IDENTIFYING INDICATORS OF READING ENGAGEMENT AMONG UPPER-SECONDARY STUDENTS DURING SHARED READING SESSIONS

ANNA W. GUSTAFSSON[1], MARTIN MALMSTRÖM[2], & ANDERS OHLSSON[1]

[1]Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University, Sweden
[2]Department of Culture, Languages and Media, Malmö University, Sweden

Abstract

Reading engagement is widely recognised as critical for literacy development, yet its dynamic nature poses challenges for empirical analysis. This study examines reading engagement as a situated event within shared reading (SR) sessions involving 40 students, organised into four groups, in vocational upper-secondary education. The data consists of two video-recorded SR sessions per group, resulting in a total of eight sessions drawn from a six-week intervention. Drawing on conversation analysis and our own operationalisation of reading engagement, as presented in this article, literature discussions were analysed at the micro level. The data were coded for indicators of the different dimensions of reading engagement. The findings show high behavioural engagement, increased cognitive and social engagement across sessions, and more frequent affective expressions. The analysis reveals that the dimensions of reading engagement are intertwined and mutually supportive of each other. Social engagement occupies a central position due to its potential to influence and strengthen cognitive engagement. The study contributes with a methodological framework for analysing engagement as an emergent classroom event. Furthermore, the study shows that SR is a context in which multidimensional reading engagement can be observed.

Keywords: Dialogic teaching, literature instruction, reading practices, reading aloud, collaborative meaning-making

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Corresponding author: Anna W Gustafsson, Centre for Language and Literature, Lund University, Lund, Box 201, 221 00 Lund, Sweden. Email: anna_w.gustafsson@nordlund.lu.se

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading engagement is widely recognised as a foundational element in the development of reading literacy (Guthrie, 2004; Guthrie et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2021; OECD, 2019; Wigfield et al., 2008). According to the OECD, reading engagement comprises an "interest in and enjoyment of reading, a sense of control over what one reads, involvement in the social dimension of reading and diverse and frequent reading practices" (OECD, 2019, p. 29). Moreover, prior research suggests that reading engagement has the potential to counteract relatively static background variables such as gender and socioeconomic status, which may pose barriers to reading achievement (Guthrie, 2004). Importantly, while engagement is introduced in the OECD framework as implying the motivation to read (OECD, 2019, p. 29), we see motivation and engagement as distinct constructs. Motivation may be defined as "what energizes and directs behaviour" and encompasses individual beliefs, values, and goals that may influence reading behaviour, whereas engagement refers to the behaviour itself, to actually being involved in a reading activity (Guthrie et al., 2012; cf. Afflerbach & Harrison, 2017; Conradi et al., 2014). Reading engagement is a dynamic, and in many ways evasive concept, which depends upon both situational and individual factors (Guthrie et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2021; McGeown & Conradi Smith, 2023). In line with Lee et al. (2021), we see reading engagement as a multidimensional construct that comprises *behavioural, cognitive*, *social*, and *affective* dimensions that are conceptualised as connected and intertwined.

In their seminal review article, Lee et al. (2021) observe that most literacy studies conceptualise reading engagement as either an aptitude or an event. Importantly, scales and indexes developed to measure reading engagement for instructional purposes have largely relied on teachers' perceptions of student engagement (Wigfield et al., 2008) or on students' self-reported reading engagement (McGeown & Conradi Smith, 2023). These instruments have primarily been designed to measure aptitude, although Wigfield et al. (2008) also incorporate observations of individual reading behaviour in the classroom. While numerous studies have highlighted collaboration and classroom-based discussion about literature as practices with the potential to promote reading engagement (e.g. Aksnes et al., 2025; Guthrie et al., 2012; McGeown & Conradi Smith, 2023), few studies have examined what occurs in such collaborative reading practices, and the ways in which reading engagement may emerge and become observable.

In this article, we explore reading engagement as a situated and unfolding event, "a situated reading activity that includes a set of dynamic, context-dependent elements" (Lee et al., 2021, p. 547). We examine reading engagement within the context of group-based literature discussions focusing on a specific reading practice, the *shared reading* model (SR), and its potential to both foster and accommodate reading engagement within a school context. We thus set out to explore how reading engagement becomes observable or inferable through the literary discussions that emerge in the read-aloud format of SR.

1.1 Reading engagement as an event: Working definitions

To examine reading engagement as an event, we adopt a four-dimensional framework encompassing behavioural, cognitive, affective, and social engagement (cf. Alexander, 2018; Lee et al., 2021; Lutz et al., 2006). We identify and explore observable aspects of these dimensions, while acknowledging that some may remain "invisible" (cf. Lee at al., 2021, p. 545). As Alexander (2018, p. 737) points out, "efforts to deconstruct engagement into its constituent forms demand further interrogation on the grounds that any single behaviour identified as 'engagement' is likely the externalisation of other engagement forms invisible to the naked eye". With this caveat in mind, we provide working definitions, grounded in previous research, to support the operationalisation of *observable indicators* for the analysis of reading engagement. These definitions are inevitably constructs—in reality, they are connected and intertwined.

In previous studies, *behavioural engagement* is usually defined as time spent reading or effort and persistence (Fredricks et al., 2004; Guthrie et al., 2012), and as something that can mediate the effects of classroom practices on reading outcomes (Guthrie et al., 2012). Fredricks et al. (2004), who discuss behavioural engagement in school, include attention, asking questions, and contributing to discussions as behavioural engagement. In this study, we define behavioural engagement as *the extent to which students are taking part in the literature discussion and how focused they are on the task at hand*. Behavioural engagement is thus possible to observe through quantitative measures: it refers to the *extent* to which the students take active part in literature discussions. In contrast, cognitive, affective and social engagement concern qualitative aspects of this participation: what students *do* when they take part in the literature discussion.

Cognitive engagement has been studied both as aptitude (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Guthrie et al., 2012), and as the use of strategies, for example meta-cognitive strategies to plan, monitor, and evaluate understanding (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 64). In the context of reading, cognitive engagement can be seen as "being thoughtful and purposeful in reading and being willing to exert the effort necessary to comprehend texts" (Lee et al., 2021, p. 545). In one of the few observational studies of cognitive engagement in classroom interaction, Lutz et al. (2006) judge "the relevance and quality of students' verbal answers" (p. 5). In another, Helme and Clarke (2001) focus on linguistic indicators of cognitive and meta-cognitive activity in mathematics lessons and specify behaviour such as questioning, exchanging ideas, giving explanations, etc. In this study, we define cognitive engagement as *the students' employment of strategies to make sense of a literary text or of the discussion*. In one sense, however, cognitive engagement can be seen as holding a special status: after all, both reading and literary discussions are cognitive activities. This means that, when the students are affectively, socially, or behaviourally engaged, they are simultaneously engaged in a cognitive activity.

Notably, few of the studies reviewed by Lee et al. (2021) explicitly address *social reading engagement* (p. 562). Furthermore, the definitions in previous research are diverse and the distinctions between social, behavioural, and cognitive engagement are somewhat unclear. Finn and Zimmer (2012, p. 102), for example, define social engagement as the extent to which a student complies with norms of behaviour in the classroom, while others see it as transactional relationships with the characters in books as well as with others (Ivey & Johnston, 2013), or as the exchange of interpretations with other students and teachers (Lutz et al., 2006, p. 5). Such collaborative practices have been seen to enhance student motivation, increase reading comprehension, and influence reading achievement (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Guthrie et al., 2012). In this study, we define social engagement as *the students' involvement in social interaction and collaborative meaning-making*. Importantly, it is possible for students to participate in the literature discussion—and thus display behavioural and cognitive engagement—without being socially engaged. Social engagement involves orienting oneself towards other participants' contributions; it entails interacting, rather than merely participating. Based on our earlier research, we see social engagement as a driving force that may help students to be more cognitively engaged both in reading and in their conversations about the texts (Gustafsson et al., 2023; Ohlsson et al., 2025a).

