Accelerated Reader Program: What do Teachers Really Think?

Amy Frances Smith[1], Karen Westberg[1] & Anne Hejny[1]

[1] Department of Teacher Education, University of St. Thomas, USA

Correspondence: Amy Frances Smith, Department of Teacher Education, University of St. Thomas, USA

Abstract

What do teachers really think about the Accelerated Reader program, a widely used supplemental, independent reading program in which their students read fiction and non-fiction books of their choice and take brief online comprehension quizzes about the books? The Accelerated Reader (AR) program was designed by Renaissance Learning Company to increase students' motivation to read and students' achievement in reading; however, a review of the literature reveals inconsistent findings about its outcomes.

Very few studies have been conducted seeking teacher input as to whether the program to achieves its intended outcomes. The goal of this study is to survey teachers (Grades 3 – 8) who use AR as a curricular component of their literacy program. We sought to learn about how teachers use the program and perceive its effectiveness as well as how it impacts their students' interest and achievement in reading.

We gathered data using an online questionnaire from teachers in urban, rural, exurban and suburban school settings in both elementary and middle schools. Teachers were asked to respond to items based on a 4 –point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree including an open-ended response section.

The respondents were primarily from suburban and exurban districts and they have been using the program between 1-15 years. Most of the teachers indicated their students enjoy the program and most teachers require their students to take the AR quizzes.

Results indicate most teachers believe that Accelerated Reader program motivates their students to read; however, they also recognize that AR is largely an accountability measure ensuring that their students read independently. Additionally, teachers recognize that AR measures comprehension at knowledge-recall level and is not an overall strong indicator of reading comprehension. Therefore, some teachers have made their own modifications to the program.

Keywords: Accelerated Reader, Reading Incentive Programs, Teacher Opinion AR

1. Introduction

What are teachers' perceptions of the Accelerated Reader (AR) program? AR is an independent reading program published by Renaissance Learning in which students read fiction and on-fiction books of their choice and take a brief online comprehension quizzes about basic knowledge of the books. Yet, as a supplemental reading program it can limit the amount of direct reading instruction a teacher can administer and the amount of personal student-teacher connections. Teachers may be concerned as to whether AR is a reliable academic measure of comprehension and how is it motivating for students. In this article we report the results from the administration of an online questionnaire completed by teachers in a variety of school communities to better understand their perceptions of this supplemental literacy program.

1.1 Review of the Literature

AR was developed as a reading program to complement a school or a classroom's reading and literacy program. It was designed to provide teachers with a tool to enhance their reading program and to increase student reading motivation and achievement. According to *Getting Results with Accelerated Reader*, (Renaissance Learning, 2007) a guide published by Renaissance Learning, the intended purposes of AR are to enable powerful practice and to increase student reading comprehension. Additionally, this resource guide states, "When used casually, AR helps students' reading abilities grow. When used thoughtfully and with proven techniques, it leads to tremendous gains and a lifelong love of reading" (Renaissance Learning Inc., 2007, p. 1). Furthermore, Renaissance Learning states

that teachers who use AR will see an increase in their students' national and state test scores (2007). The literature written regarding this mission, however, does not clearly support the claimed benefits of the AR program.

The AR program has contradictory support from research studies. On one hand studies support that teachers should be able to monitor their students' reading levels easier because the program tracks all student quiz scores allowing them to gauge whether students are benefitting from reading practice (Nunnery, Ross, & McDonald, 2006). Some researchers have found that there are benefits to helping developing readers or at-risk students. However, other researchers focus directly on the importance of students' exploration and transaction with the text which may be limited by use of AR (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Teacher perceptions that AR motivates their students to read more are contradicted by the research in motivation theory. The use of extrinsic rewards, as recommended by Renaissance Learning, may actually create reading avoidance when rewards are withdrawn (Baker &Wigfield, 1999). When summarizing this issue, Biggers (1991) concludes "Extrinsic motivators, particularly tangible rewards such as those suggested by AR, also reduce internal motivations to read" (p. 73). SuHua (2012) investigated the effectiveness of the AR program on middle school students' reading achievement and motivation. The results showed that Accelerated Reader neither improved students' reading scores nor promoted intrinsic reading motivation for middle school students, but did increase the amount of time they read.

Another study gathered teacher opinions of the AR program in the classroom and a common statement was, "It is only one tool. It is not the core reading program. It is not the way to teach reading, but it is one tool to use to help students to become better readers" (White, 2005, p. 65). Hodgins (2009), however, reports a survey where teachers were very supportive of the AR program within their school. A summary of his study focuses on the "individualized nature of the program" and how teachers appreciate the tracking that directs students to appropriate level-books depending on the students' needs (p. 108).

