

Accelerated Reader: What are the lasting effects on the reading habits of middle school students exposed to Accelerated Reader in elementary grades?

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Middle school students who used a popular reading program in elementary school were surveyed to determine their reading habits.

Promoted by effective advertising and popularized by word of mouth, the Accelerated Reader (AR) program has been adopted by many U.S. schools as either a supplementary or primary reading program. Company promotional materials state that over 50,000 schools worldwide now use AR (Renaissance Learning, 2002a). While there are several research reports showing educational and motivational benefits for this program (e.g., Goodman, 1999; Paul, VanderZee, Rue, & Swanson, 1996), there are few peer-reviewed journal articles that document these effects. On the other hand, there are some reasons to be skeptical about the purported benefits of the program (Carter, 1996; Prince & Barron, 1998).

Accelerated Reader's philosophy is that by using the system, students are motivated to read more and better books. Consequently, because reading is a foundational skill, other academic domains improve in conjunction with reading skills. Because successful readers appreciate reading and school more than struggling students,

attendance rates will improve along with increases in overall achievement and self-esteem (Paul et al., 1996). "Accelerated Reader® gets students excited about reading books.... Students who never read before suddenly become voracious readers after they experience success with Accelerated Reader®.... With AR, you will...build lifelong readers and lifelong learners" (S. Swanson, 2000, publicity letter).

The current study investigates whether seventh-grade students who were exposed to Accelerated Reader during elementary school tend to do more reading of books than those who did not have such exposure.

An introduction to Accelerated Reader and the study

Research has shown that students who read more, especially recreationally, do better on measures of reading comprehension and vocabulary (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Cipielewski & Stanovich, 1992; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1990, 1991). This research has provided evidence that the act of reading itself improves reading performance. Therefore, it is important that teachers develop in their students a reading habit

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that will endure and help to produce lifelong readers. Accelerated Reader promises to help motivate these students (S. Swanson, 2000, publicity letter).

The program

According to company promotional materials, Accelerated Reader has been in existence since 1986. It is heralded as “the world’s most popular reading management software” (Renaissance Learning, 2002a). AR and its ancillary materials include computerized reading diagnostic tests and over 50,000 primarily literal-level quizzes; computer-based record-keeping systems for both students and teachers; and STAR Reading Program, a computerized, multiple choice, literacy skills objectives testing system.

Books that are included in the Accelerated Reader program are assigned two numbers: reading level and points. Prior to 1994, these reading levels were based on the Fry Readability Index; since January 1994 they have been based on the Flesch-Kincaid reading index (Paul et al., 1996). Books are given a point value on the basis of length and reading level, according to the following Accelerated Reader formula (Paul et al., 1996, p. 3):

$$\text{AR Points} = \frac{(10 + \text{Reading Level}) \times (\text{Words in Book})}{100,000}$$

For example, *Dear Mr. Henshaw* (Cleary, 1983), a Newbery Award-winning book, is classified as a 4.9 reading level and assigned 3.0 points. A few familiar titles, from the very simplest books like *Clifford’s First Christmas* (Bridwell, 1994) to titles by Maya Angelou and Alice Walker, are shown in Table 1. The most surprising inclusion, because of its violent content, is Brock Cole’s *The Facts Speak for Themselves* (1997). Because of the way in which the AR reading level is computed, this book has been marked 3.6 (third grade, sixth month) and may therefore end up shelved where third-grade students select their books.

Students self-select their books and complete computerized objective tests of 5, 10, or 20 questions when finished. The number of test questions is based on the book’s length, reading level, and complexity, with most quizzes having 10 questions (Institute for Academic Excellence, 1998). A student’s final score is the percentage test score times the book’s point value; for example, 80% (test score) \times 3.0 points = 2.4 points for reading *Dear Mr. Henshaw* and answering 8 of 10 questions correctly. Students do not receive points if their test scores fall below 60%, and they may take quizzes only once. This differs from other computerized systems where students may take quizzes more than once.