Affective engagement has often been regarded as only attainable through indirect measures such as self-report instruments (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). The concept has usually been applied generally, not differentiated by domain or activity (Fredricks et al., 2004). Emotional reactions can be observable in the classroom, as physical cues of affects or as expressions of enthusiasm or enjoyment (Helme & Clarke, 2001; Lutz et al., 2006). In this study, we define affective engagement as *expressions of affect in literature discussions*. Importantly, such expressions of affect are closely connected to social engagement: they relate to the reading experience, the texts, and the discussion, but simultaneously serve interactional functions.

1.2 Shared reading and its affordances for reading engagement

SR is a group-based reading model developed by the British charity The Reader Organisation. It is used in a range of settings, including libraries as well as healthcare and social services contexts, in the UK, The Netherlands, Belgium, and Scandinavia (www.thereader.org). SR typically involves small groups of readers and is facilitated by a trained reader leader. A short piece of literary fiction—short stories and poems—is handed out at the beginning of each session. It is read aloud, and participants engage at intervals in open-ended literary discussions, in which they articulate and relate their own perspectives, experiences, and emotional responses to the text (Andeweg et al., 2025). Reading aloud constitutes a core feature of SR and may contribute to participants' sustained focus while being associated with positive affect (Ohlsson et al., 2025a). Pauses during joint literary meaning-making are another core feature of SR, and this practice allows time for individual reflection

on the text or on what has just been said, which may deepen the ensuing discussions (Steenberg et al., 2021; Gustafsson et al., 2023). Additionally, participants are afforded agency in the joint literary meaning-making with the reader leader, who models the five essential values of SR—notably 'be kind' (Forslid et al., 2022)—by adopting a non-directive role. In this role, the reader leader refrains from evaluating participants' contributions, instead showing genuine interest in each contribution and supporting connections between participants and with the text. In sum, SR may be understood as a literature-promotion initiative that cultivates a post-critical mode of engagement with literature, foregrounding its cognitive and affective dimensions while paying comparatively less attention to questions of form and contextual analysis (Anker & Felski, 2017; Felski, 2015).

A growing body of research has examined the use of the SR model as implemented across the contexts outlined above. In their recent scoping review, Andeweg et al. (2025) identified three key effects of SR: *emotional engagement*, *new perspectives* and *social connection*. These three effects may be aligned with three of the dimensions of reading engagement as defined above: affective engagement; cognitive engagement, understood as gaining new perspectives through literary discussions; and social reading engagement through interaction with other participants. Against this backdrop, and in light of the affordances outlined above, SR can be understood as a promising model for fostering student reading engagement.

In a school context, the SR model may be understood as a social reading practice that complements existing dialogically oriented models of literature instruction, which aim to engage students in open-ended literature discussions (Applebee et al., 2003; Langer, 2011; Nystrand et al., 1997; Reznitskaya, 2012; Tengberg et al., 2023). It is worth noting that Andeweg et al. (2025) call for research on SR in education and hypothesise that SR may strengthen reading motivation and, in turn, reading habits and performance. In an earlier publication (Ohlsson et al., 2025a), drawing on post-intervention focus groups from the same intervention that underpins the present study, we arrived at a complementary conclusion: SR is perceived by students and teachers as a practice that may promote reading engagement as an "event" (Lee et al., 2021). The findings from the focus groups reinforced the connections between SR and engagement: participants highlighted that collaborative interpretation during SR sessions not only supported engagement but also enhanced their understanding of the texts (Ohlsson et al., 2025a, Ohlsson et al., 2025b). Building on this, the present study examines how, and to what extent, this perception is reflected in the literature discussions analysed here.

2. THE PRESENT STUDY

This study is an explorative investigation into observable indicators of reading engagement in SR sessions with students in vocational upper-secondary education. Its overall aim is to deepen the understanding of reading engagement as a situated

and unfolding event within dialogic reading practices in the literature classroom. To pursue this aim and address Lee et al.'s (2021) call "to operationalize reading engagement" (p. 564), we begin by outlining an operationalisation of reading engagement as an event. This approach facilitates the identification and coding of observable indicators within students' verbal interactions during SR sessions. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- In what ways, and to what extent, are the behavioural, cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of reading engagement realised and observable in the SR sessions?
- In what ways, and to what extent, are these dimensions intertwined and mutually supportive within the dialogic reading practice explored?

3. DATA AND SETTING

This article draws on data from a six-week SR intervention, collaboratively designed by teachers and researchers, and implemented during Swedish language lessons in vocational upper-secondary education. Seven first-year classes (N=140) participated. Each class was divided into smaller SR groups (6–12 students), resulting in 16 groups. One group per class was facilitated by the Swedish teacher, while the remaining groups were led by external reader leaders or by one of the researchers. The 12 reader leaders jointly selected a short story and a poem per session, adhering to SR principles by choosing literature aiming to encourage reflective and exploratory literary discussion among participants. All reader leaders in this study are certified Swedish teachers, three of whom are employed at the school in question.

Although the reader leader's role is central (Steenberg et al., 2021), an analysis of facilitation is beyond the scope of this article due to space limitations. All 140 students who participated in the intervention were informed by one of the researchers during an ordinary lesson and invited to participate in the present study. Out of the 140 students, 40 provided written consent to participate. Their participation involved completing a pre-intervention questionnaire, attending two video-recorded SR sessions (during the second and sixth weeks of the intervention), and participating in a post-intervention focus group. Since participation included video recording of two SR lessons, the 40 participants formed four separate groups. Students were grouped according to their vocational programme: Child and Recreation (CHILD), Restaurant Management and Food (REST), or Health and Social Care (HEALTH). Swedish as a Second Language (SSL) students formed a group of their own. At the start of the intervention, the students had known each other for four weeks.

The dataset comprises: (a) 40 student questionnaires; (b) 12 reflective reader leader diaries; (c) eight video-recorded SR sessions; and (d) seven audio-recorded focus groups. This article draws on the video recordings and their transcripts (see Table 1). Transcriptions were made by research assistants, using a simplified version of the Jefferson system (Jefferson, 2004), and the quotes presented below were

translated and edited for clarity and readability. Ethical approval was granted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (decision no 2023-02086-01).

Table 1. Recorded SR sessions

Recorded sessions	Intervention week	Length* (minutes, break excluded)	No. of students	Reader leader (RL)	Texts
REST1	2	57	10	Teacher	Short story, poem
REST2	6	56	10	Teacher	Short story, poem
CHILD1	2	60	6	External RL	Short story, poem
CHILD2	6	62	5	External RL	Short story, poem
HEALTH1	2	45	5	External RL	Short story
HEALTH2	6	57	8	External RL	Short story
SSL1	2	47	6	Teacher	Short story, poem
SSL2	6	55	6	Teacher	Short story, poem

Note: *Length = from the initiation of reading to reader leader ending session.

3.1 The literary texts

The texts read were works of literary fiction and poetry. All four groups engaged with one short story during each SR session: Anita Goldman's "Rita Rubinstein Takes the Subway in the Best of Worlds" (1997; first recorded session) and Karin Boye's "The Shells" (1941; second recorded session), respectively. While students were familiar with the texts' *general repertoire* (McCormick, 1994), themes such as the Holocaust and familial transformation, their *literary repertoire* posed greater challenges. Features such as internal focalisation, non-linear chronology, and the use of archaic vocabulary in "The Shells" made comprehension more demanding. However, the use of complex literary texts in literature instruction is supported by previous research (Johansen, 2015; Sønneland, 2019), which demonstrates positive outcomes even among less experienced readers. One group read no poems and, for the last session, the groups chose different poems.

