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From Accelerated Reader to Engaged Reader: Reimagining Early Literacy

Many adults recall participating in Accelerated Reader programs during their childhood. While these programs incentivize reading and contribute to improved reading scores, some question whether they foster a genuine love of literature. Accelerated Reader, with its focus on quizzes and points, may inadvertently prioritize speed and comprehension tests over the joy of reading itself. This emphasis on measurable outcomes can overshadow the potential for deeper engagement with stories, imaginative exploration, and emotional connection with characters. Donalyn Miller, a leading voice in the movement for student-centered literacy practices, argues in her influential book, *The Book Whisperer*, that "When we reduce reading to a task with a grade, a level, or a score, we are communicating to our students that the value of reading lies in performing a task successfully, not in the act of reading itself" (112). In higher education settings, students are encouraged to engage with literature on a more profound level, analyzing themes, interpreting symbolism, and appreciating diverse perspectives. This approach cultivates critical thinking, empathy, and a lifelong appreciation for the power of storytelling. It raises the question of whether early childhood reading programs might benefit from a similar shift in focus. Rather than solely relying on assessment-driven models, perhaps a more holistic approach would better serve young learners. By nurturing a sense of wonder, curiosity, and visualization, educators can foster a deeper connection to literature. Renowned linguist

Stephen Krashen asserts in *The Power of Extensive Reading*: "Free voluntary reading is the most powerful tool we have in language education" (3). In light of this, it is worth considering whether preschool reading programs should move beyond the limitations of Accelerated Reader-type programs and embrace a more holistic approach that cultivates wonder, curiosity, and visualization to foster deeper engagement with literature and a lifelong love of reading.

Cultivating a sense of wonder within young children is crucial for fostering a lifelong love of reading. Drawing on his expertise in educational neuroscience, David A. Sousa, in his book *Engage the Brain*, defines wonder as "the feeling of surprise and awe that occurs when we encounter something unexpected or inexplicable, something that defies our current understanding" (Sousa 78). This sense of the mysterious and the unknown inherent in wonder creates a powerful allure, drawing children into the world of stories and igniting their imaginations. Some may argue that a focus on wonder is impractical, prioritizing imaginative thinking over concrete skills like phonics and vocabulary. However, research suggests that wonder plays a vital role in cognitive development and learning. Paula Denton, veteran educator and literacy specialist, advocates for creating a classroom environment where students are eager to learn by using language that "sparks curiosity and wonder" (87). Echoing this sentiment, Doug Buehl, a seasoned educator with extensive experience in interactive learning strategies, highlights the importance of providing children with opportunities for "exploration and discovery," stating that "wonder is the foundation of lifelong learning" (121). By encouraging children to ask questions, explore possibilities, and embrace the unknown, educators can create a fertile ground for intellectual growth and a love of learning. Wonder opens the doors to deeper engagement with literature. When children encounter stories that

spark their curiosity and inspire awe, they are more likely to become immersed in the narrative, connect with characters, and develop a genuine interest in reading. This sense of wonder can transform reading from a passive activity into an active exploration of ideas, emotions, and worlds both real and imagined. By fostering a sense of wonder in early childhood reading programs, we can nurture a love of reading that extends far beyond the classroom and lasts a lifetime.

Nurturing curiosity is equally essential in fostering a love of reading. Sarah Jenson, an instructional coach and expert in inquiry-based learning, offers a clear definition of curiosity in her book *The Curious Classroom*: "the desire to learn or know something; inquisitiveness" (23). It is the driving force behind exploration, discovery, and learning. When children are curious, they are intrinsically motivated to seek out new information, ask questions, and delve deeper into subjects that intrigue them. This inherent desire to learn is a powerful tool for cultivating a lifelong love of reading. Some might suggest that emphasizing curiosity could lead to a scattered approach to learning, with children flitting from one topic to another without developing solid foundational skills. However, research indicates that curiosity actually enhances learning and comprehension. According to renowned educational neuroscientist David A. Sousa, curiosity activates the brain's reward system, making learning more enjoyable and memorable (Sousa, *How the Brain* 145). Further supporting this claim, a team of cognitive neuroscientists led by Jacqueline Gottlieb, in their groundbreaking research on information-seeking, have shown that curiosity triggers neural mechanisms that enhance attention and memory, making it easier for individuals to absorb and retain new information (Gottlieb et al. 588). When individuals are curious about a topic, they are more likely to engage in active

