

How to Accelerate a Reader

 edweek.org/education/opinion-how-to-accelerate-a-reader/2010/09

September 5, 2010

On Twitter today, a heated debate about the effectiveness of reading management and incentive programs like *Accelerated Reader* and *Scholastic Reading Counts* drove me to investigate what compels schools and school districts to implement such programs. Reading management programs work like this: Students take a computerized placement test to determine their reading level. Students select books to read that match this level. When students complete books, they take computerized tests on these books. Teachers generate reports on students' test scores. With the noble goals of increasing reading achievement and fostering lifelong reading habits in children, these for-profit programs claim that extensive research supports their widespread implementation.

Abundant reading research proves that the following components of an independent reading program increase students' reading achievement and motivation to read:

Access to books: Students need access to a wide array of reading materials at their independent level.

Time to read: Students need consistent, daily time to read at school.

Reading engagement: Students need classroom conditions that engage them with reading and foster reading self-efficacy.

School-wide support: Schools must create a culture of reading that values reading in all subject areas.

Well-stocked libraries with qualified librarians: School library collections should contain current, well-maintained collections of interesting reading material manned by trained, licensed librarians.

Student choice: Students need frequent opportunities to select their own reading materials for both personal and academic reasons.

These components, considered best practices, are the same components that Accelerated Reader points to when making claims about its program's effectiveness. There is little research to be found, however, that compares schools that already have these best practices in place with schools that implement reading management programs. Out of 158 studies mentioned on Accelerated Reader's website only 3 studies compared such classrooms. In spite of claims that many of the studies supporting their program appear in peer-reviewed journals, no positive studies have appeared in leading reading research journals published by the International Reading Association or National Council of Teachers of English.

Teaching Opinion Eight Instructional Strategies for Promoting Critical Thinking (Opinion)

As for the key components that differentiate *Accelerated Reader* and other programs from any free-choice voluntary reading program--the tests and incentives--there is no substantive research proving that these components increase reading achievement or develop lifelong reading habits. To its credit, *Accelerated Reader* does not mention or endorse rewards or incentives on their website, but many schools offer children prizes or improved grades for passing AR tests.

It's not about the numbers. It's about reading enough to build reading experiences, fine-tune your preferences, and discover who you are as a reader. It's about previewing, choosing, reading, and discussing scores of books. Promoting independent reading demands that children have the time and encouragement to develop reading habits for their own purposes. Reading for the sake of rewards or higher grades (or avoidance of lower grades) marginalizes reading for authentic reasons and sends the message that reading has no intrinsic value to the individual. Reading bestows lifelong gifts on those who read, and I don't mean t-shirts or bookmarks.

In order to make these programs work, schools must invest in books for students to read and teacher training in best practices. You could do this without spending thousands of dollars on reading management software. The value added by such programs is not research-proven on a large scale and does not justify the expense.

In addition to the limited positive impact of reading management programs, there are significant concerns for young readers in schools with these programs in use:

Students' choices are limited to the books that have tests. Teachers can create their own tests for books without a pre-packaged test, but it is doubtful whether many would do so.

Students' motivation to read hinges on the point values for books, not a book's literary merit or personal interests. In a *New York Times* essay last year, author Susan Straight questioned *Accelerated Reader's* point assignment system observing, "The passion and serendipity of choosing a book at the library based on the subject or the cover or the first page is nearly gone, as well as the excitement of reading a book simply for pleasure."

Computer-based tests don't identify comprehension strategies, higher-level thinking or allow for open-ended response to literature. Tests focus on low-level recall of facts from the books. For students who fail tests, there is no remediation offered through the program. You just take the same test again and again.

Students can cheat on the AR tests. You can read *The Outsiders* and share the answers for the computer-based test with all of your friends who didn't read it. With no other measures in place to assure that students really read, how do teachers know whether

students read the books or not?

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Teachers and librarians do not need wide knowledge about children's literature in order to run the program. For some school districts, this factor may seem like a positive quality, but would you want your child in a school where the literacy leaders did not know much about books? There are no replacements for knowing the reader and knowing the book.

Teri Lesesne, Professor in the Library Sciences Department at Sam Houston State University and esteemed expert in children's and young adults' literature, expresses her concerns about Accelerated Reader, "AR began as a way for teachers to keep track of students' free reading choices. It has evolved into a "program" touted to cure all. What AR does is teach that reading is for points and that details are all that matters. Response is unimportant. Theme is negligible. Worse, AR restricts books readers can read /re-read. It does not consider the reader, just the reading level, ignoring the human element."

Reading management programs can increase reading achievement in schools with no other independent reading initiatives in place, because the addition of research-proven components fill a void, but the programs in and of themselves are not the primary cause. With shrinking school district budgets and increasing pressure to maintain critical staff and services, it seems irresponsible to waste money on programs that do not provide greater gains. Our students would be better served by hiring qualified staff and buying more reading material.

Additional Reading on Accelerated Reader and Reading Management Programs

Stephen Krashen, "Does Accelerated Reader Work?"

Jim Trelease, *The Read-Aloud Handbook Web site*

Addition (September 7, 2010) Alfie Kohn, internationally-known expert in human behavior, education, and parenting thoughtfully provided this excerpt, "A Closer Look at Reading Incentive Programs," from his touchstone book, *Punished By Rewards*, which reveals how incentive programs damage young readers' motivation to read.

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