Moreover, the emphasis on literary fiction aligns with the principles advocated by The Reader organisation. The poems by Farrokhzad (2013; first recorded session), Andersen (2010; second recorded session) and Ferlin (1933; second recorded session), dealt with themes such as exile, loss, resilience, and existential solitude, and employed conventional imagery rather than complex or experimental metaphors. This made them more accessible and better aligned with students' general and literary repertoires (McCormick, 1994).

4. ANALYTICAL APPROACH

When analysing observable indicators of reading engagement as an event unfolding in literature discussions it is important to recognise that students who engage in such activities orient not only towards the reader leader or the text, but also towards one another. An interactional perspective is therefore required to capture the

collaborative and dynamic character of these discussions and to understand reading engagement as an emergent phenomenon within the interaction itself. This necessitates analysis at the micro-level of conversation.

In analysis we "zoomed in" on the moment-by-moment interaction, in line with the tradition of conversation analysis, identifying patterns in the data through a combination of emic and ethic coding, that is, codes generated inductively from the data as well as informed by theory and previous research (cf. Berenst & Deunk, 2025). Furthermore, also in line with the tradition of conversation analysis, all three researchers engaged in ongoing discussions of categories and data throughout the analytical process, rather than using measures of inter-rater reliability. Because our study involved a comparison between two SR sessions, we subsequently "zoomed out" and quantified the indicators to identify patterns and trends. However, as this is a case study with limited data, no statistical analyses were conducted (apart from descriptive statistics in the analysis of behavioural engagement).

4.1 Analytical steps

The operationalisation and analysis included the following steps:

Step 1: Preliminary coding and operationalisation of subtypes of reading engagement in relation to the working definitions of the four dimensions outlined above. The researchers examined the video and audio recordings, as well as the transcripts, both individually and together, and assigned preliminary codes.

Step 2: Revision and refinement of the categories and codes for indicators of reading engagement. Relevant theoretical and analytical literature of language use were consulted to support the development of a code scheme (cf. 4.2 below).

Step 3: Systematic coding for indicators of the different kinds of reading engagement. Each transcript was independently annotated by at least two researchers. The annotations were compared and discrepancies were discussed and resolved collectively.

4.2 Operationalisation of reading engagement

An overview of observable indicators of reading engagement is presented in Table 2. As shown in the table, the indicators differ in character and quality depending on which dimension of reading engagement is being addressed. The operationalisation is further explained below.

Table 2. Observable indicators of reading engagement in literature discussion

Behavioural engagement	Cognitive engagement	Social engagement	Affective engagement
Total number of words in on-topic vs off-topic utterances	Language acts for meaning-making (*e.g. asking questions, expressing difficulty, explaining, describing, reflective reasoning, interpreting, expressing understanding, engaging in hypothetical reasoning, contextualising, visualising, reformulating interpretations, engaging in dialogue with character, referring to text, citing, meta reflections*)	Stance-taking: Convergent alignment, divergent alignment, elaboration	Stance-taking: Affective and evaluative stances
Distribution of words and length of turns		Social language acts (*e.g. commenting upon participants' reading, asking/answering questions to each other, explicitly referring to others' interpretations*)	Expressions of eagerness (*e.g. unprompted utterances*)
Meta-instructive language acts (*e.g. offering to read or urging others to read*)		Sequences with co-construction of meaning	

Each turn in the transcripts may be assigned codes in four tiers simultaneously, one for each dimension of engagement. The grey-shaded areas in Table 2 include indicators for more than one type of engagement: meta-instructive language acts also usually indicate affective or social engagement, while social language acts can also indicate cognitive engagement, and sequences involving co-construction, placed in social engagement because they involve collaboration, also indicate cognitive engagement.

In our analysis of *behavioural engagement*, defined as "the extent to which students were taking part in the literature discussion and how focused they were on the task at hand", we measured *the total number of words in on-topic* vs *off-topic utterances*. To further explore the extent to which individual participants contributed to the discussion, we measured *the distribution of words and length of turns* between different participants. This quantitative data provides overall characteristics of the SR sessions. Finally, we coded utterances in which students engaged in *meta-instructive language acts* to steer the conversation (such as offering or urging others to read the text) as behavioural engagement, although it can be argued that such utterances also indicate social or affective engagement. The reason for counting such meta-instructive language acts as behavioural engagement is that they can be interpreted as an orientation towards a normative expectation of focusing on the task at hand.

Our analysis of *cognitive engagement*, i.e. the students' strategies to make sense of a literary text or of the discussion is based on the *identification of language acts*

for meaning-making. We coded the participants' utterances using active verbs denoting actions associated with meaning-making. These codes can be seen to denote speech acts (Austin, 1962). However, since they are not strictly pragmatically defined (see e.g. House and Kádár, 2024, p.1697, for a critique of research "inventing new speech acts *ad libitum*"), we use the notion of "language acts". The codes were assigned to turns, defined as extending from where the speaker starts an utterance until the speaker is finished or interrupted by another speaker (cf. Sacks et al., 1978). The end of a turn is usually signalled with prosodic, grammatical, or lexical means.

The identified language acts (n=15), indicative of cognitive engagement, align with the "activity in sense-making" that, according to Langer (2011), readers typically undertake when drawing upon the "options available" to develop interpretations (pp. 15–16). Students' individual utterances may contain multiple language acts.

The analysis of *social engagement*, i.e. the students' involvement in social interaction and collaborative meaning-making, focuses on interaction: on *stance-taking*, *social language acts* (questions, answers, comments between students), and the *co-construction of meaning*. Du Bois' (2007) approach to stance-taking in dialogue provides tools to analyse collaborative aspects of the SR sessions (cf. Gustafsson et al., 2023). The alignment accomplished by agreeing with another speaker's stance builds a sense of community, which makes it an important aspect of social engagement. The concepts of *convergent* or *divergent alignment* refer to agreeing or disagreeing with a speaker but can also refer to interactional responses that collaborate (or do not collaborate) at a structural level, i.e. responses that seemingly "go along with" the conversation (or not). Turns in which students adjusted and diverged somewhat from each other's interpretations were coded as *elaboration* ("yes, but there is also"). Backchannelling (short, supportive utterances like "mm", "exactly") were coded as convergent alignment (however, since an orientation towards the teacher/reader leader is to be expected within the school context, we excluded backchannelling during the reader leader's turns; that is, we did not count compliance as social engagement).

Furthermore, utterances in which students commented upon each other's reading, asked and answered each other's questions, or explicitly referred to each other's interpretations were coded as "social language acts". Utterances could simultaneously be coded as cognitive, e.g. asking questions, or affective engagement, e.g. taking an evaluative stance.

Finally, we coded sequences of *co-construction of meaning* as social engagement, i.e. sequences where students were engaged in collaborative meaning-making, adding to and adjusting each other's interpretations rather than answering the reader leader's questions (cf. Clancy & McCarthy, 2014). Such sequences almost invariably involve intense cognitive engagement (cf. Helme & Clarke 2001, p. 141, who include "completing peer utterances" as an indicator of cognitive engagement).

Affective engagement, defined as expressions of affect in the literature discussion, are closely connected to social engagement. According to Du Bois (2007), the articulation of stance (evaluative or affective utterances in relation to an "object

of stance", p. 147) is simultaneously a language act and a social act. To analyse affective engagement, we coded *affective stances* (the expression of one's own affects, e.g. "I felt sad") and *evaluative stances* (evaluation of texts, characters, or other "objects of stance", e.g. "he's paranoid"). The recordings were decisive for discerning instances of evaluation or affect, e.g. when the tone of voice and prosody indicated that a word (such as "paranoid") was used evaluatively rather than descriptively.