Our concerns

We have received anecdotal reports that cause concern. One teacher reported that in her school students were not allowed to have discussions following Sustained Silent Reading time for fear they would be able to learn enough to pass the Accelerated Reader quizzes without having first read the book. Several librarians and a bookstore owner have told us that parents were only selecting books that appeared on their respective schools’ book list. Books not in the school’s AR program were not selected for recreational reading. There are also anecdotal reports of students taking AR quizzes and then sharing the answers with other students. This appears more prevalent where grades are tied to the AR point totals. While there are certainly books of high caliber on the AR lists, many kinds of books may not be represented, especially the newest releases and books of poetry or informational books (Carter, 1996).

Accelerated Reader involves a considerable start-up investment on three fronts: hardware, software, and books. Some districts we had hoped to include in our study—low socioeconomic status, minority districts—did not have AR in their schools because they did not have modern wiring or adequate funds available to purchase computers. The second investment is in the AR software. The information on the Renaissance Learning

Table 1
Book examples arranged by Accelerated Reader assigned reading levels

Title	Author	Reading level	Word count	AR points
<i>Clifford's First Christmas</i>	Norman Bridwell	1.9	294	0.5
<i>Sarah, Plain and Tall</i>	Patricia MacLachlan	3.4	8,377	1.0
<i>Where the Wild Things Are</i>	Maurice Sendak	3.4	336	0.5
<i>The Facts Speak for Themselves</i>	Brock Cole	3.6	38,101	5.0
<i>When I Was Young in the Mountains</i>	Cynthia Rylant	3.6	429	0.5
<i>The Color Purple</i>	Alice Walker	4.0	66,556	9.0
<i>Maniac Magee</i>	Jerry Spinelli	4.7	35,427	5.0
<i>Dear Mr. Henshaw</i>	Beverly Cleary	4.9	18,145	3.0
<i>Mr. Was</i>	Pete Hautman	5.0	52,729	8.0
<i>Monster</i>	Walter Dean Myers	5.1	32,846	5.0
<i>Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (1)</i>	J.K. Rowling	5.5	77,508	12.0
<i>Hatchet</i>	Gary Paulsen	5.7	42,328	7.0
<i>Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (2)</i>	J.K. Rowling	6.7	84,799	14.0
<i>Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (3)</i>	J.K. Rowling	6.7	106,821	18.0
<i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i>	Maya Angelou	6.7	78,384	13.0
<i>Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (4)</i>	J.K. Rowling	6.8	190,858	32.0
<i>Babbitt</i>	Sinclair Lewis	7.8	122,494	22.0

website states, "It's easy to get started—on any budget!" (Renaissance Learning, 2002c). The cost of a "starter kit," that includes four test sets—usually 50 book titles per set—or "up to 200 quizzes" is US\$499. The "economy kit" includes up to 1,000 quizzes for US\$1,499, and the "super kit" lists for US\$2,999. The super kit includes 1,000 quizzes as well as STAR Reading, the AR assessment component (for additional information visit AR's website at <http://www.renlearn.com/starreading/>). One of the pitfalls of this system is the limitation of the site license: "Each kit includes everything your need!... A Network-Wide School Site License for up to 200 students!" (Renaissance Learning, 2002b). It is easy to see why administrators, like the principal in one of the schools we surveyed, feel an economic incentive to use AR: "[The principal] said that teachers

wanted Accelerated Reader because they had attended a workshop and came back wanting to try it. He mentioned that the school had put out [US]\$6,000 for the program, so he wanted it used in all the Language Arts classes" (researchers' log, 10/27/00). The final investment is in books. Accelerated Reader supplies software only; the school must purchase the books. In reviewing the book sets offered by AR, it became clear that no matter what quiz sets a school ordered, there would be books of lesser quality that would have to be ordered or the quizzes would remain unused. This is an extremely troublesome phenomenon with problematic implications for authors, publishers, and advocates of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment right to certain freedoms.

