|  |
| --- |
|  |
| How to Most Effectively Implement Accelerated Reader into a School Reading Program |
| Jennifer McMahon, jenn.mcmahon17@gmail.com |

|  |
| --- |
| Trends in K-12 Literature and Related Media  8/6/2010 |

How to Most Effectively Implement Accelerated Reader into a School Reading Program

According to the Renaissance Learning Website, Accelerated Reader is the “world’s most widely used reading software” (“Accelerated Reader Enterprise”); however, for as often as this popular reading tool is praised, it is also loathed. Research on the implications of the software’s use with students is often contradictory. The mere mention of the program makes some teachers and librarians jump for joy while others get their hackles up. In an ideal world, professionals using the program would be using it because they believe in its mission and theories. In reality, however, many professionals have no choice in the matter. They have been told by well-meaning administrators they will use the prescribed program. So, what is the best way to implement the use of Accelerated Reader in a school? One must first define the goal of the program itself.

Introduced in the United States in 1986, Accelerated Reader is a computerized testing program meant to create life-long readers (Brisco). Quizzes cover over 20,000 titles, with the books divided by grade level, reading ability, and given a “point” value. The program aims to assess the reading level of students, quiz students on their reading comprehension, and provide a variety of reports for teachers to use. It’s important, however, that teachers understand and know how to use these reports.

Used in almost 40,000 schools across the United States, with over half of schools in the U.S. participating at some level in the program (Schmidt), the Accelerated Reader program consists of four components.

* Provide interesting books for students to read
* Provide time for students to read (AR recommends one hour per day)
* Quiz students on content of books, focusing on facts
* Rewards for points earned on the quizzes

When AR supporters are asked to explain what about the program is beneficial, school librarians often point out that when Accelerated Reader is used school-wide, book circulations increase. The program does, in fact, get students reading and talking about books. According to Greer, when Accelerated Reader was implemented as a *supplement* at Powell Valley Elementary School in Gresham, Oregon, library circulation went up 25%, and at times it went up closer to 75% (32). Teachers also noted that students began talking about books and recommending books to others. Some research has also found Accelerated Reader to be an effective method for improving reading for young people (Everhart). Teachers at Powell Valley Elementary School “saw immediate increases in grade level reading ability, from a small increase in proficient readers to more than a year’s growth in lower ability readers” (Greer 32). According to The Renaissance Learning Website (parent company of AR) as of April 15, 2005, they report that “’126 scientific studies support the effectiveness of AR’” (Everhart). Out of the 126 studies, 95 were research studies independent of Renaissance Learning.

It is important to note that when used properly, or as it was designed to be used, Accelerated Reader is meant to be used as a *supplement* to a reading program – not used as the reading program itself (Greer). Rather, AR should be used as a *tool*, with teachers and experts deciding how best to implement the tool into their school’s reading program. AR was not designed to be used exclusively as a reading program. And when used properly, teachers receive training on the program and how to use its supports and reports to help students.

Critics of Accelerated Reader, however, fear that unlike the way it was designed, schools are using AR as their sole reading program. Instead of teachers and librarians working side-by-side to involve students in reading for discussion or creating unique book projects, teachers are requiring students to read “within grade level” to earn points. Points transfer to rewards like pizza parties, prizes, and recognition. In an effort to earn points and get rewarded, yes, students read more, but they will only read something that has a quiz. Although studies show that circulation increases with AR and students do in fact read more, there is “no evidence of higher-level thinking skills being developed among readers” (Brisco 33). Teachers and librarians have long understood the success reading brings through creative activities and intelligent, thoughtful discussion. Brisco says that “in our rush to produce readers of quantity, we have forgotten that without thoughtful review of literature, we create mediocre readers who will not be able to achieve the same success that we had when our teachers made us think beyond the literal written word and apply our own personal insight and creativity into what we chose to read” (Brisco 34). According to Brisco, once Accelerated Reader is in place, gone are serious discussions between teachers and students regarding a book’s symbolism, underlying theme, and even character development. With this in mind, the question becomes will these students grow up to be life-long readers if they are only reading for tangible rewards? For creating life-long readers is what AR claims is its goal. Because long-range studies haven’t been conducted on the effects of the AR program, one could say schools, teachers, and librarians use AR as a “quick fix” for a deep-rooted problem (Brisco 33).

