Accelerated Reader: A Position Statement

Frank Serafini

Accelerated Reader (AR) is a computer based assessment system for the tracking of children's literature reading. Originally published by Advantage Learning Systems and now owned and operated by the School Renaissance Institute, AR is purported to be "the most popular reading software in America" and it is estimated to be in over 50,000 schools as of 2003. In one brochure, AR claims to have tests available for over 35,000 books. Self-published research reports claim that Accelerated Reader raises standardized test scores, increases library circulation, and increases students' motivation to read.

These tests generate a grade equivalent score and a student's reading level, to be used to determine what books students should be reading.

The program focuses on the STAR assessment system designed to measure reading comprehension and a reporting/tracking system that generates weekly reports for teachers about the progress and "Zone of Proximal Development" for each reader. STAR is a computer generated, norm-referenced, multiple choice reading test. In these assessments, students choose the best word to finish a sentence, where the word comes directly from the text. These tests generate a grade equivalent score and a student's reading level, to be used to determine what books they should be reading.

I would like to outline a series of challenges I have about the AR program. Each challenge is based on observation, reading of AR's research, and discussions with teachers and librarians that have adopted or were mandated to use, Accelerated Reader.

The act of reading is reduced to a thing students do to collect points.

Reading In and Of Itself is Devalued
Reading books becomes parallel with collecting reading trophies. Books become something readers need to finish and answer questions because of the promise of points and rewards. When a book is finished, readers are simply required to move onto the next book. The focus of the reading program is always on what book you can read next. The act of reading is reduced to a thing students do to collect points.

Challenges with Extrinsic Rewards
Alfie Kohn's work clearly describes the challenges and possible dangers of relying so heavily on extrinsic rewards for promoting learning. This program is a throw back to Skinnerian-based motivation theory based on positive reinforcement and extrinsic motivation. Children end up rushing through books, neglecting the aesthetic experience of reading, to get to the computer test to score points. Some students have bragged to me that they have been able to pass the tests without even reading the books. Life long readers don't need points to understand the joy and power of reading.

Effects on the Publishing Industry
What happens if AR becomes really influential? Will publishers only publish books if there are going to be tests made for them? Will they publish fewer picture books than chapter books because they are worth less points? Will old books that aren't going to have tests made for them be removed from catalogs? My biggest fear is that AR will influence publishers' decisions and limit the choices available for students.

Limited Choice
Accelerated Reader only has certain books that are available for testing. Although their list is quite extensive, not all books can be made available. Their list is heavily weighted toward
literature. Poetry and non-fiction are minimally represented. Chapter books receive many more points than picture books, regardless of their complexity. When teachers require only AR books to be read, or when funds go to only the purchase of those books that have tests available, students choices are limited. AR’s claims of increased circulation focuses only on the circulation of those books that have tests available.

**Reading Selections Predetermined by Commercial Program**

Why should we allow a commercial program to decide what books we should purchase for our schools? Do they read the Hornbook, Reading Teacher Choices, Booklinks to make their decisions? We are already witnessing a narrowing of choices due to publishers culling their inventories and putting books out of print faster than ever. Further reductions in choices of texts will only serve to decrease readers’ choices and motivation to read.

**Reading Levels and Leveled Books**

Making an appropriate match between a reader and a text takes more than just applying a readability formula. Limitations of Flesh-Kincaid or the Fry formula include the overemphasis on decoding rather than conceptual complexity.

**Software or Books**

Simply put, AR is expensive. The cost of the software is prohibitive and significantly reduces the amount of money available for books. When principals and school districts dole out large amounts of money, they expect teachers to use what they buy. Because of this, teachers often have no choice about whether they will use this program or not. We bought it, so you use it, regardless of whether it aligns with district or state reading standards or the instructional approaches of the classroom teacher.

**Erosion of Effective Literacy Instruction**

Although AR claims to be a supplemental program, many schools have adopted it as their comprehensive reading instructional program. This focus on AR and the points that can be earned diminishes the amount of reading instruction that occurs. Reading instruction may eventually become simply teaching children how to answer five multiple choice questions after reading. Advances that have been made in the name of “balanced” literacy are in danger of becoming obsolete. The use of AR as a reading instructional program does not align with any of the research on “best practices.” AR is NOT an instructional program; it is a computer-based tracking and assessment system.

**Non-Scientific Research Base**

In this day of scientifically-based reading research, how can schools and districts use money to purchase AR when there is no scientifically-based evidence of its effectiveness? Of the twelve studies included in the AR literature, none were found to be published in peer reviewed journals, and most were conducted by the AR company itself.

**Misrepresentation of the Zone of Proximal Development**

AR’s definition and use of the Zone of Proximal Development is blatantly misused and misrepresented. In their “research report” entitled ZPD Guidelines, they offer the following definition: “a student’s ZPD is the range of book readability levels that will result in optimal growth in reading ability.” This is just plain wrong. Vygotsky originated the theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, where he defined it as the level between what a child can do independently and what she can do with the help of capable others. Since no where in the AR program are readers allowed to work with capable, or even incapable others, how can they determine the upper bounds of the zone? The boundaries AR establishes for the ZPD are determined by a test score based on readability
formulas. Vygotsky was quite clear that the ZPD cannot be determined by a test, but rather by assessments and observations done in the context of the learning event. In an effort to link to "science" in their brochures, AR has inappropriately adopted the term ZPD and has misunderstood and misrepresented the concept Vygotsky.

Effects of Leveling Readers and Texts
Hearing comments from classroom teachers like, "He's a level 10 reader" shows a lack of understanding of reading comprehension and literacy development. Based on these levels, readers are grouped together for instruction. This practice assumes readers of the same level are homogeneous and need the same types of instruction; this can lead to inappropriate instruction. AR and the assessments that accompany the texts leads teachers to believe they know the readers in their class and don’t need to use other assessments, for example miscue analysis, running records, retellings, interviews, discussions and observational guides to understand their students’ abilities and needs. Without these other assessments, reading ability is often reduced to the correct and incorrect oral pronunciation of text, rather than comprehension.

In the AR program, books become reading "trophies," something that readers are required to "master" before moving on to the next book at a higher reading level. Can we actually get a book right? Can we ever just ask the right questions? I don’t believe we want to send the message to students that reading is a slow progression through a predetermined series of books. Rather, I want students to see books as something to explore, discuss, share, revisit and enjoy.

Final Thoughts
The most detrimental effect of the AR program is that it changes what readers come to view as reading. Readers begin to see reading as the ability to pass multiple choice tests when they finish with a text. It changes what they talk about and how they relate to reading. Reading is so much more than test-taking ability. Why would we want to send our students this inappropriate message?

Why do we have to take a quiz when we finish with a book? Do we do this ourselves as adult readers? Is it because we don’t trust students to get the things out of their reading we expect them to? What effects does the continual use of literal recall questions have on the expectations of readers about reading? Who determines what the main idea of a text is? What kind of messages does this program send to young readers? What important decisions does it take away from classroom teachers? Does AR really develop life-long readers? These provoking questions need to be addressed by teachers, administrators, and those charged with overseeing curriculum. Our goal is to develop confident, independent, and strategic readers. Reading educators want to produce life-time readers, not just school-time readers.

**************************************************************************
Frank Serafini, PhD., is an Assistant Professor at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, where he teaches courses in Children’s Literature, Reading Education, and Literacy Research.
**************************************************************************

The best homework is to surround kids with appropriate books and read to them 365 days a year.

Allan S. Vann