Expressions of eagerness were also coded as affective engagement. One such category is *unprompted utterances*. Usually, the reader leader ends their reading by turning to the group with a question, such as "any first thoughts?" But when students are engaged, they do not always wait for the prompt. Thus, we coded unprompted utterances after the reading as signs of eagerness; however, they can simultaneously express cognitive engagement.

5. FINDINGS

In this section, we present how, and to what extent, the behavioural, cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of reading engagement were realised in the SR sessions. Throughout the analysis, the first recording (intervention week 2) is referred to as Session 1, and the second recording (intervention week 6) as Session 2. In the examples, [x] on two different lines indicates overlapping talk, (.) a brief interval and (..) a slightly longer interval.

5.1 Behavioural engagement

Across the eight recorded sessions, approximately 97% of students' utterances—from the point of the reader leader's initiation to the conclusion of the discussion—were on-topic. This finding indicates a high level of behavioural engagement. Instances when students diverged from the topic were limited and primarily concerned procedural matters (e.g., session timing) or brief social exchanges, such as comments on clothing or behaviour.

Although the four groups differed in composition, reader leaders, and timing, several overarching tendencies emerge. Firstly, the participants' contributions to the dialogue were more evenly distributed in the second session than in the first (see Table 3). Whereas initial discussions were (to a greater extent) dominated by one or two individuals, the second session exhibited a more balanced allocation of speaking time. This shift could suggest that increased familiarity with the format and peers facilitated behavioural engagement.

*Table 3. Dominance of discussion, two most active speakers, percentage of words spoken**

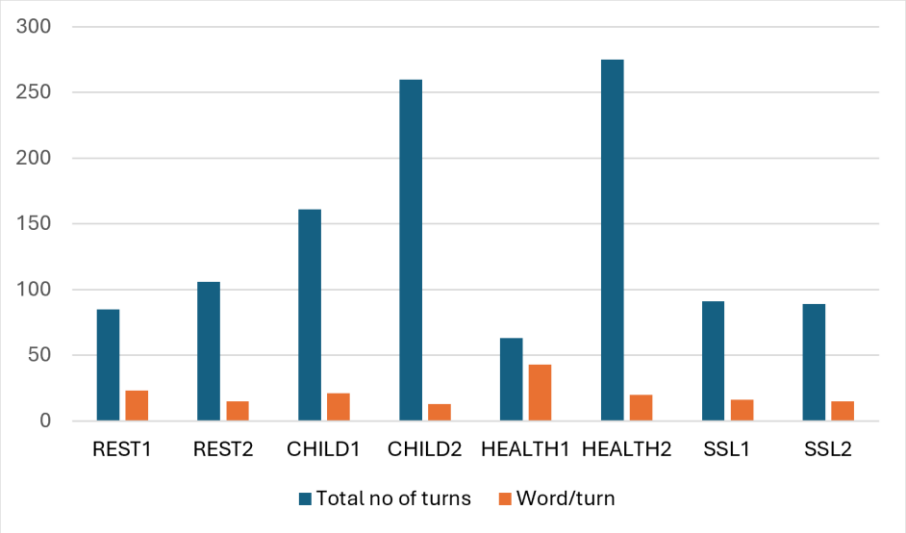
Group	Session 1	Session 2
REST	66%	58%
CHILD	86%	69%
HEALTH	63%	53%
SSL	76%	59%

Note: **Backchanneling excluded.*

Some differences might be explained by a few participants being absent from one of the sessions and affecting the balance of the group, but the tendency is the same in all four groups.

Secondly, student turns tended to be shorter in the second session (measured by word count), a tendency that was evident in all groups except the SSL group, where participants appeared to experience greater challenges in comprehension and articulation (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Student activity in number and length of turns



The total number of words spoken varied considerably, ranging from 1,420 (SSL, Session 2) to 5,680 (HEALTH, Session 2). For the HEALTH group, there was a substantial difference between the two sessions in number of words, which may partly be attributable to the longer duration of the second session (cf. Table 1). The reduction in turn length between sessions visible in Figure 1 could also reflect a

qualitative shift towards a more engaged, collaborative dynamic. Consequently, the co-construction of meaning—through overlapping talk, interruptions, and elaborations—appears to entail shorter turns. Such co-construction is examined in greater detail below in the subsequent analysis.

Thirdly, in the second session of both the CHILD and HEALTH groups, the students engaged in meta-instructions. In the CHILD group, two students interrupted an off-topic discussion that had emerged after reading the short story and, instead, urged the group to return to the task at hand.

(1)

E: okay now let's read [s- so that]»

C: [yes, let's start]

E: you can talk about your stuff at home

Following this intervention**,** the reader leader introduced the poem, after which two students volunteered to read aloud. This occurred only in the CHILD group, which consisted of students preparing for work with children. Subsequently, the students seemed to assume control of the process, discussing how the reading should be organised (2).

(2)

B: should we re- should we read every [other sentence]

E: [yes yes let's] yes let's take every other sentence

RL: okay

E: [[mm should we start now]

B: [[or every other what's it called] every other line

In contrast, in the HEALTH group, meta-instructions appeared to take a somewhat different form. Apart from one comment encouraging the reader leader to begin reading, these meta-instructions were more akin to policing, as students asked peers not to interrupt or requested permission to speak to the point.

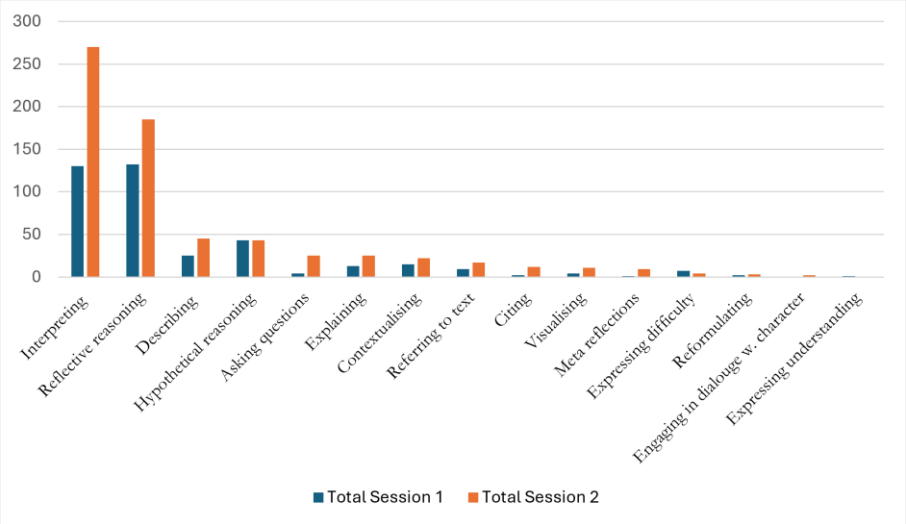
Both instances are interpreted as indicators of behavioural engagement. In other words**,** students demonstrated loyalty to the task and appeared to take responsibility for the progression of the SR session. Moreover, these behaviours may reflect an emerging sense of collective responsibility.

5.2 Cognitive engagement

Of the 15 language acts coded as indicators of cognitive engagement, two broad categories—*interpreting the story or characters* and *reflective reasoning*—predominate and occur more frequently in Session 2. Since the pattern in the SSL group differs, it is addressed separately. As shown in Figure 2, utterances involving

language acts expressing cognitive engagement in the REST, HEALTH, and CHILD groups are generally more numerous in Session 2 than in Session 1. Moreover, less common language acts—such as asking questions, visualising, citing, and engaging in meta-reflections—also appear more often in the later session.