Another concern involves the suitability of leveling books for students without the benefit of

a knowledgeable adult's guidance. Seldom are elementary media specialists, librarians, or teachers conversant about young adult books—there are enough new publications within their students' age group. The following is a quote from a student enrolled in our teacher education program, whose son's school is in one of the districts we studied. Unfortunately, it is not the only case we have encountered.

February 1, 2001

I'm reading a book with my son that he checked out from his elementary school library.... On the inside jacket cover, below the price, it states "for 12 years and above." It is marked as being a part of the Accelerated Reader Program, and rated with a reading level of 5.0 (which is 5th grade, or age 10). The book is a mystery called *Mr. Was* by Pete Hautman (1996). The inside of the book jacket describes the book as part mystery, part science fiction, and part thriller....

It turns out that the dying grandfather does indeed die—which is also fine. It turns out that the main character, a boy of 14, has a father who drinks too much, verbally abuses the mother, then one day physically abuses her, landing her in the hospital. Reading on, the father goes to AA, gets sober, rejoins the mother and son, falls off the wagon, begins abusing the mother again and "accidentally" murders her with a baseball bat during a fight in the home (witnessed by the son).

Can this possibly be appropriate reading material for elementary-aged school children? I am so glad that my son and I were reading the book together so that I was with him as the "bad" parts were read. My son is in the third grade (age 8) but reads at a level as high as 6.7. This book seemed a logical choice for him....

My question is who (or what committee) decides upon the books to be included in the Accelerated Reader program? Does anybody ever read more than the book jacket blurbs before making these decisions? I am amazed that a book with this content is in the program. The scenes I was appalled by were very graphic—down to describing the sound the baseball bat made when it struck the mother's head, crushing her skull and killing her, as well as letting the reader know that her neck was bent at an unnatural angle as she lay dead in a pool of her own blood. My son cried, I was disgusted, and I plan to ask someone (a librarian or learning consultant?) at my son's school about removing the book from the Accelerated Reader "ap-

proved books" list. Am I being unreasonable and overprotective, or is this type of content truly inappropriate?

Measuring relative reading amounts

Previous studies have shown that using an instrument with actual book titles interspersed with foils can determine relative levels of recreational book reading done by upper elementary and middle school students (Allen, Cipielewski, & Stanovich, 1992; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1990, 1991). This instrument, a Title Recognition Test (TRT), has been shown to measure the same types of reading behaviors as a diary or log such as that used by Allen et al. (1992). The study showed that the TRT acted as a proxy indicator of children's print exposure, able to predict reading achievement and other verbal measures such as vocabulary (Allen et al., 1992). Using instruments of this type, it is possible to determine whether there are differences in the amount of reading done by middle school students who have been exposed to Accelerated Reader compared with those who have not.

One of the goals of Accelerated Reader is to build lifelong readers. This study was designed to investigate this claim and to provide some evidence as to whether students exposed to AR in elementary school will be *more likely* to continue higher levels of recreational reading in middle school. Using instruments such as the Title Recognition Test, it is possible to determine whether there are differences in the amount of reading done by middle school students who have been exposed to AR compared with those who have not. If there were significant differences between those students who had used AR and those who had not, the claim that AR produces lifelong readers would be supported. While this kind of evidence cannot prove or disprove that AR is the *cause* of these behaviors (due to the quasi-experimental nature of the study), it can provide support for the claim.

Table 2
School districts and participants in each district

District	Number of middle schools	Students completing surveys	Students included in analyses
Exurban School District 1 (not using AR in middle school)	2	333	297
Suburban School District 2 (not using AR in middle school)	4	608	502
Suburban School District 3 (using AR in middle school)	4	830	737
Total	10	1,771	1,536

The participants

The students were recruited from seventh-grade classrooms in one exurban (a district with both rural schools as well as small city schools) and two suburban U.S. school districts. There were 1,771 students altogether, distributed in 10 different middle schools. These middle schools are in districts where some of the feeder elementary schools use Accelerated Reader and some do not. One district employed AR in its middle schools; the other two did not. Data collection took place during October. The Title Recognition Test surveys were administered by the authors and by doctoral students we had trained. All students with valid permission slips were surveyed and included in the determination of reliability estimates. Only students whom the researchers could determine were in the district during their fifth-grade year (the last year of elementary school), and who had been exposed to AR (based on the researchers' ability to determine which elementary school the student had attended) were included in the statistical analyses. This resulted in the inclusion of 1,536 students in the final analyses (see Table 2).

