

The Effects of Participant-Centered Staff Development on Teacher Monitoring Techniques in the Implementation of the Accelerated Reader Program

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Abstract: This study stemmed from my desire to maximize the benefits of Accelerated Reader (AR) for students by focusing on teacher implementation. The intervention was participant-centered staff development in AR monitoring techniques. Reading Renaissance training videos were presented prior to the staff development workshop. In the workshop, teachers discussed research supporting Reading Renaissance strategies, reviewed AR reading logs and reports, then shared AR techniques they had used in the past, problems encountered, adaptations they had made, and suggestions for successful implementation of the AR program. The four-week study that followed investigated whether participant-centered staff development affected the types or frequency of monitoring in the classroom as well as teacher attitudes about the AR program. Results indicated an increase in both types and frequency of monitoring as well as very positive attitudes about AR. Several other critical implementation issues surfaced as a result of the study. Overall, participant-centered staff development for AR appeared to be a practical, effective training strategy that promotes problem solving, shared practices, and peer support but may be most effective when implemented as an ongoing training strategy.

Introduction

Although our teachers used a variety of educationally sound instructional strategies to teach students reading skills, reading performance remained low at our school. In January 2001, after much discussion and planning, our rural South Georgia middle school implemented the Accelerated Reader program. A reading enhancement program created by Advantage Learning Systems, AR was selected by our School Improvement Team to supplement our existing reading instruction by providing reading practice for all reading levels of our population of seven hundred eighty students. As media specialist and chair of the reading committee, I was to help our teachers to improve reading skills throughout the school by implementing the program in a 30-minute per day reading time. After attending a one-day workshop for Reading Renaissance Librarians, I provided teachers with staff development in the program directly from The Basics of Reading Renaissance training videos.

From the beginning, I supported the concept promoted by Reading Renaissance and Accelerated Reader that reading is a skill and, much like learning to shoot basketball or play a musical instrument, requires instruction followed by practice, practice, and more practice. Current research supported that concept. I also accepted the program's assertion that teachers could nurture and support reading by using carefully planned monitoring techniques with each student.

After one semester of implementation, AR reports provided evidence that AR was not having the impact on student reading our School Improvement Team had hoped for. Why? I wondered. Although the Reading Renaissance training tapes had outlined a prescriptive technique for implementing the program, teachers seemed unprepared or unwilling to employ them. Our ultimate goal was reading improvement. What could I do? How could I help almost 800 readers? *By helping their teachers!* I decided.

A plan materialized as I realized I had the perfect opportunity to try a different staff development technique and follow up with data collection to evaluate the effectiveness of the training. My objective was to provide an intervention in the form of participant-centered staff development with every staff member being encouraged to contribute their practices, voice their concerns and complaints, and work together to arrive at some basic assumptions about the monitoring techniques promoted by Reading Renaissance for AR. I was curious to examine the effects of participant-centered staff development on:

1. Types of monitoring techniques used
2. Frequency of monitoring techniques used

3. Teacher attitudes about implementing the AR program

I knew at once I needed research data on the types of monitoring strategies promoted by Reading Renaissance. I believed monitoring techniques including feedback and immediacy could ultimately impact every student in our school. Research data would enable me to assess the strategies promoted by Reading Renaissance from a more objective viewpoint. After extensive review of the literature, my beliefs were fortified. The possibility of truly making a difference in our reading program prompted me to outline a plan for staff development and action research.

Literature Review

Vygotsky's (1978) research defines the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as the gap between what a child can learn alone and what a child can learn with adult guidance. Although Vygotsky's theories neglect to identify the nature of the guidance needed (Wood & Wood, 1996), Reading Renaissance has provided a detailed model of adult guidance in the AR program in the form of specific monitoring techniques in the status of the class activity (Training Tape Four: MIMI, 2000).

Research by Topping and Paul (1999) based upon a landmark study of AR data suggests that reading ability is positively related to in-school reading practice as promoted by AR. Yet research on the success of AR in improving reading comprehension and improving attitudes about reading has provided some conflicting reports. For example, a five year longitudinal study in two North Carolina schools by Peak and Dewalt (1996) indicates the AR program increased reading test scores each year, while a year long study in Illinois found no statistically significant increase in reading comprehension from using AR (Mathis, 1996). Why is AR successful in some schools and not in others? One reason may relate to the program's implementation. Reading Renaissance promotes monitoring the program daily by visiting the student's desk, conversing briefly about the student's reading, and checking the student's reading log and occasionally making written comments (Training Tape Four: MIMI, 2000). Current research supports the use of these kinds of monitoring techniques. A study by Ivey and Broaddus (2000) suggests teachers should use silent reading time to attend to and get to know individual readers. Giving students verbal or written feedback opens the door for meaningful dialog. Desrochers (2000) notes feedback in a variety of forms can be very motivating for learners just as Tunstall and Gipps (1996) assert that feedback helps shape and improve learner competence. Along with feedback, Reading Renaissance monitoring strategies also promote immediacy. Immediacy relates to the physical or psychological distance in a learning environment (Orpen, 1994). Immediacy is linked to student motivation and learning outcomes. Decreased physical and/or psychological distance between teachers and students has been linked to enhanced learning (Christophel, 1990). Teachers who practice immediacy with their students in the classroom setting will likely be more effective in facilitating learning.