Figure 2. Language acts for meaning-making, REST, CHILD, and HEALTH groups, no. of turns



These results suggest that students became increasingly involved and engaged in meaning-making. However, the influence of the texts cannot be overlooked. The higher incidence of interpretative language acts in Session 2 may be linked to the more relatable themes of the short story or poem discussed, as illustrated in (3), where a participant in the REST group combines interpretation, quotation, and hypothetical as well as reflective reasoning when they discuss the poem "Happiness" by Andersen (2010).

(3)

C: yes but he er (.) he writes here like as if it's something to
practice for (.) or (.) er (.) when adversity finally strikes (.)
It's a relief (.) so it (.) feels better in a way (.) when you're not
happy (.) because you don't know (.) how long you're going to be
happy

A more relatable theme also seems to encourage closer identification with characters. A particularly striking, although rare, language act signalling cognitive engagement is engaging in dialogue with a character, which was observed twice in HEALTH2 with different participants, see (4) and (5).

(4)

D: I think he makes it a bit worse for himself by thinking like that

CHANGES THE VOICE ae it's a borrowed bike she shouldn't be here

(5)

A: just say to Sigrid fucking move her things fucking old biddy

Both short stories include sequences of analepsis, which may complicate comprehension. Students expressed greater difficulties with understanding in the first session, largely due to the poem rather than the short story. Nevertheless, the increased number of questions in Session 2 might indicate ongoing challenges, as students queried difficult words and aspects of the storyline. The older text and its language appear to have posed some challenges for the students.

Reflective reasoning and meta-reflections are language acts that imply greater distance from the text (cf. Langer, 2011). As already discussed, reflective reasoning was common and became even more frequent in the second session (cf. Ex. 3 above). Meta-reflections only occurred in two groups: in CHILD2 one participant jokingly commented upon their own reflection, and in HEALTH2 participants reflected upon the discussion itself or, in a heated exchange, upon the fact that you can see things in different ways (6):

(6)

A: yes that he's let you down by just met a new girl not letting you see

her [and then just let her move- no come on listen]

D: [yes xx but look listen you ca you can see it in two different ways]

A: listen I'm not finished

D: I know what you're gonna say you can see it in two different ways

The SSL group has been excluded from Figure 2 above because its pattern differs from the others. These students focused to a greater extent on understanding vocabulary and context. However, as can be seen in (7) below, from Session 2, they also engaged in interpreting the text, here discussing the thoughts of the main character.

(7)

RL: mm (..) and then her (.) m. her gr- granny who she'd never met

Hanna (..) what do you think happened to her (.) now I'm asking

that I shouldn't do but I have to do that

B: er was kidnapped and they (.) have (..) taken her to a concentration

er camp perhaps

RL: mm that might be right (..) mm (..) eeh in the end here (.) no now

Rita Rubinstein also said quietly to herself no I can't sit here not another second (..) what can you say about that

F: maybe that she woke up a bit more (.) I mean from her thoughts maybe (.) that [she] realised that erm she had some crazy thoughts maybe

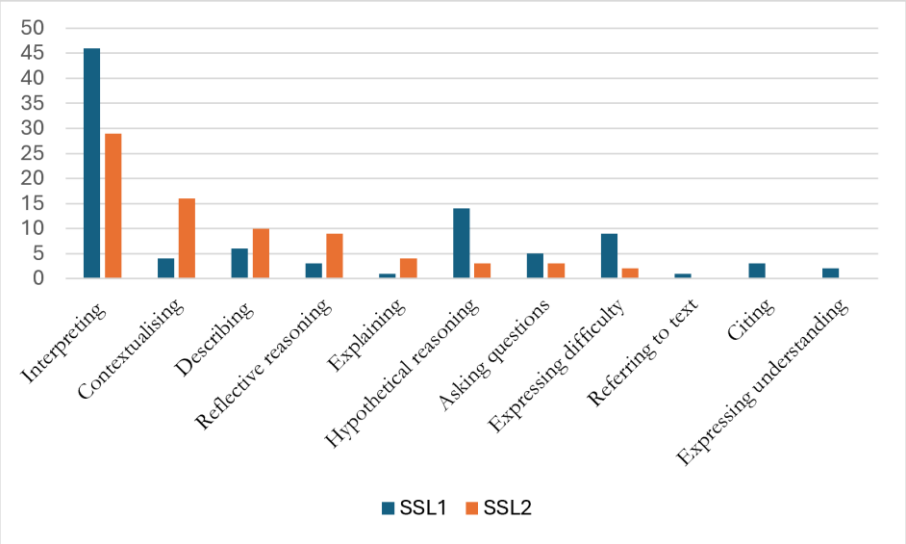
RL: [mm]

RL: mm

F: or that she was afraid of those (.) men who were sitting beside her

As is visible in the example above, the reader leader (RL in the transcript) is active in asking questions and steering the discussion to establish common ground (notably more than they think they should), making sure the students are following. We see how B hypothetically suggests an interpretation of prior events, and how, after the reader leader has cited the text, F reasons hypothetically and suggests an interpretation of the protagonist's reactions.

Figure 3. Language acts for meaning-making in the SSL group, no. of turns



As can be inferred from Figure 3, the students in the SSL group seemed to be working harder to understand the language of the text in session 2, which might explain why they did not engage as much in interpreting in this session as the other groups (cf. Fig 2 above). On the other hand, probably due to the more relatable theme, they used their own experiences more than in the first session—often prompted by direct questions from the reader leader—and contextualised the story by referring to their own lives (8).

(8)

RL: nah (.) m (.) but you've been in a divorce

B: er sort of like it's my stepdad

RL: mm

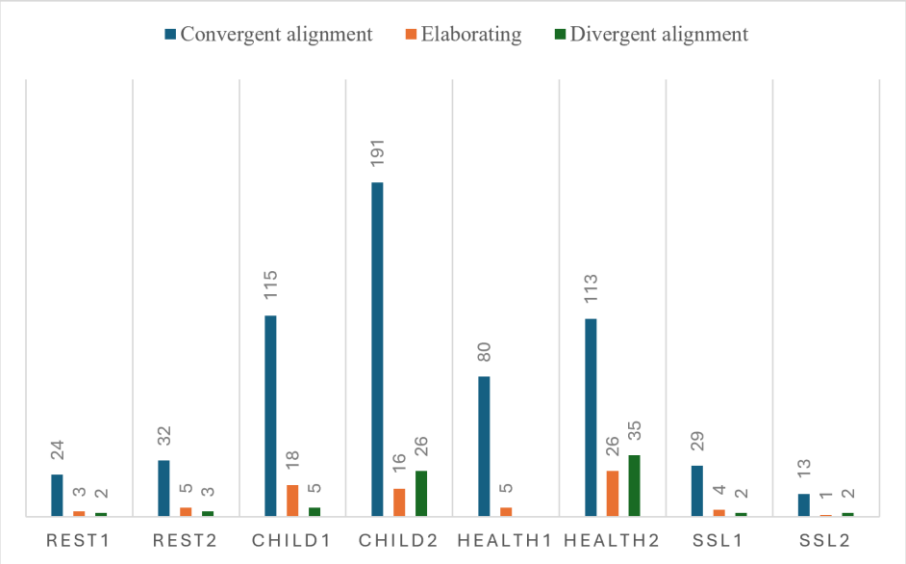
B: I don't call him dad but still he's nice

Indeed, contextualisation in Session 2 for the SSL group is almost as frequent as in all the other groups combined. Reflective reasoning remains rare and, when present, is typically elicited by the reader leader.

5.3 Social engagement

Explicit instances of agreeing, disagreeing, or elaborating were analysed as stance-taking, i.e. as convergent or divergent alignment, or elaboration. Overall, these indicators of social engagement were more frequent in Session 2 for three of the groups (see Fig. 4). Specifically, students provided greater support through backchannelling (coded as convergent alignment), disagreed more often, and elaborated upon one another's turns to a greater extent. This pattern suggests that participants became increasingly confident in contributing to the dialogue.