Francis (2009) conducted a study of teachers' perceptions of Accelerated Reader. Surveys and interviews were used to investigate teachers' beliefs about whether Accelerated Reader helped them and their students. The results of the study indicated teachers believed that Accelerated Reader was helping them in the classroom, and that Accelerated Reader was motivating their students to read. Some teachers believed that Accelerated Reader helped their students with comprehension, but only on the lowest level. Overall, teachers indicated that there were some benefits to having the Accelerated Reader in their classroom.

Pennington , (2010) however, in his article, *18 Reasons Not to Use Accelerated Reader,* lists many criticisms of AR including: AR promotes a mindset that reading is a chore, that AR tends to limit reading selection to a narrow band of readability, AR trains students to accumulate basic knowledge level facts in order to answer recall level quiz questions, and that AR replaces the intrinsic rewards of reading with extrinsic rewards. Thompson, Madhuri, and Taylor (2008) found in their study of a small group of high school students that many students were reading less than they had been prior to AR's inclusion in the reading program. Results indicated that aside from matching books by readability level, "providing book choice, relevancy, and time within the school day are significant components that must also be addressed (p. 559).

1.2 Research Question

What do teachers really think about the Accelerated Reader program, a widely used supplemental, independent reading program in which their students read fiction and non-fiction books of their choice and take brief online comprehension quizzes about the books?

2. Methods

2.1 Pilot Study

We administered a pilot questionnaire to graduate students enrolled in an education course. These graduate students are current teachers who use the AR program in their classrooms. Fifteen students completed the questionnaire. The pilot study affirmed clarity of the questionnaire and the use of the 4-point response scale.

2.2 Pilot Study Results

Results of the pilot indicated that teachers appreciate the convenience of AR for documenting students' independent reading. All teachers reported using AR quiz results in grading/progress reports. The teachers also recognized that AR quizzes measure comprehension at a very basic level. Additionally, they reported that they preferred the online quizzes over more complicated measures of documenting independent reading (e.g., book reports, posters, book talks, conferring with students, etc.). After the pilot study, researchers edited items and dropped two redundant items.

2.3 Procedure

The online version of the questionnaire was placed on SurveyMonkey.com and administered to teachers at rural, suburban, urban and exurban schools. The online survey included 4 demographic items, 344-point response scale items and one open-ended comment item. Thirty-nine teachers in grades 3-8 responded, however, not every respondent completed the entire survey. The brief demographic items included questions regarding current grade level, years of teaching, years of using AR, school location: rural, urban, suburban and exurban. The 344-point response scale items included questions regarding teachers' implementation practices and teachers' beliefs about AR. Sample items include: "My students are motivated to participate in AR reading," "I use the results of the AR quizzes to assess reading comprehension" and "I will continue to implement the AR program in my curriculum as I currently do." (See Appendix for Questionnaire)

After a period of two weeks, the survey responses were downloaded into the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for data analysis. Open-ended narrative comments were then analyzed using constant-comparative analysis procedure. This method was originally developed for use in grounded theory methodology, (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) 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 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 similar or different to other pieces of data. The results section will focus on the themes that emerged from the analyses of the open-ended comments.

3. Results

The demographic results indicate that approximately 60% of respondents have been teaching for 1-10 years. The other 40% have taught for 11-21+ years. Thirteen teachers report using the AR program for 1-5 years, 11 teachers have used AR for 6-10 years, 11 teachers have used AR for 11-15 years and 4 teachers report using AR for 16-20 years. Table 1 describes the numbers of teachers according to the school level and community type. The majority of respondents report working in suburban schools with approximately 35% at the elementary level and 63% were at the middle school level. One person did not respond to this item.

Table 1. School Level and Community Types of AR Teacher Survey Respondents (N = 39)

Community Type

School Level	Urban	Rural	Suburban	Exurban	Total
Elementary	2	0	12	0	14
Middle Level	2	1	16	6	25
Total	4	1	28	6	39

A reliability coefficient was calculated for the 34 items measured on the 4-point response scale (r= .84). This indicates strong internal consistency on the survey.

The means and standard deviations of all items are shown in Table 2 and Table 3. Items related to teacher practices with AR are shown in Table 2. For example, "I supervise my students while they take the AR quizzes" and "I allow my students to choose their own books regardless of the text is on the AR list." Items related to teacher beliefs are described in Table 3. Sample items include, "My students enjoy participating in the Accelerated Reader Program" and "I believe the AR program motivates my students to read independently."

