



Using Guided Reading with Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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Abstract

There is a national movement underway to assist teachers in connecting the ideas and practices found in multicultural, general, and special education (Sobel & Taylor, 2006, p.29). In particular, educators are seeking innovative ways to implement general education practices with students with low incidence disabilities. This article describes the model used by one elementary school teacher to implement guided reading, a research-based practice in a LIFE skills classroom in order to increase the reading skills of students with autism. The teacher shares how each student's reading levels were identified and describes the classroom management system that allowed for instruction based on student needs. The teacher's knowledge of the guided reading principles allowed the students to take responsibility for their learning, providing them with challenging reading lessons that lead to growth in their own reading abilities. Each component of the program can be replicated within a general or special education classroom.

Keywords

autism, guided reading, Asperger's

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As the demographics of American schools change to include students of diverse linguistic, academic, and cultural backgrounds, restructuring efforts such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA) and the No Child Left Behind Education Act (NCLB) of 2002 require that teachers become skilled in delivering effective, research-based instruction to *all* students. Some educational experts believe that many students from diverse backgrounds, including students with disabilities, have not been provided with effective instruction and thus will face a “lifetime of challenges due to unequal delivery of quality instruction;” thus, there is a national movement underway to assist teachers in connecting the ideas and practices found in multicultural, general, and special education (Sobel & Taylor, 2006, p.29). In particular, educators are seeking innovative ways to implement general education practices with students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD).

This article describes a model used by one elementary school teacher to implement guided reading, a research-based practice in a LIFE skills classroom in order to increase the reading skills of students with autism. The teacher shares how each student’s reading levels were identified and describes the classroom management system that allowed for instruction based on student needs. The teacher’s knowledge of the guided reading principles allowed the students to take responsibility for their learning, providing them with challenging reading lessons that lead to growth in their own reading abilities. Each component of the program can be replicated within a general or special education classroom.

The Use of Guided Reading

Guided reading is a teaching approach used with all readers, struggling or independent, that has three fundamental purposes: to meet the varying instructional needs of all students in the classroom; to teach students to read a variety of increasingly challenging texts with understanding and fluency (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001); and to construct meaning while using problem solving strategies to figure out complex sentence structure and gain an understanding of new ideas or concepts (Iaquinta, 2006). Research has shown guided reading to be an appropriate research-based strategy for students who are working

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on developing literacy skills and is also considered an important “best practice” associated with today’s balanced literacy instruction (Fawson & Reutzel, 2000; Mooney, 1990; Tompkins, 2001; Tyner, 2004). However, after a review of the literature, there were no studies identified that examined the use of guided reading as a strategy to teach students with ASD.

Guided reading instruction occurs in a small group setting to allow for interaction among the teacher and readers. Because each group of readers has different strengths and needs, each guided reading lesson varies in the skills that the teacher focuses on. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) present a framework for the guided reading lessons that take into consideration the students’ level of functioning and includes selecting the text, introducing the text, reading the text, discussing and revising the text, teaching for processing strategies, extending the meaning of the text, and word work. Thus, the teacher’s role to guided reading is essential.

A critical precursor to the guided reading lesson occurs when the teacher determines each student's independent reading level. This step allows the teacher to select materials that are easy enough for the student to read with 90-95% accuracy but still challenging enough to help increase their reading development.

Next, the teacher has to create a classroom management design that allows her to work with the guided reading group as the rest of the students are productively engaged. In order to help students accomplish this, the teacher develops classroom procedures and independent assignments that help all students remain academically engaged and be accountable for the work they must do (Guastello & Lenz, 2005). This is often done through the development of independent work stations, which allow the students to rotate to a variety of stations where independent work can be completed, such as math, or other academic projects.

Work station activities must be directly connected to the guided reading lesson or to another aspect of the classroom reading program. All groupings are flexible and based on student needs. The teacher continuously monitors student progress in the guided reading groups and the work stations, and students may be regrouped as their needs change.

Setting up the Groups

The Living in a Functional Environment (LIFE) Skills class was a self-contained classroom in which students with severe cognitive impairments were served using a curriculum focusing on functional skills. The elementary class was made up of eleven stu-

dents with ASD, two girls and nine boys. All of the students had a dual diagnosis including disorders such as speech impairments, mental retardation, and emotional disturbances. In order to expose the students to literature they might be interested in pursuing on their own, the teacher organized guided reading groups. The students were given the Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA), the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI), and independent reading inventories along with running records, graded passages, readers, and word lists, in order to accomplish the task of attaining a baseline reading level for each student as well as district benchmarks to assess their skills in areas such as reading readiness, phonics, and grammar.

Based on the results, a grid was designed providing information on each student's reading abilities including strengths and weaknesses. The guided reading groups were chosen based on this information, but would change on a daily or weekly basis according to the skill taught. Group size

ranged from two to four students based on the amount of re-direction the student needed and the topic of the mini-lesson.

Fifty percent of the students had word identification skills at the second grade reading level with varying skills in the areas of reading comprehension, spelling, and writing. This was advantageous within the reading groups, because it allowed the stronger readers to serve as models for those readers with less developed skills. The other 50% of the students were at a more basic level of letter identification.

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The Guided Reading Lesson

Along with the classroom teacher, three paraeducators worked with the students in the classroom. The paraeducators were familiar with each student's daily schedule and were able to implement the schedules with minimal guidance on the teacher's part. Each paraeducator directed a work station which lasted 20 minutes before the students rotated to another work station. The three work stations were basic reading skills, written language, and math. However, the basic reading station was made up of two stations. The classroom teacher focused on comprehension while a paraeducator focused on phonics using the Spalding phonics program (Spalding & North, 2003). This particular paraeducator had been trained in the program.

A second paraeducator directed the writing station where students extended on their work completed in the reading stations. Students wrote phonetically based on activities focusing on comprehension or their phonics lessons. If the students had not yet been to the reading station that day, they would write based on the previous day's session. The third paraeducator taught functional math skills. Having the assistance of paraeducators allowed the teacher to focus on the reading station. In addition to the paraeducators, there were parent volunteers and general education peers who would also come and assist at the work stations.

The lessons taught were designed around the skill designated in the district's curriculum guide for the functioning grade level of the student. For example, a chronologically aged second grade student that was reading and writing at a first grade level would use the first grade curriculum guide

and state standards. Before each guided reading session, colored construction paper mats were placed at the guided reading table. Each mat had a student's name on it, so the students knew where to sit when they came to the table for instruction. Seating was important, as it allowed the teacher to work individually with a student in close proximity.

One example of how to begin a guided reading session involved the use of alphabet activities. For lower functioning students, they took magnetic letters and placed them on a mat with the letters printed. This served as a reminder of what the letters looked like and allowed students to complete a matching activity independently. For the students who were functioning at a higher level, several

activities, such as alphabetizing sight words in a recipe box with letter dividers, working from the Spalding phonics cards (Spalding & North, 2003), practicing their letters in a notebook while making the letter sounds quietly to themselves, or working individually with the teacher were all activity options that were varied

between lessons.

During this individual time, approximately ten minutes, the teacher could complete a running record, instruct a mini-lesson with a student who required constant redirection, test the student on their sight words or Spalding sounds, and document student progress on a regular basis. The other students in the reading group worked independently on their previously assigned tasks.

Classroom Management

In order to maintain attention to task, a dry erase marker was used on the table to document "sticks" or tally marks, that the students could earn by answering questions,

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volunteering to read, and remaining on task to complete their work. At the end of the lesson, students counted their sticks and earned prizes based on the number of sticks they had earned. However, erasing the sticks with their fingers was more reinforcing for some students. For those students a cup was placed near them at the table and pennies were used as the reinforcer. The noise the coin made when it went into the cup served as audio reinforcement, as well as visual.

