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**IMPROVING READ-ALoud INSTRUCTION IN AN AUTISM PRESCHOOL
CLASSROOM**

By
Amanda M. Bruffy

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Education
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of
Master of Arts in Reading Education
at
Rowan University
June 21, 2022

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, James and Michelle. Mom and Dad thank you for always being there for me, encouraging me to continue with graduate school even when I felt as though I could no longer do it and felt defeated. Thank you for providing me the opportunity to pursue my passion to become a teacher and encouraging me to further my education. I could not have done this without your love, support, and constant encouragement.

I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my husband, Mike. My love I started this journey right after you proposed to me and continued this journey through our first four years of marriage. I know that I did not always make it easy. Thank you for being my rock, my constant support system, and continuously encouraging me to power through. For reminding me that it will all be worth it in the end.

Thank you for always being there for me. I hope I made you proud. This is for you. I love you.

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I would first like to acknowledge and express my deepest appreciation to Dr. Valerie Lee, my advisor. Thank you for asking the probing questions, challenging me, and helping me grow as an educator. You helped me to see the many ways I can support my students in their learning journey. I have learned and grown tremendously through this experience. Throughout this entire research process and study your help and guidance has helped shape me into a better teacher. Thank you.

Thank you to my principal and colleagues. Your support, encouragement, and “check ins” helped me to get through this program and meant a lot to me. Most importantly thank you to my classroom assistants. You lived this crazy experience along with me. Thank you for your help, support, and guidance as I navigated this research study within our classroom. I could not have done this with you.

Finally, I would like to thank my students. This research project would not have been possible without each and everyone of you. Thank you for being the unique children that you are. You helped me to grow tremendously as a teacher through this experience. I hope you never stop learning. Keep shining bright!

Abstract

Amanda M. Bruffy
IMPROVING READ-ALLOUD INSTRUCTION IN AN AUTISM PRESCHOOL
CLASSROOM

2021-2022

Valerie Lee, Ed.D.
Master of Arts in Reading Education

The purpose of this study was to look at what literacy strategies can be implemented to engage autistic preschool students during read-aloud instruction. Through this qualitative case study, I conducted research to find strategies that would engage my students in a way that is purposeful, effective, and create instruction where students take something meaningful away from the lesson. The research was conducted in a self-contained preschool classroom with a focus on Autism. A teacher's journal, family questionnaire, observational and anecdotal notes were used and collected to analyze data from read-aloud instruction. The data that was collected was analyzed through the use of triangulation and coding of student participation patterns and engagement in order to determine themes that emerged from the study. Based on the data analysis it was evident that instruction was more effective in a large group setting when implementing a variety of fiction and nonfiction texts based on student interest. Other factors such as seating arrangements, rereading of texts, incorporation of technology also resulted in an increase in student engagement and students demonstrated greater comprehension of the text. Another key component of effective read-aloud instruction was setting up a read-aloud routine that is predictable and consistent. At the conclusion of the study of implementing these strategies it was evident that student engagement and comprehension of the text increased.

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Chapter I

Introduction

It's Monday morning and it is time for read-aloud in Room 8. As you enter my classroom you would first see three students engaged in their sensory break. One student is jumping on the trampoline, while another student is sitting in a rocking chair watching the sensory video on the boxlight, and the third student is engaged with theraputty at one of the tables. As you continue to walk into my classroom on the other side of the room you will see five students working with a teacher and engaged in trials.

I look at my watch and notice that it is around 10:55am. "Alright friends, in five minutes we are going to switch to story." As I give students a five-minute warning they continue with their sensory break or working back in trials. Five minutes have passed, and I then say, "Okay friends, let's clean up and get ready for story time." My staff and I work with the students to complete what they are working on or help them with cleaning up their sensory materials. After all the hustle and bustle of cleaning up the staff and myself help the students make their way over to the large group area. As we transition students from one area of the classroom to the next it is almost like a game of whack-a-mole. Students begin to cry and scream, while other students continue to elope from the large group area and refuse to sit down in their chairs. Once all of the students are in their seats and the staff are seated throughout the circle area, I begin to pass out the letter sound song folders. As I continue to pass out the folders and begin the letter sound song students are still crying and screaming, making it nearly impossible to hear the letter sound song. After a few verses have played students are now sitting calmly following along as they listen/watch the video on the boxlight. Now story time can begin. The letter

sound song concludes, and I collect the folders. Then I begin introducing the book that we are going to read. As I introduced the book and began to read, some students continued to scream and cry. While other students continue to attempt to elope from the area. All of a sudden one student jumps out of their seat and runs across the large group area, bobbing and weaving through the chairs. They make it through the obstacle course and across the room. They begin running laps around the room until one of the assistants is able to catch up with them and redirect them back to their seat. In a few rare situations my staff was able to stop the student before they left the large group area. Despite all of the noise and chaos I continue to read.

Story of the Question

“The best research questions often begin with the words *what* or *how*” (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 31). Ever since I was a little girl, I knew that I wanted to become a teacher. I know it sounds cliché but that does not make the statement any less true. When I was young, I would dart off the school bus and run down the street to my house. Once I was unpacked from school and completed my homework, I would beg my younger sister to play school with me. Reluctantly she would go down into our basement where our playroom was, including our pretend classroom, and participate in playing school with me. My sister was of course the student while I was the teacher. As I took on the role of the teacher, I would write math problems on the chalkboard and after solving the problems moved right along into language arts; writing vocabulary words and the definition that would help with understanding and comprehending the reading. I knew then teaching was my calling.

We all have at least one teacher we remember the most. For me that teacher was my fifth-grade teacher. She was passionate, caring, and made learning fun. It was evident that she loved her career and her students. She was the one that encouraged me to become a teacher. I aspire to emulate those qualities and create a classroom where students look forward to coming to school each and every day. I am a special education preschool teacher; I am my students' first teacher, a part of their first experience at school. Knowing this I make sure that my students adjust to school easily; that they feel welcome and know that their teacher is there for them. I strive to make learning enjoyable through play, songs, and engaging read-alouds. In a way where they do not even realize they are working and learning. When my students leave my class, I hope they remember that Ms. S was kind, caring, and made learning fun.

In 2014 I achieved that dream. As a brand-new college graduate, I was fortunate enough to be hired as a maternity leave substitute from September to December of the upcoming 2014-2015 school year. The day I received the call informing me that I got the job is still one of the best days of my life. This maternity leave position led to me being hired for my own classroom starting in January of 2015. I am now in my eighth year of teaching within that same school district. Throughout my teaching career I have taught in a variety of settings. For the first four years of my career, I taught in a self-contained preschool classroom, teaching preschool students with a variety of disabilities. During my fifth year of teaching, I was moved to the elementary school to teach second through fifth grade autism. At the end of that school year, I learned that I was being moved back to the preschool to teach the autism class, which is where I am currently placed.

However, one part of my teaching that has been a challenge regardless of the grade level: read-aloud instruction has always been a source of stress and tension for me. “Tension is defined as both an act of stretching and a state of uneasy suspense. Each definition of tension applies to teaching and research. Often, the best research questions are in a taut spot between two points.” (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 23). I have always felt this tension with my read-aloud instruction. It seemed ineffective and did not seem that my students were not gaining anything meaningful from the lessons. With this nagging feeling and unsure of how to improve my read-aloud instruction, I decided to make it the focus of my research. Recent research findings show that read aloud experiences are particularly influential to young children’s development of important emergent literacy skills. Pentimonti and Justice (2009) stated “children who attend preschool classrooms characterized by high quality instructional support exhibit greater growth in emergent literacy skill relative to children attending classrooms characterized by low quality instructional support” (p. 243). As an educator I believe that it is my responsibility to provide my students with the knowledge and resources to be successful. I am one of my students’ first literacy teachers, with their first literacy teacher being a family member. Holdaway (1979) believed that a child’s first literacy experience is observing an adult read and being read to. The theory supported that as a child develops, they begin to imitate reading and writing based on their experiences. As a literacy teacher with an understanding of the theory of literacy development I will continue to implement various strategies to further encourage my students to read. With this role I teach my students the fundamental skills of reading such as holding the book correctly, identifying the front and back of the book, turning one page at a time, and distinguishing between

pictures and print. I also teach my students letter identification and letter-sounds. Though read-aloud I teach my students how to physically join a read-aloud and visually attend to the story. As the class listens to the story for multiple days I focus on comprehension and answering simple “wh” questions.

My philosophy as a literacy teacher is focused on the student and addressing their needs as a reader. I believe that students learn best from social interactions and teaching one another. When provided with the opportunity to work with their peers, students are not only working on literacy skills but social skills. The constructivist view believed by Piaget supports my philosophy. With his theory Piaget believed that social interaction and hands-on experiences are an imperative part of education. Piaget used this information to develop his theory of cognitive development which then led to the implementation of the stages of cognitive development. The basis of this theory is teaching to the whole child. The theory starts at birth and progresses to adulthood. Each stage is defined by the change in one’s thinking. By knowing how the brain makes connections at each stage teachers can direct their instruction to reflect the stage of thinking. As a result, students will be more successful. Thus, this sparked the beginning of my research and desire to create a more meaningful read-aloud experience.

Purpose Statement

As stated previously at the beginning of this chapter, read-aloud instruction has always been a part of my teaching that causes tension. I have always felt that read-aloud instruction was ineffective and that my students did not gain anything from the lesson. While reading my vignette one can get a clear picture of how challenging read-aloud instruction in my classroom can be. As a teacher this did not sit right with me and I felt as

though I had to do something to change it. With the desire to improve my teaching I decided to make it the focus of my thesis. By doing so it allowed me the opportunity to research a variety of strategies that have been implemented in preschool classrooms while other strategies had an autism focus. Based on the strategies that I read about while completing my literature review, I selected a few strategies that I thought could make a difference in my read-aloud instruction and decided to trial the strategies in my classroom. Through this qualitative case study, I hope that I will be able to find strategies that will engage my students in a way that is purposeful, effective, and create instruction where students take something meaningful away from the lesson.

While completing my literature review, I focused on reviewing various researched based strategies on effective read-aloud instruction in a preschool classroom. While determining what strategies to implement within my classroom I paid close attention to whether the strategies helped with student engagement throughout the lesson and on whether or not the strategy helped improve student comprehension of the text. Much of the literature reported that timing of the lesson, student choice, and seating arrangements had a significant impact on student engagement and comprehension of the text.

Delpit (1996) once said, "Teaching is like telling a story. But you have to look at people while you're telling the story and you can't tell the same story to everyone." This quote really resonated with me as a reading specialist and as a special education teacher. I have always believed that every student who walks through my classroom door is their own unique person with their own story. Every student who is a part of my class has their own strengths and weaknesses. As an educator it is my responsibility to provide them with the knowledge and strategies that they need to succeed. Knowing this, instruction

must be differentiated; you can't tell the same story to every student. This is particularly true when it comes to teaching literacy. Not every student benefits from the same form of literacy instruction. Literacy instruction should be student-centered. When instruction is focused on students and their interests, they will be more engaged in their learning, resulting in a greater understanding of the material. Reading is a fundamental skill to success. Students first begin learning to read and then instruction switches to reading to learn. It is imperative for students to have a strong foundation in reading. When readers can connect to the text, they are more engaged in the reading process and reading becomes more meaningful. By having the opportunity to interact with the text and make personal connections, the reader will gain a greater understanding of the text, resulting in stronger comprehension.

