

**Aesthetic Education and Positive Effects on Student Engagement**  
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**Abstract**

The Museum Magnet School/P.S.191, on Manhattan's Upper West Side, is a Title 1 school with a long-standing partnership with Lincoln Center Education. A primary goal on the school's Comprehensive Educational Plan is to increase student engagement. In this study, the engagement of a 5<sup>th</sup> grade class in an independent reading unit was analyzed. The unit was modified with Lincoln Center Aesthetic Education teaching practices. Several tools were used to measure student engagement, defined as affective, behavioral and cognitive: Engagement versus Disaffection in Learning (EvsD) student and teacher reports<sup>1</sup> and the Reading Engagement Index (REI)<sup>2</sup>. Overall, student engagement increased on both assessments leading the researchers to believe that aesthetic education practices that are well integrated into current curriculum will lead to increased student engagement across the school.

**Introduction**

Student engagement is a major issue in education today. Charlotte Danielson's ubiquitous Framework for Teaching<sup>3</sup> places student engagement at the center of teacher evaluations. Researchers posit that student engagement is fundamental to student achievement<sup>4</sup>. The Museum Magnet School serves one of the last lower income, high need communities on Manhattan's Upper West side. The school serves a very diverse student body and an uncommonly high number of students with special learning needs. Standardized test scores are low and the wide ranging emotional needs of its students make it hard to maintain a rigorous learning culture. To address this, MMS administration has designated engagement as a schoolwide

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<sup>1</sup> Wellborn, J. G. (1991). *Engaged and disaffected action: The conceptualization and measurement of motivation in the academic domain*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Rochester, New York. Retrieved from <http://www.pdx.edu/psy/ellen-skinner-1>

<sup>2</sup> Wigfield, A., et al. (2008). "Role of reading engagement in mediating the effects of reading comprehension instruction on reading outcomes." *Psychology in the Schools*, 45, 432-445. Retrieved from <http://www.cori.umd.edu/measures/REI.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Danielson, Charlotte. (2013). *Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument*. Retrieved from [www.danielsongroup.org](http://www.danielsongroup.org).

<sup>4</sup> Fredricks, J., et al. "Measuring student engagement in upper elementary through high school: a description of 21 instruments." *Issues & Answers Report*, REL 2011–No. 098. Retrieved from [http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southeast/pdf/REL\\_2011098.pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southeast/pdf/REL_2011098.pdf)

priority. Fredricks and McColskey identify three facets of student engagement: behavioral engagement (time on task and participation), emotional engagement (feeling of belonging, enjoyment and attachment), and cognitive engagement (investment in learning, perseverance in the face of challenges, and use of deep rather than superficial strategies). Together these facets of engagement constitute the rich and rigorous engagement that leads to learning. All of them can be activated using the pedagogical practices of Aesthetic Education.

MMS has partnered with Lincoln Center Education for twenty-five years. Lincoln Center Education (LCE)<sup>5</sup> is the education division of Lincoln Center. LCE has distilled decades of arts education practice into a distinct approach to aesthetic education. Anecdotal reflections from teacher faculty and administration over many years indicate that the LCE units at MMS inspire a high level of engagement among all participating students. The question at MMS is, “How can we replicate this level of student engagement in other areas of the curriculum?”

In this study we sought to discover if student engagement in regular curriculum could be amplified by integrating core teaching practices from aesthetic education. More specifically, if we reworked a standard independent reading unit and predicate lessons on LCE’s four core teaching concepts (art making, reflection, context, and inquiry) will student engagement—as measured by student and teacher reports—increase?

Further, we wondered if acting and writing activities might allow us to broach more complex questions about character motivation than are provided in the standard curriculum guide, and if doing so would foster greater cognitive engagement.

## **Materials and Methods**

In this study we sought to analyze student engagement in an independent reading unit after it had been purposefully embedded with aesthetic education teaching practices. Before the unit started, students in a 5<sup>th</sup> grade ICT class completed a survey measuring their current level of engagement, and the teacher completed two relevant teacher reports. The reporting methods were chosen based on their ability to report on affective, behavioral and cognitive modes of engagement particularly in reading, and because these measures had been successfully used with upper elementary students in the past<sup>6</sup>. Both students and teacher completed the Engagement versus Disaffection in Learning (EvsD) reports and the teacher completed the Reading Engagement Index (REI).