reading strategies, such as making predictions, asking questions, and seeking connections to prior knowledge. These strategies, in turn, lead to improved comprehension and retention of information. In their seminal work on reading comprehension, *Mosaic of Thought*, literacy experts Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmermann emphasize the importance of teaching students to "ask questions," "make connections," and "visualize" to deepen their understanding of texts (56). By encouraging curiosity, educators can empower children to become active participants in their own learning journey. When children are given the freedom to explore their interests and ask questions, they develop a sense of ownership over their education. This sense of ownership, combined with the joy of discovery, can ignite a passion for reading that lasts a lifetime. By fostering curiosity in early childhood reading programs, we can equip children with the tools and motivation they need to become lifelong learners and engaged readers.

Cultivating a child's ability to visualize, to create vivid mental images while reading, is another key element in fostering a lifelong love of reading. In her article "Creating Classroom Cultures that Foster Reading Motivation," literacy researcher and advocate for student-centered learning, Linda Gambrell, explains that visualization is a powerful strategy that "enhances comprehension, engagement, and memory" (517). When children actively visualize, they are not merely passively decoding words but actively constructing meaning and stepping into the world of the story. Imagine a child reading about a majestic lion prowling the savanna; if they can vividly picture the lion's golden mane, the tall grasses swaying in the breeze, and the intense gaze of its amber eyes, the story transcends the page and becomes a multi-sensory experience. Some might argue that visualization is a natural byproduct of reading and doesn't

require explicit instruction. However, research demonstrates that actively encouraging visualization significantly enhances comprehension and engagement. Drawing on her years of experience as an educator and reading specialist, Gayla Collier argues that "visualization helps readers connect with characters and settings, make predictions, and understand complex ideas" (132). By fostering the ability to visualize, educators can empower students to become active participants in the reading process, deepening their understanding and strengthening their connection to the narrative. This active engagement with the text can spark a love of reading that extends far beyond the classroom. Therefore, while programs like Accelerated Reader can be useful tools for monitoring reading progress, educators should prioritize practices that encourage active visualization, such as reading aloud with expression, providing opportunities for dramatic play, and facilitating discussions that prompt students to create mental images. By nurturing the ability to visualize, we can unlock a richer reading experience for young learners, encouraging them to connect with texts on a deeper level and develop a lifelong appreciation for the power of stories.

It's clear, then, what the benefits would be if we moved preschool reading programs away from the limitations of Accelerated Reader-type programs and embraced a more holistic approach that cultivates wonder, curiosity, and visualization. While Accelerated Reader can be a useful tool for tracking progress and encouraging independent reading, it should not be the sole focus of early literacy instruction. By prioritizing a more holistic approach, educators can foster a deeper love of reading that extends far beyond standardized tests and reading levels. Wonder, curiosity, and visualization work together to create a dynamic and engaging reading experience. Wonder sparks the initial interest, drawing children into the world of stories and

igniting their imaginations. Curiosity encourages them to delve deeper, ask questions, and explore the unknown. Visualization allows them to connect with the text on a multi-sensory level, bringing the story to life in their minds. When these elements are combined, reading becomes an active and joyful process of discovery. In his book *The Reading Workshop*, literacy consultant and advocate for student-centered reading instruction, Thom Hicks, suggests that educators should create a learning environment where students have "choice, inquiry, and time" to explore books and develop their own reading identities (9). Continuing to rely solely on Accelerated Reader-type programs risks fostering a transactional relationship with reading, where the focus is on external rewards and quantifiable measures rather than the intrinsic joy of reading itself. As noted by educational leadership expert, Douglas Reeves, "Extrinsic motivation systems can undermine intrinsic motivation" (154). Conversely, by incorporating wonder, curiosity, and visualization into early reading instruction, we can nurture a love of reading that will benefit children for a lifetime. Children who are genuinely engaged with literature are more likely to become lifelong learners, critical thinkers, and empathetic individuals. Ultimately, the goal of early literacy instruction is not simply to produce proficient decoders of text but to cultivate a generation of passionate readers who find joy, meaning, and connection within the pages of a book. By embracing a more holistic approach, we can empower young children to become lifelong readers who view reading as a source of wonder, discovery, and endless possibilities.

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