school's extensive reading program represent a terrain that was full of contradictions. Despite commitments to enhance extensive reading, teachers held strong beliefs about the importance of monitoring outcomes and a preference for specific types of print-centric texts. These conceptions did not begin at the level of student' lived experiences (Dewey, 1938). Rather, logging and exchanging school-sanctioned books every three weeks failed to engage Shah or his peers. They struggled against the measurement of outcomes and with restricted literacies and school policies that limited their choices and silenced their multivariate literacy practices. In an end-of-year focus group, when students were asked what a perfect school would look like, they requested subjects that interest them and more activities relevant to their lives. Thus, it appears that many policies and practices contributed to Shah's (and peer) unfulfilled engagement and to a school

where new ways to engage readers were not routinely considered.

Discussion and Implications

In seeking to create engaged learners, the Minister of Education (2005) recognizes the “need to develop our students holistically... and to equip our students with an enquiring spirit, a certain zest for learning that carries them through life.” The Minister emphasized repeatedly the importance of giving students the room to exercise initiative and shape more of their own learning (Tharman Shanmugaratnam, 2005). While engaged readers can be equipped with this spirit, it is clear that this extensive reading program did not engage Shah fully.

Importantly, some changes are starting to take place. In Singapore, governmental policies continue to introduce new initiatives to encourage schools to “re-examine the fundamentals of teaching and learning, teaching for understanding and not just to pass exams but to engage both the hearts and minds of the students,” and resources are provided to support such efforts (MOE, 2004). In the community, the National Library Board introduced a “READ! Singapore” initiative to engage a nation of readers. Within Shah’s school, students will be permitted to read magazines once a month. By explicitly starting to spread the message that pleasure reading is fun, sustainable change may result. If this message can be further embedded in the school and community it can “offer ways of reading the world, and thus literacy itself is full of possibilities whose manifestations span the many ways it can be used” (Worthman, 2002: p.463).

When we followed Shah into his home, we saw parents who actively encouraged him to read and to succeed in school but who also aligned home literacy practices and events closely with Singaporean outcome oriented educational values. He spends hours on homework, test preparation, home-imposed revision tasks and extra tutoring. We also have seen him creatively engage in literacy practices that encourage him to define himself within these dominant discourses. Yet, he has

indicated that he has little success with “lengthy” texts. For him, reading more books “is very important in Singapore” because “everyone wants to be known as smart” and where reading strongly associated with the acquisition of new vocabulary skills. His discourses intertwine reading with pleasure but we do not see him reading often. More often, “Reading is not its own reward,” a concept assumed to be inherent in engaging extensive readers (Day & Bamford, 2002).

Finding indicated varied situations and contexts and different constructions of literacies – some of which facilitated and others of which constrained Shah’s full ER engagement (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). In school, he was often confronted by a culture that is torn between measuring outcomes and nurturing an infectious reading culture, one hesitant to engage students in multimodal communities or to provide adolescents with what Guthrie (2008) calls academically significant and realistic choices to support their self-directed reading. As we discovered, unintentionally, Shah got contradictory messages reinforced at multiple levels. Clearly, more research on how to engage students in extensive reading would be valuable. More research on ways the school and teachers can engage readers such as Shah, along with ways to bolster low self-efficacy and advance ownership of reading is needed (Guthrie, 2008).

Ironically, I learned recently that the morning extensive reading periods were stopped in this school. This was another example of why getting students engaged in ER is challenging. On the other hand, Guthrie (2008) contends that dramatic improvements in students’ engagements are feasible. He suggests two simple starting points for educators – begin with conversations about engaging readers and administer surveys to assess extent of engaged learning. This paper suggests other ways to move forward, using two frameworks: engaged learning and engagement in reading (Ministry of Education, 2007; Fredericks, et al., 2004; Guthrie, 2008). These suggestions come with two caveats – they are not intended to be exhaustive and they require

further investigation to confirm their usefulness to move beyond outcome focused restricted literacies and a library where texts are rarely used.

