



## Student Attitudes Toward Accelerated Reader: “Thanks for Asking!”

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The Accelerated Reader (AR) program, designed by Renaissance Learning, states its purpose is to increase students’ motivation to read and students’ achievement in reading. A review of the literature reveals inconsistent findings about its outcomes. While Renaissance Learning cites many research studies on their website that suggest the program is meeting its goals, very little has been noted regarding student opinion of the program. Independent research studies about students’ attitudes toward the program have been varied, yielding both favorable attitudes toward the program and others indicating unfavorable results. What do students really think about the Accelerated Reader program, a widely used supplemental, independent reading program in which students read fiction and non-fiction books of their choice and take brief online comprehension quizzes about the books? The results from student focus group interviews during our study on students’ attitudes toward AR in Grades 3-8 are described in this article.

*Keywords:* accelerated reader, independent reading, motivation to read

The Accelerated Reader (AR) program was designed by Renaissance Learning to increase students’ motivation to read and students’ achievement in reading; however, a review of the literature reveals inconsistent findings about its outcomes. The Renaissance Learning company reports several research studies on their website that suggest the program is meeting its goals. Independent research studies about students’ attitudes toward the program, however, have been varied, some reporting favorable attitudes toward the program and others indicating unfavorable results.

The purpose of this two part study was to gather students’ views about the Accelerated Reader (AR) program. In part one of the study (results previously reported in a paper given at American Educational Research Association, May, 2010) questionnaires were administered and completed by 1365 Grade 3-8 students in four schools. The results from the questionnaires indicated that most students perceive the AR program as being helpful in motivating them to read and acquiring reading skills; however, older students have significantly less favorable attitudes toward the program. While valuable insights emerged from the questionnaire data, the purpose of this article is to discuss the results from part two of the study in

which focus group interviews were conducted at five schools. The focus group interviews provide findings that are similar, in some respects, to the questionnaire findings, but students express more critical views about the AR program in the interviews.

What do students really think about the Accelerated Reader program? The focus group interview results from our study on students’ attitudes toward AR in Grades 3-8 are described in this article.

### **Review of the Literature**

The empirical literature on student outcomes from participation in the Accelerated Reader (AR) program reveals varied and contradictory findings. Renaissance Learning, the developer of the AR program, reports on its website that 155 studies conducted on the AR program support the effectiveness of the program, of which 129 were conducted independently, and 20 were published in peer-reviewed publications. It isn’t totally clear, however, how “independent” these studies are, and the studies are varied in terms of methodology and purposes. And, furthermore, a review of the literature using databases, such as ERIC and Wilson Web, reveals that studies resulting in negative findings on the AR program are not listed on the Renaissance Learning website, and we have been unable to

locate 129 “independent” studies. In discussions with teachers regarding their knowledge of AR it was noted that teachers, consumers and prospective customers of the AR products most likely read only the research summaries on the Renaissance Learning website and are not aware of other research conducted on AR that reports different outcomes or some concerns about the program (D. Cooper, personal communications, 2009).

Many parents and teachers perceive the AR program to be achieving its promise (personal communications, 2009), but some independent research studies indicate that students have unfavorable views about the program and that the AR program does not increase students’ achievement or self-efficacy about reading (e.g., Conrath, 2007; Krashen, 2005; Melton, et al., 2004; Schmidt, 2008; White, 2005). For example, when investigating students’ motivation for reading, Schmidt (2008) found that teachers believed the program was important for instilling a love of reading, but the students of these teachers indicated they read only for the AR points, not for the joy of reading. Thompson, Mahuri, and Taylor (2008) also found negative student views in their study with high school students in California. The use of AR was actually counterproductive in this situation because the students read less after the AR program was implemented than before they participated in the AR program. Obviously, the program had a negative impact on students’ interest in reading.

The developers of AR claim that the program will “get students excited about books”, but Persinger (2001) and Brisco (2003) questioned if AR is responsible for getting students excited about reading or if it simply gets students interested in the program to earn points and prizes. Teachers often reward students with pizza parties, etc. after they have earned a certain number of AR points. Persinger concluded that rewarding students with points and prizes actually undermines students’ intrinsic motivation to read. Schmidt (2008) also concluded that AR has a negative effect on students because of its emphasis on literal fact-type quizzes and extrinsic rewards. Gallagher (2009), the author of *Readicide*, argues that the “overtaching of academic texts” and the use of programs, such as AR that offer extrinsic rewards for reading, are responsible for “readicide”, the noun he created to describe “the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools” (p. 2).