An examination of the literature indicates Reading Renaissance monitoring strategies are based upon research; yet it also notes mixed reviews on the perceived effectiveness of the AR program. Is it possible that overall success in the program may be directly related to teacher monitoring techniques? No research was found on the relationship of monitoring techniques and success rates in Accelerated Reader.

For a complete review of the literature on this topic, please see *The Role of Teacher Monitoring Techniques in the Implementation of the Accelerated Reader Program* by Linda W. Davis.

Methods

My research involved all the sixth grade homeroom teachers – ten in all. They were chosen because they had first-year middle school students who were unfamiliar with our implementation of AR. The ten teachers included nine female and one male teacher, all Caucasian, one of whom was a first year teacher. Nine of the teachers had viewed the Reading Renaissance training videos during the prior year and had implemented the AR program in their classrooms for one semester.

The intervention was participant-centered staff development in Reading Renaissance monitoring techniques. I made the Reading Renaissance training videos available for viewing on closed circuit television prior to the workshop. I then met with the ten teachers in our conference room for a roundtable discussion (workshop) of best practices, problems, solutions, and ideas for improved implementation. My original plans included guiding our discussion with overhead transparencies, but my earnest desire to make the workshop meaningful led me to make a brief handout of Reading Renaissance monitoring strategies with plenty of room for additional notes and comments.

I wanted to be the 'guide on the side' rather than the 'sage on the stage.' To begin, I initiated a discussion of some of the research I had read on monitoring, feedback, immediacy, and AR. As I served refreshments, we shared cookies, Cokes and comments with everyone having time to talk and ask questions. We discussed the Reading Renaissance techniques supported by the research. Several teachers shared successful experiences they had during the prior year with AR while some mentioned problems and listened to peers' suggestions for possible solutions. The veteran teachers shared experiences and the new teacher was encouraged to contribute questions or comments about any anticipated implementation problems. I listened for helpful information, rephrased some comments for clarification, and asked open-ended questions to keep everyone involved in the discussion. Everyone examined the reading log form and some offered ideas on how to be more successful in implementing the monitoring strategies associated with the reading log. After summarizing our game plan for implementing AR, I provided the teachers with manila folders and reading log sheets for all students. The next day I gave each teacher a word-processed follow-up sheet highlighting Reading Renaissance strategies and some of the most helpful comments and suggestions discussed in our workshop.

I began my investigation soon after the participant-centered staff development workshop using three different instruments during the four weeks of data collection. One instrument was data collection by passive observer. I observed each teacher during reading time on three different occasions for periods of at least ten minutes. A checklist was used to ensure comparable data but a section also allowed for notation of any details that might prove helpful or relevant later. The observations, I knew, would provide first-hand assessment of monitoring techniques including types and frequency as well as other elements that might impact student success in AR.

A second instrument was a student reading log sheet, kept by each student reader and written on each day, with a space for comments by teachers. Teachers were to modify their normal posting to the reading log to add a "C" to indicate the log was checked, a "V" to indicate they visited the student's desk, or an "S" to indicate they had spoken to the student about his or her reading. My thinking was that the three designations would clearly show me the specific types and frequencies of monitoring techniques used daily by each teacher.

A third instrument was a survey given to the teachers after the intervention and four weeks of implementation. Survey questions were aimed at answering the three research questions as well as asking about the value of the staff development method and how the teachers felt about the state of the AR program in their classroom. The end of the survey also asked for additional comments.

Results

Classroom observations proved to be a significant source of information. However, I was unable to act as a passive observer as planned due to regular requests from teachers for assistance or information. Over the course of thirty visits, 67% of the visits found the teacher moving about the room visually monitoring when I entered the classroom. Seventy percent of the teachers visited at least three students during each ten-minute observation and 50% also spoke to at least three students during the same time period. Comments were brief and often focused on corrective measures such as 'Why don't you have an AR book?' 'Are you taking quizzes?' 'Where are your quiz scores?' Over the course of thirty observations, I saw written comments being made in the reading logs an average of 2.8 times per each ten minute visit.

