

Pros and Cons of Accelerated Reading

I'm writing in regard to Susan Straight's article, "Reading by the Numbers" (Winter 2009). I successfully used the Accelerated Reading (AR) software at the junior high level for seven years. If used with fidelity, the program does what it is set up to do: provide students with time to read in a classroom setting, provide teachers with software that helps place students in books that are in their zone of proximal development, and give incentives to students. While the program does have a point system, it is not recommended that the points be tied too closely to a student's grade.

AR is a management software and is not intended to replace the teacher as instructor, nor does the testing give information about the student's ability to make inferences or use other higher level cognitive thinking skills. AR merely tracks the number of books a student reads and with what accuracy. If the program is not being used properly (for instance, if students are required to get a certain number of points without being provided appropriate time within the school day), then students are not going to meet the goals.

The criticism of AR by Ms. Straight is really a problem with teacher/school use of the software, not the software itself. I encourage you to take a look at the factors surrounding the proper use of AR before deciding

whether or not it should be banned. It could be that professional development has not been provided to the teachers using the software and the program is not being used with fidelity. The AR program does help motivate students and provides a structured format for individual reading that is especially helpful to students who have never developed the habit or discovered the joy of reading.

—Carolyn Hondo
Principal, Burley High School,
Burley, Idaho

Susan Straight's "Reading by the Numbers" accurately describes problems with Accelerated Reader's scoring system. AR could easily fix this. However, Straight also points out that AR encourages reading only to earn points. This is a very profound criticism. The program alters the nature of reading as it pushes readers to focus on often irrelevant details in order to pass tests.

AR could also have the effect of discouraging reading in the long run: Reading is intrinsically pleasant. Substantial research shows that rewarding an intrinsically pleasant activity sends the message that the activity is not pleasant, and that nobody would do it without a bribe. AR might be convincing children that reading is not pleasant. No studies have been done on the long-term effect of AR.

There is no clear evidence that AR works, even in the short term. AR has four components: access to books, time to read, quizzes, and prizes for

performance on the quizzes. It is well established that providing books and time to read are effective, but AR research does not show that the quizzes and prizes are helpful. Studies claiming AR is effective compare AR to doing nothing; gains were probably due to the reading, not the tests and prizes.

—Stephen Krasben, Professor
Emeritus, University of
Southern California

Warning Labels on Books?

I write to commend you for publishing "Save the Muslim Girl!" (Winter 2009). As a U.S. citizen of Pakistani heritage who is a classroom teacher and academic, I believe this important piece should be required reading for anyone who teaches literature. The popularity of the books mentioned and the acclaim they have received give them great power to convey prejudicial messages about Muslim women and girls to large numbers of people. Therefore, it is imperative that these messages are offset by critiques such as the one that Sensoy and Marshall provide. They state: "These novels can be best used to teach about the common Western stereotypes that are universalized in these books rather than teach about Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Islamic cultures." Personally, I would like to see this quote on the back of books like *The Breadwinner* (like a warning on cigarettes).

As the wars against Iraq, Afghanistan, and, in effect, Pakistan, continue to

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escalate and the misinformation against people from these countries continue to abound, it is particularly important to remember that "young adult literature about the Middle East cannot be separated from the post-9/11 context in which these books are marketed and increasingly published."

It is likely that those

"We should thank the governor and mayor for bringing us together," one community activist summed up. "Based on our victory, we can now go forward—not to fight against something, but to fight for what the kids really need in this city."

What can we learn from the coalition's success? A key component of that success was the patient organizing and coalition building that at times are neglected when activists focus mainly

on large mobilizations. Public demonstrations were an important ingredient of the Milwaukee experience, but building relationships and focusing on a deep understanding of the issues laid the foundation.

Even more basic to the success in Milwaukee was the simple, yet often elusive, recognition that, even in difficult times, believing that people can change reality is essential.

As Howard Zinn wrote, "Every-

thing in history, once it has happened, looks as if it had to happen exactly that way. We can't imagine any other. But I am convinced of the uncertainty of history, of the possibility of surprise, of the importance of human action in changing what looks unchangeable."

The success of the Coalition to Stop the MPS Takeover can be a lesson for all of us. We, the people, can shape our futures. We must. ■

Rethinking schools means rethinking ourselves as educators. Where have we ourselves come from?
How well are we serving all of the students in our schools?



THE SEED PROJECT NOW IN ITS 24TH YEAR

Participants and staff
New SEED Leaders' Workshop, 2008

The SEED Project on Inclusive Curriculum (SEEKING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND DIVERSITY) prepares educators to lead year-long monthly seminars in their own schools anywhere in the U.S. or the rest of the world. SEED participants work to make curricula, teaching methods, and school climates more multi-cultural, gender-fair, and more inclusive of all students from all backgrounds.

WHAT ARE THE KEY IDEAS IN THE SEED PROJECT?

- Unless we as educators re-open our own backgrounds to look again at how we were (or were not) schooled to deal with diversity and connection, we will be unable to create school climates and curricula that prepare students to do so.
- When teachers are put at the center of our own processes of growth and development, we are better able to put students' growth and development at the center of our classrooms. "Faculty-centered faculty development" parallels student-centered learning.
- In the metaphor of SEED Co-director Emily Style, schooling should provide a balance of "windows" into others' experiences and "mirrors" of each student's own realities and validity.
- Individual lives carry the pathologies of the larger society, but also the seeds of wholeness and the potential for change. Deeply personal group work in a monthly SEED seminar helps educators to see systemically, connects them to each other, and deepens their commitment to seeing and teaching all students equitably.

The multi-ethnic staff and participants of the SEED project reflect our commitment to understanding and respecting ourselves and our students, in all of our complexity and diversity, in both the curriculum and the classroom.

2010 training for new SEED seminar leaders: July 8-15, San Anselmo, CA. Applications and information: wcwonline.org/seed

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