



Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 46

Issue 1 *September/October 2005*

Article 3

9-1-2005

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Robin D. Groce

Appalachian State University

Eric C. Groce

Appalachian State University

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Recommended Citation

Groce, R. D., & Groce, E. C. (2005). Deconstructing the Accelerated Reading Program. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 46 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol46/iss1/3

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WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
Dorothy J. McGinnis
Reading Center and Clinic



Deconstructing the *Accelerated Reader Program*

**Robin D. Groce
Eric C. Groce
Appalachian State
University**

Teacher implementation of the Accelerated Reader Program is as widespread as it is diverse in terms of classroom and campus application. This manuscript highlights the findings of an informal, pilot study that examined four categories regarding the Accelerated Reader Program. They are: 1) assessment, 2) aesthetics and text interaction, 3) motivation, and 4) book selection.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to deconstruct and examine teacher implementation of the *Accelerated Reader Program*. Due to its growing popularity and wide-spread implementation, we found it useful to examine the various aspects of the program and how teachers are integrating these within the context of their language arts curriculum. This study focused on four main categories pertaining to issues involving the *Accelerated Reader Program*. They are: 1) assessment, 2) aesthetics and text interaction, 3) motivation, and 4) book selection.

Introduction

The *Accelerated Reader Program* (AR), School Renaissance Institute, is a literature-based reading program that is gaining popularity in classrooms and districts across the nation. The program is credited for its perpetuation of improved test scores and for fostering a love of reading. Students are afforded the opportunity to select their own reading material (within the limitations of a predetermined “reading level” and within the limitations of books that are on the AR list) and are assessed based on computerized multiple-choice tests. The implementation of a reward system is often established where students receive points for completion of books and success on tests.

Current modes of reading instruction place heavy emphasis on the isolation of reading skills and programmatic approaches to the implementation of specific goals and objectives through adherence to district scope and sequence lesson plans (Slattery, 1995a). The AR program exemplifies the type of programmatic approach that many teachers implement due to their district’s decision to purchase and promote it. The purpose of this manuscript is to not only deconstruct four main aspects of the program, but to also share data from a pilot study conducted with practicing teachers who use the AR program. In the following sections, our viewpoints regarding AR are based on anecdotal evidence through observations and first-hand accounts with parents and teachers. This qualitative assessment will be supported by quantitative data that collected through random sampling of one-hundred teachers

from two districts in the southwest region of the United States. Sixty-seven teachers responded to the surveys (See Appendix).

Discussion

Assessment

McLaren (1994) proposes that mainstream educators use assessments that are driven by technical knowledge whereby students are sorted, regulated and controlled based on empirical methods such as standardized test scores. In reference to the AR program, Carter (1996) found that part of the AR propaganda suggests that the program leads to higher scores on standardized tests. She further asserts that there are much more effective methods for achieving the same goal – not to mention cost-efficient benefits as well. In the AR program, students are required to take a placement test (STAR – Standardized Test for Assessment of Reading) at the start of the program to ascertain their “reading level” and post tests to measure comprehension. Advantage Learning Systems claims to give a reading level that is based on the students’ zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Advantage Learning Systems, n.d.) and students are to read only books within their prescribed ZPD. The reading level determined at the start of the program is passed along to parents and librarians in an effort to keep the students reading within their purported reading level. Biggers (2001) discusses the invalidity of the STAR by stating that it more accurately reflects a cloze-procedure than a placement test. She further notes that the STAR is void of oral reading comprehension opportunities or any other methods whereby a teacher can observe the reading behaviors of their students (Biggers, 2001). “Advantage Learning Systems never cites Lev Vygotsky’s (1986) work that originated the concept of the ZPD, which he defined as a dynamic continuum of independent and assisted abilities” (Biggers, 2001, p. 72). The consequence of such invalid assessment instruments is the misinformation to parents and teachers regarding the reading abilities or even reading potential for their children. In our informal research, we learned that some librarians are reluctant to allow students to check out books of their choice because they are considered too difficult or too easy (it was not in their ZPD).

Almost half the teachers surveyed revealed that they allow students to read books that were above their reading level *some of the time*. While sixty percent allow students to read books that fell below their reading level *some of the time*. Twenty-four percent said that they *never* allow students to check out or read material that is below their reading level. We found it alarming that almost a quarter of these teachers refuse to allow students to enjoy a book that is considered too easy for them. Conversely, only half the teachers seemed to find merit in allowing students to read challenging material that may be considered too difficult for them.

Slattery (1995a) proposes that modern emphasis on assessment has been on quantitative measures such as test scores and measurable outcomes that are behaviorally observable. At the conclusion of a book reading experience, children are to take tests to measure their comprehension. The five, ten, or twenty (depending on the level of the book) items on the multiple-choice tests are basic knowledge and comprehension level questions that are limited in their capacity to invoke higher-order thinking. Greene (1978) criticizes practices such as these stating that schools and districts are training children to perform to a certain standard rather than emphasizing critical thinking. She points out that technology and a focus on measuring basic competencies are replacing "...emancipatory thinking and critique" (p. 57). As classroom teachers, we were surprised by the emphasis that parents and administrators place on test scores since authentic assessment items such as portfolios, student writing, student projects, and observations provide a much more qualitative kaleidoscope of how students are progressing in school. However, the AR program omits these types of assessments and doesn't even "suggest written responses, extension activities, or repeated interaction with the text" (Biggers, 2001, p.73). In our surveys, we learned that sixteen percent of the teachers *never* use the AR comprehension tests for assessment of reading skills while thirty-eight percent *sometimes* used them. These percentages allotted for half the teachers in terms of those implementing the AR comprehension tests on an *infrequent* basis. However, the other half *frequently* to *mostly* implement the AR comprehension tests. We were encouraged to learn that only one percent *always* implements the AR comprehension tests in assessing the reading skills of their students. Given that over half the

teachers *frequently* rely on these assessments, we conclude that students in those classrooms may be missing out on the type of critical-thinking, higher-order, and aesthetic activities that are crucial to a well-rounded literacy program. This is discussed more thoroughly in the following section.

Aesthetics and Text Interaction

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) discusses the value of integrating purposeful activities and choices of alternatives in an effort to make teaching aims more flexible. He states, "The aim must always represent a freeing of activities. The term 'end in view' is suggestive, for it puts before the mind the termination or conclusion of some process" (p. 123). He emphasizes the necessity of making the process and product work together to provide for the most enriching learning experience. The culminating activities for many students as they finish an AR book are the computerized, multiple-choice tests. This seems to greatly contrast the type of aesthetics and self-reflection that Greene (1978) believes invokes higher-order thinking skills. Dewey (1938) identifies the need for students to be exposed to a variety of equipment, toys, and games that serve as a social set-up under which they can interact. Spring (2000) asserts that students need opportunities to talk about critical issues with each other as well as engage in community activities. If students are limited to the post-tests provided by the AR program, they are missing out on the myriad of opportunities to engage in aesthetic response and creative endeavors related to reading experiences. Slattery (1995a) asserts that children also need opportunities to engage in hermeneutic circles whereby they share their interpretations in a non-threatening environment.

The purpose of investigating aesthetics and text-interaction was to determine if teachers were implementing additional project ideas or aesthetic integration with the AR program. Forty percent of the teachers surveyed revealed that they implement student project-related activities as a form of reading assessment *some of the time* while thirty percent revealed that they *frequently* use project-related activities in their classrooms. According to this data, most teachers involved in this study recognized the merit in providing opportunities for students to engage in

more than just AR tests. We have observed teachers who also engage their students in literature circles, story retellings, teacher-student conferences, writing activities, and other aesthetic text interactions. However, according to the data in the previous section, we still see over half of the participating teachers who rely on the AR tests in determining reading skill proficiency – namely comprehension.

As part of our interest in the AR post-tests, we had an undergraduate elementary education class that was studying Bloom's Taxonomy evaluate some of the AR post test. We had ninety students evaluate twelve different tests from levels three through eight of the AR program. The students were to evaluate each question and determine what level of Bloom's Taxonomy the questions addressed. As a whole, the students analyzed nine-hundred and sixty questions. They found that seventy-one percent were from the *Knowledge Level* of Bloom's Taxonomy and twenty-one percent were from the *Comprehension Level* of Bloom's Taxonomy. These bottom two levels of Bloom's reflect questions that call for basic recall of specific facts and details or prompt students to remember main ideas. Carter (1996) notes that children need school libraries and classrooms to be places where children engage in critical thinking activities that prompt them to evaluate and synthesize the information that they are reading. The questions were not found to promote application, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation of the material presented in the text. The unfortunate consequence of this is that students who are only taking the tests to measure comprehension fail to engage in the critical components of a well-rounded literacy program. Furthermore, in the classrooms where teachers are frequently relying on the AR to measure reading skills, it is clear that the only reading skills measured are comprehension and knowledge. An added consequence is that in many cases, the only measures of comprehension are the AR tests. As Biggers (2001) states, "The only thing a child must do to demonstrate comprehension and readiness to progress to the next level of books is score highly on the AR tests" (p.73).

Motivation

McLaren (1994) challenges teachers to question pedagogical practices that involve the use of rewards and punishments as control

devices. The AR program utilizes a computerized point system whereby students earn points for completion of books and success on tests. Points are used toward the advancement of goals set by teachers in regard to individual reading levels of the students. Goals are usually set within a six-week grading period. Slattery (1995b) states, "In the postmodern curriculum, it does not make sense to evaluate lessons, students, and classrooms based on predetermined plans, outcomes, or standards..." (p. 624). Slattery (1995b) further asserts that adherence to predetermined goals alters the possibility and reality of a natural course of action that takes into account the randomness and chaos that dominate classroom life. We are reminded of a teacher we observed making her students sit out at recess toward the end of the six weeks if they had not reached their AR goal. The students somberly sat out at recess or stayed in the classroom reading in an effort to earn the deficient points.

Slattery (1995b) asserts that by lessening our emphasis on time constraints, educational experiences will become more meaningful to both teachers and students. Allowing students the opportunity to set their own goals and reach those by their own schedule may prove more meaningful than taking away privileges such as recess and forcing children to read. As we enter many school buildings, we can't help noticing the large bulletin boards in the main foyers that portray the names, and in some cases photos, of the schools' *Accelerated Reader All Stars* (or whatever slogan they have given to acknowledge the students who have reached their reading goals). According to Slattery (1995a), competitive motivation of this nature is in stark contrast to a philosophy that advocates cooperation over competition. Dewey (1916) may have questioned whether the activities leading to this type of extrinsic motivation hold any internal continuity. Teachers should consider whether children are reading to satisfy the external factor or if they are reading out of internal satisfaction that could result in life-long reading habits. Clearly, the children who were forced to miss recess were satisfying the teacher's external drive for recognition while their own internal drive (at that moment) was probably to participate in recess.

Motivation through the point system was *always* implemented by over half the teachers surveyed. Fifty-four percent of the teachers surveyed indicated that they *always* recognize students who reach their

goals while fifty-eight percent reported that their schools *always* give special recognition to those who have earned the most points. Some interesting treats for children earning the most points were photos on the school's bulletin boards, ice-cream socials, principals who shaved their heads, AR store shopping, and even limousine rides. Unfortunately, we observed that the children who are earning the most points were those who were already high achievers in reading. Carter (1996) states that these types of tangible rewards may actually lessen a child's motivation to read and that such extrinsic motivators devalue reading, in and of itself. In their study with more than 1,500 students from 10 middle schools in Michigan, Pavonetti, Brimmer, and Cipelewski (2003) found that "readers are not motivated by a computer bookkeeping system" (p. 309). The researchers conducted research on the AR program based on their love of reading and belief that "students will not become lifelong readers from tests or points or incentive programs" (Pavonetti, Brimmer, and Cipelewski, p. 309).

Book Selection

One of the positive aspects of the AR program is that students are given the freedom to choose the books that they want to read. Again, Dewey (1938) states that student interest and choice will greatly impact the learning experiences of the students. The choices that they make will be meaningful and relevant to them, thereby increasing their internal motivation to read and making the educational experience match their realities. However, there are limitations to this freedom in regard to the AR program. The books that students select must be from the AR list (that is, the schools have bought the assessment discs for certain books), and the books must be within their reading level. We are concerned with the wide variety of books that children are missing out on because they are not yet on the AR list or because financial limitations of the district restrict the number of titles that they can purchase. Fifty percent of the teacher's surveyed said that they encourage the reading of the AR books *all of the time*. A teacher informed us of a student who would not read a recently released Phillip Pullman novel that she suggested because it was not yet on the AR list. This is alarming to us due to the fact that book selection of this nature is not indicative of real-world reading or the perpetuation of establishing life long reading habits including selection

of books based on personal interest and inquisition. We have personally never bought, checked out, or read a book because it was on the AR list or any other propagandized establishment. In a 1995-1996 survey of schools using the AR program, Carter (1996) found that while the number of children checking out library books had increased, the books that they were checking out were almost exclusively AR titles.