Statement of Research Problem and Question

As a preschool special education teacher, I am interested in researching various literacy strategies that can be implemented to engage autistic preschool students during read-aloud instruction. Literacy instruction, more specifically read-alouds, has been an area of my teaching that has been perplexing and causes tension. Over the past seven years I have observed that my students have not been engaged during read-alouds and behaviors often escalate during this instructional time. Research has shown that early literacy skills are imperative for students to become strong and independent readers. Through this qualitative case study, I hope that I will be able to find strategies that will engage my students in a way that is purposeful, effective, and create instruction where students take something meaningful away from the lesson. Therefore, my research

question that I plan to address is, what strategies can be implemented to engage autistic preschool students during read-aloud instruction?

Organization of the Thesis

The chapters to follow outline the organization of the thesis. Chapter two discusses the literary research that was completed for this study and focused on strategies of effective read-aloud instruction in preschool classrooms. The topics of research included in this literature review are student engagement, comprehension, autism, funds of knowledge, and preschool read-aloud instruction. Chapter three explains the context of this study, defines qualitative research, explains data collection methods used during this study, as well as the sources of data. Chapter four discusses the data that was collected during the research study as well as data analysis, including major findings. Chapter five concludes with a summary of the findings, conclusions drawn from the case study and recommendations for future research.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

This study looks at individual characteristics, environmental factors, and classroom strategies and the effects on students and their educational success. This is framed by Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory which posits that culture and cognition are the makers of one another and together work effectively. One of the major themes behind sociocultural theory is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. The student is put at the center of instruction and learning is viewed as a social process and the origin of human intelligence in society or culture.

“Examining and observing a student as an individual being separated from the culture and community would be like missing the most important pages of his/her life” (Panhwar, Ansari, & Ansari, 2016, p. 183). Vygotsky placed education between an individual and culture. “Vygotsky theorized and empirically explored that development is initiated by social and cultural influences and interactions which lead to higher and deeper mental development and functions”(Panhwar, Ansari, & Ansari, 2016, p. 184). This means that learning relies on both the outside sociocultural forces and the inner stimuli in an equal manner. Learning for children begins with interactions with other people. After these interactions children internalize and process the information and knowledge gained from the interactions and carry what was learned into future interactions.

Through his research Vygotsky introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). “The ZPD is a theoretical endeavor to understand the process of

contradictory points between the internal possibilities and external needs that form the dynamic and driving energy for development” (Panhwar, Ansari, & Ansari, 2016, p.184). The basis of the Zone of Proximal Development is that when teaching a concept, it is important to consider the individual's independent level and teaching just outside of that zone in order to push the individual to use their knowledge to bridge that gap between new knowledge. This is known as scaffolding which is a “type of assistance from adults, which enables a student or an inexperienced person to solve problems, perform activities or accomplish targets which he/she could not achieve without help (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976; Daniels, 2001; Blake & Pope, 2008)” (as cited in Panhwar, Ansari, & Ansari, 2016, p. 185). This approach is successful because teachers assume the role of a guide, which allows for students to actively engage in the learning process as they assume responsibility for their own learning. Students are placed at the center of instruction and given the opportunity to freely argue, discuss, and apply critical thinking skills to create their own new knowledge. When teaching students with Autism, sociocultural theory, and especially ZPD, are imperative to remember when planning effective instruction. A major component of teaching students with Autism is to meet them where they are at and build on their skills. Through modifications and accommodations students with Autism will thrive.

Defining Autism

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5), “Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is classified as a developmental disorder, with or without intellectual disability (ID), which is characterized by impairment(s) in reciprocal social communication and social interaction (i.e., turn taking activities, such as a two-person

conversation) and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities (i.e. an individual who talks exclusively about trains).” (The Arc, 2015). Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder typically begin during early childhood. The term “spectrum” is included in the name because there are many diagnoses that are considered a part of the “autism spectrum”. Those conditions include autistic disorder, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and Asperger’s Syndrome.

“The CDC estimates that roughly 1 in 68 children in the United States have autism spectrum disorder” (The Arc, 2015). Those who are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder continue to increase. The reason behind the increase of diagnosis is unclear. It could be contributed to the creation of a broader definition of Autism or better diagnostics. Autism Spectrum Disorder can occur in all racial, ethnic, and socio-economic groups. However, boys, siblings of individuals who have autism, those who have other developmental disorders, such as Fragile X syndrome are more likely to receive a diagnosis of autism (The Arc, 2015). Statistically speaking, boys are five times more likely to be diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder as compared to girls (The Arc, 2015). Behaviors that suggest a need for further developmental evaluation include,

- Absence of response to their name by 12 months of age;
- Not pointing or waving “bye-bye”;
- Disinterest in other children;
- Repetition of words or phrases;
- Flapping of their hands, rocking their body, or spinning in circles;
- Sensitivity to noise; or

- Engagement in violent tantrums (The Arc, 2015)

An autism spectrum diagnosis is considered reliable by the age of two; however, most children do not receive a diagnosis until they are much older. There are two steps taken to diagnose autism: developmental screening and a comprehensive diagnostic evaluation. Developmental screening includes a short test to assess if the child is meeting developmental milestones. If a delay is found in any area it can be a cause for concern. Screening for Autism Spectrum disorder should be completed during regular well-visits at eighteen and twenty-four months of age. Additional screening should be completed if a child is at high risk for autism spectrum disorder or if behaviors associated with autism spectrum disorder are observed. If the results of the developmental screening raise concerns, then the next step would be to complete comprehensive diagnostic evaluations. These evaluations include looking further into the child's behavior and development. As part of this evaluation, a parent interview is also conducted. As part of the evaluation, evaluators will also complete hearing and vision screenings, genetic testing, neurological testing, as well as other medical tests. During this process primary care physicians will refer families to a specialist for further testing. These specialists can include developmental pediatricians, child neurologists, and child psychologists or psychiatrists.

Educators who work with students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder experience students with varying language abilities, including nonverbal, minimally verbal, and verbal. Researchers have stated that one of the implications of their studies has been that there is not a clear or concise definition of the terms nonverbal and minimally verbal. Through the literature review completed by Koegel, Bryan, Su,

Vaidya, and Camarata (2020), one definition of the term nonverbal is that the individual is observed to have no functional language. The term minimally verbal can be defined as an individual who is observed to have less than 20 intelligible words and does not have productive syntax. Research has suggested that it may be more difficult to teach verbal communication to children after the age of five, especially if they have no expressive words or symbolic gestures. If toddlers or preschoolers have one or two words at the beginning of intervention services the likelihood of those individuals further developing their expressive language and vocabulary is greater (Koegel, Bryan, Su, Vaidya, and Camarata 2020). Studies have shown that verbal expressive communication can be predicted based on the presence of both verbal and nonverbal behaviors.

One type of accommodation that is used to assist nonverbal or minimally verbal students is the use of an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) system. An augmentative and alternative communication device could be an iPad with a specific speech/language program or app or a specific communication device such as a Dynavox Device. “Following speech-generating devices (SGD) treatment, some children become more verbal and increase their spoken communication, and others who remain nonverbal demonstrate increases in augmented vocabularies” (Bourque & Goldstein, 2020, p. 190). One common theme across much of the research was that very few studies focus on strategies and techniques for working with students who are nonverbal.

For example, we found only two studies from more than five decades of published research that focused exclusively on teaching verbal communication to non-verbal preschool children, with an aggregate of only six children participating.

Additionally, due to variability in measures and descriptions of the children in the

article, it was unclear whether the participants were completely nonverbal.(Koegel, Bryan, Su, Vaidya., & Camarata, 2020, p. 2966)

Limited research exists with young children, more specifically those with severe autism spectrum disorder. There is a lack of research on specific teaching strategies that are proven effective in the classroom. Researchers have stated that early childhood educators should have access to evidence-based strategies that will improve student communication competence across a wide range of modalities and functions and ensure that those that they interact with have the skills to be able to communicate in turn (Bourque & Goldstein, 2020). In order to ensure a supportive communication learning environment, it is important that communication partners are appropriately trained in the communication system. In the augmentative and alternative communication literature this is referred to as communication partner instruction and included instructional strategies such as describing and modeling skills or strategies, verbal rehearsal, practice and role play of skills, and guided practice when interacting with the individual(s) using an augmentative and alternative communication device (Bourque & Goldstein, 2020). This allows for communication partners to effectively communicate with the individual. More specifically regarding communication needs of preschool students using augmentative and alternative communication devices, research has shown that they benefit from a combination of approaches that include language activities that involve teachers as communication partners and other activities that include peers as communication partners (Bourque & Goldstein, 2020). However, in order for this to be successful preschoolers using augmentative and alternative communication devices and peers should be provided instruction on use of the augmentative and alternative communication devices and peers

without disabilities should be trained on the stay-play-talk model, with the “talk” step being focused on using the same augmentative and alternative communication device combined with spoken words (Bourque & Goldstein, 2020). By varying the communication partners and setting it provided students the opportunity to generalize their communication skills using augmentative and alternative communication devices and exposed them to more language as their communication partners combined nonverbal communication techniques with spoken words. With positive peer interactions students with autism spectrum disorder will be more willing to attempt to communicate with their peers which would then result in improved reciprocal interactions. The more engaged and motivated the student with autism spectrum disorder the more they will independently attempt to communicate and interact with others. Engagement is a key component to a successful lesson. When students are engaged the lesson becomes more meaningful and the students walk away learning something new.

Instructional Strategies for Read-Aloud

It is useful to think of read-aloud instruction as having three main parts: before, during, and after. Paciga, Lisy, Teale, & Hoffman (2015) stated that such strategies included:

Before Reading

- Position the book so illustrations are clearly visible to students
- Show the cover of the book, ask for predictions, and discuss background knowledge
- Introduce the author/illustrator

- Establish a purpose for reading
- Create anticipation

During Reading

- Read with expression (e.g., vary pace to fit the text, use facial expressions and gestures to clarify meaning, and create voices for characters)
- Ask questions and discuss the book to help children (1) understand unfamiliar words, (2) make predictions, (3) more deeply interpret the book's meanings, (4) understand difficult concepts, and (5) relate illustrations to the story/information
- Respond to children's comments and questions

After Reading

- Encourage children's responses
- Ask questions to foster deeper meaning of the book

Grouping and Duration

Researchers (Paciga, Lisy, Teale, & Hoffman, 2015) have stated that many educators can conceptualize students' engagement during read-alouds in two ways: verbal and nonverbal. Verbal engagement refers to students' talk during the read-aloud and nonverbal engagement refers to students' attention during read aloud instruction. The research completed by Paciga, Lisy, Teale, & Hoffman (2015) has shown that two factors to have an impact on student engagement include seating arrangements of students and the duration of read-aloud instruction. In this qualitative study of read-alouds in early

childhood classrooms, the researchers observed teachers using different seating arrangements within their classrooms during read aloud instruction. Seating arrangements included a cluster seating pattern or ring seating pattern. Observations showed that students sitting close (less than five feet from the teacher) demonstrated higher levels of nonverbal and verbal engagement compared to their peers sitting further than five feet from the teacher. In regard to the duration of read-aloud instruction, on average 84% of students remained engaged for the first 20 minutes. This showed that read alouds that are around 15-20 minutes are a strong target for preschool teachers.

Research also indicated that the content of what is read during read-aloud instruction plays a role in student engagement (Paciga, Lisy, Teale, & Hoffman, 2015; Robinson, A. 2021 E. Bingham, G., Venuto, N., Carey, M., & Moore, C. 2018). Individual student characteristics also affect engagement during lessons. Much of the research indicates that discussion of the text is imperative in supporting comprehension and vocabulary development from read-alouds. Short read-alouds typically focus on simply reading the text concluding with a few explicit questions about the text; however, this approach does not allow time for discussions focused around the main ideas of the story (Paciga, Lisy, Teale, & Hoffman, 2015). The longer read-alouds, those exceeding twenty minutes resulted in an increase in management talk from both teachers and students. Meaning teachers were moving from one place to another or waiting until everyone was quiet, students complaining about others behavior (Paciga, Lisy, Teale, & Hoffman, 2015). In conclusion, strong read-aloud instruction should consider both seating arrangements and duration, as well as student interest and groupings in order to encourage student engagement and to improve students' early literacy learning.

Text Selection

During read-aloud instruction in a preschool classroom, teachers are more likely to read fictional texts over informational texts. This is due to the fact that most early childhood educators are less familiar with the topics of informational texts and are concerned that students will become disengaged during instruction, while others lack the confidence and do not enjoy reading informational texts (Robinson, 2021). As a result of focusing mainly on fictional texts during early childhood as students move through the grades, they start to experience difficulty comprehending content area reading in future grades. Increased experience with informational texts in early childhood education could support future school success (Robinson, 2021).

“Experts indicate that read-aloud should be interactive, because reading to young children without response to the text offers few opportunities for developing language, literacy, and content knowledge (Robinson, 2021). Through this approach teachers are creating an environment where open-ended dialogue is encouraged. An environment where the teacher and students are exploring all parts of the text together. The teacher models various reading strategies such as making connections, asking questions, and making inferences and predictions. The use of informational texts has also been shown to improve receptive and expressive vocabulary with preschool students (Robinson, 2021). The use of fictional and informational picture books has been proven to be an effective approach when reading to preschoolers. In picture books, images and words work together to tell stories and present information. When using picture books students were more engaged and adept to analyze and interpret visual elements (Robinson, 2021).

The study took place in one preschool classroom with two full-time teachers who were both white females with over twenty years of experience. There were twenty students in the class whose ages ranged from two-and-a-half to five years old and came from middle-income families. Of the twenty students, nineteen students participated in the study. Instruction was mostly completed in a small group setting. “Small groups are an ideal context for teaching and learning in preschool” (Robinson, 2021, p. 75). The small group setting allowed students close access to the pictures and opportunities for frequent interactions between the teacher and students. There were no fixed groups and group sizes ranged from two students to six. Read-aloud instruction was offered as an activity during free choice time. It was observed that students would enter or leave the groups during read-aloud sessions. The texts selected for read-aloud instruction were either based on the units of study that was currently being explored or based on student preference. The frequency of participation during read-aloud was based on student preferences and interest in the read-aloud as opposed to other choice time activities. Research showed that girls tend to choose read-aloud more frequently than boys and that older preschool students (4–5-year-olds) participate more frequently than their younger classmates 2 ½- 3-year-old. As a culminating activity to read-aloud the students would typically participate in response activities focused on the content of the text such as simple science experiments, engage in art projects, participate in cooking activities, or play musical instruments.

At the conclusion of the qualitative study the results showed that both teachers made personal connections and prompted students to interpret pictures while reading fictional and informational texts. Both teachers were observed using multimodal

instructional strategies as well as differentiating instruction. While reading fictional texts the teachers would scaffold student's inferences about the characters thoughts and feelings as well as student predictions about story events. As the teachers read informational texts, they were observed describing academic vocabulary and content while also scaffolding student interpretations of informational text features.

In conclusion, this study reiterates the importance of incorporating both fictional and informational texts during read-aloud instruction in an early childhood classroom. By incorporating both types of texts teachers model important literacy skills needed to be successful readers. Robinson (2021) observed that student engagement is a major component of student success. In order to encourage student engagement teachers must consider groupings and the effectiveness of large group instruction versus small group instruction. Another key component to student engagement is considering their interests and tailoring the lessons based on those interests. When these strategies are applied students will be more engaged and take new knowledge away from the lesson.

Making it REAL

This qualitative study also focused on implementing informational texts in a preschool classroom using an instructional approach entitled REAL Time. REAL stands for Read and Explore; Ask and Learn (Bingham, Venuto, Carey, & Moore, 2018, p. 467). Using informational texts helps to build content vocabulary. The approach was designed to address two needs in preschool classrooms; increase intentionality around learning experiences and introduce informational texts to students and teachers in ways that make them more comfortable and engaging. As teachers implement REAL Time, they use the

approach to share how informational texts work, engage students in discussions of critical components of informational texts, and encourage students to make connections between content within the texts and learning (Bingham, Venuto, Carey, & Moore, 2018).

To begin implementing REAL Time strategies, teachers first select a sophisticated or complex text to read-aloud. Complex texts typically have characters with specific personalities and a main idea and/or problem of the story that has to be inferred. The Read and Explore part of REAL Time instruction begins with a story being read aloud. While reading the story together the teacher and students explore concepts that may be unfamiliar and challenging to understand. During this time teachers are modeling how to use text features to help build understanding. While implementing the Ask portion of the REAL Time literacy strategy the teacher uses questions or think alouds to draw out the student's understanding of the text and to help guide students to make connections. The Learning part of REAL Time should not be rushed or limited to just read-aloud instruction. Teachers should strive to encourage students to generalize the knowledge they learned through other parts of their day as well as across content areas.

During this study, seventeen preschool teachers participated in a REAL Time professional development study. Throughout the study teachers were observed in their classrooms as they learned to implement REAL Time. During teacher observations the evaluators wanted to ensure that the strategy was being implemented with fidelity. In order to collect data on this the evaluators used a checklist of specific indicators. Such indicators included how teachers follow the REAL Time approach and focus on text features. The checklist also looked at how teachers used informational texts to help students understand key concepts. Results from the study indicated that teachers

effectively learned how to draw attention to text features and showed a strong understanding of implementing informational texts and pairing them with complex storybooks (Bingham, Venuto, Carey, & Moore, 2018, p. 473).

Preschoolers have a natural curiosity about the world around them and want to know how it works. By incorporating informational texts as part of read-aloud instruction educators are providing their students with the opportunity to explore topics of interest and the world around them. A student's ability to comprehend informational texts is an imperative part of their success in school. While reading informational texts educators expose students to new vocabulary knowledge and about important text structures. As they are able to connect new ideas to known ideas further expanding their vocabulary and content knowledge. "The purpose of REAL Time is to give teachers a framework to guide their read-alouds in ways that help students understand how informational texts work and to increase their vocabulary and content knowledge (Bingham, Venuto, Carey, & Moore, 2018, p. 473).

Scaffolding

Scaffolding is influenced by Vygotsky's theory on the Zone of Proximal Development. Scaffolding refers to the process of temporarily providing support to a learner and then gradually withdrawing this support as the learner becomes capable of independence in performing tasks (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010, p. 241). The focus of this qualitative study was to characterize preschool teachers' use of six types of scaffolds. Those scaffolds included generalizing, reasoning, predicting, co-participating, reducing choices, and eliciting (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010). Throughout this study researchers

aimed to answer the following two questions, to what extent do preschool teachers use high and low support scaffolds during whole group read-aloud instruction and to what extent do preschool teachers perceive frequency of use of specific scaffolds correspond to their actual use of scaffolds. Throughout the study five preschool teachers were observed while leading whole group read-aloud instruction. The observations were videotaped and the frequency of use for the six types of scaffolds were coded using systematic observation procedures (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010).

Recent research findings from the study reported that students who attend preschool classrooms that implement high quality instructional support show greater growth in emergent literacy skills compared to peers who attend classrooms implementing low quality instructional support. Numerous studies have shown that read-aloud experiences are influential to young students' development of emergent literacy skills. Read alouds are a highly predictable and routinized activity, providing a systematic format that helps young children learn how to participate in literacy activities. "Research findings have shown that children's participation in read-alouds that feature strategies such as active engagement through questioning and repeated readings can have a positive effect on young children's vocabulary growth." (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010, p. 242). If read-aloud instruction includes questions and comments with a strong focus on print this approach can increase student's knowledge of the written language. In regard to language, additional research has shown that engaging students in retelling activities during read-alouds and rereading texts can improve student comprehension skills.

This study shows that preschoolers' participation in read-aloud instruction is imperative in order to support their language and literacy development. Every student has

their own set of needs and as educators it is important to build on that foundation and meet the student where they are at. As educators it is important to consider the six types of scaffolding and how it is important to vary the approaches based on student needs.

RECALL

RECALL stands for Reading to Engage Children with Autism in Language and Learning and is an adapted shared reading intervention that is based on dialogic reading. Dialogic reading is defined as a shared reading intervention that enhances the oral language skills necessary for future reading comprehension (Whalon, Martinez, Shannon, Butcher, & Hanline, 2015, p. 103). Supporting joint attention is another key component to RECALL. In order to encourage joint attention educators should label objects and implement visual and/or verbal prompts to gain or direct attention.

The purpose of this study conducted by Whalon, Martinez, Shannon, Butcher, & Hanline (2015) was to investigate the impact of RECALL on the correct, spontaneous responding to fact-and inference-based questions of children with Autism and to evaluate the verbal and nonverbal initiations of students with Autism. The participants of the study were preschool students recruited from Exceptional Student Education with the help of classroom teachers. The students were placed in a self-contained classroom. During the study the interventionists read aloud with a student with autism and a peer three days a week for about two and a half months. Peers were students who demonstrated positive social behavior and readily responded to questions. The role of these students was to be interactive reading partners and social models. The sessions were videotaped and coded.

In the area of early literacy, a strength for students with Autism is their ability to decode words. Where students with Autism typically struggle with reading comprehension and applying reading strategies to help them understand the text. Since future reading comprehension is connected to early complex oral language skills, educators should focus on instruction that goes beyond vocabulary and include instructional strategies that focus on oral language skills such as inference making. In the early years these skills can be addressed during shared reading experiences. Shared reading is a literacy strategy in which educators read aloud to their students. This strategy is most effective when interactive strategies are incorporated as well. As the study progressed the researchers adapted the instructional sequence for dialogic reading to PEEP. PEEP stands for prompt, evaluate, expand, and praise. While using this instructional approach educators followed a prompting hierarchy. During instruction the initial RECALL question prompt was followed but when a student failed to respond or responded incorrectly the teacher then implemented a four-level prompting hierarchy. Following intervention, students gradually improved their correct, spontaneous responses to factual and inference-based questions about the story content. Results from this study suggested that the frequency of incorrect or no responses immediately decreased following the implementation of RECALL (Whalon, Martinez, Shannon, Butcher, & Hanline, 2015, p. 112). It was also observed that students immediately responded to the use of visual supports, and over time educators were able to decrease the level of prompting as spontaneous, correct responding increased. Young students with ASD can participate in and benefit from shared reading interventions with supports.

Conclusion

The literature that was presented in this chapter suggests that the implementation of research-based interventions and strategies focused on literacy instruction for preschool children and those with a diagnosis of Autism can increase student engagement and comprehension of the text. Based on the literature another key component to a successful read-aloud lesson is student grouping. However, there is very limited research on these topics and therefore educators would benefit from further research.

The following chapter will focus on how the study was organized. Information about the district, school, and participants will be discussed. In addition, an explanation of the procedure of the study as well as data sources and analysis will be emphasized.

Chapter III

Research Setting and Design

“You draw on all your experiences and observations of kids, throughout your history as a teacher, to analyze the data in your current project.” (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 136)

Research Paradigm

The research methodology for this study is a qualitative approach. In the field of education, qualitative research is a common practice used among teacher researchers.

“Qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples, even single cases, selected purposefully” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). Qualitative research can be described as an inquiry process that investigates a social or human problem. The purpose behind qualitative research is to build a complex and complete picture of a question. Qualitative research is considered to be naturalistic and interpretive. This type of research is often conducted in a natural setting. While conducting qualitative research, the researcher focuses on fostering positive relationships with the participants in order to record data from participants as a way to better understand the trend, as it allows the teacher to interact with the students and be a part of the research process. For this study, qualitative research is the most effective approach because it allows the teacher to be able to have personal insight into the classroom as the events are naturally occurring. This study is designed to see how using various literacy strategies can be implemented to engage autistic preschool students during read-aloud instruction. Literacy instruction, more specifically read-alouds, has been an area of my teaching that has been perplexing and causes tension. Over the past eight years I have observed that my students have not been engaged during read-alouds and behaviors often escalate during this instructional time. Through this qualitative study, I hope that I will be able to find strategies that will engage

my students in a way that is purposeful, effective, and create instruction where students take something meaningful away from the lesson. During my research I aim to answer the following questions:

- What strategies can be implemented to engage autistic preschool students during read-aloud instruction?
- In what other ways can read-aloud instruction be modified at this instructional level to ensure that the lesson is meaningful and engaging?
- How does using a variety of texts affect student engagement and the effectiveness of the lesson?
- How does implementing these instructional strategies impact student behavior?
- What does student engagement look like during read-aloud instruction?
- How can the strategies implemented during instruction be modified for students who are nonverbal?

It is argued that integrating a variety of texts in a preschool school classroom as well as considering seating arrangements, timing and other specific strategies during read aloud instruction will improve student engagement and understanding of the lesson. Student engagement is another key component to successful read aloud instruction.

Procedure of the Study

The study looked at read aloud instruction in an autism preschool class while implementing a variety of research-based strategies to improve the effectiveness of instruction. The study was completed between September 2021 and January 2022. At the beginning of the school year, I sent home a questionnaire to each of the families in my class. The questionnaire included questions regarding family life, routine, student likes,

and questions about literacy at home. The information gained from the family questionnaire helped me to better understand each of my students' homelife and the value of literacy in the home. This information allowed me to gain a better understanding of each of the students in my classroom and how to teach them more effectively.

I introduced the research study to families during Back-to-School Night and a subsequent email was sent to ensure all families had been notified. Six students were invited to be subjects in the study. From this group, I was hoping that at least three students would agree to be participants, providing enough qualitative data to fully describe the effectiveness of the strategies implemented during read aloud instruction. Throughout the study students were observed during read aloud instruction. Through the study, I was able to gather data and share findings with colleagues to continue to develop more effective read aloud instruction. The study took place in my classroom during read-aloud instruction which typically lasted approximately twenty minutes. Materials for the study included a variety of fiction and non-fiction texts, as well as a boxlight and interactive comprehension activities through Google Slides or BoomCard Learning.

In September I began by focusing on the routine and expectations of read-aloud instruction. With the help of my classroom assistants, we worked on teaching our students how to visually and physically attend to the story. At the beginning of the study while participating during the read aloud, students were gathered around in the whole group meeting area. Each student was sitting in their chair in a half circle formation facing the teacher. Students were divided into two small groups of three. Then in November, my staff and I learned that we would be getting a new student. My staff and I

took time to discuss how we would change our schedule and adjust our groupings to best accommodate all students. One of the changes we decided to implement was changing read-aloud instruction from small group instruction to large group instruction. This approach to read-aloud instruction continued for the remainder of the study.

Data Sources

In order to fully understand student engagement during read-aloud instruction, a variety of sources of data were collected. One of the data sources included observation of student participation. During these informal observations I took notes during read-aloud instruction on the engagement I saw from the students. While observing student engagement I would look for students who were physically attending to the story; remaining seated with their body oriented towards the reader without protest or physical prompting. I also look for students who are visually attending to the story; keeping their eyes on the story being read aloud. I also took daily notes on any progress that is observed during the lesson. Daily notes on student progress were also collected in the form of anecdotal notes. While taking anecdotal notes, I took notes from observing student engagement during the read-aloud as well as during follow-up activities.

I included the notes taken by my classroom assistants as well. No participant names were connected to any data sets, as all data sets were coded for analysis purposes.

Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis followed a model of critical discourse analysis, using a process of coding to identify themes that emerge in the data. As a teacher researcher it is important to trust your ability as an educator and find an analysis process that works for you. In order to analyze the data collected from the study, the use of “triangulation” was

employed. Triangulation is defined as “the use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, or theories (at least three) to confirm findings.” (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 144). The data sources that were utilized during this study included: a family questionnaire, observations, and anecdotal notes. Since the focus of the study was on student engagement and success during read-aloud instruction, analyzing the observations and anecdotal notes is key to defining and interpreting student engagement.

While analyzing the data I compared and reflected on any patterns or themes that were evident throughout the data collected. I conferred with my classroom assistants and took notes on the conversation and comments that were made. I compared and contrasted observational notes to look for trends within individual student progress and within the progress of the whole class. I used the data to guide future instruction. “Looking back on those written notes and elaborating on them can provide a bridge between what you are experiencing in the classroom and how you translate the experience into larger meaning.” (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 92)

Context

District

The Township of Waterville Public Schools (pseudonym) is located in a southern New Jersey town in Atlantic County. The district is home to one preschool, four elementary schools ranging in grades kindergarten through sixth grade, and one middle school; which includes grades seven and eight. There are 3,263 students within the district and 360 teachers and paraprofessionals. The district provides programming for students in regular education, special education, as well as gifted and talented. The Township of Waterville Public Schools is considered a Title 1 school district with about

40% of the district's population in need of assistance due to economic factors. The township population is 37, 813. The community population is made up 71.4% of the residents are White, 11.8% are Black or African American, 8.3% Asian, 11% Hispanic, and 4.4% identify as two or more races. In the area of economics 5.9% of residents live within the poverty line. The educational level of Galloway residents is currently 91.8% have a high school diploma or higher and 31.0% have bachelor's degree or higher. The primary language is English followed by Spanish, 21.4% of the population in the township speak a language other than English (United States Census Bureau).

School

The school in which the study took place at the preschool. The preschool is a part of the Public-School System and follows their calendar. The student population consists of 107 students and 60 of those students are classified as a preschool student with a disability. Students enter the program at 3 or 4 years old. There are three classroom settings in which students can be placed. The three settings include: general education, in-class resource, or self-contained (PSD- Preschool Disabilities). There are two ways in which students can enroll in the preschool; one through the preschool lottery or by being classified as a preschool child with a disability. In order to qualify through the lottery, you must register at the age of three and are assigned a number at random and that is your slot. In order to be placed in our PSD Classrooms the student must be evaluated and have a 33% delay in one area or a 25% delay in two areas. At the preschool there is one general education classroom, five self-contained, and three in-class resource classrooms. The preschool is its own building on the other side of town. The school is located at the

end of a residential street that meets a major county road. The neighborhood surrounding the school is small and all the houses on the street are ranchers.

The student population at the preschool is extremely diverse, while the staff population is not as diverse. In regard to the staff, nine of the classroom teachers are white females and one is Asian-American. The teachers range in years of experience as well. There are ten teachers in the building; nine of them are dual certified with Early Childhood Education and Special Education, while one is certified in only Early Childhood Education. Regarding classroom assistants there are two white males, while the other classroom assistants are white females. The experience level amongst classroom assistants ranges from first year assistants to veteran assistants. In reference to turnover, there is not much turnover in positions. There may be classroom assignment changes within the building but that is the extent of it.

Lodge School (pseudonym) begins at 9:10am-3:10pm, making the school day about six hours long. Our daily schedule includes. Morning Meeting, Discrete Trials (STAR Curriculum), Read-Aloud, Play Skills, Gross Motor, Work Tasks, and Rest Time. At the preschool technology is limited; there is one desktop computer and one laptop provided for each teacher. Each classroom has a new boxlight and a few iPads. I currently teach Preschool Autism. At this time, I have six students in my class, two students who are verbal and four that are nonverbal. My goal for my students is to expose them to emergent literacy skills. During literacy instruction I expose students to the letters of the alphabet, letter identification, and letter-sounds.

Lodge School has an active FSA (Family Student Association) that encourages parent and teacher participation from the community. The FSA typically meets monthly

with the school principal, family members, and a teacher representative to make decisions for the school. These decisions include school assemblies, fundraising ideas, and special incentives throughout the year.

The curriculum used at the preschool is *Creative Curriculum*. *Creative Curriculum* is one that is literacy and language rich. The classroom environments use a great deal of visuals and print. This is important to developing early literacy skills and expanding vocabulary. Over the last four years; the goal has been to continue to increase the teachers' mastery of implementing *Creative Curriculum*. In order to achieve this goal teachers have been provided professional development opportunities at various levels. This has included the school principal leading professional development sessions, sending teachers to out of district training on the curriculum, to PLCs being formed on different aspects of the curriculum, and most recently a professional development session led by one of the Master Teachers of the program. Regarding special literacy training, that has been incorporated into curriculum training as read-alouds are a major part of the daily schedule at the Preschool. *Creative Curriculum* is a comprehensive, research-based curriculum that features exploration and discovery as a way of learning, enabling children to develop confidence, creativity, and lifelong critical-thinking skills. The philosophy behind the curriculum is that all children learn through active exploration of their environment and therefore the environment plays a critical role in learning. The curriculum is broken into studies and is guided by student interest and is a comprehensive collection of knowledge- building and daily practice resources that explains the "what," "why," and "how" of teaching. The program includes special supports to help teachers individualize instruction for English- and dual-language learners in the classroom.

Included in each of the studies are a variety of books that further enhance student learning.

Since I teach the class with an Autism focus, I do not follow *Creative Curriculum* like the other preschool classes. Currently, I am implementing the STAR Curriculum which follows an ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis) approach to instruction. The STAR Curriculum is a researched based program for students with Autism and is aligned with the Common Core. The lessons are delivered in a 1:1 setting. The lessons focus on six curricular areas: receptive language, expressive language, spontaneous language, functional routines, academics, and play/social skills. Since discrete trials are delivered 1:1 it allows for individualized instruction based on the needs of the student. As we complete the trials the data is recorded on Pathfinder allowing for progress monitoring to be simple and daily. The data from the trials is used to determine the trials the student will complete and to create appropriate IEP goals.

COVID-19 has continued to impact instruction. In relation to this study, research stated that considering seating arrangements affects student engagement. Research has shown that when students are seated in a cluster formation instead of a ring formation, they are more engaged (Paciga, Lisy, Teale, & Hoffman, 2015). However, based on COVID-19 regulations students are to be at least three feet apart and given the space in my classroom where read-aloud instruction is held, having the students sit in a cluster formation was challenging. During read-aloud instruction students were seated in the cube chairs in a ring formation around the teacher. I have also observed an increase in student behavior and lower student ability levels. As a result, the staff in my classroom

are seated amongst the students in order to address behavior and to redirect students to remain on-task as I continue with instruction.

Participants

The student population served by the preschool is diverse (see Table 1). The ethnic demographic that is represented in the student population include, Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, and Asian. Within these groups are Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners. The preschool is a Title I school. The entire student population is eligible for free or reduced meals. Bussing is offered to every student but only 90% of students get bussed. Only a few students experience housing insecurity.

The students participating in this study are three to five years old and in preschool. In total there were six students who were asked to participate in the study; however, only four students returned consent forms to participate in the study. The students participating in the study have an Autism diagnosis. Two of the four students are nonverbal and use an Augmentative Communication device to communicate. The two students with some language use a sentence strip as a visual cue to help them formulate a complete sentence to make requests. All of the participants are boys and identify as White/Caucasian, while three students identify as Hispanic. English is the primary language spoken at home and in the classroom. All of the students receive speech and language services as well as occupational therapy, while one student also receives physical therapy.

Table 1

Student Information

Name:	Lennon	Leo	Luke	Charlie
Age:	4	5	5	5
Ethnicity:	White	White	White	Hispanic
Primary Language:	English	English	English	English
Related Services:	-Occupational Therapy -Speech Therapy -Physical Therapy	-Occupational Therapy -Speech Therapy	-Occupational Therapy -Speech Therapy	-Occupational Therapy -Speech Therapy
Communication:	Nonverbal: uses an AAC Device	Verbal	Partially Verbal: uses an AAC Device	Verbal

During read-aloud instruction it is myself and three assistants. All six students participate in read-aloud instruction regardless of consent to participate in the data collection as this is a major component of the curriculum.

Conclusion

Chapter four focuses on the analysis of the data collected during the research study. While analyzing the data common themes were identified and further analyzed and used to further guide instruction and the study.

Chapter IV

Findings of the Study

“Reading aloud to young children is a widely embraced and enduring practice. It has been viewed among early childhood scholars and educators for decades as vital to facilitating young children’s language and literacy development and has strong support from the literature (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Morrow, 2007).” (Robinson, A. (2021).

This chapter focuses on the data collection to help understand the effects on student engagement during read-aloud instruction in a preschool autism class after implementing research-based strategies. At the beginning of the research study, I focused on the routine and expectations of read-aloud instruction. After the first six weeks of school, I switched my focus to different reading strategies. Based on my research I began to implement a variety of strategies that have been proven effective in improving student engagement and comprehension during read-aloud instruction. I also focused on strategies that were proven effective for preschool students as well as students who have a diagnosis of autism.

Prior to Implementing Instructional Strategies

Prior to this study, read-aloud instruction in my classroom was constantly changing and I always felt as though the students did not gain anything from the lesson. As a brand-new teacher, eight years ago I was just going through the motions of read-aloud. I would begin instruction by quickly introducing the book I was going to read and then I would jump right into reading the book. As I read the story, I would occasionally

pause and ask a question based on what was just read in order to check for understanding. After reading the story I would then dismiss the class to the next part of our day.

Over the years, read-aloud instruction has been a part of my teaching that is constantly changing year to year and at times even throughout the year. Read-aloud is a major part of the *Creative Curriculum*, which is the preschool curriculum we implement within our program. When I first started teaching, our daily schedule consisted of two periods of read-aloud instruction. One read-aloud was focused on the study of the week and the second was based on a social skill that I felt my students could benefit from learning. Over time that has changed back to one read-aloud. Most teachers follow the following read-aloud schedule, picture walk Mondays, Tuesdays focus on vocabulary, read and ask questions Wednesdays, read with no interruptions Thursday, and create a new ending/story map/act out story on Friday or read to your friend Friday with lips and ears.

One topic of discussion with the principal during meetings, professional development sessions, and even post-observation reflections was the importance of read-aloud instruction. Read-Aloud is a time to expose students to written language and beginning reading skills. One point my principal emphasized was when selecting a book to read to the class, remember you are the one reading the story, not them, and you know how to read. His point was that we should be taking advantage of the teachable moment to expose students to vocabulary and higher order thinking. My principal always stressed to take advantage of every moment we are with our students and turn every one of those moments into a teachable moment. This is often a topic of many meetings and stressing the importance of wait time; however, teaching special education preschool, providing

ample wait time can be a hard balance between giving them time to think the information over and not losing their attention. As I reflect on my teaching, not only in the area of literacy but across the board, I am reminded of the importance of wait time, of taking their responses and guiding them to the right direction and providing opportunities for higher order thinking.

The Beginning of the School Year

At the beginning of the school year, read-aloud instruction was conducted in a small group setting which helped with the effectiveness of the lesson. The groups were determined by class size and number of assistants. Typically, I would split the class into two equal groups and two or three assistants would be supporting. This read-aloud routine has been the structure of read-aloud instruction in my classroom for the past three years. Instruction began with students being exposed to the alphabet and letter-sounds by singing/listening to The Letter-Sound Song:

Do you know these letter sounds? Do you know these letter sounds?

They will help you learn to read. They will help you learn to read.

Apple, Apple, /a/, /a/, /a/, Apple, Apple, /a/, /a/, /a/,

Baby, Baby, /b/, /b/, /b/, Baby, Baby, /b/, /b/, /b/,

Cookie, Cookie, /c/, /c/, /c/, Cookie, Cookie, /c/, /c/, /c/,

Dolly, Dolly, /d/, /d/, /d/, Dolly, Dolly, /d/, /d/, /d/,

Elbow, Elbow, /e/, /e/, /e/, Elbow, Elbow, /e/, /e/, /e/

After singing The Letter-Sound Song, I introduced the book. While introducing the book, I read/identified the title of the story. I then exposed students to identifying the front cover and back cover of the book. While identifying the front cover and back cover of the book, I encouraged students to find and identify things that they saw within the illustrations or on the covers. After introducing the book, I began to read. While reading the book, I paused every so often to ask a simple comprehension question in order to check for understanding as I read the story. To conclude the lesson students would participate in a culminating activity such as a Boom Card activity or an interactive group activity. I would typically reread a story two or three times during that week, resulting in reading two books a week. In my classroom students would be engaged in a study or theme anywhere from two to four weeks. During this time students would listen to a variety of texts based on the theme or study. The study or theme was often based on the time of year or student interest.

As stated previously, I use Boom Cards as a culminating activity. I first started using Boom Cards when schools were shut down due to COVID-19. A colleague had shared the resource with us as we were scrambling to learn how to teach virtually essentially overnight. During this time, I used Boom Cards as a way to work on my students' trial programs in a virtual setting. Boom Learning Cards is an online interactive teaching resource. On the website educators have access to a number of resources on a variety of topics and subjects. Teachers can use Boom Cards as a reinforcement activity at the end of a lesson, assign differentiated tasks to students to complete during independent work time or for homework, or even as an assessment tool to check for student understanding. As part of your account as an educator you can create a class

roster and each student will be given their own login code and as the teacher you can assign different decks for the students to complete. What is also beneficial about Boom Cards is that they are self-correcting. If the student selects the incorrect answer, it makes a sound and then that option is covered with a red circle with a line through it; if they select the correct answer then a green circle appears, and a different sound is made.

As I continued to learn more about Boom Cards, I began to occasionally use this resource as a culminating activity during our virtual read-aloud. Once we returned to in-person instruction the following year I continued to incorporate Boom Cards as a part of my read-aloud instruction as it allowed students to interact with the material without having to share materials with each other since due to COVID-19 protocols students were not allowed to share materials. Since Boom Cards are interactive, I began to observe that students were more engaged in the activity allowing me to gain a better understanding of what they took away from the lesson. Researchers look for examples of both verbal and nonverbal signs of engagement. Student engagement is defined as physically attending to the story; remaining seated with his body oriented towards the reader without protest or physical prompting. Engagement also looks like visually attending to the story, keeping one's eyes on the story being read aloud. Researchers have found that a student's individual characteristics have an effect on their level of engagement.

A Portrait of Each Student

At the beginning of the study there were six students in the class. By the end of November, a new student was added to our class. There were now seven students and four adults. I begin with a small portrait of each of my participants.

Charlie

When answering the questions regarding literacy at home Charlie's family shared that he will not sit long enough to listen to a story and will often become frustrated when Mom begins to read a story. Charlie prefers to look through the book independently and label different things he sees within the illustrations. It was shared that Charlie's favorite books or reading material focuses on animals or dinosaurs. When asked about how storytelling, music, or other forms of literacy are used by members of the family or within the household, Charlie's Mom shared that she does storytelling as part of the bedtime routine to help him calm down and relax. She also shared that they will typically sing songs randomly throughout the day and while driving in the car.

Charlie consistently participates during read-aloud instruction. He visually and physically attends to the story as the teacher reads aloud with minimal adult support. Charlie is verbal, when communicating in the classroom, however, Charlie does not have difficulty expressing his wants and needs. He is able to clearly communicate with teachers and peers. During read-aloud instruction he will answer questions and make comments about the story. Charlie was always calling out different things he noticed within the illustrations. During this instructional time, he seldomly engaged in behaviors. Charlie's behaviors include;

- *Non-compliance*: Refusal to participate in an activity after directions have been delivered two times
- *Flopping*: falling to the floor from a standing or seated position; including all attempts
- *Swiping*: using hand to push items away or off of surface; including all attempts

- *Tantrum:* any occurrence of the following for any period of time; crying, and/or screaming

Charlie always has a lot to say and is eager to talk with his teachers. He loves to talk about animals and shares his knowledge about what they eat, their habitat, and any interesting facts he knows about that animal. More recently, Charlie has been beginning to engage with peers from another class while outside on the playground. Charlie appears to enjoy coming to school and works hard.

Luke

Regarding literacy at home Luke's family responded with the following information. Luke's family shared that he loves looking through books and will follow along as he points to the words while his mother reads the story. When asked about Luke's favorite books or reading material his Mom shared that he enjoys reading books about animals and textured books. Luke's Mom shared that she reads to him every night before bed. If she is not reading one of his favorite books, then she is making up a story about a little boy. Luke is minimally verbal (MV). When communicating, Luke uses a communication device to make requests. During a typical school day Luke will use his communication device during mealtimes and play skills. The teacher will then encourage Luke to repeat the sentence after them. After he makes the request the communication partner will then give Luke the item.

During read-aloud instruction, Luke will answer questions about the story with some prompting or when provided with choices. Luke has a difficult time focusing and staying on-task. He is frequently redirected by staff to remain on-task. Luke does participate in read- aloud instruction with moderate adult support. He continues to work

on physically and visually attending to the story. While listening to the story, Luke typically has his hands over his ears, can be observed lounging in his chair, looking around the room, body turned looking to the side. Luke's behaviors include;

- Non-compliance: Refusal to participate in an activity after directions have been delivered two times
- Off-Task: failure to initiate demands after the 2nd verbal prompt; independent suspension of engagement in activity for more than 10 seconds; spinning
- Tantrum: Crying, screaming, stomping; can include one or all behaviors
- Swiping: using hand to push items away or off of surface; including all attempts
- Eloping: moving 5 feet or more from a designated area without adult permission for any duration of time.

Luke is always very happy and energetic. He loves to be silly and desires a close bond with his teachers. Luke appears to enjoy coming to school and works hard. He has an "old soul" type of personality.

Lennon

While answering the questions about literacy in the home Lennon's family shared the following information. Lennon's family shared that as part of his nighttime routine they read before bed. Leo's favorite books include Mickey Mouse Clubhouse.