Figure 4. Stance-taking. Turns with convergent alignment, elaborating, and divergent alignment

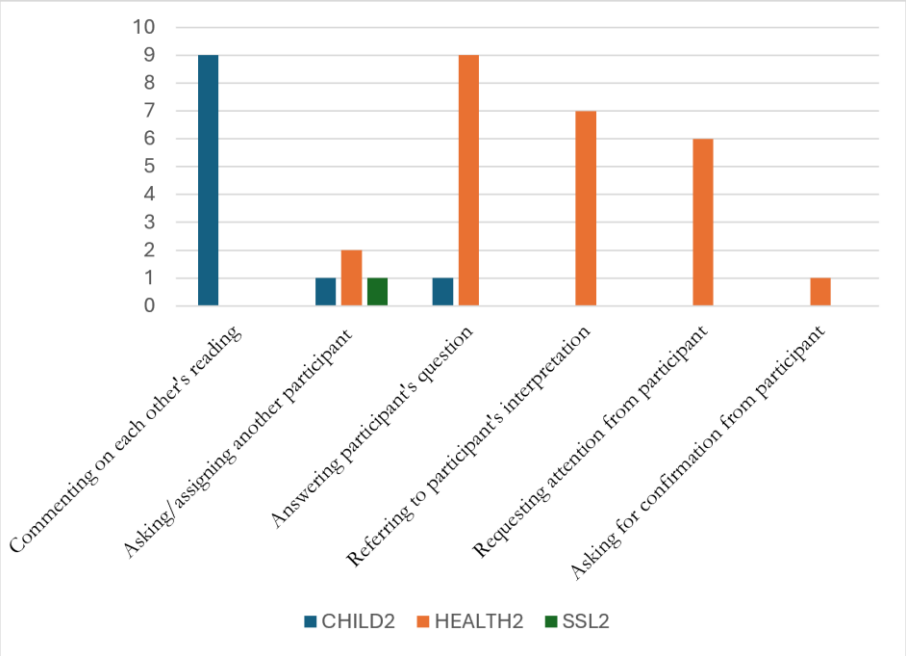


However, the SSL group followed a different trajectory, showing less social engagement realised as stance-taking in Session 2. One possible explanation is that

students were primarily occupied with understanding vocabulary and contextual meaning, because the short story used in Session 2 was older and linguistically more challenging. Consequently, the reader leader assumed a more active role, explaining words and contextualising the narrative, and interaction was largely mediated by the reader leader rather than occurring spontaneously among students.

Social language acts, such as answering peers' questions, referring to others' interpretations, or commenting on their reading, only occurred in three groups and exclusively in Session 2 (see Fig. 5). In this respect**,** the pattern for HEALTH and CHILD appears consistent with stance-taking: social engagement was more prevalent in the second session, and students seemed to assume greater responsibility for maintaining the conversational flow. By contrast, in the SSL group, only one such act was identified, while in REST social engagement realised as social language acts was consistently low, with no such language acts observed in either of the two sessions.

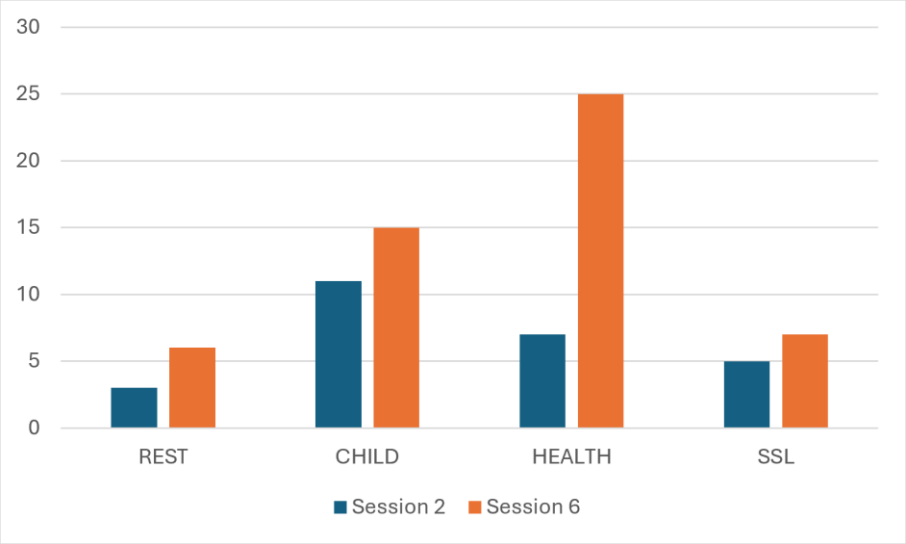
Figure 5. Social language acts, no. of turns



Sequences in which participants collaboratively co-constructed meaning without reader leader intervention were also examined. A sequence was defined as a stretch of dialogue bounded by a reader leader turn (e.g., a question or summary). Although sequences could follow consecutively, any reader leader intervention marked a new sequence. Importantly, co-construction sequences were more frequent in Session 2

across all four groups (see Fig. 6), which may indicate a shift towards more autonomous collaborative meaning-making.

Figure 6. Number of sequences containing co-construction



The HEALTH group displayed the highest level of co-construction in the second session. In (9), the reader leader initiates a sequence by referencing an earlier contribution and quoting the text, “a feeling of triumph”. One student (G) queries the meaning of *triumph*, prompting another student (A) to explain and elaborate in relation to the text, concluding that the boy will never accept his stepmother as a mother. The reader leader supports by backchannelling (“mm”). The discussion develops as students evaluate the character, agree and disagree with each other’s views, and offer alternative perspectives.

(9)

RL: uhm she just like you said er (.) er he he tries to smile she tries

to smile at him [(.)] er but er (.) he stares tenaciously back at

A: [yes]

RL: her like and then she gets insecure and lowers her gaze and then it

says that a sense of triumph flew through him

A: like [happiness that he f-]

G: [what’s triumph]

A: I guess it’s like happiness

RL: mm

A: so I guess it's like the gain of that he's tried to e- I mean made her show that he shows his feelings for her that he maybe doesn't accept her in the [the family]

RL: [mm] [mm]

A: and he will never accept her as a mother

RL: [[no]

G: [[it's] a bit mean

A: but you have to understand him too he hasn't had a mother

G: but then perhaps he should be a bit happy (.) [have a girl figure in life]

A: [no but you don't understand that]

G: no my mother hasn't died [so] I don't have experience of that [but]

A: [no] [no]

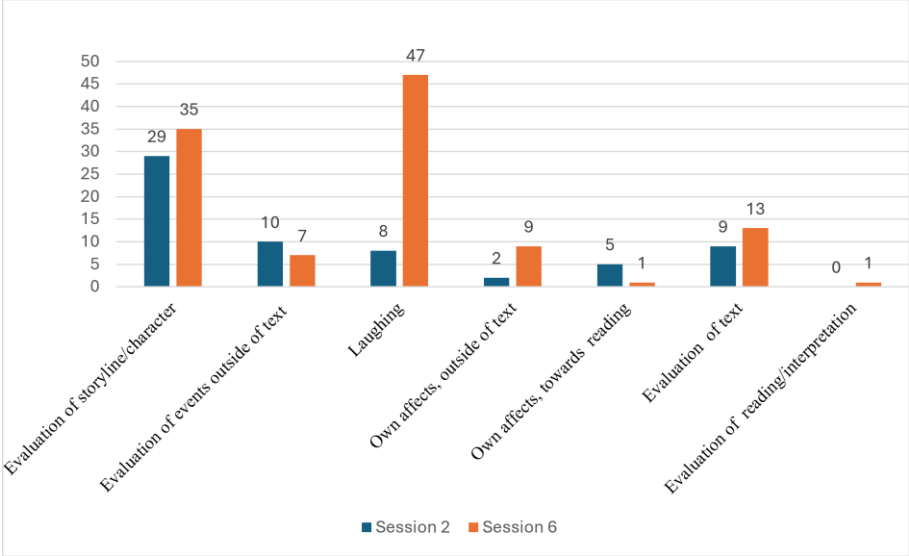
Taken together, this exchange illustrates intense social engagement alongside collaborative interpretation, characterised by latching turns and dynamic convergent or divergent alignment. Moreover, as evident in the analysis, such sequences are also marked by intensive cognitive engagement. Thus, the interplay between cognitive and social engagement, also highlighted by the students in the focus groups, is clearly observable here (cf. Ohlsson et al., 2025a).