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations on Items Related to Teachers' Implementation Practices

	N	Mean	SD
I am required by the school principal to use AR as a part of my curriculum.	39	2.10	.82
I require all of my students to take the AR quizzes.	39	3.10	.94
I have discussions about the AR Program with my principal.	39	2.44	.85
I am required to implement the AR program because of a district-wide or school-wide decision.	39	2.31	.86
I incorporate the AR quiz results into my students' final grades.	39	2.62	.94
The AR program is the only supplemental reading program available for teachers in my school.	39	2.54	.68
I use the results of the AR quizzes to assess reading comprehension.	38	2.66	.71
I supervise my students when they take the AR quizzes.	39	2.56	.79
All of my students read books from the AR list.	39	2.59	.91
I rely on the AR program as a major part of my language arts curriculum.	37	1.98	.69
I have conducted research to further understand the origins and goals of the AR program.	37	2.35	.75
I use the STAR test to assess my students' reading level.	37	2.43	.83
I believe the AR program motivates my students to read independently.	37	3.05	.66
I use my students' zone of proximal development (ZPD) to determine books for AR reading.	37	2.68	.67
I use my students' ZPD to recommend books for independent reading.	37	2.86	.54
I allow my students to choose their own books, regardless if the text is on the AR list.	37	3.32	.63
I share my students' AR quiz results with their parents.	37	2.89	.77
AR is used to supplement our core language arts program.	36	2.97	.65
I keep my students motivated to read for AR quizzes with extrinsic rewards (e.g., recognition, awards, etc.)	36	2.28	.81
I have restricted students (excluded them from participation in activities or events) because they did not complete their AR point goal.	37	1.81	.78
I will continue to implement the AR program in my curriculum as I currently do.	37	3.19	.70

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations of Items Related to Teachers' Beliefs about AR

	N	Mean	SD
My students enjoy participating in the Accelerated Reader (AR) program.	39	2.97	.67
I understand the purpose of using AR in my classroom.	39	3.33	.74
I believe the designated list of books from the AR program offers variety for all of my students.	37	3.03	.60
My students have told me that they enjoy taking the AR quizzes.	37	2.68	.63
My students' standardized test scores (e.g., MAP, ITBS, etc.) have improved since starting the AR program.	35	2.69	.53
My students are motivated to participate in AR reading.	37	3.03	.50
The AR quizzes include questions at all levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.	36	2.00	.76
I believe the STAR test is an accurate method for measuring students' reading levels.	35	2.40	.65
I believe the AR program motivates my students to read independently.	37	3.05	.67
It is important for my students to take AR quizzes because it will help improve our national test scores.	37	2.22	.67
The AR quiz results are a strong indicator of my students' reading comprehension.	36	2.47	.51
I recommend the AR program to other educators because it is a reliable indicator of comprehension.	37	2.54	.65
I have verbally questioned the reliability of the AR program with other educators.	37	2.49	.65

4. Discussion

There appears to be an interesting contradiction between several items related to teachers' practices (Table 2) and teacher beliefs (Table 3). In Table 2, teachers agree with the following items: *I require all of my students to take the AR quizzes* (mean = 3.10) and *I share my students' quiz results with their parents* (mean = 2.97). However, in Table 3, teachers disagree with the following items regarding belief statements about comprehension: *The AR quizzes include questions at all levels of Bloom's Taxonomy* (mean = 2.0) and *The AR quiz results are a strong indicator of my students' reading comprehension* (mean = 2.47). The disconnect between teacher responses on these items leads researchers to question their practice. Even though teachers understand that AR quizzes only measure the basic levels of comprehension they continue to require all students to take the quizzes and share results with parents.

In addition we noticed that the teachers indicate on the survey that AR does not have an impact on standardized test scores as shown by responses to the following items: *It is important for my students to take AR quizzes because it will help improve our national test scores* (mean = 2.22) and *My students' standardized test scores (e.g., MAP, ITBS, etc.) have improved since starting the AR program* (mean = 2.69). Therefore, it appears that teachers do not think that AR affects their achievement in reading as measured by standardized tests. Despite this, results in the survey show that teachers believe AR motivates their students to read and they will continue to use it. This is demonstrated by the following items: *I believe the AR program motivates my students to read independently* (mean = 3.05), *I will continue to implement the AR program in my curriculum as I currently do* (mean = 3.19) and *My students enjoy participating in the Accelerated Reader (AR) program* (mean = 2.97).

Eighteen respondents provided comments to the open-ended item. The comments tended to fall into one of three categories. The first category we labeled: Modifications in Implementation of the AR Program. Some teachers allow students to create alternatives to AR quizzes. Teachers allow students to create their own quizzes for books that are not on the AR list. For example, one respondent said, "If it's a book that doesn't have an AR value, then we discuss a value and the student completes an alternative project."