Lennon is nonverbal (NV). When communicating in the classroom Lennon will use his communication device during mealtimes and play skills. When he is highly motivated, he does not need prompting to complete the exchange. While participating in read-aloud instruction Lennon will answer questions about the story when provided with visuals that represent the answer choices. Lennon does participate in read-aloud

instruction and will physically and visually attend to the story with heavy adult support. During read-aloud instruction he will typically make vocal stims as the teacher is reading while lounging in his chair. When he is redirected to sit appropriately and remain on task, he will often tantrum, which includes screaming, crying, and/or stomping his feet.

Lennon's behaviors include;

- Tantrum: crying; can be paired with inappropriate touch
- Non-Compliance: Refusal to engage in a activity after 2 verbal directives; can include swiping of materials

Lennon may be small, but he is mighty. He is very independent and determined to do things on his own. Lennon loves to learn and is an extremely hard worker. He has a very strong academic foundation. Lennon enjoys music and loves Mickey Mouse.

Leo

Leo's family shared that he loves looking through books and has a lot of them. At times as they are reading a story, they will pair the story with music. Leo enjoys reading stories about animals. His favorite book is *From Head to Toe* by Eric Carle. When asked about storytelling, music, and other forms of literacy within the home Leo's family shared that he loves music and will often play his piano.

Leo will typically repeat simple "I want" phrases after the teacher. For example, during Morning Meeting while working on greeting the teacher, Leo will select one of the two greetings, wave or hello. Once he has selected the greeting he would like, the teacher will say, "I want (greeting)." and Leo will repeat after the teacher. In the classroom setting, Leo has been observed occasionally using three-word sentences to make requests or state needs but does so spontaneously and inconsistently.

Leo engages during read-aloud instruction with heavy adult support. He does physically and visually attend to the story as the teacher reads with continued adult support. Leo is easily distracted. He is often observed looking around the room. During read-aloud instruction Leo will often scream or drum on the surfaces around him. Depending on the subject of the story will pay attention to the reader. Leo engages during read-aloud instruction with heavy adult support. He does physically and visually attend to the story as the teacher reads with adult support and redirection. Leo is easily distracted. He is often observed looking around the room. During read-aloud instruction Leo will often scream or drum on the surfaces around him. Depending on the subject of the story will pay attention to the reader and engage in less behaviors. Leo is verbal. When communicating, Lir will typically repeat simple phrases after the teacher. In the classroom setting, Lir has been observed occasionally using three-word sentences to make requests or state needs but does so spontaneously and inconsistently. During read-aloud instruction he will answer questions and make comments about the story. Leo's behaviors include;

- Tantrum: client making crying (with or without tears) accompanied by screams louder than a conversational tone, for longer than 1 minute
- Physical Disruption: defined as the client swiping materials away or throwing items onto the floor and kicking items with feet in his environment with quick rapid movement
- Dropping: defined as the client dropping to the ground from a seated or standing position

- Elopement: moving away from the instructional area without permission and/or attempts to leave the physical space without permission
- Screaming: Defined as the client producing loud non-contextual sounds above a conversational tone
- Drumming: banging hands on surfaces for any duration of time when quiet hands are expected, can include feet
- Head Banging: making contact with surfaces with his head using force
- Aggression: engaging in gross motor movements (hitting, kicking, head-butting, scratching) directed at another person's body (with or without contact made – counts blocked attempts)
- SIB: hitting and/or scratching self in the face with own hands

Leo is very energetic and always on the go. He interacts well with his teachers and appears to enjoy coming to school. He is very interested in animals and can name a variety of animals. Leo is always talking about visiting the Zoo. He works hard and has a strong academic foundation.

Family Literacies

While reviewing the questionnaire one theme that was evident was that each of the four families reads to their student every night as part of their nightly routine. Another common theme that I observed was that a majority of the families incorporate music into their day as well. Some families even mentioned that they connect the music to the book on occasion as well. I noticed that the book selections were often connected to the students' favorite show or movie. A majority of the students enjoy reading stories about animals as well. While planning read-aloud instruction I would keep this information in

mind in order to create meaningful instruction as I was able to meet my students where they were at based on their experience with reading.

Launching into the Study

Student Groupings

The timer is beeping, signaling that the students' sensory break is over, and it is time to transition to read-aloud. I and two assistants begin to transition students to the large group area where read-aloud instruction takes place. As we are guiding students to story time, they are openly showing their frustration about having to sit down in their cube chairs. They are screaming, crying and refusing to sit in their seats. Once the three of them are seated, I begin with read-aloud instruction. Eventually they calm down and I am able to read the story.

While conducting research one of the topics that was continuously mentioned throughout the literature was student groupings. More specifically, small group instruction. The literature suggested that read-aloud instruction be implemented in a small group setting to encourage student participation and increase comprehension. Based on this information I began the school year conducting read-aloud instruction in small groups.

In September I started with two small groups. The first group included myself, two classroom assistants, and three students. The second group included myself, one classroom assistant, and three students. The groups were differentiated based on student behavior and ability level (mixed ability grouping). During the read aloud students continue to gather around in the whole group meeting area. Each student is sitting in their chair in a half circle formation facing the teacher. After implementing small group

instruction, I have observed a slight increase in student engagement and comprehension of the text. This was evident in that there were less off-task behaviors as students were more easily redirected by the increase of staff present during read-aloud instruction and student behaviors did not occur at the same frequency as prior to implementing small group instruction.

At the beginning of November, my staff and I learned that there would be a new student starting in our class after Thanksgiving break. My staff and I began to discuss how we would change our schedule and adjust our groupings to best accommodate all students. One of the changes we decided to implement was changing read-aloud instruction from small group instruction back to large group instruction, despite what the research suggested. As we reflected on read-aloud instruction we felt as though our lessons were not as meaningful and effective as we would hope for them to be. We felt as if we were just putting out fires as we addressed various student behaviors and that the students were not gaining anything from the lesson. While continuing to have this open discussion, we talked about effective instruction, how to best accommodate all students, and provide them with the time and instruction in order to be successful. As this conversation took place you could hear in all of our voices the frustration and teacher guilt. We knew that there was a need for change. We were determined to find a solution that allowed us to provide our students with the education that they deserve. Switching read-aloud instruction from small group to large group instruction would allow for all staff members to be present during instruction to assist with student behavior. Within the large group settings, the staff and I tried different seating assignments for students in order to continue to engage students and encourage more attention/on-task behavior.

After reflecting on small group instruction and large group instruction, I found that the lessons were more effective when conducted in a large group setting.

Another change that we faced in my classroom this year was the constant changing of classroom assistants. In September there were three assistants assigned to my classroom. By mid-October an assistant from another classroom was moved to my classroom and one of my assistants was moved to another classroom within the building. The assistant who moved to my classroom has been in my classroom during previous school years. Then in early November the administration assigned the newly hired assistant to my classroom. This presented a variety of challenges for my classroom. With the constant changing of assistants, it was difficult to get into a consistent routine as I was always training new staff on data collection, STAR curriculum, and addressing student behavior. The inconsistent support made it difficult to provide students with effective instruction. This student population thrives on consistency and with these constant changes I was unable to provide that environment for my students. Another challenge as a result of changing assistants so frequently was that one of the assistants was new to preschool and the other assistant was newly hired and had no experience in a classroom that focused on autism. With no experience and no training, it created another hurdle that made it difficult to provide effective and meaningful instruction.

Despite these challenges, I persevered and continued to try different strategies. In the following section, I discuss the themes that emerged from these different approaches we took to increase comprehension and engagement.

Strategies Implemented Throughout the Study

Setting Up the Read Aloud

Research-based structures were implemented to create a successful classroom set up and an effective read-aloud instruction timeline. The research concluded that sitting students in a cluster seating pattern or ring seating pattern resulted in greater student attention. Due to COVID-19 guidelines, we had to keep students at least three feet apart. Throughout the study I continued to try and figure out how I could successfully implement this seating arrangement in my classroom while still adhering to the COVID-19 guidelines that were set in place.

Another factor that made cluster seating a challenge in my classroom was student behavior. Due to the frequency and intensity of many students' behavior implementing a cluster seating arrangement would prove to be difficult as it would not allow the classroom assistants and I to quickly address student behavior and redirect them back on-task. The other difference that was observed among teachers was the duration of the read-aloud lesson. Observations showed that students sitting close (less than five feet from the teacher) demonstrated higher levels of nonverbal and verbal engagement compared to their peers sitting further than five feet from the teacher. Their research also showed that short read-alouds (less than 12 minutes) do not support students' understanding of the story enough to maintain their attention and/or to drive opportunities for discussion relating to the text. While planning read-aloud instruction I kept in mind what Paciga, Lisy, Teale, and Hoffman (2015) shared in their article in regard to effective read-aloud instruction; it is useful to think of read-aloud instruction as having three main parts: (1)

before, (2) during, and (3) after. As I prepared read-aloud instruction I kept this piece of advice in mind.

While writing my weekly lesson plans, I planned out read-aloud instruction to include a strategy to begin read-aloud instruction such as introducing the book and the purpose for reading. At this point I had read mostly fiction texts. As I read the story, I periodically stopped to ask questions in order to check for understanding or point out key components of the story. To conclude the lesson, I implemented an activity that is based off of the story and focused on a particular strategy or skill. I usually included comprehension questions/wh-questions or a sequencing activity. Once all of the questions had been answered, read-aloud instruction concluded. Students were then dismissed to the next activity on their schedule. As a result of this routine, I have observed a slight increase in student engagement and comprehension of the text. In my observation of the lessons, it appears that students are engaged in the interactive activity. While participating in the activity the students are eager to participate and answer questions. Even if it is not their turn you can hear them calling out the answer. When I call their name, they race to the Boxlight eager to answer the question. The questions are displayed on the boxlight, and each student has at least one opportunity to come up to answer a question about the story that was just read. I read each question aloud as well as the possible answers, which are pictures. Students then touch/tap using the pointer what they believe is the correct answer to the question. Through their responses I have been able to get a greater understanding of what each student is comprehending. I intend to continue to follow the same routine for read-aloud instruction.

Attending to Student Behavior

Student behavior plays an important role in the effectiveness of the lesson. When students are engaged in disruptive behavior, they are more likely to be disengaged from the lesson and as a result do not gain an understanding of the story or the objective of the read-aloud. Off-task behavior is defined as failure to initiate demands after the second verbal prompt; independent suspension of engagement in activity for more than ten seconds. Lennon, Luke, and Leo all exhibited off-task behavior during read-aloud instruction on a daily basis. Eloping is another common behavior that is observed during reading instruction. Eloping is defined as moving five feet or more from a designated area without adult permission for any duration of time. Leo and Luke will often exhibit this behavior while transitioning to read-aloud instruction. Both students will also elope while returning to their seat after answering questions up at the Boxlight. At one point or another all four students will engage in crying or screaming during read-aloud instruction. Crying is defined as the occurrence of vocalization (sounds or words), at a volume above normal conversational level, with or without facial contraction with or without tears for any period of time. Screaming is defined as the student producing loud non-contextual sounds above a conversational tone. Leo will also drum frequently during instruction. Drumming is defined as banging hands on surfaces for any duration of time when quiet hands are expected, which can include feet. Addressing student behaviors and meeting student needs continued to be a challenge throughout my study. On a typical day, we would gather in the large group area preparing to begin reading the story for the day. Another student began to cry and display his frustration about being at story time and would refuse to sit in his chair. His crying would then set off Leo. Leo then began to cry,

scream, and engage in self-injurious behavior such as banging his head against the radiator next to him. He even began to be aggressive towards adults such as hitting and scratching. Logan engaged in vocal stims and wiggled in his seat. Even with these behaviors taking place, the letter sound song continued to play. As the song continued to play, Charlie and Luke followed along with the song. After the song concluded, I began to introduce the story that I would be reading.