Table 2: Directions to Consider to Strengthen Engagement in One School's Extensive Reading Program

Behavioral	Teachers and parents encourage students to participate in multimodal practices. Students display effort and persistence to read extensively in spaces where there are no disjuncture between their in and out-of-school literacy worlds. Families and teachers serve as role models. Program obligations are minimized. Students are encouraged to adapt strategies to meet program requirements. ER classrooms continue to promote socially supportive activities.
Emotional	Reading events and space make learning authentic for students by mirroring students reading worlds and interests and valuing their everyday social capital in the home and community. Additional resources are given to the multimedia center so that it may be more closely aligned with out-of-school and school literacies. It can become a space that welcomes and engages readers in a wide variety of print and non-print texts. Students are empowered to select interesting print and non-print texts, in and out-of-school, at their own pace and level (Guthrie, 2008), and text choices, interests and voices are valued. Teachers and librarians create an environment where students feel supported and where trust is engendered. Student voices are given increased agency.
Cognitive	Teachers select pedagogies that considers students' learning styles; promotes inter-connectedness and develop independent learning. Across the curriculum, make efforts to create a stimulating literacy environment with spaces that nurture multidimensional engagement; spaces that are harmonized and mutually supporting. Better align literacy experiences with self (or school mandated) assessment and provide timely feedback. Encourage independent learning and metacognitive competence.

The suggestions highlight the fundamental roles that teacher and peer support, classroom literacy events and practices, autonomy support and assessment practices played in the engagement of one student and his literate world in and out-of-school. Competing programmatic components and the school's own culture, along with the complex and multifaceted nature of engagement and attitudes, beliefs and habits, impeded Shah's extensive reading engagement. Teachers and student were pulled in different directions and the extensive reading program morphed into a Singapore version (Wolf,

et al., 2007). These experiences demonstrated the importance of reexamining narrowly defined literacies and exam-driven discourses to position students so that they have active, dynamic roles in their own literacy development (Verhoeven & Snow, 2002). Teachers, as well, need to have opportunities for safe, sustained reflection on their literacy beliefs and practices and feel comfortable questioning and tackling everyday dogmatic assumptions. The discussion also demonstrates that we can learn from social cognitive models of motivation that emphasize that one needs to think about literacy and learning in terms of many factors that play a role in mediating engagement and subsequent outcomes (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002).

Additional issues are in need of further deliberation. Specifically, further research into ways to include student and teacher voices, in multiple contexts and literacy spaces would be valuable. Continued discussion will also be useful about “conventionally defined boundaries, looking for flows rather than states, focusing on networks and layered connections” (Nespor, 1997: p. xiv). While it appears impossible to dismiss assessments, closer alignment with teacher and student beliefs and more de-emphasis of mandates are suggested. The study also raises a need to look more closely at the uneven emphasis upon literacies in the school, and, as students move to home and peer groups, and how these shape reading for pleasure. To meet program aims, students must be encouraged to read independently, what and when they wish. In other words, creating a more engaging ER program will not be easy. Sustained change can only happen when it goes beyond the individual, program, texts and exams to the educational belief systems and relationships of stakeholders.

Here in Japan, extensive reading programs are growing. While caution must be exercised in generalizing from Singapore to Japan and from one case study, implications that may help realize the broad objectives of ER, including engaged ER readers, merit consideration.

It is clear that broad conceptions of literacies, sustained use of multi-literacies, and giving students choices to read a large amount of interesting materials at their own pace and without emphasis on assessment are a *sine qua non*. Furthermore, since extensive reading is meant to be done mainly outside of school, it is important to anticipate the ways in which the values and assumptions that underlie extensive reading fit—or fail to fit—into homes and communities and give students the opportunity to take responsibility for their own reading. Borrowing loosely from Yamashita's (2004) study conducted in a Japanese university where extensive reading was also compulsory and where some readers focused on getting good grades, these discourses were at odds with the goal of engaging readers. Stand-alone programs are less likely to engage students than whole school environments that proclaim the value of reading for enjoyment and value students' everyday worlds. Collectively, all educators can work together to send readers the message that their needs and interests are a priority in and out of class. As argued by Luke and Elkin, we need to "understand both the sociocultural and economic contexts where growing up and where being 'literate' and 'adolescent' occur" (2002: p. 670). And, as Luke warns, "For literacy teachers not to attend to the complex technologically and symbolically mediated textual worlds into which youngsters are immersed and how they structure their experience, knowledge, identity and social relations would be politically and pedagogically irresponsible" (Luke, 2002: p. 198).

When reading engagement grows, it becomes self-generating (Guthrie, 2001). Key components of a Singaporean school's extensive reading programs, however, did not mirror the everyday lived experiences of Shah or engage him fully. Rather, it raised the need to restructure literacy conversations from what a student argued – "They shouldn't ask us to log in - it is a pain. You should be reading because it is on your own will, not because the school wants you to. Then I don't see the purposes of reading" – to conversations about ways in

which the school's quintessential reading program can further realize the aim of nurturing engaged students and foster lifelong readers.

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