The instrument was not designed to gather data on any of the subjects' elementary school experiences. Consequently, it is not known whether the students were rewarded with prizes in addi-

tion to points for participating in Accelerated Reader. However, it was ascertained that the elementary schools that did not participate in AR did not subscribe to any other electronic or computer-based reading system. Because many students in the school districts use library services, it is assumed that students participated in some form of library reading program, but that would apply to students across the board, with or without AR in their elementary schools.

The Title Recognition Test

The Title Recognition Test (TRT) was designed as an analog of recognition measures that had previously been used to assess exposure to print in adults (Stanovich & West, 1989) and children (e.g., Allen et al., 1992; Ciplewski & Stanovich, 1992; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1990). These measures employ a signal detection logic whereby subjects must recognize actual target items (real book titles) when they are embedded among foils (phrases that are not book titles). There are several advantages to this checklist-with-foils method. First, it is immune to the social desirability effects that contaminate responses to subjective self-estimates of socially valued activities such as reading (Furnham, 1986; Paulhus, 1984). Guessing is not an advantageous strategy because

it is easily detected and corrected for by an examination of the number of foils checked. Further, the cognitive demands of the task are low. The TRT checklist procedures have been shown to track independent reading quite well as demonstrated by the high levels of construct validity between the TRT and diary measures tracking out-of-school reading (Allen et al., 1992).

The version of the TRT employed for this investigation was similar to the children's measure used in previous research on print exposure effects (Allen et al., 1992; Ciplewski & Stanovich, 1992; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1990, 1991). The version used in this investigation consisted of a total of 41 items: 25 actual children's book titles and 16 foils. The titles were selected from lists of books for teens and young adults compiled by the American Library Association (1998, 1999) and the National Education Association's Read Across America book list (*Teachers Announce*, 1999), by consulting bookstore owners and librarians, and by talking to teachers and reading education professionals knowledgeable about current trends in children's literature. There was no effort to include or to exclude titles that appear in Accelerated Reader collections. However, in more than one situation one or more of the titles appeared in classroom libraries or on individual students' desks as the TRT was administered. The list of children's titles that were included on the TRT is presented in Table 3, along with the percentage recognition for each item. The foil titles are listed at the bottom of Table 3, but on the actual TRT forms they were randomly interspersed with the real titles. All foils were checked against *Books in Print* (R.R. Bowker Company, 2000) listings to ensure their validity as pseudotitles. In selecting the 25 items to appear on the TRT, an attempt was made to choose those that were more likely to be part of middle school readers' independent reading. While some books were part of classroom reading programs, the emphasis was on books that young adults would choose to read on their own.

The instructions that were read to the students and printed on their response sheets were as follows:

"Below you will see a list of book titles. Some of the titles are the names of actual books and some are not. You are to read the names and put a check mark next to the names of those that you know are books. Do not guess, but only check those that you know are actual books. Remember, some of the titles are not those of popular books."

On the response sheet, this measure was labeled the Title Recognition Questionnaire and was referred to in this manner by the survey administrator. The TRT took approximately five minutes to administer. For each student, the number of correct targets identified was recorded as well as the number of foils checked. The split-half (odd/even) reliability of the number of correct items checked (Spearman-Brown corrected) was .81. Calculating Cronbach's alpha produced a reliability estimate of .79. These reliabilities are consistent with those found in earlier investigations. Scoring on the task was determined by taking the proportion of the correct items that were checked and subtracting the proportion of foils checked. This is the discrimination index from the two-high threshold model of recognition performance (Snodgrass & Corwin, 1988).