The second category we labeled: AR Quizzes as an Accountability Measure for Documenting Independent Reading. One teacher wrote, "Our students would not read independently if we didn't have AR." Another commented, "AR at

least allows students to read independently and have some simple check that they did the reading." Teachers value the convenience of documenting student independent reading without using additional ways of monitoring students' independent reading.

The final category we labeled: AR as a Questionable Measure of Reading Comprehension. Teachers recognize that the AR quiz questions have some limitations. One comment that illustrates this is, "No, AR does not assess reading comprehension on a valid scale and no, it does not measure higher level thinking." Additionally, "Questions are just for checking the facts and not anything more. That's what we want- a way to check and see if you read the book."

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The Accelerated Reader program is widely-used in elementary and middle schools as a way to monitor independent reading and motivate students to read. The results taken from our online survey indicate that overall, teachers value AR as a way to document the independent reading of their students, while at the same time realize AR provides only a basic level of comprehension. Furthermore, while many teachers reported limitations of the AR program and questioned the value of quiz results, most of the teachers surveyed will continue to use AR as they currently do.

After reviewing results of the on-line survey and reading related research several recommendations come to mind. In Renaissance Learning's publication *Getting Results with Accelerated Reader*, the author's describe the role of the teacher during independent reading time. They state that the teacher should confer with students during reading, before taking a quiz, and use quiz results to guide instruction. Additionally, teachers should monitor quiz-taking and help students set reading goals. It is clear from the survey results that the majority of teachers using AR do not implement Renaissance Learning's recommendations with fidelity. Adhering more closely to AR's guidelines may improve instruction because teachers would be more aware of individual student performance based on observation and conversation rather than on just a quiz score.

While greater fidelity to AR guidelines may be beneficial, it is also clear that teacher modifications can offer alternatives to the limitations of the AR quizzes. It is recommended that teachers allow a range of alternatives to document student independent reading.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

1. **Please indicate the school level in which you are currently teaching**

   Elementary Level   Middle School Level

2. **Please select a response that describes the community in which you teach.**

   Urban   Rural   Suburban   Exurban (small town becoming a suburb)

3. **How long have you been teaching in your current school?**

   1-5 years   6-10 years   11-15 years   16-20 years   21+ years

4. **How many years have you been using the AR program?**

   1-5 years   6-10 years   11-15 years   16-20 years   21+ years

5. **My students enjoy participating in the Accelerated Reader (AR) Program.**

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

6. **I am required by the school principal to use AR as a part of my curriculum.**

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

7. **I require all of my students take the AR quizzes.**

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

8. **I have discussions about the AR Program with my principal.**

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

9. **I have discussions about the AR Program with my fellow teachers.**

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

10. **I am required to implement the AR program because of a district-wide or school-wide decision.**

    Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

11. **I incorporate AR quiz results into my students' final grades.**

    Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

12. The AR Program is the only supplemental reading program available for classroom teachers in my school.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

13. I understand the purpose of using AR in my classroom.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

14. I use the results of the AR quizzes to assess reading comprehension.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

15. I supervise my students when they take AR quizzes.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

16. All of my students read books from the AR list.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

17. I believe the designated list of books from the AR program offers variety for all of my students.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

18. My students have told me that they enjoy taking the AR quizzes.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

19. My students' standardized test scores (e.g., MAP, ITBS, etc.) have improved since starting the AR program.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

20. My students are motivated to participate in AR reading.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

21. I rely on the AR program as a major part of my language arts curriculum.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

22. The AR quizzes include questions at all levels of Blooms Taxonomy.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

23. I have conducted research to further understand the origins and goals of the AR program.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

24. I use the STAR test to assess my students' reading level.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

25. I believe that the STAR test is an accurate method to measure students' reading levels.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

26. I believe the AR program motivates my students to read independently.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

27. I use my students' zone of proximal development (ZPD) to determine books for AR reading.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

28. I use my students' (ZPD) to recommend books for independent reading.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

29. I allow my students to choose their own books, regardless if the text is on the AR list.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

30. I share my students' AR testing results with their parents.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

31. It is important for my students to take AR quizzes because it will help improve our national testing scores.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

32. AR is used to supplement our core language arts program.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

31. **The AR quiz results are a strong indicator of my students' reading comprehension.**

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

32.I keep my students motivated to read for AR tests with extrinsic rewards (e.g., recognition, awards, etc.)

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

33. I have restricted students (excluded from participation in activities or events) because they did complete their AR point goal.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

34. I recommend the AR program to other educators because it is a reliable indicator of comprehension.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

35. I have verbally questioned the reliability of the AR program with other educators.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

36. I will continue to implement the AR program in my curriculum as I currently do.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree