Reading Comprehension in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder
**Abstract:** This research will look at the effects of focusing on a specific skill taught to students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in an elementary school setting.

**Statement of the Problem**

Children with autism face many challenges. One is the ability to understand spoken and written language in order to learn, communicate, and function independently on a daily basis. This limitation impacts their lives from grade school through adulthood. According to data collected and compiled from different sources by the Center for Disease Control in 2008, 1 in every group of 88 children has an ASD. When comparing the data from four years prior, with 1 in every group of 125 children, it is evident that the number of children being diagnosed with autism is increasing. It is impossible to ignore the impact that deficits in reading comprehension have on this population. As students with ASD progress from grade to grade, their deficits in reading comprehension become more apparent when compared to their same grade/age peers. This important skill impacts their ability to complete academic assignments and participate in many activities in the general education classroom without peer or teacher assistance. As these children move beyond the elementary classroom into middle and high school, the importance of reading comprehension increases. Students are expected to gain more independence and daily living skills to prepare them for life after they leave school.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to see if targeting a specific skill will increase the comprehension skills of students with ASD.

Research Questions:
1. Will targeting a specific skill help to increase the reading comprehension of children with autism?

2. Will targeting this skill also help with oral language comprehension?

**Literature Review**

Flores and Ganz (2007), conducted a study in which they targeted three specific, higher order, reading comprehension skills using the direct instruction approach. Of the four elementary aged students that participated in the study, two of them were diagnosed with ASD. The students not only met criterion for mastery for all three skills but they also maintained an accuracy of 100% for all three skills a month after the interventions.

In recognizing the evidence that shows the difficulties children with ASD have in language and reading comprehension, Whalon, Otaiba, and Delano (2009), reviewed 11 studies that addressed one of the National Reading Panels (NRP) Essential Components of Reading Instruction. They chose these studies based on criteria they specified, one being that the participants had to have a diagnosis of ASD and be between the ages of 5-18. In their review of the literature, they found that children with ASD benefited from receiving instruction in all of the essential areas of reading especially when focusing on skills that addressed language and reading comprehension.

Chiang and Lin (2007), acknowledged the importance of reading comprehension for both academic and functional/daily living skills for individuals with ASD, in their review of research literature. Their criterions were more specific in that the research had to include studies having sight or text word comprehension for either functional or academic purposes. The research shows
that reading comprehension skill acquisition is possible for students with ASD for both functional and academic gain.

**Methodology**

My action research is taking place in a self-contained elementary classroom for students with ASD. The intervention is being used with 5 students: four 4th graders and one 5th grader who will all be assessed with the Florida Alternative Assessment. Data will be collected in the form of student work samples, teacher observation (daily), and teacher made weekly assessments. The intervention will last for 8 weeks. During this time, students will receive daily practice in the skill of sequencing in addition to their direct instruction reading program. Two students will be instructed one to one and three students will be instructed together in a group. Each session will last approximately 15 to 20 minutes with 5 of those minutes targeting the skill of sequencing. The intervention has varying levels of difficulty from pictures (level A) to paragraphs (level E). In the beginning data will be used to determine what level of instruction the students require and data will be monitored to adjust instruction during the process as needed. Data will be kept in a folder and on a laptop.

**Findings and Results**

During the intervention the teacher will analyze data in hopes to find that the students either learn how to sequence events (both in picture/word form as it relates to real life situations), or will increase their ability to sequence events in order to increase their reading comprehension. The teacher also hopes to find that this skill practice strengthens the student’s ability to comprehend oral language as an application to daily routines. The teacher expects that the students will reach and maintain proficiency in this skill area which the teacher can use to build
on and expand to more skills. These skills will hopefully follow them through grade school into adulthood. As an educator that specifically works with this population, it is important to recognize the importance of planning all aspects of the educational, emotional, behavioral, and independent functioning needs of students with ASD.

Implications

Going forward, the teacher would like to see and be a part of research that considers the unique learning style of children with ASD. The teacher would like to explore other specific skill areas and share research and findings with colleagues. It would be interesting to see how educators at the middle and high school level would apply specific skills practice for students with ASD. Further research could also be conducted in different settings and with different groups. For example, in a general education class with high functioning students with ASD.

References

