

# COUNTERPOINT

## AR: What are Motives Behind the Motives?

Shonda Brisco

Being wrong is hard to admit sometimes. Like everyone else in the early 1990s, I was intrigued by the idea that a computerized testing program would create lifelong readers in my school. However, as I have watched the progress of the Accelerated Reader program, I have begun to question the motives behind "the motivation."

Instead of librarians and teachers working together to involve students in reading for classroom discussions or unique book projects, teachers are requiring students to read "within grade level" to obtain points. These points transfer to anything from a grade in class to a free pizza party. And in their eagerness to win prizes or recognition, students begin reading everything in sight...that is, if there's a test for it.

Although the Accelerated Reader program has changed significantly in the past 10 years, most significant is that it now has become a multi-million dollar "catch-phrase" for any company that wants to promote its books to teacher-librarians. Instead of suggesting and selecting books through thoughtful review processes and evaluations, teacher-librarians generate copies of AR reading lists for specific grade levels and distribute them to students.

For many teacher-librarians, the Accelerated Reader program has also become an accepted selection tool. As a result, regardless of the quality of the product, if a book has an AR test, it is certain to find its way to a school library shelf. Therefore, teacher-librarians who fail to use professional selection tools to carefully choose materials for their younger patrons may find high-

interest, low vocabulary books for high school students on elementary shelves because of the AR reading levels.

Once the computer program is in place for the entire student body, most serious discussions between the teacher and the student regarding a book's underlying messages, its symbolism, or even character development, come to an end. Instead, books are pulled off the shelves, examined for points, and then, without regard to genre or perhaps true interest, read by students in hopes of passing a 10- to 20-question multiple-choice test. This alone demonstrates that teachers and teacher-librarians are forgoing the instructional concepts of Bloom's taxonomy when it comes to literature instruction.

As with any behavior modification program, AR has taught teachers and teacher-librarians to give up all common sense and educational theories, and put their trust (and money) in the hands of those who know how to "motivate" children to read. In turn, these followers of the program continue to report success in student reading and library circulation statistics without evaluating the possible repercussions of the product. With no evidence of higher-level thinking skills being developed among readers, the question becomes, "Will these students become lifelong readers who can later evaluate and select materials for reasons other than a tangible reward or points listed on the inside of a cover?"

To skeptics of the program and those who question the long-term success of students, reports are offered as proof - reports written by Advantage Learning Company,

developer of the Accelerated Reader program. And when independent researchers question the program's ability to create lifelong readers, such reports are ignored by AR's true believers.

Because research into the effect of a program on students is often difficult unless it is long-term, many teachers and teacher-librarians, it seems, are not willing to wait and are forging ahead with the program. Perhaps it is this blind acceptance of AR's promise to "motivate" and reward students while "creating readers" that is most disturbing, as it seems to have overshadowed educators' normal skepticism over products offering quick fixes to deep-rooted problems.

Although such problems might require the expertise of reading specialists, teachers and librarians, it appears that the 17 individuals who make up the Accelerated Reader's Advisory Board consist of four educational psychologists, two classroom teachers, one reading specialist and one librarian. The remaining 13 members are a mixture of school administrators (6), education consultants (1) and test developers (1). I maintain that this suggests that the company's emphasis is in changing "behavior" rather than improving reading (and thinking) skills.

Because the AR program suggests (and offers) extrinsic rewards for points gained through reading, it is important to question if the company (which is also listed on the New York Stock Exchange) is truly designed to help students become better readers. For if better readers were the company's primary goal, shouldn't there be less emphasis placed on psychology and more on reading? Otherwise, wouldn't there

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be more than one reading specialist, one librarian, and two elementary teachers seated on the board?

As librarians and teachers continue to work through their problems with the Accelerated Reader program, thousands of dollars are spent each year by districts hoping to "create readers" by seating students in front of computers containing a program that generates multiple-choice questions – the same type of questions that could be written by a classroom teacher.

For the poor students, struggling readers or non-readers, the AR program should be placed in the Reading Recovery classroom to assess those who need intensive reading practice in order to catch up with their peers. However, as a tool to "motivate" students who are capable of independent reading and who are reading on grade level, the AR program has become an addiction of points and prizes that no one seems to know how to overcome.

As librarians and teachers, we understand the difficulty of reading and we understand the success that it can bring through thoughtful discussion and creative activities. However, in our rush to produce readers of quantity, we have forgotten that without thoughtful review of literature, we create mediocre readers who will not be able to achieve the same success that we had when our teachers made us think beyond the literal written word and apply our own personal insight and creativity into what we chose to read. In my opinion, it's time to close the book on this program.



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WN: 0309106345005

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