

Autism Spectrum Disorder and Reading Comprehension

Abstract

High school students with Autism Spectrum Disorder demonstrate behaviors that inhibit reading comprehension. This is due to atypical social mannerisms, lack of attention during instruction, and challenges staying on task. The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of literature circles during English class on reading comprehension.

Statement of the Problem

Students identified as having Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) present distinct behaviors that may hinder their success in an inclusive classroom. These behaviors include challenges during social interactions, lack of verbal communication during class, and difficulty with peer relationships (Good & Williams, 2007). Lack of engagement results in lack of attentive focus on academics. Challenges with peer collaboration impact their learning by limiting the amount of time they are actively engaged in the social aspects of learning. When these difficulties are combined, they impede students' academic success in the area of reading comprehension. According to Williamson, Carnhan, and Jacobs, (2012) the essence of reading is comprehension and this involves an interaction between the reader and the text. A vast number of high-functioning students with autism display impaired reading comprehension. According to O'Conner (2004) both decoding and reading comprehension levels are displayed on a continuum of performance, however reading comprehension falls well below other skills assessed. A key component to analytical reading is the ability to integrate information; students identified with ASD have difficulties with this abstract skill (O'Conner, 2004). Nation, Clarke, Wright, and Williams (2006) note that even amongst the fluent readers, comprehension scores are low.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this action research project is to describe the effects of literature circles (LC) on students' participation, engagement, and appropriate verbal responses during English Literature class. Questions to be investigated: Do LC increase student engagement, increase comprehension, and create opportunities for appropriate verbal responses?

Literature Review

Reading is a multifaceted ability that demands a variety of skills in order to read a basic sentence (Nation, Clarke, & Wright, 2006). According to Nation, Clark, and Wright (2006) successful reading comprehension consists of two processing events: (a) accurate recognition of words and (b) the ability to form a meaning-based interpretation of the text. To have a thorough understanding of the text, readers must surpass the clause, integrated passages, and sentences, to orchestrate a depiction of the general idea, message, or meaning of the text (O'Connor & Klein, 2004).

Research by O'Connor and Klein (2004) shows that the majority of people with ASD exhibit distinct challenges in reading, specifically the paradox of students having average to strong word recognition skills, but low reading comprehension. The term "hyperlexia" used to explain this phenomenon (O'Connor & Klein, 2004; Nation et al., 2006).

Constable, Grossi, Moniz, and Ryan (2013) identified the following theories associated with autism to be crucial components of the challenges students face with reading comprehension: theory of mind, weak central coherence, and impaired executive function.

Literature circles are small, temporary groups formed based upon a book choice. Groups meet regularly within the class to have thoughtful, in-depth student-led conversations about the selected text (Daniels, 2006).

Theory of mind, weak central coherence, and impaired executive functioning, along with impaired understanding of oral language comprehension and challenges in social communication make reading comprehension difficult. LC are a cooperative, collaborative strategy intended to facilitate comprehension skills and foster peer relationships.

Research Methodology

The action research will be conducted in two general education 9th grade English Literature classes located in Miami-Dade County. The school is a private, Catholic school owned by the Archdiocese of Miami. The school offers a set tuition as well as a scholarship program to assist with the costs of attending the school which results in a varied socioeconomic population. The two participants are both Hispanic males identified as having ASD, in 9th grade. The other participants include 53 general education students. The population is diverse in ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. The teacher will be responsible for executing and facilitating the literature circles, and collecting data.

Results

Research findings will be available in time of the conference and will be presented.

Implications

Students with ASD experience challenges in inclusion classrooms where reading comprehension and peer interaction are required. These impediments can cause a negative

impact on a student's academic success as well social progress. A literature circle is an inclusive intervention that fosters independent and group learning simultaneously while analyzing literature thus increasing comprehension.

References

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