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<sup>5</sup> <http://lincolncenterededucation.org/>

<sup>6</sup> Fredricks, J., et al. “Measuring student engagement in upper elementary through high school: a description of 21 instruments.”

The class studied then participated in a 5-week Independent Reading unit based on a unit from Columbia University Teacher's College<sup>7</sup>. The unit, as published by TC, involved students forming book clubs based on their independent reading levels and teacher guidance in the form of mini-lessons given by the teacher each day. The book clubs are based on social issues that are relevant to fifth graders (growing up, forgiveness overcoming obstacles, etc.). The Teachers College Independent Reading unit is a regular feature of the MMS curriculum and can be used with all fifth grade students.

MMS teachers on the LCE inquiry team worked together with LCE staff to rework and embed elements of aesthetic education into the standard reading lesson. Since our working hypothesis held that the four teaching practices would, in combination, foster all three facets of engagement, all four practices were worked into the unit in the following ways. **Inquiry:** Students identified their own over-arching inquiry questions. They were tasked with using this question as a prompt for inferencing based on the character's actions throughout their book. This question could also be modified and it was used to generate further questions related to their scene work. **Art-making:** Students learned basic tenets of improvisational theater dialogue and used these skills to generate character dialogue. Students used improvisational dialogue as a tool to make inferences about their character's motivation throughout the latter half of the unit. **Reflection:** Was embedded throughout the unit. Students regularly used close observation of their fellow students art making choices as a foil for reflecting on their own. This reflection is accomplished in book group discussions and in whole classroom discussions and drives back to their independent inquiry questions. **Context:** After scene making was meaningfully underway, information about each book's social context was introduced.

At the end of the unit students and teacher were again given the EvsD and the REI in order to ascertain whether or not student engagement had improved throughout this unit. The scale for answers on the REI is from 1 to 5 (not true to very true) with one question being reverse scored. The scale for responses ranges from 8 to 40. An average score for each student was determined and then an average class score was found. For the EvsD an average subscale score was found for each student and then an average class score was determined for each subscale. The average pre- and post-assessment scores for the REI and for each subscale of the EvsD were compared in order to determine the effectiveness of the methods used. A percent increase or decrease in different categories was also analyzed. As surveys were analyzed it came to light that in recording student disaffection some students may not have understood the relationship between the question being asked and the negative scale response choices. This did not greatly affect the overall results, however it is important to keep in mind for future work.

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<sup>7</sup> Retrieved from

<http://www.brownco.k12.in.us/links/curriculum/elementary/uploads/Grades%205%20and%206%20Reading%20Units%20of%20Study.pdf>

## Results

This study took place in a 5<sup>th</sup> grade Integrated Co-Teaching class. 23 students, ranging in ages from 10 to 13 years old, participated in the study. 12 students in the class have IEPs and 16 of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. 17 students were Hispanic, 2 students were African-American, 3 students were Asian and 1 was Caucasian.

When looking at the overall results of the REI the average gain in reading engagement was 8.65 points, which was approximately a 34% improvement in teacher reported engagement. (see Table 1). The largest gains were in the categories “Thinks deeply about the content of texts,” in which there was a 22% increase in scores, and in “Enjoys discussing books with peers,” in which there was a 43% increase in scores. By increasing student engagement in those key areas of reading, one could infer that we can increase student achievement in reading when we embed aesthetic education practices into the regular curriculum.

The EvsD also showed gains in student engagement as reported by both students and teacher. Table 2 clearly shows an increase in behavioral and emotional engagement from the beginning to the end of the unit, and a decrease in disaffection both behaviorally and emotionally as reported by the teacher. Greater gains were made in Emotional Engagement in the teacher report, as the results show a 53% increase in that category. In Emotional Disaffection there was approximately a 52% decrease, which shows that according to the teacher more students were engaged than were not.