What we discovered

The first analysis compared students in all three districts, dividing them into two groups, those who had Accelerated Reader in elementary school and those who did not (see Table 4). A *t*-test comparing the two groups showed no significant difference between groups (mean difference = $-.008$, $d_f = 1534$, t -value = -1.025 , $p = .31$).

In order to control for differences in reading levels between the districts, a *z*-score was computed for each TRT score within each district. These standard scores *by district* were then entered into an omnibus analysis. As Table 5 indicates, a *t*-test on these scores using whether or not students had

Table 3
Title Recognition Test items

Targets	Percentage recognition
<i>Ella Enchanted</i>	41.2
<i>All Creatures Great and Small</i>	17.1
<i>Beyond the Burning Time</i>	4.7
<i>Holes</i>	55.3
<i>The Indian in the Cupboard</i>	88.0
<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	49.3
<i>Redwall</i>	27.0
<i>Witch Baby</i>	3.2
<i>Island of the Blue Dolphins</i>	74.9
<i>Owl in Love</i>	1.9
<i>The Call of the Wild</i>	65.8
<i>Carrie</i>	12.6
<i>Hatchet</i>	84.6
<i>The Witches</i>	53.9
<i>My Side of the Mountain</i>	57.5
<i>The Subtle Knife</i>	4.1
<i>Catherine, Called Birdy</i>	10.9
<i>The Outsiders</i>	48.7
<i>The Sign of the Beaver</i>	56.2
<i>The Boggart</i>	12.6
<i>Hank the Cow Dog</i>	7.8
<i>Frindle</i>	14.8
<i>Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul</i>	89.5
<i>A Wrinkle in Time</i>	61.0
<i>Adrift: 76 Days Lost at Sea</i>	10.7
Foil	Percentage recognition
<i>Sadie Goes to Hollywood</i>	4.2
<i>Searching the Wilds</i>	3.7
<i>The Legend of Sean O'Toole</i>	4.6
<i>Never Lie to Your Teacher</i>	5.1
<i>Football Freaks</i>	7.4
<i>Let's Save the Pandas</i>	6.6
<i>The Ghosts in Room 313</i>	16.9
<i>Katie of Norway</i>	3.0
<i>Chaos in the Cafeteria</i>	3.7
<i>Grandpa Found an Alien</i>	4.2
<i>The Exploits of Hillary and Her Friends</i>	1.8
<i>Joshua Johnson</i>	1.5
<i>BMX Champions</i>	11.9
<i>Mystery of the Missing Maserati</i>	4.0
<i>Melvin Meets the Moonlight Monsters</i>	4.2
<i>The Superheroes Fan Club</i>	2.8

Table 4
Unpaired *t*-test for TRT score: All students

Accelerated Reader?	Count	Mean	Difference	Degrees of freedom	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
Yes	836	.340				
No	700	.332	-.008	1,534	-1.025	.31

Table 5
Unpaired *t*-test for TRT *z* score: All students

Accelerated Reader?	Count	Mean	Difference	Degrees of freedom	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
Yes	836	-.006				
No	700	.007	-.013	1,534	-0.253	.80

Accelerated Reader in elementary school as the grouping variable yielded no significant difference between the two groups (mean difference = $-.01$, $df = 1,534$, t -value = $-.25$, $p = .80$). Having had AR in elementary school does not appear to make a difference on this measure of reading.

While the major hypothesis investigated in this study was not supported by this analysis, a further analysis of the TRT scores was conducted *by district*. This analysis produced mixed results (see Table 6). The exurban district did not show a statistically significant difference between those who had and those who did not have Accelerated Reader in elementary school, although the trend in the data showed more reading by those who had not had the program (mean difference = $-.02$, $df = 295$, t -value = -1.56 , $p = .12$). In Suburban School District 2, which did not use AR in the middle schools, the results were significant in favor of those elementary schools that did not use the program (mean difference = $-.056$, $df = 500$, t -value = -3.86 , $p < .001$). Finally, in Suburban School District 3, which used AR in all of the middle schools, the results favored the students that had used the program in elementary school (mean difference = $.037$, $df = 735$, t -value = 3.43 , $p < .001$).