Due to the extent and frequency of these behaviors, it has been beneficial to conduct read-aloud instruction in a large group setting as it allows for all staff members to be present in order to quickly address behaviors and redirect students back to instruction. As a result, we have seen a decrease in student behavior during read-aloud instruction and an increase in student engagement. Throughout the behaviors, my assistants and I redirected student attention to read-aloud instruction and address behaviors as they arise.

Text Selection

As part of my research, I also tried both fiction and informational picture books as suggested by research on read-alouds. Further research stated that student participation during read-aloud was greatly based on student preferences and interest in the story. While implementing reading informational texts I observed that the students had the same level of engagement with a fiction text as an informational text. As I read fictional texts they were, at times slightly more engaged in the text when compared to their engagement while reading an informational text.

When students are interested in what they are reading, then they will gain more from the lesson. As the school year continued and I learned more about my students I

also attempted to select texts of high student interest. For the majority of the students in my class they are very interested in animals of all kinds and dinosaurs. In November we spent about two weeks reading both fiction and nonfiction books about dinosaurs and paleontologists. When answering comprehension questions after reading the story I observed that Lennon, Leo, Luke, and Charlie were all able to correctly answer the questions with minimal prompting from the teacher and without additional support such as visual cues.

While reading fictional texts, I observed that students were visually and physically attending to the read-aloud more consistently and for extended periods of time than compared to when I would read informational texts. As I read *Dinosaur Roar!*, Charlie turned ever so slightly towards me. Next to him, Leo was visibly more excited and stopped drumming. They both began to smile as I continued to read, and a new dinosaur appeared on the page. The simple and witty flow of the story kept their attention. As I continued to read the story both Charlie and Leo would comment on what they saw on the page or even identify the dinosaur. Another trend I noticed when comparing student behavior while reading fictional stories as opposed to informational stories is that my verbal students would comment on what they saw in the illustrations as

I read the story:

Charlie: Tyrannosaurus-Rex! Tyrannosaurus-Rex! T-Rex Ms. S!

Leo: Dinosaur!

Charlie: Leaves Ms. S. Eating Leaves. Bones. Eating bones.

Leo: Dinosaur angry!

Charlie: Brontosaurus! Brontosaurus! Ms. S Brontosaurus!

Rereading of the Story

As a literacy teacher in preschool, my focus is on getting my students to be attentive and expose them to higher language skills, and beginner reading skills. This year during my read-aloud I have implemented a variety of new strategies. I began reading a story more than once which has proven to provide students with the opportunity to truly gain an understanding of what the story is about and provided the students with exposure to various literacy skills through repeated readings of the story. I would read a story two to three times during the week. At the beginning of the read-aloud I make it a point to state the objective and their job for the read-aloud, whether it is just listening to the story the first time we read it or paying close attention to the details to answer simple comprehension questions. This strategy has proven to be effective as I can see an increase in their comprehension of the stories. When conducting multiple readings of a story I would read the same story over a period of two or three days and would select one skill based on the story and review that skill throughout the entire time of reading the story. Some of the skills that were of focus included sequencing and answering wh-questions.

Boom Cards

Throughout the research study I wanted to ensure that the students were understanding the story. Comprehension is a key component to developing reading skills. In order to informally assess student comprehension, I implemented the use of Boom Cards as a culminating activity to read-aloud instruction to assess reading comprehension. I either used Boom Cards that were already made and focused on the story or created my own Boom Cards to go along with the story that was being read that day. After reading the story students participated in an interactive comprehension

question activity either through Google Slides or Boom Learning Cards. I use Boom Cards almost daily as a part of my read-aloud instruction. I search for Boom Cards that are either about the book specifically or are related to the topic of the story. One beneficial feature of Boom Cards is the studio. In the studio educators are able to create their own decks. I have used this function many times and created specific comprehension decks for stories that we were reading in class and that I was unable to find a deck that I felt was an effective assessment tool in order to assess student comprehension of a particular story.

For example, one week I read the story *Room on the Boom* by Julia Donaldson. The focus of the lesson was to work on answering simple comprehension questions and putting the characters in sequential order based on when they appeared in the story. For each day I read the story, the objectives remained the same in order to assess how the students were progressing towards achieving the objectives. In order to encourage student engagement and informally assess student understanding of the story, I found a Boom Card activity that included simple comprehension questions based on the story. During the Boom Card activity, I read the question aloud and identified the three answers which were pictures from the story. Each student had a turn to come up to the boxlight to click on the answer. What is great about Boom Cards is that they are self-answering so to speak. If the student selects the incorrect answer, it makes a sound and then that option is covered with a red circle with a line through it; if they select the correct answer then a green circle appears, and a different sound is made. The students did well participating in this activity but needed a lot of prompting to answer the questions such as physical prompting using hand-over-hand prompting or physically assisting students to complete

the task, gestural prompting is prompting or nodding, and verbal prompting is any verbal prompt given after the initial direction or saying part of the answer. This prompting hierarchy was used to help students answer the question. After answering the comprehension questions students worked on retelling the story and sequencing the characters in order of their appearance in the story.

In my observation of the lessons, it appeared that students were engaged in the interactive activity. While participating in the activity the students were eager to participate and answer questions. The questions were displayed on the boxlight, and each student had at least one opportunity to come up to answer a question about the story that was just read. I read each question aloud as well as the possible answers, which are pictures. Students would then touch/tap using the pointer what they believe is the correct answer to the question. Through their responses I was able to get a greater understanding of each students' comprehension of the story.

Charlie is very interested in dinosaurs as well as some of the other students so for two weeks we studied dinosaurs. One day as I was reading a book about dinosaurs, he was naming each one as they appeared on the page and at times even stating whether they ate meat or ate plants. As a way to assess comprehension students participated in answering questions about the story in the form of Boom Cards. When answering the questions, Lennon tried to answer the questions but did not know the answer since he was not paying attention and did not understand why he picked the answer he picked. Lennon just picked an answer to answer the question. Leo who often had a difficult time focusing during read-aloud also required a lot of prompting when answering questions. Luke also required a lot of prompting to answer questions about the story due to the fact that he had

a hard time focusing and paying attention to the reader. As they would come up to the Boxlight they were easily distracted, looking all around the classroom. While they were standing at the Boxlight, I would stand behind them to keep them from eloping and hand them the stylus in order to select the correct answer. However, what they would do is just select a random answer without listening to the question. Once they heard the sound effect that represented an incorrect answer, they would then select one of the two answers that was not blocked out and do so until they heard the sound effect representing a correct answer. As they were answering the questions I would also point and verbally label each picture that represented an answer choice as a way to prompt them to the correct answer. I would even rephrase the question if I felt it would help them understand the question more accurately. Once the question was answered I would restate the question and the correct answer before moving on to the next question.

This routine continued throughout the study, as I attempted to fade the prompting and allow the student to exhibit more independence to answer the question. As the study progressed, I slowly increased the wait time as I considered it to be an appropriate amount of time for the student before they lose interest in the task and begin to exhibit off-task behavior. I also worked on fading the physical, gestural, and verbal prompting. After each reading of the story, it was evident that students were gaining a greater understanding of the story. This was evident based on the fact that I was able to fade my level of prompting as students answered the questions and sequenced the story.

Wait Time and Repetition

Leo will answer questions with some prompting or when provided with choices. If I asked him a question as I was reading the story, the level of prompting was dependent on his attention and whether he was focused. When I asked him a question, I would often ensure to provide enough wait time. If he did not answer right away and was off-task, I would regain his attention and ask the question again. I would do this until he responded to the question. When answering questions after listening to the story Leo would come up to the Boxlight and would often be easily distracted. At times Leo would require two teachers to keep him at the Boxlight and from eloping. As he would be up at the Boxlight I would repeat the question and read the answer choices as I pointed to each one. At times when he was very distracted and not focusing on the answer choices I would hand-over-hand prompt him towards the correct answers. Once he answered the question, I would restate the answer and provide positive praise for his work. This is the same approach I would follow for all students as they would answer questions.

Interactive Instruction

Sometimes engagement occurred due to both the text selected and the interactive nature of the activities. This was also evident while reading stories from the *There was an Old Lady* series. From the first time I read a book from this series, I knew the students loved these books. Although I was concerned about the length of these stories, the repetitive language, rhymes, and captivating illustrations, the students were hooked. Another successful component of reading this series is that I would use a mystery box that had a picture of the Old Lady's face as well as pictures of the items that the Old Lady Swallowed. As I read the story each student had an opportunity to feed the Old Lady the

item that she swallowed on that page. This allowed the students to work on labeling and identifying items as I would put three pictures out at a time and ask the students to “Feed the Old Lady (item).” The students really enjoyed this activity.

There were a few stories I was able to find Boom Cards or Google Slides that allowed the students to feed the Old Lady on the Boxlight. As I observed the students' engagement and understanding of sequencing the story, it was evident that the students comprehended the story and were able to identify the various items the Old Lady swallowed. They always enjoyed the end when the Old Lady would burp or sneeze out all the items, she swallowed to make something.

Technology

The students in my classroom are very tech savvy. They are extremely engaged and motivated by technology. If I am being completely honest, a majority of my preschool students know how to work technology better than I do. This is the main reason in which I incorporate technology into my lessons as a way to increase student engagement. With the large screen the lessons come to life, grabbing the attention of the students. They are very motivated by iPads which is why the Boxlight is so beneficial because it is basically a large iPad or computer.

One of the reasons Boom Cards are so engaging and effective is because of how interactive the decks are. When implementing a Boom Card activity, I display the deck on the Boxlight which is a big screen. While completing the decks each student has a turn to come up to the Boxlight to answer questions. As the student is up at the Boxlight with me I had them the stylus and read the question aloud along with the choices, as I am also pointing to each choice. The student then selects the correct answer.

Observing

Charlie provided a vivid example of engagement due to technology and interaction and the impact on comprehension as a result. He was always eager to answer questions about the story. Towards the end of the study, he was beginning to predict (anticipate) what was going to happen next. While listening to the story, he would start talking about something similar. For example, when reading a story about winter animals, Charlie began talking about a related topic, such as naming other animals that could be categorized in the same group or even animals that began with the same letter. Charlie would comment while the teacher read the story and would comment on what he saw in the illustrations. One day as I was reading the story, *The Mitten*, Charlie would shout out as I turned the page comments such as, “Look Ms. S, a badger.” This would continue throughout the entire story as different animals appeared to seek warmth by climbing into the mitten.

Charlie is very interested in dinosaurs as well as some of the other students so for two weeks we studied dinosaurs. One day as I was reading a book about dinosaurs, he was naming each one as they appeared on the page and at times even stating whether they ate meat or ate plants. As a way to assess comprehension students participated in answering questions about the story in the form of Boom Cards. I also observed that occasionally Leo would call out the different dinosaurs as well.

Throughout this study I observed that students are often more engaged when there are concrete manipulatives for them to interact with during the lesson. The more hands-on a lesson is, the more effective it is. When students have the opportunity to manipulate different items, I am able to gain a better understanding of what they know. As they are

using the manipulatives, they are more actively engaged in the lesson compared to if they were just sitting in their cube chairs listening to the teacher.