Only a few studies have investigated whether the AR program actually has an impact on students’ reading achievement. As with AR studies on motivation, the results of these studies are contradictory, and only a few used comparison groups. Peak and Dewalt (1994) investigated the impact of AR on 50 randomly selected Grade 9 students in North Carolina who had used the system for five years; and they report that the AR students made better gains on the *California Achievement Test* in reading than the comparison students. A different result was found,

however, in a causal-comparative study by Conrath (2007), who found that Grade 8 students in non-AR schools had higher reading achievement scores on the *Measures of Academic Progress* than the students in the AR schools. These surprising findings were attributed to the teachers’ emphasis in non-AR schools on reading in general and their use of critical reading skills.

Some researchers have examined reading achievement outcomes for various student subgroups. For example, Melton et al. (2004) conducted an ex post facto study comparing the reading achievement of 352 students who had AR for one year with a group in another school (n = 270) that did not have AR. Pre-test and post-test Terra Nova scores (ANCOVA analyses) indicated that the AR students in quartiles 2, 3, and 4 scored significantly lower than those who did not participate in the AR program. No difference was found for students in quartile 1 (lowest quartile). It appears from the limited number of studies conducted to investigate achievement that AR does not usually result in gains, although it should be emphasized again that few well-designed, independent experimental and quasi-experimental studies have examined this issue.

Despite the positive views that many educators have about the AR program (personal communications, 2009), many teachers do not integrate the Accelerated Reader program into their regular reading program—it is an add on. White (2005), in his dissertation research, found that AR is an isolated event in most classrooms and is not integrated into other literacy activities. Biggers (2002) argues that computer-based literacy programs, such as AR, are eroding well-supported balanced literacy programs and states that AR cannot even be considered a literacy instructional program. Stevenson and Camarata (2000), when comparing whole-language learning with the Accelerated Reader program, concluded that AR teaches students that reading is an isolated and competitive activity. Cuddeback and Ceprano (2002) conducted a study to determine if AR would be beneficial to the development of comprehension in young emergent readers when involved in a summer school program that used AR. They concluded that AR did contribute to reading comprehension improvement with struggling readers when utilized in conjunction with other materials and teaching procedures. The reality is, however, that most teachers do not integrate AR into their literacy programs (Schmidt, 2008; White, 2005).

As the previous study cited, some researchers have investigated how the program impacts high-achieving and low-achieving students. In our conversations with capable elementary and adolescent readers (K. Westberg, personal communications, 2008, 2009) and in a few studies (e.g., Thompson, Madhuri, & Taylor, 2008), we found that capable readers actually dislike the program so much that they take quizzes by watching a movie made from a book, ask friends to take the tests for them, or read books well below their reading level to earn AR points on the AR tests.

Some studies have found that low-performing students and low SES students also do not like AR (e.g., Thompson, Madhuri, & Taylor, 2008).

### **Student Focus Group Procedures**

While much has been published by Renaissance Learning heralding the value of Accelerated Reader for students, and teachers speak of the quiz printouts as proof that students are gaining comprehension skills and are motivated to read more, very little has been written about students' perceptions of Accelerated Reader. The *student voice* is missing in this conversation. In order to gain a more complete picture of students' opinions, we conducted focus group interviews in three school districts (five schools). We recognize that students are not given the opportunity to express their opinions about school programs to an outsider very often, and as one Grade 7 student commented after the focus group, "Thanks for asking!"

### **Methodology**

Eight to ten students were selected by their teachers from five school sites to meet in focus group settings. These student participants were selected by their teachers from among 1,365 students in 68 heterogeneous classrooms within five school buildings located in three districts. In District No. 1, 591 Grade 3-5 students in an elementary school and 504 Grade 6-8 middle school students participated in this study. District No. 1 is considered to be a rural district (less than 10,000 residents in the town), but it is located near a metropolitan area and will soon be considered a suburban school district. At the second site (referred hereafter as District No. 2), participants included 166 Grade 4-6 students attending an urban, magnet school in an Inter-district School District created to promote diversity and interdisciplinary education. The third site for the study was a private religious school located in a metropolitan area, referred to as District No. 3. 104 Grade 3-8 students in this school participated in the study. Students in the three school districts are relatively diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, and they reflect the overall demographics in the state in which these districts are located. District No. 1 is 90% Caucasian, 10% non-Caucasian; District No. 2 is 64% Caucasian, 36% non-Caucasian; and District No. 3 is 88% Caucasian, 12% non-Caucasian. Using free and reduced lunch as an indicator of SES, District Nos. 1 and 2 have 25% and 24% of their students, respectfully, participating in the federal free and reduced lunch program (District No. 3 is not a public school.)

We conducted five focus group sessions, three with middle school students (Grades 6-8) and two with elementary school students (Grades 3-5) at their respective school sites. The open-ended questions were designed to give students an opportunity to share what they thought of Accelerated Reader (see fig 1). We met with each group of 8-10 students for approximately 45 minutes. No school personnel were present for the interview sessions. At the

beginning of each focus group, students were assured that their responses would not be shared with any school officials, teachers, or parents, so they were encouraged to be candid. Prior to meeting with the students, their parents had signed consent forms and the students had signed assent forms.