Other analyses were conducted at the individual middle school level, but they are mixed and not conclusive. In several schools, especially those in the suburban district using Accelerated Reader in middle school, the numbers in the two groups were very uneven. As seen from these further analyses, there is not a simple answer as to whether or how prior experience with AR affects the reading habits of middle school readers.

What we learned

This study was conducted to investigate the claim that Accelerated Reader creates lifelong readers—that is, students who continue to read independently after they no longer participate in the AR system, as compared with students who did not use the AR program. The overall results of this study do not support this claim. Still, when we begin to look at the individual school districts, the results become more complicated. For example, why is it that the suburban school district that continued to use the program in middle school showed a significant positive difference in the amount of reading done by those students having had AR in elementary school, while the other suburban district not using AR in middle

Table 6
Unpaired *t*-test for TRT *z* score

School district	Accelerated Reader?	Count	Mean	Difference	Degrees of freedom	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
Exurban (1) (no middle school AR)	Yes	114	.251				
	No	183	.275	-.024	295	-1.558	.12
Suburban (2) (no middle school AR)	Yes	364	.331				
	No	138	.388	-.056	500	-3.859	.001
Suburban (3) (with middle school AR)	Yes	358	.377				
	No	379	.340	.037	735	3.428	.001

school showed a significant negative difference in the amount of reading done by those who had used the program in elementary school?

In the case of the first two districts, Exurban School District 1 and Suburban School District 2, the middle schools did not use the Accelerated Reader program. However, Suburban School District 3's middle schools did use AR (see Table 7). Comparing the TRT *z* scores of the first two districts who used AR in elementary but not middle school reveals a significant difference in favor of those students who did not use AR in elementary school (mean difference = -0.266 , $df = 797$, t -value = -3.720 , $p = .0002$).

This seems to suggest that when the Accelerated Reader program is used in elementary school it does not result in middle school students who read more relative to those who did not use it. In fact, students who did not have AR in elementary school in these two districts are reading more relative to their AR-exposed peers.

As for the advantage that students who encountered Accelerated Reader in their elementary schools have in the school district using AR in the middle school, could it be that those students understand how the program works? Other studies seem to indicate that the effects of AR increase with time (Paul et al., 1996). Perhaps this time

advantage is related to being able to negotiate the program more efficiently.

This study certainly does not represent the final word on the merits of Accelerated Reader. There is much to be studied regarding this program. In particular, it is important to look at the factors that have been so strongly linked to reading behaviors and reading achievement such as motivation, reading ability, and school and home environment. It seems to be particularly important to consider the studies that examine motivational factors influencing how much reading students engage in (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999; McKenna & Kear, 1990; Turner & Paris, 1995). In particular, Turner and Paris's (1995) discussion on the role of classroom literacy tasks seems especially relevant. Their vignettes describing open versus closed tasks may inform how we consider AR. In AR, students are taking end-of-book tests that are composed of admittedly literal-recall questions (Institute for Academic Excellence, 1998). There is only one specific correct answer to each question. These quizzes would be classified as "closed tasks" using Turner and Paris's definition (1995, p. 664). Turner and Paris went on to conclude that open-ended tasks are more supportive of literacy growth in the

Table 7
**Unpaired *t*-test for TRT *z* score: Exurban School District 1
 and Suburban School District 2**

Accelerated Reader?	Count	Mean	Difference	Degrees of freedom	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
Yes	478	-.107				
No	321	.159	-.266	797	-3.720	.001

future. "The motivational outcomes of literacy tasks influence how students interpret their roles in learning to read. Those interpretations can affect their desire to persist and to remain involved in literacy" (1995, p. 671). While they studied first graders, it is not difficult to extend their conclusions to older students.