5.4 Affective engagement

Figure 7 depicts the distribution of affective engagement, operationalised as an affective or evaluative stance, in the two sessions. The most prominent pattern is the substantial increase in laughter during the second session. While this may reflect greater familiarity with the group and task, it is equally plausible that the texts and the evolving discussion trajectory contributed to this shift.

A recurring stance signalling affective engagement is evaluative commentaries on characters or narrative (cf. Ex. 9 above, "it is a bit mean"). Students primarily orient towards central characters, interrogating and appraising their actions and thoughts. The extent of their affective engagement appears mediated by narrative features, characterisation, familiarity with the topic, and students' experiential resources. Taken together, the observations indicate more intense affective engagement in the second session.

Figure 7. Affective and evaluative stances in all groups, no. of turns



The two sessions also differ in the frequency of unprompted turns, i.e. instances where students initiate contributions immediately following the reader leader's reading, prior to any explicit invitation to reflect. Such turns are interpreted as markers of eagerness and affective involvement. With the exception of the SSL group, such contributions occur more frequently in the second session, suggesting that procedural familiarity and consolidation of group dynamics may underpin this pattern.

5.5 Concurrent dimensions at work

To illustrate interconnectedness of the dimensions we now return to example 9 above. As indicated in 5.3 above, the example illustrates the interplay between social and cognitive engagement, but also affective engagement is at play here. Cognitive engagement holds a distinctive position, because all efforts to interpret texts constitute cognitive activity. But while students perform language acts for meaning-making (cf. Helme & Clarke, 2001), these acts are often intertwined with social or affective engagement.

In example 9, the reader leader invites discussion by quoting the text. A then ventures into an interpretation of the character (cognitive engagement). G queries about the meaning of the word "triumph" (cognitive engagement). A answers G's question, thus displaying both social (answering another participant's question) and cognitive engagement (explaining). A then continues their interpretation of the character (cognitive engagement). G, in turn, reacts on A's interpretation and

evaluates the character (affective engagement). This evaluative stance sparks A to respond with divergent alignment (social engagement) and to further their interpretation (cognitive engagement). G responds with another divergent alignment (social engagement) and adds another evaluation of the character, ”perhaps he should be a bit happy” (affective engagement), thus adjusting their evaluative stance. While G explains their stance, A questions G’s ability to understand the situation of the character (divergent alignment, social engagement, and evaluation of another participant’s contribution, affective engagement). The raised tempo and latching turns also indicate affective engagement. G then agrees with A (convergent alignment, social engagement) and reflects on their own life in relation to the character’s life (cognitive engagement). During this turn, A supports G with backchanneling (social engagement).

This closer look at different dimensions of reading engagement at work in example 9 also illustrates how social engagement and affective engagement have the potential to further interpretations and reflections.

6. DISCUSSION

The aim of this article has been to deepen our understanding of reading engagement as a situated and unfolding event within dialogic reading practices in the literature classroom. While reading engagement is widely recognised as a multidimensional construct— encompassing behavioural, affective, cognitive, and social dimensions— its abstract nature poses challenges for systematic analysis in classroom settings. To address this challenge and responding to Lee et al.’s (2021) call for “more sophisticated tools to empirically prove how those dimensions of reading engagement work reciprocally” (p. 565), we have proposed an operationalisation of reading engagement that enables the identification and coding of observable indicators in students’ literature discussions. This is essential for bridging the gap between theoretical understandings and empirical observation. Our operationalisation provides a framework for examining engagement as a situated and emergent event, co-constructed through students’ collaborative meaning-making within the literature classroom. In this section, we provide answers to our research questions and relate our findings to the theoretical framework and prior research.

6.1 Observable indicators of reading engagement in SR sessions

While all four dimensions of reading engagement were evident in the SR sessions, their prominence varies both across dimensions and between student groups. Students’ *behavioural engagement* was observable in numerous ways, notably through their high level of on-task behaviour (97%). Moreover, students in the present study increased their participation (behavioural engagement) and their contribution to the SR group’s collaborative meaning-making (cognitive engagement

and social engagement) as the intervention progressed, thus displaying the "effort and persistence" typically indicating reading engagement (Lee et al., 2021, p. 545).

Students' *cognitive engagement* was mainly expressed through interpretations of story and character, and reflective reasoning, which increased between the two sessions examined. Moreover, this upward trend could be observed for other, less common, language acts attributed to cognitive engagement, such as asking questions, explaining and citing. Thus, students increasingly demonstrated "the mental effort needed to comprehend" (Guthrie et al., 2012, p. 602), which is a defining characteristic of this dimension of reading engagement. These findings are corroborated by self-reported data, which reveals that students expressed a commitment to understanding the texts (Ohlsson et al., 2025a).

The distribution of language acts associated with meaning-making appears to be linked to the texts read during the two sessions. Both short stories challenged the students' literary repertoire (McCormick, 1994), particularly Boye's, with its use of archaic vocabulary and complex narrative structure. Moreover, for students with Swedish as a second language, all the texts posed challenges to their proficiency in Swedish. In comparison, the number of instances of contextualisation in this group's second session is almost equivalent to that observed across the other three groups in the same category. On some occasions, prompted by the reader leader, students compared and related their own experiences to the familial theme explored in the short story.

The *social dimensions* of reading engagement, such as stance-taking, backchannelling, convergent or divergent alignment, and elaboration, were comparatively more frequent in the last session. Students demonstrated growing confidence in contributing to the co-construction of literary meaning, thereby exemplifying the "reciprocal and transactional relationships" (Lee et al., 2021, p. 546) that characterise the social dimension of reading engagement. Observed social language acts, such as responding to peers' questions and referencing others' interpretations, correspond with students' self-reported accounts in which they emphasised the value of discussions and listening to others' perspectives for deepening their textual understanding (Ohlsson et al., 2025a). These findings resonate with our previous research which suggests that joint attention to texts and interpretations in social reading practices such as SR provides a space for intersubjectivity and perspective-taking, while simultaneously cultivating a sense of togetherness (Gustafsson et al., 2023).

As visible in the analysis, the SSL group exhibited a divergent trajectory, characterised by lower levels of social engagement manifested through stance-taking, which may be attributable to the greater cognitive effort required to comprehend the texts.

Students' *affective* reading engagement during collaborative meaning-making was evident in evaluative remarks about characters and narrative elements. Unprompted turns and laughter, regarded as physical indicators of affect (Lutz et al., 2006) and as manifestations of enthusiasm or enjoyment (Helme & Clarke, 2001),

occurred more frequently in the second session than in the first. This positive affective response may be linked to students' perceptions of the SR sessions as "a breathing space, providing a respite from the pace, stress and demands of an ordinary school day" (Ohlsson et al., 2025a, p. 47).

6.2 The intertwined and mutually supportive nature of the dimensions of reading engagement

We define behavioural engagement as the extent to which students participate in literature discussions and remain focused on the task. This implies that cognitive, affective, and social engagement can only be observed when there is behavioural engagement. Student participation varied, with some not actively contributing to the discussion. However, although no observable indicators of their engagement were seen, such students may still be "covertly" engaged (cf. Fredricks et al., 2004; Guthrie et al., 2012).