Changes in the EvsD Student Report were more modest, but still positive (Table 3). Students self-reported 8% gains in Behavioral Engagement and 10% gains in Emotional Engagement. Decreases in Behavioral and Emotional Disaffection were 8% and 7% respectively. We suspect this can be partially attributed to the aforementioned misunderstanding of the rating scale. It should also be kept in mind that--according to Fredricks and McClosky--the teacher reports for the EvsD have higher reliability ratings than student reports.

## Discussion

P. Bruce Uhrmacher proposes that aesthetic learning experiences, as closely defined by John Dewey, should exist alongside constructivist and authentic learning experiences. Our local study does suggest that aesthetic education teaching concepts, when carefully integrated into the general curriculum, can indeed increase student engagement overall and that if educators wish to galvanize their classrooms it may behoove them to create engaging experiences that incorporate inquiry, art-

making, context and reflection. For our school, the results imply that the Lincoln Center partnership could indeed be used to fortify teaching practice schoolwide and to better engage the care, interest and actions of our students.

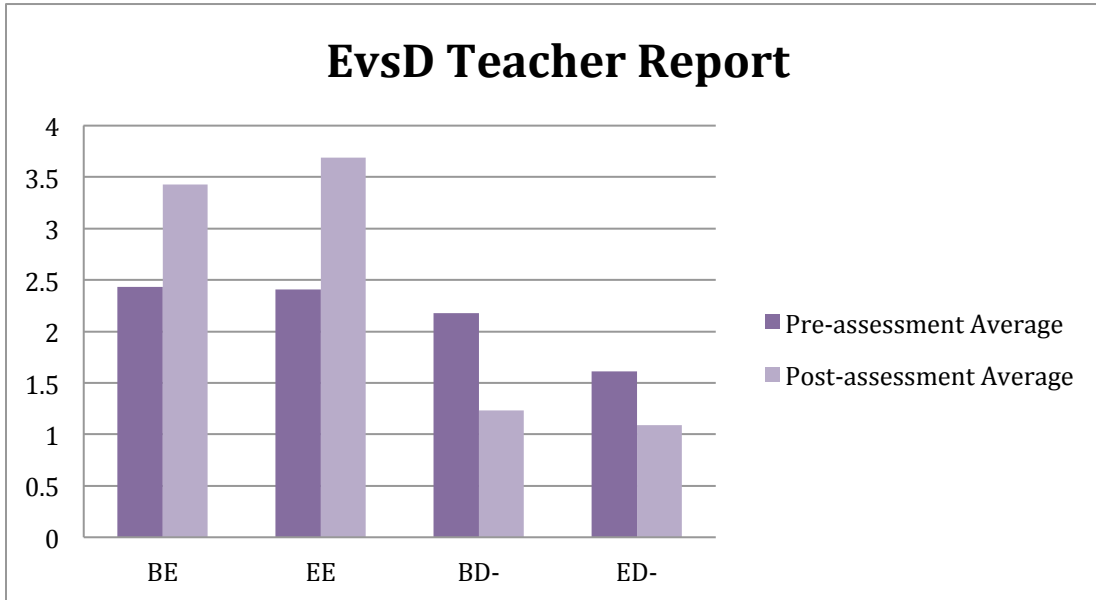
Our study was—in the spirit of action research--carried out on a small scale to answer the immediate, authentic questions of a particular school. To further tease out the implications we've described, it would need to be replicated across subject areas and grade levels. We would want to revisit how the tool is framed for students, to see if student results are muted by rule or by a misunderstanding about scales. Ultimately, future studies should also include an objective report from an outside member and a control group to establish direct correlation between aesthetic education and student engagement.

Moving forward at the school level, it will be important to work with teachers on looking at their current curriculum in order to see where it makes sense to incorporate aesthetic education practices. Given that this study took place during independent reading time, it seems natural to try this out in the English Language Arts curriculum as a next step. It is particularly significant to us that the highest gains in the REI category related to thinking and discussion around the texts themselves. This suggests that careful integration of art making within the contexts appropriate to the subject area drive interest deeper into the content at hand, not just into the art activity itself. Professional development will need to be carefully crafted to help teachers understand and try out these practices in order to replicate them successfully in their classrooms.

