Developing Print Concepts: Supporting Autistic Literacy Learners to Move to Conventional Literacy Instruction

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Short Abstract

Reading with comprehension is a complex process consisting of several skills. The Simple View of Reading separates it into two broad areas. However, there exist some models which break it up further. These models are commonly used by schools, as they provide guidance around skills that each developing reader needs. One skill in these models is print concepts.

As part of implementing comprehensive literacy instruction within special education settings, we have also been assessing student's print knowledge. At many schools, we have seen a pattern similar to the one reported in the research, where many autistic students have a particular strength in alphabet knowledge but are struggling with skills in the other dimensions of print knowledge.

At the Grove Education Centre, despite regular shared book reading as part of comprehensive literacy instruction, and robust AAC implementation, we had very slow progress in student's development of print concepts, and began looking for options to improve this.

This presentation will describe how the author has adapted some of the ideas from the Sit Together And Read (STAR) program for use in special education classrooms. Resources developed take advantage of the recommended dosage from the STAR program and support teachers to explicitly target print concepts using texts of their choice.

Outcomes from this change in practice will be shared using data from The Grove Education Centre's literacy assessments. This will then be discussed in terms of the support it has provided for students to move from emergent to conventional literacy instruction.

Long Abstract

Reading with comprehension is a complex process consisting of many skills. The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) separates it into two broad areas. It describes reading with comprehension as a product of decoding by language comprehension. However, there exist several models which break it up into further areas (e.g. Scarborough, 2001, Duke and Cartwright, 2021). These models are commonly used by schools to guide their literacy instruction, as they provide guidance around the range of skills that each developing reader needs.

One skill that is consistently mentioned in these models is print concepts. Print concepts are broadly defined as a group of understandings about how print works. They include knowledge that text goes from left to right, that we read down a page, or that there is one spoken word for each written word. Like some of the other skills, such as vocabulary, print concepts begin developing while an individual is still an emergent reader and writer.

Justice & Sofka (2010) list emergent literacy achievements that every literacy learner needs, in four dimensions of print knowledge. Each of these are important for an emergent literacy learner to develop before moving to conventional literacy instruction. These are:

1. Book and print organisation: title of book, author of book, page order, page organisation, print direction;
2. Print meaning: function of print, environmental print, concept of reading;
3. Letters: upper and lower case forms, letter names, concept of letter;
4. Words: concept of words in print, short words and long words, letters and words, word identification.

Autistic literacy learners often have difficulty developing communication skills, which in turn makes it difficult for them "to acquire the early language and literacy skills fundamental to future reading" (Mundy, 2016). Of the four dimensions of print knowledge listed above, autistic literacy learners tend to be particularly strong in one aspect, alphabet knowledge (Davidson & Weismer, 2014; Lanter et al., 2012; Westerveld et al., 2017).

As part of implementing comprehensive literacy instruction within special education settings across Australia, we have also been assessing student's print knowledge across all four dimensions listed above. At many schools, we have seen a pattern similar to the one reported in the research, where many students have a particular strength in alphabet knowledge but are struggling with skills in the other three dimensions. This, in turn, has impacted their development of reading with comprehension.

At the Grove Education Centre, despite regular shared book reading as part of comprehensive literacy instruction, and robust AAC implementation, we had very slow progress in student outcomes in book and print organisation and words. We also had slow progress in the dimension of print meaning, although we did have good success in improving function of print via both reading and writing instruction.

The Sit Together And Read (STAR) Project at The Ohio State University has been researching how to develop and strengthen young children's awareness of and knowledge about print through shared reading. The project has helped over 2000 children, their families, and their teams to get more explicit in their shared reading practices, with improvements in student's knowledge of print concepts.

Justice (2021) presented many of the resources from the STAR-3 study. This was a 15-week adult-child home reading program designed to improve children's early literacy skills at home. The STAR lessons were organized around widely available storybooks with high-quality content. Additionally, she shared some of the information learned from the previous STAR projects, including the research around dosage required for optimal outcomes in print concepts.

This presentation will describe how the author has adapted some of the ideas from the STAR project to support the development of print concepts via shared reading in special education

classrooms with students who use AAC or who use speech. Resources developed take advantage of the recommended dosage from the STAR project and support teachers to explicitly target print concepts in the areas of Book and Print organisation, Print Meaning, and Words, using texts of their choice.

Outcomes from this change in practice will be shared using data from The Grove Education Centre's literacy assessments – with progress in student print concepts being shown from before the changes were implemented and compared with afterwards. This will then be discussed in terms of the support it has provided for students to move from emergent to conventional literacy instruction.

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