We were encouraged by a small number of teachers who allowed students to read books that were not on the list and/or were above or below their assigned reading levels. We spoke to teachers and librarians who worked together to reward points based on books that were not on the AR list. The teachers created their own point system in keeping with the school's motivation system and in helping each student (who so desired) to have their photo placed on the "All-Star" wall. Although Carter (1996) claims that the AR program handcuffs students' abilities to develop independent book selection techniques, innovative techniques like this circumvent the limitations of the program and center on learner development.

Conclusion

Seventy-five percent of the teachers surveyed use the AR program as a focus of their reading instruction. Greene (1978) discusses the necessity of teachers in becoming reflective practitioners who question the pedagogical trends that they are adopting. Doll (1998) alerts educators to become more conscious of the systems of control and the political power that is influencing teaching practices and ways of thinking about the educational process. Researchers Pavonetti, et al. (2003) found that students participating in the AR program did not read more once the program was over than they had prior to their participation and did not develop life-long reading habits like the program claims to do. An interesting aspect regarding their study was that students involved in the AR program actually read more during the school year and during the promotion of reading, but did not sustain these reading practices once the school year was over (Pavonetti, Brimmer, and Ciplewski, 2003).

With such heavy emphasis being placed on the adoption of the AR program in districts and schools across the country, it is important to

consider some modifications and ways of enriching the program to best meet the needs of all students and to actually promote lifelong reading habits. A few modifications could include, 1) allowing children to engage in authentic types of assessments such as portfolios, student writing samples, projects, and grand conversations in efforts to ascertain their reading interests and general reading ability, 2) surveying children to determine the factors that are motivating them to read, 3) avoiding the use of AR tests as their only form of assessment, and 4) allowing students to have more choice in their reading selections.

It is hopeful that teachers will begin to move back toward a more independent and flexible approach to teaching thereby emphasizing more student choice, aesthetic opportunity, inquiry, internal motivation, critical thinking, ambiguity, art, and hermeneutics. Teacher will then place emphasis on time constraints, reading abilities, competitive atmospheres, external motivation, and social control.

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Robin D. Groce and Eric C. Groce are faculty members at Appalachian State University, Boone, NC.

Appendix

Teacher Survey Implementation of Accelerated Reader

Please rate the following statements according to this scale:

5-Always 4-Most of the time 3-Frequently
2-Sometimes 1- Never

1. The AR program is the focus of my reading instruction.
1 2 3 4 5
2. My students are engaged in independent reading of books and novels.
1 2 3 4 5
3. The basal reader is the focus of my reading instruction.
1 2 3 4 5
4. I use the AR program for student assessment of reading skills.
1 2 3 4 5
5. My students earn points for reading books that are not on the AR list.
1 2 3 4 5
6. My students are allowed to read books that are above their reading level.
1 2 3 4 5
7. My students are allowed to read books that are below their reading level.
1 2 3 4 5
8. I encourage books that are not on the AR list.
1 2 3 4 5
9. I encourage books that are on the AR list.
1 2 3 4 5
10. I use treats and prizes as rewards for earned AR points.
1 2 3 4 5

11. I give treats and prizes to students with the most AR points.
1 2 3 4 5
12. I give treats and prizes for students who have reached their AR goals.
1 2 3 4 5
13. My school recognizes students who have earned the most AR points.
1 2 3 4 5
14. My school recognizes students who have reached their AR goals.
1 2 3 4 5
15. My students earn a grade for reaching their AR goals.
1 2 3 4 5
16. My students are required to reach a certain AR goal within each six weeks.
1 2 3 4 5
17. My students are required to reach a weekly AR goal.
1 2 3 4 5
18. My students are allowed at least 30 minutes a day of reading time.
1 2 3 4 5
19. My students are allowed more than 45 minutes a day of reading time.
1 2 3 4 5
20. My students are more motivated to read as a result of the AR program.
1 2 3 4 5
21. I conference with my students about what they are reading.
1 2 3 4 5
22. I offer specific feedback to students regarding their books.
1 2 3 4 5
23. I provide various activities pertaining to the literary elements.
1 2 3 4 5

24. I implement at least one group novel study each six-weeks. 1 2 3 4 5
25. I use the basal reader along with the AR program. 1 2 3 4 5
26. I use student projects as an assessment tool for reading skills. 1 2 3 4 5
27. I use journal writing as an assessment tool for reading skills. 1 2 3 4 5
28. I encourage students to read from a variety of genres. 1 2 3 4 5
29. I have noticed an improvement in the reading comprehension of my students as a result of the AR program. 1 2 3 4 5
30. It is my perception that students' scores on standardized tests have improved as a result of the AR program. 1 2 3 4 5