Conclusion

Welcome to story time friends! Let's begin by singing our letter-sound song. The song begins to play and as I look around, I think to myself in amazement that all of my students are sitting in their seats following along as we sing our letter-sounds. If you listen closely, you can even hear some of the students singing along even my students who have limited language are singing along the best they can. Other students are calling out the items that represent that letter sound. Once the song concludes I introduce the story that I will be reading, *The Mitten*. I then begin to read the story. While reading the story I observe students both visually and physically attending to the story. Charlie, Leo, and Luke are calling out the animals they see crawling into the mitten. During read-aloud instruction there were a few behaviors observed by Lennon and Leo but due to the high student to staff ratio the behaviors were quickly addressed, and students were redirected back to the story. If you were to walk into my classroom a few months before this is not what you would have observed. The growth that I have seen in my students over the last few months makes my teacher heart so happy. It also makes me excited to see the progress that they will continue to make through the remainder of the school year.

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The findings from this study as well as from the literature review suggest that when students' funds of knowledge, student interest, as well as implementing various research-based strategies during read-aloud instruction, more students are engaged and motivated to take part in various components of the lesson. Continuation of the use of

these strategies will help to learn more about effective read-aloud instruction and the implementing such strategies affects student engagement. Chapter Five outlines conclusions and implications from the study and research.

Chapter V

Conclusions

This final chapter reviews the findings of the study and overall conclusions that can be made based on the research findings. In addition, the chapter discusses implications as well as suggestions for future researchers to consider while investigating such topics. The chapter concludes with final thoughts.

Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to look at what literacy strategies can be implemented to engage autistic preschool students during read-aloud instruction. Through this study, I was hoping that I would be able to find strategies that would engage my students in a way that is purposeful, effective, while creating instruction where students take something meaningful away from the lesson. The findings suggest that having an understanding of what literacy looks like in the homes of your students as well as knowing their likes, builds a strong foundation for literacy instruction. The findings also suggest that implementing such strategies as rereading, student groupings, and text selection all have an effect on student engagement. Throughout the study an increase in student engagement and comprehension was observed.

Conclusions of the Study

The main objective of this study was to implement researched based strategies that have been proven to increase engagement of preschool students and those with a diagnosis of Autism. Read-Aloud instruction has always been the most challenging part of the school day and would cause a great deal of tension for both staff and students. I wanted to find different strategies that would increase student engagement during this

time. As a result of increased student engagement students would exhibit less behaviors and take away more from the lesson, increasing student comprehension of the text.

Which overall made read-aloud instruction more effective.

Many in the field of education believe that our family are our first teachers. I wanted to research family literacy and the literacy opportunities provided to the student at home and how it affects early literacy development. After reviewing the family questionnaires one theme I noticed is that all four families read to their student as part of their nighttime routine. However, many of the families when asked about what reading looked like at home shared that their student was not very interested in reading. A majority of the students wanted to read the same book every night or did not want family members to read to them but would rather just look through the book independently and label what they saw in illustrations. After reading the responses on the family questionnaire and reflecting on the behaviors observed of the students during read-aloud instruction, I could see how literacy experiences from home affected the literacy experiences in school. Based on the research, it can be concluded that a student's first experience with reading and the environment at home plays a key component in student engagement and understanding of literature. As an educator, having an understanding of a student's funds of knowledge is an integral part of creating effective instruction.

As an educator who works with students with disabilities, more specifically those diagnosed with Autism, I learned early on in my career that students thrive with routine and structure. As I set up read-aloud instruction I kept this in mind and planned how I would conduct read-aloud instruction and think of instruction in parts, before, during, and after. To begin read-aloud instruction students would participate in singing/following

along with the Letter-Sound song. Students would then listen to the story read aloud by the teacher, and to conclude the lesson would participate in an informal comprehension activity. This routine remained the same throughout the entire study. During the first six weeks of school the staff and I focused on the routine and expectations of read-aloud instruction. This proved to be effective, as the study continued past the first six weeks it was evident that there was a slow increase in student engagement and a decrease in student behavior. This was due to the consistency and routine of read-aloud instruction.

Paciga, Lisy, Teale, and Hoffman (2015) discussed seating arrangements regarding student engagement during read aloud instruction. Much of the research showed that when teachers implemented a cluster seating arrangement, it was more effective in encouraging student engagement and comprehension. As previously stated, due to COVID-19 guidelines that were set in place during the time of the study and the intensity and frequency of student behavior, having students sit in a cluster seating arrangement had proven to be difficult. Therefore, students gathered around the whole group meeting area, each student sitting in their chair in a half circle formation facing the teacher. This seating arrangement remained consistent throughout the study. The research made it evident that additional research is needed to further investigate the most effective seating arrangement for students with an Autism diagnosis.

While researching effective reading strategies one theme that was prevalent in the research was that meaningful instruction occurs when students are in small groups. However, once read-aloud instruction was changed to large group instruction student behavior began to decrease as staff was able to address behavioral issues quickly. With a decrease in disruptive behavior an increase in engagement was observed. As a result,

read-aloud instruction continued to be effective in a large group setting. While conducting research on this topic it quickly became evident that there is limited research on student groupings during read-aloud instruction in an Autism classroom.

Text selection is another key component of effective and engaging read-aloud instruction. Read-alouds should also be interactive. Through interactive read-alouds students have the opportunity to further develop their language, literacy skills, and build on their content knowledge. Research conducted by Robinson (2021) discussed the effects of incorporating fictional and nonfictional texts on student engagement and comprehension during instruction. Research stated (Robinson, 2021) that students who have more experience with nonfiction books often develop stronger comprehension skills and provide them with literacy skills need to be successful readers as they progress through their educational career.

The other key component is student interest. If students are interested in the topic or theme of the story, they are more likely to be engaged in the text resulting in a greater understanding of the text. When students are engaged with a text that is of interest to them, they bring prior knowledge to the story that allows them to comprehend the text and build new knowledge. These skills can then be applied to future texts. “Children who are able to imitate and exhibit appropriate attentional behaviors are likely to have better communicative outcomes” (Koegel et al., 2009, p.). Throughout the study one of the areas, I observed in order to evaluate the effectiveness of read-aloud instruction was student engagement. Educators can conceptualize students’ engagement in two ways, verbal and nonverbal (Paciga, et. al, 2015).

While I did not see a large difference in engagement related to narrative or informational texts, students in my study reacted positively to informational texts they found interesting such as about dinosaurs. Researchers such as Robinson (2021) discovered that the more experience students have with informational texts in early childhood education could support future school success.

Rereading of a text was another strategy that I incorporated into read-aloud instruction. Pentimonti and Justice (2010) found that rereading texts can improve comprehension skills. After reading a story for two or three days in a row, students are able to answer questions about the text more accurately and show an increased understanding of the literacy skill that is the focus of the story, such as answering wh-questions or sequencing. Students completed the culminating activity with less prompting to answer questions or complete the task.

Implications for Teaching

This study demonstrated positive effects on student engagement during read-aloud instruction and can offer educators valuable information on effective teaching strategies for meaningful literacy instruction. By incorporating students' funds of knowledge, student engagement increased. However, the challenge with incorporating funds of knowledge into lesson plans is that many teachers do not include this information in their plans, even though the research shows the positive effect it has on student engagement and participation.

As previously stated, one of the most important components of a strong Autism classroom is consistency. In order to provide students with the structure and routine they

need to thrive, the staff in the classroom need to be properly trained. Much of the research on providing effective instruction in an Autism classroom discussed the barriers to implementation of evidence-based interventions in public school classrooms (Wilson & Landa, 2019, p. 2). Authors, Wilson and Lanada stated that one major barrier pertains to lack of adequate training to prepare educators to effectively instruct children with Autism. The staff would need to be trained in the Applied Behavior Analysis curriculum that the Autism program implements. Staff would also need training on how to address behaviors, track behaviors (data collection), and in Non-Violent Crisis Intervention (NVC) solutions. Teachers and classroom assistants are a team. Kratz and Locke (2015) defined the term team as “a collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks. Kratz and Locke (2015) stated that studies find that classroom assistants perform their duties most effectively when they are appropriately supervised, their roles are clearly defined, they are trained for assigned tasks, and they participate in regularly scheduled planning meetings. The students in the Autism program often have a variety of language abilities. Students are either nonverbal, minimally verbal, or verbal. Those students who are nonverbal or minimally verbal may use an augmentative and alternative communication device to communicate. Therefore, staff would need proper training on how to use and implement such devices appropriately and effectively. All of the factors play a role in implementing a successful and effective Autism program.

Students who are placed in an Autism classroom often require a variety of services and interventions, such as behavior interventions, Applied Behavior Analysis curriculum (ABA), and speech and language interventions. Due to the intensity of these interventions and the frequency behaviors occurring, it is imperative that the classroom is

staffed appropriately to meet the needs of all the students. This requires a high student-to-staff ratio as well as hiring those who are qualified for the job. Schools often call upon classroom teachers to give this training to new educators; however, this creates less time for literacy instruction. When teachers and classroom assistants see themselves as a team and function as a cohesive unit they are better able to effectively implement the strategies and curriculum resulting in greater student achievement.

As educators we know that a student can be added to our class roster at any time. This can present a greater challenge in a self-contained classroom, more specifically a classroom with an Autism focus because one student can change the dynamic of the classroom. The student joining the class could require the addition of another classroom assistant or even become a trigger for other students causing their behavior to escalate. As a result, the entire process starts all over again as students begin to regress and progress is lost while training new staff members or helping the new student acclimate to the classroom.

In regard to family literacies, one of the challenges I came across was that families may not share a lot of information regarding literacy in the home and therefore it can be difficult to gain a strong understanding of their funds of knowledge. Without this information it can be challenging to plan engaging literacy activities.

As teachers in the twenty-first century, technology has become a major part of our classroom. Our students are extremely technologically savvy and often know more about technology than we do. However, incorporating technology does not come without its challenges. The Internet can stop working suddenly or the device stops working as well, requiring modification of plans. Throughout the study I observed that the lessons in

which technology was not implemented, it was evident that students were not engaged. Since they were not focused on the lesson behavior began to escalate.

Implications for Future Research

Through this research study I found very limited information on effective strategies for preschool read-aloud instruction. With limited research it was difficult to find strategies that pertained to preschool literacy skills and that I could implement during instruction to observe the effectiveness of the strategies on student engagement and on developing literacy skills. While conducting additional research on effective strategies for students with Autism, more specifically at the preschool level there were limited resources available to educators. It is evident that this educational topic would benefit from further research on effective literacy strategies in a preschool classroom with an Autism focus.

Limitations

With my classroom being a revolving door of students and classroom assistants being moved in and out of the classroom it was challenging to settle into a routine. With the constant change I was unable to provide my students with the consistency and routine they thrive on. As a result of a constantly changing environment, it became difficult to collect on student behavior during the study.

Final Thoughts

In closing, incorporating students' funds of knowledge along with research-based literacy strategies results in improving student engagement. As a result of higher student engagement, students can gain literacy skills that will help them as they continue to grow as readers. Through this research study I have grown immensely as an educator, but also

as an individual. I will be a forever learner and continue to research and implement new strategies in order to ensure that my students are receiving the best education possible. It is my hope that through this research I have been able to help other educators who feel as though they are struggling in the area of literacy instruction, and to encourage them to try these practices to promote student engagement and literacy skills.

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