

Chapter 3.27

Electronic Reading Programs

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ABSTRACT

Administrators, classroom teachers, technology specialists, and library media specialists must be knowledgeable and ready to create and maintain strong, individualized reading programs for their students. They must also know the components of strong literacy programs and be proactive in the creation of such at the schools in which they work. Electronic reading programs are gaining in popularity as well as in controversy. Numerous companies are producing programs that have students read books, then take a computerized quiz to check for comprehension. These programs claim to provide an educationally sound tool for teachers to use as part of classroom reading instruction, with the result of increased student test scores. These programs, if used, must be carefully considered and supported with appropriate staff development. They can be a large expense and may actually do the opposite of their claim to help create lifelong learners.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is the basis of a child's education upon which a large portion of learning takes place. The development of an intrinsic love of reading while a child is still young is a prime component of a strong educational plan. The sheer amount read by a child, or reading volume, "facilitates growth in comprehension ability" and "is itself a significant contributor to the development of other aspects of verbal intelligence" (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Packaged electronic reading programs claim to be a part of this process, but actually focus on testing children on material read. These programs do not achieve the goal of creating lifelong learners. Instead they simply bribe children to read using extrinsic rewards. In using computers to deliver the product, some school districts see this as an easy way to meet goals related to integration of technology. Classroom

reading programs suffer, with the focus being on gaining points and rewards instead of on a rich variety of literature experiences.

There are numerous products available which fall under the realm of electronic reading programs. Their purpose is to supplement and facilitate reading instruction through tests of comprehension taken on a computer. These programs are reading management systems, touted as helping teachers match children to appropriately leveled books, as well as providing information on how students progress in individual reading skill areas. Books are categorized by reading level, with computer software providing detailed records of what students read and how they score on computerized quizzes. Points are assigned to books based on difficulty level, with rewards in place once a certain number of points are accumulated. All these programs are similar in that they require students to select a book from a preordained list, read the book, and then go to the computer and complete a comprehension test. This feature is to enable teachers to monitor what students are reading and have a record of how well they have comprehended the reading material. Unfortunately, these programs can become the focus for both students and teachers. Classroom reading programs and student learning suffer. Motivation to read is not promoted intrinsically, but by an extrinsic reward system.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Available Electronic Reading Programs

The most popular and most widely used electronic reading program is Accelerated Reader, by the company Renaissance Learning. Next on the list is Reading Counts, Scholastic's version. Book Adventure is produced by Sylvan Learning Center and is the largest free electronic program available.

Accelerated Reader was founded in 1993 by Judith and Terrance Paul, owners of Advantage Learning Systems. They claim that Accelerated Reader "helps teachers motivate students to read more books, while enabling teachers to evaluate, monitor, and record student progress" (Paul, 1999). The program includes more than 70,000 titles, the most of any of these electronic programs.

Reading Counts is owned and operated by Scholastic, Incorporated and operates on the same premises as Accelerated Reader. Differences are few, though the teacher is able to customize the computer-based tests to student ability. Reading Counts has around 30,000 available titles.

Book Adventure is a nonprofit program by Sylvan Learning Systems. It is available free on the Web (www.bookadventure.org) with quizzes for around 6,000 titles.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST USE OF ELECTRONIC READING PROGRAMS

There is a lack of research proving any type of long-term gains resulting from electronic reading programs. "Academic researchers," it claimed, "often shy away from...commercial programs" (Chenowith, 2001). Research that does exist includes a study done in 1999 in Tennessee. Students in classrooms with Accelerated Reader improved their reading scores significantly on Tennessee's standardized test. It was not simply the implementation of Accelerated Reader in the classrooms that has increased test scores. Prior to this study, Renaissance Learning provided teachers with extensive professional development on the instruction of reading and on the successful use of their program. Educational programs that include quality teacher training will have positive effects and "increased student learning" (Paul, 1999). Any worthwhile professional development, not necessarily that which has been provided by Renaissance Learning or Scholastic, can "con-

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