Student reading logs provided data on the teacher monitoring strategy of checking student's books to ensure they read daily in their ZPD range. Two of the teachers had over ninety percent of their students reading within their listed ZPD, which indicated frequent monitoring of reading logs and reading materials. Another five teachers had at least 72% of their students reading within their listed ZPD. One teacher had 62% reading in their ZPD. Two teachers did not have ZPD levels listed on the logs. The comments area of the reading logs showed that each teacher provided some measure of feedback via written comments. Written remarks were most often teacher initials, with occasional comments such as 'Good job', 'Try harder', 'Excellent', or 'Keep trying'. Six of the teachers logged between four and six comments per student during the four-week period – a frequency of at least one written comment per week for each child. One teacher logged 3.4 comments per child over the same four-week period. Three teachers logged an average of 1.4 to 2.7 comments per child during the four-week period. The "C", "V", and "S" designations on the reading logs, which were meant to show the types of monitoring as well as the frequency, provided no conclusive data. These reading log designations will be further discussed in the next section of this article.

The survey data supplied teacher opinions on 10 questions related to the participant-centered staff development. Ninety percent said they shared methods and strategies during the workshop. One hundred percent

said they found it helpful to hear their peers discuss problems, successes, and concerns regarding the implementation of the AR program. Seventy percent responded they increased the frequency of monitoring after the workshop and 80% said they increased the types of monitoring techniques they used. Ninety percent said they had a more positive attitude about implementing AR and 90% noted they now felt more confident working with their students in the AR program. However, only 55.5% (5 of 9) reported that the program implementation had gone more smoothly than last year and 44.4% (4 of 9) responded there was an overall improvement in the implementation of the AR program in their classroom. (The new teacher was not counted on this question because she did not implement the program last year.)

Interpretation and Implications

Classroom observations were invaluable because they provided a down-to-earth view of the challenges involved in AR implementation. By being immersed almost daily in observations, my reflections began early in the research process and themes gradually emerged as I watched the teachers. Although the observation checklists gave evidence that many teachers were moving around the room monitoring, only a few were actually visiting the students to chat or write in the students' reading logs. Fewer still were engaging in meaningful one-to-one dialog (immediacy) related to the student's reading selection or were providing purposeful written comments (feedback) that might impact student reading. The lack of these types of monitoring techniques and the low frequency of usage led me to theorize that teachers need additional training and modeling in these techniques and possibly even classroom help with the responsibility. Considering the hesitancy I saw in some teachers, I think it might be helpful to have hesitant teachers visit and observe in classrooms where teachers are modeling desired techniques. Those teachers who have a comfortable grasp on Reading Renaissance monitoring techniques may also act as mentors to other teachers, providing needed assistance and support. Another possibility this study brought to mind is to have both administrators and other teachers who do not administer the AR program to train in the implementation of the monitoring techniques. Then each of the additional trainees could visit classrooms during reading time to assist with the monitoring, model it for reluctant teachers, and send the message to students that all of us care about their participation and success in AR.

Data collection from the reading logs supported my belief that additional training and support were needed to improve frequency and variety of monitoring techniques. After reviewing the reading logs for teacher comments, I realized many reading logs were deficient. Students seemed not to understand how to correctly fill in the reading log each day. Although I thought the reading log form was easy to understand, reflection on the poorly notated logs indicated that some teachers and students might need not only directions but also examples and modeling. This finding led me to create an overhead transparency of the reading log for teachers to use. The transparency will allow the teacher to show the students how each section is filled in daily and how the log looks after several postings. From now on, our staff development will include a complete review of the log form, an example of how to model it for students, and a transparency form. Additionally, I am creating a brief video that shows students how to fill out the reading log. This video can be shown at the beginning of the school year on closed circuit television; then throughout the school year it can be shown to new students as they enroll at our school and begin the AR program. All of these attempts to orient the reader in how to fill in the reading log should facilitate the teachers' application of the monitoring techniques.

Data collected from the student reading logs was certainly not as rich as I had hoped for. The coding of "C" (checked reading log), "V" (visited student's desk), and "S" (spoke to student) were often written in by students, erased when students needed more writing space, lost when students misplaced their logs, or forgotten by teachers. In retrospect, collecting teacher data from reading logs kept by sixth grade students was not a good idea. A better choice, perhaps, may have been a checklist used and kept by the teacher. However, the student reading logs did provide proof of teachers monitoring students to ensure they were reading in their reading level and also gave evidence of feedback via written comments. Eighty percent of the teachers had more than 60% of their students reading within their ZPD range. The two teachers who neglected to put the students' ZPD on the pages added to my belief that the basic elements of the program's implementation must be more thoroughly covered and/or modeled in the staff training workshop.

The survey responses provided teacher opinions regarding the three research questions I had posed. While one hundred percent of the teachers surveyed said they found the participant-centered staff development helpful, 70% said they actually increased the *frequency* of their monitoring. Eighty percent said they increased the *types* of monitoring techniques they used. Obviously, the teachers felt they were monitoring better than the previous year.