Students' experiences with AR varied from school site to site. For example, some middle school students had AR as a class for forty-five minutes a day, and AR was optional for some students in Grade 3. Some elementary students could read with a partner or as a class, and then take a quiz. Students at all sites were given an AR point total goal for each quarter. Point levels and reading level were determined in all schools by a standardized measure of reading aptitude or achievement. All students received rewards for reaching reading goals.

During each focus group session, we made handwritten notes of students' responses to interview questions. These raw data were then analyzed using constant-comparative analysis procedure. This method was originally developed for use in grounded theory methodology, and is now applied more widely as a method of analysis in qualitative research. It requires the researcher to take one piece of data (e.g. one interview, one statement or one theme) and compare it to all other pieces of data that are either similar or different. During this process, the researcher begins to look at what makes this piece of data different or similar to other pieces of data. The results section will focus on the themes that emerged from the analyses from the focus group data.

### **Findings**

The first question on the focus group interview guide asked students to describe how AR is used in their school. Students provided the following descriptions in each district.

In District No. 1, the middle school students have a class period devoted to AR. Their AR class meets daily for 45 minutes, just like math or science. Students spend class time reading AR books each day, and record what they are reading in an AR reading log. A teacher supervises the class period, but no instruction is given. Students must read books totaling 25 points each quarter. When students reach the reading goal they may use the AR period as a study hall. Students receive grades for this subject, their AR class, based on the number of points they earn. The elementary students in District No. 1 are given the option of participating in the AR program, although most students participate. Students who reach reading goals receive prizes. Third graders read several books as a class and then take individual quizzes.

In District No. 2, students in Grades 4-6 participate in AR. The program is organized and supervised through the media center, with little connection to classroom instruction. Students read AR books and must earn an assigned number of points each quarter. School-wide incentive programs are in place for students who go

Focus Group Interview Guide: Accelerated Reader

1. Tell us about how Accelerated Reader is used in your school.
2. What do you like best about Accelerated Reader?
3. What do you like least about Accelerated Reader?
4. If you could change anything about Accelerated Reader what would it be?
5. Do you and your classmates always read the book before taking the quiz? Explain.
6. Do you find the AR quizzes to be easy or hard? Explain.
7. Do you have enough books that interest you from the Accelerated Reader titles available to you? Explain.
8. How do you choose which Accelerated Reader books to read?
9. Do you think all schools should have Accelerated Reader programs for their students? Explain.
10. Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experience using Accelerated Reader? Explain.

Figure 1. Interview Guide Questions

above and beyond their assigned reading goals.

In District No. 3, students in Grades 4-8 are required to earn teacher-assigned point totals each quarter. Occasionally students will have time in class to read, but the majority of AR reading is homework. Grade 4 students, new to the AR requirement, read several books together as a class, and then the students take individual quizzes on the books.

The remaining focus group interview questions provided students with an opportunity to express their views about the AR program. The following themes emerged from these conversations with students across all focus group sessions.

#### **Too Much Process**

Several students explained that they like to read and don't particularly like the extra components of the AR program. At the completion of a 45-minute discussion about AR, one Grade 6 student summarized the group's opinion stating, "AR--it's just plain silly." A Grade 5 boy corroborated this sentiment by saying, "I don't know, quiz questions, points, rewards...I just like to read. I don't need all that." Several students noted that time spent organizing and supervising AR could be better spent just letting kids read. A seventh grader noted that, "I sometimes have to spend the whole independent reading block filling out my log and waiting to see the teacher to prove that I read what I said I read, before I can take a quiz." From their perspective there was too much process and not enough time to read.

#### **Rewards for Reading**

A considerable amount of time in the focus group sessions was spent discussing the reward systems associated with AR. When asked about receiving rewards for reading and reaching point goals one student commented, "You shouldn't read just to get a reward, but I like them!" Students were careful not to complain too much about receiving rewards for reading. While many children explained that time to read for pleasure was valuable to them, they also like receiving candy or treats, AR parties, special field trips etc. for reaching point totals.

#### **Points Lead to Changes in Reading Behavior**

A middle school focus group spent several minutes revealing that they read differently because of AR. One student said, "I wouldn't read as fast, I would read at my own pace if I didn't have to do AR." Another boy in Grade 7 noted, "I would read more relaxed, pay attention to details if I didn't have to do AR." Other students commented that they would choose different books or read several books at a time if they didn't have to worry about meeting point totals.