Yet another argument against the use of Accelerated Reader is that students no longer focus their reading selections based on quality of literature, content, and interests, but instead focus their reading selection based on what books have an AR quiz. A further argument is that library selection is based on what books have AR quizzes, rather than on quality literature. Librarians may change their book selection focus because books without AR quizzes simply don’t get checked out by students.

In the United States, one of the loudest arguments against the use of AR is its use of rewards to motivate students to read. Accelerated Reader suggests good readers: read a lot of books, frequently score above 80% on AR tests, and accumulate a lot of AR points (Schmidt). But wouldn’t most parents and teachers say a good reader is one who finds intrinsic pleasure and knowledge from reading? Critics claim the use of tangible rewards actually diminishes motivation for students to read. With AR, reading is not necessarily for enjoyment or learning, but rather as a “job” – a means to an end or specific reward. Renaissance Learning maintains that

The use of extrinsic rewards is not an essential part of Accelerated Reader’s use. AR provides learning information which teachers can use in a variety of ways, including reading incentive programs. Such programs, while not the only way to motivate students’ reading, can also serve as important, tangible feedback that helps students discover an intrinsic love of reading and learning within themselves. (Everhart)

If this is true, why does the website sell markers, highlighters and other prizes? According to source Everhart, AR “teaches adults and children that reading is more about numbers and efficiency than learning from or enjoying books.” In their study investigating AR’s claims to motivate children to be life-long readers, Pavonetti, Brimmer, and Cipielewski found “middle school students using AR who had also used AR in elementary school showed a significant increase in their amount of reading while those students not using AR in middle school after using it in elementary school showed a significant decrease.” This suggests that students who were required to participate in AR in elementary school, and then had free choice as to how often and what to read in middle school were for some reason turned off by reading. Perhaps this is because when participating in AR, students do not learn how to choose literature on their own. Instead, they focus on finding books that have quizzes, are within their reading level, and offer them a certain number of points. Perhaps once given the freedom to choose their own literature, these students simply do not know how to do it.

Further research and studies also need to done to support AR’s claims that the program creates life-long readers. Although it has been shown to increase reading scores and improve reading skills, not enough longitudinal studies have been done to show that if AR is implemented as a supplement to the reading program in a school, and used the way it was designed, if it truly creates *life-long readers*. This would make an interesting research study – one that could ultimately show whether AR meets its claims of creating life-long readers or simply increases the amount of reading students do – ultimately, making them “better” readers, but not people who will continue to read for pleasure without tangible rewards.

In Kelly Gallagher’s book *Readicide: How School Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do About It*, he says that “If our students are to have any chance of discovering reading flow, if they are to have any change to discover what it is like to come up for air while reading, if they are to have any chance of becoming lifelong readers, they will need what all readers need when they read: access to great books and large doses of uninterrupted time to read them (73). Stephen Krashen points out in “Accelerated Reader: Evidence Still Lacking,” that most students given quality literature to read and one hour per day to read it will become better readers. These are components of AR, but so are quizzes and rewards. To date, no longitudinal study has been done to see if AR works or if certain components of the program work. Is it offering students literature and time to read it –the first two components of the program – or the quizzes and rewards – the last two components of the program that are making for better readers?

The good news with regards to implementing Accelerated Reader is that students will read a lot of books. But Gallagher suggests there is a lot of bad news with the program, including:

* Students can only read books found on the AR list. If a good book is not on the list, students are not allowed to read it.
* Students choose books for high point value, rather than for their level of interest.
* The reward system sends the message that the reason students should read is not to enjoy reading but to earn points. Students are taught to read for the wrong reasons.
* Chenowith found that although students did a significant amount of reading in the program, their reading dropped lower than nonparticipants within one month of exiting AR. Without the points, their motivation significantly decreased.
* Pavonetti, Brimmer, and Cipielswski found that once students left AR they read on average ten hours a week less than nonparticipants. The program had short-term success but actually set young readers back in the long run. (Gallagher)

Although AR will create students that do a lot of reading during their participation in the program, students will ultimately be demotivated to read after they have left the classroom. Putting test scores aside, in the long-run it is more paramount that students leave our schools seeing themselves as readers than students who were able to quickly move from reading level three to reading level four in middle school.