Our findings suggest that social engagement—defined as involvement in interaction and collaborative meaning-making—has the potential to drive more intense cognitive engagement in both reading and discussion (cf., Gustafsson et al., 2023; Ohlsson et al., 2025a). This is most evident in sequences of co-construction, such as in example 9, where students pursue understanding and sustain discussion independently of the reader leader. It also aligns with the findings by Steenberg et al. (2021), who primarily focus on the role of the reader leader while emphasising that the contributions of other participants in the collaborative meaning making has the potential to facilitate engagement by creating "a reading that is more than the total sum of individual readings" (p. 248). The social and cognitive dimensions of reading engagement thus appear closely interconnected.

Previous research has underscored the significance of discussions and collaborative reading activities for enhancing social engagement (e.g., Aksnes et al., 2025; McGeown & Conradi Smith, 2023). Moreover, it is established that social engagement can enhance student motivation, increase reading comprehension and influence reading achievement (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Guthrie et al., 2012). Our study may be regarded as bridging the relationship between social engagement, reading comprehension, and reading achievement. Social engagement may increase cognitive engagement, which in turn enhances reading comprehension. Wigfield et al. (2008) show that the level of engagement accounts for the success of the instructional model they examine. However, they do not consider the role of social interaction, which they argue "should be studied as a process of reading engagement" (p. 444).

Consequently, our analysis of interaction in SR sessions places social engagement in a central position, highlighting its potential to influence and strengthen cognitive engagement. One explanation for this centrality might lie in the characteristics of the student group: The participants were in the first year of upper secondary vocational education—an age at which social connections with peers are particularly important.

Previous studies have mainly investigated younger student populations (Lee at al., 2021, p.554). However, as mentioned above, social engagement was comparatively lower in the SSL-group, reflecting a greater cognitive effort required to comprehend the texts and the more active role of the reader leader. It is therefore reasonable to hypothesise that the interplay among different dimensions of engagement might vary according to age or student group.

Research on the dialogic practice of SR has emphasised its potential to foster social connections, collaborative practices and provide new perspectives as well as offering a space for emotional engagement (Andeweg et al., 2025). In the present study, affective engagement primarily related to characters in the texts or peers' contributions (also serving interactional functions). Expressing evaluations, affect and convergent or divergent alignment with others' stances in interaction, have been defined as central to the development of intersubjectivity and perspective-taking (Gustafsson et al., 2023; cf. Du Bois, 2007). Affective engagement may therefore stimulate both social and cognitive engagement and contribute to the collaborative meaning-making: affective contributions in interaction prompt reactions and thereby contribute to peers' involvement.

6.3 Limitations and future research

An important limitation is the small scale of the study. In total, 40 students provided consent to participate, and the data was limited to eight video-recorded SR sessions during six weeks. This may entail selection bias and further studies are needed.

Another limitation concerns contextual factors of the SR sessions, such as the time of day, group characteristics, or the physical environment, were not addressed, even though they may also affect the degree of engagement. Also, the reader leader's way of promoting dialogue, steering the conversation, and enabling social interaction constitutes a significant facilitator of engagement (cf. Steenberg et al., 2021). Consideration of the texts themselves was also limited. It is reasonable to assume that discussion of a short story containing a narrative and a character perspective elicits different forms of cognitive and affective engagement than discussion of a poem centred on an abstract emotion such as happiness. Finally, the analysis concentrated on patterns at a group level rather than individual reading engagement.

For future research, an up-scaled study with a larger sample size and a longitudinal intervention design could further deepen our understanding of the dynamic intermingling between the cognitive, the social, and the affective dimensions of reading engagement. Additionally, the proposed framework for observable indicators can be applied in future research to study the aspects mentioned above: the role of the reader leader and different facilitation styles, the influence of text genres on literature discussions, contextual factors, and individual reading engagement.

6.4 Conclusions

This study frames SR as a context in which reading engagement can be observed. By identifying and examining observable indicators of engagement within literature discussions, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how students engage with literature and with one another in real time. The operationalisation of reading engagement as an event as well as the interactional perspective enable researchers to capture the dynamic and situated nature of reading engagement as it unfolds. Moreover, it offers educators terminology for recognising different manifestations of engagement in classroom discussions, and it may provide them with practical means of creating meaningful literary experiences in dialogic classroom contexts.

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APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTS IN SWEDISH

(1)

E: okej nu läser vi [s- så kan]»

C: [ja nu kör vi]

E: ni prata om era saker hemma

(2)

B: ska vi lä- ska vi läsa var[annan mening]

E: [ja ja kö-] ja vi kör varannan mening

S: okej

E: [[mm ska vi börja nu]

B: [[eller varannan va heter de] varannan rad

(3)

C: jo men han eh (.) han skriver här typ som att de e en träningssak (.) eller (.) eh (.) när motgången äntligen inställer sej (.) så ä de en lättnad (.) alltså att de (.) känns på något sätt bättre (.) när man inte är lyckli (.) för man vet att (.) inte hur länge man kommer ha Lyckan

(4)

D: ja tycker han gör de lite värre för sej själv genom å tänka så GÖR TILL RÖSTEN äe de e en lånecykel hon ska inte va här

(5)

A: ba säg till sigrid fucking flytta hennes saker jävla gummajävel

(6)

A: ja att han har svikit dej genom att ba l- träffat en ny tjej låtit inte dej träffa henne [å sen så ba låtit henne flytt- nä men lyssna]

D: [ja xx men kolla lyssna man ka man kan se de på två olika sätt]

A: lyssna ja e inte klar

D: ja vet va du ska säga man kan se de två olika sätt

(7)

RL: mm (..) å då hennes (.) m. hennes m- mormor som hon aldrig träffat hanna (..) va tror ni hände me henne (.) nu ställer ja fråger som ja inte ska göra men ja måste göra de

B: eh va kidnappad å dom (.) har (..) tagit henne till en koncentrations eh kamp kanske

RL: mm så kan de kanske vara (..) mm (..) eeh i slutet här (.) nej nu sa också rita rubinstein tyst fö sej själv nä här kan ja inte sitta inte en sekund till (..) va kan man säga om den

F: kanske att hon vaknade lite till (.) asså från hennes tankar kanske (.) att [hon] insåg att ehm de gick lite vild i henne huve kanske

RL: [mm]

RL: mm

F: eller att hon va rädd för dom dära (.) män som satt brevid henne

(8)

RL: näh (.) m (.) men du har vart me i en skilsmässa

B: eh ungefär asså de e min styvpappa

S: mm

B: ja kalla inte honom pappa men ändå han e trevlig

(9)

RL: ehh hon precis som du sa så eh (.) eh så så försöker han le hon
försöker le mot honom [.] eh men eh (.) han stirrar stint tillbaka på

A: [ja]

RL: henne liksom å då blir hon osäker å sänker blicken å så står de att
en känsla av triumf flög igenom honom

A: asså [lycka att han f-]

G: [va e triumf]

A: de e väl typ lycka

RL: mm

A: asså de e väl typ [vinsten] av att han har försökt få e- asså fått»
henne att visa att han visar hans känslor för henne att han kanske
inte accepterar henne i [familjen]

RL: [mm] [mm]

A: å han kommer aldrig acceptera henne som mamma

RL: [[nej]

G: [[de] e lite taskigt

A: fast du måste ju förstå honom också han har inte haft nån mamma

G: men då kanske han ska va lite glad (.) [ha en tjejfigur i livet]

A: [nä men du förstår ju] inte det]

G: nä min mamma har inte dött [så att] ja har inte experience av de [men]

A: [nej] [nej]