Upon reflection, I think the sharing nature of the participant-centered staff development helped them to gain a measure of comfort with these tasks. Ninety percent said they had a more *positive attitude* about implementing AR. Believing a positive attitude is an important element in achieving any goal, I was encouraged to think that participant-centered staff development might provide similar benefits in other settings because the opportunity to contribute personal practices seems to help to engender a feeling of ownership in a program.

Although most of the survey data was quite positive, two negative responses caused concern. One, only 55.5% of the teachers said implementation of the AR program had gone more smoothly this year than last year. Two, only 44.4% agreed there had been an overall improvement in their classroom implementation of AR. Armed with shared practices and positive attitudes, what caused so many to feel negatively about this year's implementation of the program? The section of the survey asking for additional comments provided key information regarding both responses. Teachers pointed to two areas of concern they felt had negatively impacted the reading program. The main problem, they reported, was one of timing. With this year's change in Georgia to increase the middle school day by thirty minutes, the bus schedules had yet to settle into a new routine that could get all students to school before homeroom. Because reading period immediately follows a brief homeroom time, teachers noted students were arriving throughout much of the reading period, disrupting many readers, and homeroom duties for teachers often overlapped into reading time. A second problem noted on the survey comments section was the dilemma of many students not having an AR book. I completely agreed that both of these implementation problems had a negative impact on the overall success of our program and began to talk with teachers and administrators about possible solutions. However, careful consideration and an effort to compare the survey data with the observation data made me theorize that additional training and support may yet have made a difference.

The comments on the survey regarding students not having AR books came as no surprise. Because I had noted that difficulty in my observations and had given it much thought, I was glad for an opportunity to discuss ideas for solutions. In addition to seeking suggestions from the teachers, I also spoke with other media specialists to ask for ideas. Not surprisingly, other program implementers have experienced the same problem. As new users of AR, I anticipate teachers will include more AR books in their classroom libraries over time, which will help somewhat. Currently, in an effort to make AR books more accessible to students, our school decided to initiate four projects. One project includes the purchase of some high interest, non-fiction AR paperback books that can be purchased in sets and shared among the teachers for classroom reading. Another is a consistent effort to schedule sixth grade classes to visit the library regularly since they have less experience in visiting the media center on their own. Yet another is to have teachers check out a few AR library books in various reading ranges to keep on their desk for two-to-four week periods to have as 'stand-by' AR books. Last, our student council had a book drive seeking donations of favorite books from all students. Total donations in the book drive reached almost fifteen hundred books. Students were encouraged to donate new or used books but those opting to give new books were given a list of recommended AR titles. At the end of the drive, student council members have begun to help sort the books and mark all AR books with reading levels and points. These AR books will be shared among all teachers implementing the AR program.

Reflection on the process and product of the research indicates participant-centered staff development is a practical choice for staff training in AR monitoring techniques. However, it appears the staff-development should include examples and modeling of the techniques and should provide ongoing support in order to maintain consistent monitoring strategies. This study not only provided an opportunity to evaluate the effects of participant-centered staff development on teacher behaviors and attitudes related to the AR program, but also yielded a glimpse into the daily challenges teachers must face in the program and an opportunity to work toward positive changes. Indications are a participant-centered approach can do much to solve problems, build rapport among peers, cultivate a sense of ownership, and expose teachers to the imaginative efforts of others. These are all desirable effects in any staff development program. However, thoughtful reflection on the nature and degree of monitoring techniques that successful implementation of AR demands caused me to plan to include more examples and modeling as well as to add follow-up workshops to our staff development plan for AR. Subsequent gatherings need to occur at regular intervals to revisit areas of weakness, to allow for continued group problem solving, and to support and motivate teachers in their efforts. In addition to working with administrators to address some of the implementation issues this study uncovered (for example, late buses and overlap of homeroom duties), I plan to have a follow-up work session each nine-weeks where we can continue our problem solving and improve our AR reading program. I also plan to continue my classroom visits in an effort to provide teachers with additional assistance and support.

In a presentation to the school faculty, I shared the findings of this research as well as the unexpected implementation problems the research uncovered. Teachers heard about modifications in our staff development for AR, about ongoing support for teachers, and about efforts to seek possible solutions for implementation problems. Group discussion led us to make some important decisions we felt would lead to positive change.

For the future, we will consider our training and support for AR a journey, and not a destination. We will continue this cyclic process that allows us to examine, evaluate and solve implementation problems. Our goal is reading improvement. By sharing best practices and joint efforts, I hope our students will reap the benefits of our many combined years of experience. With our best efforts and a willingness to learn and grow with the program, we *can* bring about reading improvement in our school.

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