Children at all grade levels stated that AR points influenced their reading choices. A girl in Grade 4 said, "I would read a lot more if I didn't have to worry about points." An entire middle school group agreed that they would not read a book unless it had AR points because they needed to get points for their grades. They limited what they read until they achieved their point goal. One boy added, "After I reach my point goal, I can read the books that interest me." A Grade 6 boy suggested that point values be left off books so that you didn't know how much they were worth and you wouldn't limit yourself.

#### **AR Quizzes Need Improving**

Students discussed the AR quizzes in much detail. A Grade 8 student summarized his opinion of the quizzes by saying, "They're [the quizzes] 80% small facts that don't connect with big ideas." Another student noted, "The quizzes are either way too easy or way too hard." Still another commented, "I read some of the quiz questions and think 'who cares?'" An elementary student noted that the quizzes asked for details that were not important to the story and were designed to trick you. Students also noted that often two answers seemed like good choices. This phenomenon led Grade 5 student to say, "The 'thoughtful reader strategies' we learn about during reading class don't help you on the quizzes."

#### **Cheating and AR Quizzes**

Elementary and middle school groups discussed student cheating on AR quizzes. One Grade 8 student made the suggestion that an "AR police" monitor students so it was fair to everyone. A Grade 5 student said, "We take

quizzes for each other sometimes if we really need to get our points in. We know each other's pin numbers so we can help each other out." Other children commented that it was common for students to take a quiz and then write down as many questions as they could remember and then tell friends what questions they needed to know. Two Grade 4 friends related that they took quizzes on books they hadn't read just for the fun of it, to see if they could pass the quizzes. Several other Grade 4 and 5 students admitted that if they were bored or had free time, they took quizzes on AR books on which movies had been made (which they had seen), which would eliminate the need to actually read the books.

After studying our field notes, we realized an interesting phenomenon emerged during the student focus groups; namely, students often distanced themselves from the usual classroom behaviors by making recommendations for other students. Students made comments, such as "I would read anyway, but for kids who don't read, AR is good." Or, "The quizzes are good to make sure kids read all the details, not just the back cover." "I don't share answers to quizzes, but teachers should supervise other kids better so there's less cheating." Students had a keen eye on equity, especially in situations where rewards were at stake.

#### **AR Program Improvements**

Finally, when asked about how students would improve AR in their schools the students made the following recommendations: have more books available; have more quizzes available; have better rewards/no rewards; remove point totals from books; improve quiz questions, allow students to adjust their own reading goals; and allow students to delete a quiz if they want to stop midway through the quiz.

#### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Clearly students have a lot to say regarding the AR program. They articulated concerns regarding important issues such as pressure, cheating, and motivation to read that are different from most published studies that surveyed only teachers, parents, and administrators.

All focus group participants noted they feel pressure to earn points for AR. Those students whose reading/language arts grade was impacted AR expressed frustration and annoyance with the program. Students also reported that the pressure to earn points changed the way they approached independent reading. Many students reported reading high point books right away until they had enough points, and then they read the books that interested them. Other students reported reading many easier books to reach point goals before concentrating on books they enjoyed. Schools need to evaluate how they are using point goals as some practices appear to cause undue pressure regarding independent reading.

Students also pointed out the need for schools to do a better job of monitoring student quiz taking. Students from all five focus groups recognized that cheating on quizzes was common. Students commented on the

resentment they felt about that, especially when rewards were at stake.

Regarding Renaissance Learning's claims that AR motivates students to read, and teacher beliefs that AR motivates students, caution should be used when assuming students are motivated for positive reasons. Many focus group participants said they read more because of AR, especially if class time was devoted to AR reading time, but that they didn't read for the pleasure of reading. Rather, they were motivated by earning treats, candy, parties, and other incentives. Independent reading became a competitive endeavor.

Based upon student comments a close and careful look at how AR is implemented in schools is warranted. While Renaissance Learning cannot control the manner in which schools implement the AR program, noting student concerns, and presenting solutions in their promotional materials and website along with the full range of research on AR would be beneficial to teachers and administrators as they make decisions on program implementation.

Most students disliked turning independent reading into a competitive activity, even if they enjoyed rewards. Students reported that they would read without the AR program rewards, especially if it meant they didn't have to take quizzes but could report on their reading in alternative ways. Additionally, schools need to be prepared to support AR with the resources to provide more books and quizzes so that students can select from a wide variety.

Overall, student focus group participants expressed negative views towards the Accelerated Reader program. When asked for their opinions, students offered complex insights into the program and its implementation citing several weaknesses that were consistent across focus groups. Students do not like the point system because it adds pressure to independent reading, especially when tied to grades. Earning points also led to cheating behavior on behalf of some students so they could avoid reading and still earn points. Most focus group participants also expressed that they changed their reading habits and preferences in order to complete point goals before they could read what they wanted to read. In order to address these student concerns, it is recommended that administrators and teachers consider the voices of their students and make changes to implementation practices at the school level.

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