Information garnered from the first school in England considered to have high AR implementation, found the following important for successful implantation of the program:

* One teacher in the school must be trained in the AR program, so he/she can then assume a leadership role of the program within the school.
* The lead teacher should then oversee additional training for other teachers.
* Classroom teachers should monitor reading progress intensely.
* Teachers should use the STAR diagnostic function of AR to determine initial reading level and set individual goals for students.
* Students must be given time during the school day to read – at least 20 minutes at a time.
* Teachers and librarians must be willing to create their own quizzes for books that do not already have an AR quiz.
* Tangible rewards must be limited. (Everhart)

So how should schools use Accelerated Reader most effectively? The program must first be used the way it was designed – as more than simply a whole reading program. AR should not be used because it is a time saver or “easy.” Rather, to truly create a reading culture within a school, AR should be used as a tool. Teachers need training on the program itself and how it was originally designed to be used. Teachers need to be trained in how to create and interpret reports, implementing the report results with individual students. Students need to be taught that reading has intrinsic rewards, not tangible rewards. A study by Vollands, Topping, and Evans found that even students of low SES in Scotland were “totally disinterested in any tangible rewards, but were highly motivated by the individualized performance feedback inherent in the program. Non-tangible incentives of teacher praise and constructive feedback have proven more motivational than tangible rewards” (Everhart). Teachers need to create a reading culture in the school by discussing books at a deeper level than AR quizzes provide. Teachers and librarians need to allow students creative outlets to show off what they’ve read – doing more with the literature they are reading than simply taking quizzes and earning points. Ultimately, teachers and librarians who use AR would offer quality literature for students to read, an hour a day to read it, options to read books that don’t have quizzes associated with them, and offer intrinsic motivation for reading – book discussion etc – rather than tangible rewards. Any other way of incorporating the use of AR into a reading program will certainly create readers of quantity, but not quality – and it won’t create life-long readers.

Works Cited

"Accelerated Reader Enterprise." *Renaissance Learning: Advanced Technology for Data Driven*

*Schools*. Renaissance Learning, 2010. Web. 3 Aug 2010. <http://www.renlearn.com/ar/>.

Bannister, Terry. "The Implementation of an Accelerated Reader Program in a Middle School."

*PNLA Quarterly*. 67.3 (2003): 13-4. Print.

Brisco, Shonda. "AR: What are Motives Behind the Motives?." *Teacher Librarian*. 30.4 (2003):

33-4. Print.

Everhart, Nancy. "A Cross-cultural Inquiry into the Levels of Implementation of Accelerated

Reader and Its Effect on Motivation and Extent of Reading: Perspectives from Scotland and England." *American Library Association*. American Library Association, n.d. Web. 19 Jul 2010. <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/aasl/aaslpubsandjournals/slmrb/slmrcontents/volume82>.

Gallagher, Kelly. *Readicide: How Schools Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do About It*.

Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2009.

Greer, JaKay. "A Positive Experience with Accelerated Reader." *Teacher Librarian*. 30.4

(2003): 32. Print.

Kohn, Alfie. *Punished by Rewards*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999. Print.

Krashen, Stephen. "Accelerated Reader: Does it Work? If so, Why?." *School Libraries in*

*Canada*. 22.2 (2002): 24-6, 44.

Krashen, Stephen. "Accelerated Reader: Evidence Still Lacking." *Knowledge Quest*. 33.3

(2005): 48-9. Print.

Libra, Suzanne. "Accelerated Reader: Does It Work?." *Colorado Libraries*. 26.2 (2000): 22-4.

Manzo, Kathleen Kennedy. "Reading Research." *Education Week* 22 Oct. 2008: 4-5. Print.

Pavonetti, L. M., K. M. Brimmer, and J. F. Cipielewski. "Accelerated Reader: What Are the

Lasting Effects on the Reading Habits of Middle School Students Exposed to Accelerated Reader in Elementary Grades?." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. 46.4 (2003): 300-11. Print.

Schmidt, Renita. "Really Reading: What Does Accelerated Reader Teach Adults and

Children?." *Language Arts*. 85.3 (2008): 202-211.

Stemig, Dana. "Accelerated Reader--Using This Tool to Get Students to Read." *California*

*School Library Association Journal*. 34.1 (Spring 2010): 10-11. Print.