When independent work time was finished, five to ten minutes instructing the whole guided reading group on a mini-lesson teaching rhyming words, vowel sounds, or other important pre-reading skills occurred. For those students who learned to read by memorization, the ability to “play” with words in the form of poems, limericks, or alliteration was a difficult skill to obtain and required a great deal of practice. An activity which involved the student working with magnetic letters to make words and exploring the words that could be made by substituting one letter was used. For example, when you start with the word B-A-T, by substituting just one letter, the words B-I-T and B-A-D can be made. Although challenging for some of the students, the motivation of earning reinforcers kept them focused on the task.

The words used in the above activities corresponded to the classroom literature that was used for the guided reading session. This built on the student’s prior knowledge and increased comprehension. The students alternated reading one page each. The books read in guided groups were 10-15 pages long and had 5-10 words per page. This quick pace and constant change of the reader kept the students engaged. As a reward for keeping up

with the reader, knowing when it was their turn, and helping with any words the reader did not know, the students received sticks. Since keeping up with the reader when it was not their turn was a challenge for some of the students, the bounty – sticks increased. The teacher would roll dice, choose numbers drawn on slips of paper, or choose dominoes to see how many sticks the students would receive. The students liked the uncertainty of how many sticks they could win, thus increasing motivation to keep up with the reading or discussion.

An alternative to reading one page at a time was choral reading. This worked well, because it allowed the weaker readers to be in the same group as the stronger readers. The approach was reinforcing to the stronger readers who seemed to enjoy modeling their reading skills, while at the same time, the weaker readers were exposed to literature above their reading level.

After a guided reading lesson was complete, the students rotated to a different station to complete a written activity related to the story. Based on the students’ writing ability, they either wrote a reflective statement of the story, drew a picture of something they remembered from the story, or brainstormed words that they learned from the story.

Summary

As previously mentioned, baseline data was collected for each student using the Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA), the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI), and independent reading inventories, along with running records, graded passages, and district benchmarks. In order to measure progress, the teacher used the DRA and running

The teacher documented between 6 and 24 months of growth in the students’ reading levels.

records on a weekly basis with each student. In addition, the TPRI was administered mid-year and at the end of the school year. Researchers were unable to obtain permission to release preliminary data from the district, however, replication of this study is now being implemented with a larger number of students, and all data from the follow-up study will be published.

After using this model for a full school year, the teacher documented between 6 and 24 months of growth in the students' reading levels. In addition to the documented change in reading levels, the teacher reported that students gained more confidence in the area of literacy. In this particular instance, the students' confidence with unfamiliar books increased, and they began to ask to go to the library during free time in order to check out a book. For students in the LIFE Skills program, this was considered a significant growth in reading skills. Areas of improvement were found in fluency, comprehension, phonics, sound blending, and listening comprehension. All students were compared against their own previous abilities, not against a national standardized sample, as many reading tests often do. This allowed for even the smallest amount of improvement to be documented.

Clearly, small group and guided reading instruction has incredible value to teachers of students with average intelligence, as has been proven with research (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Iaquina, 2006; Tyner, 2004). Thus, much of the previous research dealing with students with ASD and reading has focused on computer-assisted instruction (Coleman-Martin, Heller, Cihak, & Irvine,

2005; Heimann, Nelson, Tjus, & Gillbert, 1995; Williams, Wright, Callaghan, & Coughlan, 2002), which has certainly yielded some positive results. However, because teachers do not always have access to computers or the necessary software to implement computer assisted instruction, it is important for teachers to have reading strategies that are effective and can be readily implemented within the classroom setting. Thus, these findings suggest that guided reading can serve as a successful reading intervention for students with ASD.

Teaching reading, including assessing reading levels, is not an easy task for educators who facilitate the education of students with ASD. Granted, this classroom was well staffed to be able to implement such a program and the sample size is small, and therefore cannot unilaterally guarantee the same results for every classroom; the results are encouraging. It seems imperative that we continue to expand this area of research and further our own knowledge base regarding the most effective ways to teach reading to students with ASD.

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