Guthrie and his colleagues (1999) helped to explain the importance of motivation in reading development:

In our view, one of the major contributions of motivation to text comprehension is that motivation increases reading amount, which then increases text comprehension.... [We] showed that different aspects of reading motivation (both intrinsic and extrinsic) predict the reading amount of children and adolescents. In addition, reading amount leads to increases in reading comprehension. (pp. 250–251)

Much of this article is theoretically and empirically based. However, the reasons we undertook this study were rooted in our love of reading and belief that students will not become lifelong readers from tests or points or incentive programs. Readers are not motivated by a computer bookkeeping system. Teachers, parents, librarians, friends, and relatives who read and discuss books are the major influences in transforming youngsters into avid, lifelong readers (Pavonetti, 1997). We have collected significant qualitative data suggesting that many districts, schools, and teachers have corrupted what was designed as essentially a bookkeeping system, converted it to part of the reading program, and encouraged students to

read for points tied to report card grades. This does not create readers who enjoy reading.

What about the 8-year-old boy who read *Mr. Was* (Hautman, 1996) as a third-grade student? His school still endorses Accelerated Reader, as is evident from the following note from his mother. We are cognizant that this is simply one anecdotal report and that AR does not affect all students in the same way.

I just went to my son's first fourth grade teacher conference. [He] read the third Harry Potter book (400+ pages) at the beginning of the year and is in the middle of reading the fourth Harry Potter book right now (700+ pages). His teacher is not happy that he has only taken four Accelerated Reader tests this year, two of which were on books that she read aloud to the class. She mentioned wanting him to read shorter books, different genres, and a variety of authors. I do not disagree with the idea of a better balanced or more rounded out reading "diet." However, my son is simply doing as he has been told. He is choosing books within his reading range, taking tests, and earning points. He usually gets 90% or 100% on the Accelerated Reader tests, so he is (presumably) comprehending what he reads. He is smart enough to know that reading the Harry Potter books is:

- (a) something he enjoys,
- (b) something that will get him the most points in the least amount of tests, and
- (c) the way to have his name on the morning announcements and his picture on the hallway bulletin board for gaining entrance to the "25 Point Club." Two days ago he told me, "You know, mom, I don't even like Harry Potter that much. I'm just reading it for the points."

Much remains to be determined about the best way to increase motivation to read. We must not be driven by promises of short-term gains. Forced by public opinion, principals, administrators, and teachers strive to achieve immediate results regardless of long-term consequences. All eyes are focused on year-by-year comparisons of nationally standardized or state-administered tests. Few stop to consider the effects of such testing on students' abilities to think creatively or with curiosity, to revel in new knowledge for the pure joy of learning. What will these students be like in 10 years? Will they be responsible employees who exhibit initiative? Will they be involved parents who read to their children at bedtime? Or will they be so "tested" that they will remove themselves from all contact with school, teachers, and even books? These questions as well as others regarding the effects of relative reading ability and reading motivation need to be investigated. This study addresses only one of many aspects that need to be explored.

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PROGRAM FOR EDUCATIONAL THEATRE ADVOCACY

The Educational Theatre Association (EdTA) has initiated Theatre for Life: A Stage for Every Age, a new advocacy program. Theatre for Life is a blueprint for a grassroots advocacy campaign that promotes the value of educational theatre. Students, teachers, and other supporters of the theatre arts can use this program.

Theatre for Life's purpose is to increase the awareness of the lifelong value of skills developed through participation in the theatre arts. Involvement in theatre allows for the building of self-confidence, leadership, interpersonal communication, and problem-solving skills.

The Theatre for Life Action Guide provides samples for public service announcements, proclamation requests, letters requesting support, and media relations ideas. A copy of the Action Guide can be downloaded from <http://www.theatreforlife.org>.

The Educational Theatre Association, founded in 1929, is an international nonprofit education association whose mission is to promote and strengthen theatre education as a means of lifelong learning. The Association's major areas of effort—student development, teacher training, and advocacy—serve to accomplish this mission by helping to improve the learning environment in the theatre arts. See <http://www.etassoc.org> for more information about EdTA.

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