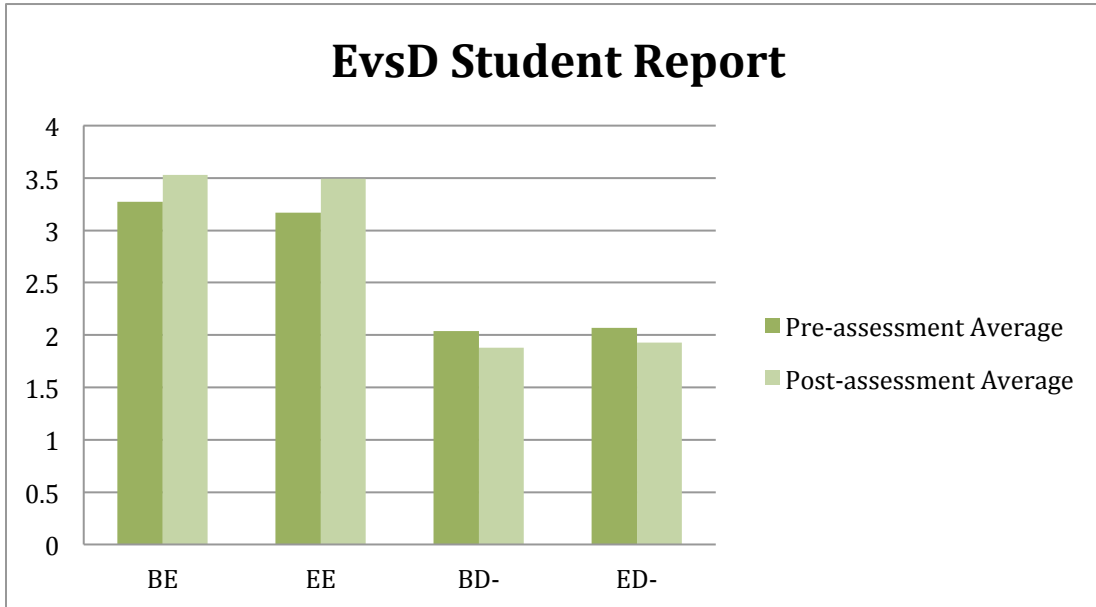
**Appendix:****Table 1**

REI	
Pre-assessment	25.22
Post-assessment	33.87

The Reading Engagement Index is a questionnaire that asks teachers to answer an eight-question survey about each student in their classroom. The scale for answers is from 1 to 5 (not true to very true) with one question being reverse scored. The scale for responses ranges from 8 to 40. The eight items are intended to reflect the behavioral, motivational, and cognitive characteristics of engaged reading. In this study student engagement rose 8.65 points, which is a 34% gain.

**Table 2**

The Engagement versus Disaffection in Learning (EvsD) Teacher Report is a 25-question survey that is rated on a four-point scale (not at all true to very true). There are four aspects of engagement that are measured on the survey: Behavioral Engagement (BE), Emotional Engagement (EE), Behavioral Disaffection (BE) and Emotional Disaffection (ED). The teacher report showed great gains in both engagement categories with BE increasing by 1 whole point and EE increasing by 1.28 points. Disaffection in both categories decreased, with a 0.95 point decrease in BE and a 0.52 point decrease in ED.

**Table 3**

The Engagement versus Disaffection in Learning (EvsD) Student Report is a 27-question survey that is rated on a four-point scale (not at all true to very true). There are four aspects of engagement that are measured on the survey: Behavioral Engagement (BE), Emotional Engagement (EE), Behavioral Disaffection (BE) and Emotional Disaffection (ED). While the gains in engagement and decrease in disaffection are less than those on the teacher report, it should be noted that the teacher report has a higher rate of reliability. Students reported 0.26 point increase in BE and a 0.32 point increase in EE. There was 0.16 point decrease in BD and a 0.14 point decrease in ED.