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Enhancing Reading Comprehension in Students with Disabilities Through Differentiated Instruction

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Enhancing Reading Comprehension in Students with Disabilities through Differentiated
Instruction

by

Allison W. Ghyzel

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of The College at
Brockport, State University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Science in Education.

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Abstract

My project is a self-study designed to assist me in my thinking and understanding as a Special Education teacher, with the aim for me to become a better educator and share my findings with other teachers and educators on how to effectively differentiate reading comprehension instruction for students with disabilities, in particular those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Research for my study was conducted in a Special Education setting, using five different instructional strategies to promote reading comprehension in students with disabilities, primarily students with ASD. I collected data using a daily questionnaire, a reflection journal, and observations over a six week period. Through the use of these data sources, three themes were found: Planning, Instruction, and Assessment. Within in these three themes, four patterns were formed: prompting, scaffolding, explicit instruction, and repetition. The results of my study demonstrate the importance of planning, self-reflection, and self-evaluation on the behalf of the teacher in order to differentiate reading comprehension instruction to support the needs of students with disabilities.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

It is Wednesday, mid-morning, and Paul (pseudonym) is checking his schedule. Paul is in eighth grade, he loves trains, buses, planes, and cars. He can read any map put in front of him, and enjoys looking up bus schedules online. As he flips through his schedule, a binder made with little index cards, he stops at ELA. Paul looks at an adult and says “It’s time for ELA”, the adult responds with “Where do you go for ELA?”, and Paul gets a pencil from his desk, meeting his teacher at the ELA table.

His teacher greets him warmly, and gives Paul a book to read. This is Paul’s second time reading this book. It is written at Paul’s instructional reading level, which means he needs a little support to read the book successfully. The teacher instructs Paul to read the book. Paul reads the book, missing only a few words, and relying heavily on initial sounds to guess words he does not recognize. The teacher is content with Paul’s ability to decode the book, and starts a discussion using comprehension questions. The teacher asks the first question, and Paul starts talking about a bus he saw last week on the same street as the school. The teacher redirects Paul by saying “Is that an old story, Paul? We are talking about the story you just read”. The teacher asks the question again, and Paul stares blankly. Eventually the teacher opens the book, and asks Paul to find the page where the answer to the comprehension question is located in the book. Paul looks through the book, and constantly asks “Right there?” not knowing what he is looking for. To scaffold instruction more, the teacher opens to the correct page and prompts Paul to look at the picture to find the answer.

Paul has Autism Spectrum Disorder. He reads at a second-grade level, and can decode most two-syllable words independently. Paul can also read most sight words on his own. His teachers have worked hard throughout his years in school to teach Paul how to decode words, and recognize sight words. While Paul understands most word patterns and has a strong phonemic awareness, he is lacking in comprehension. He would much rather talk about what interests him than what he just read. His decoding abilities are impressive, but his lack of comprehension skills is often overlooked. Paul is not the only student with Autism Spectrum Disorder in this situation. Many students with disabilities are able to learn how to read, but have a cognitive barrier that prevents them from comprehending what they just read with traditional reading instruction. Comprehension is the end goal of reading instruction, and students with disabilities should have the opportunity to comprehend what they read.

Students in Paul's situation would benefit from differentiated instruction in reading comprehension from a young age. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder respond well to explicit instruction to learn a set of skills. This is true of other disabilities as well, such as intellectual disabilities and learning disabilities. The Autism Spectrum is vast, in other words, Autism affects different students in different ways. Paul has a lower functioning Autism, which affects his everyday interactions. Other students have high-functioning Autism, in which they can succeed in a general education classroom at their grade level.

In my study, I explore different reading comprehension strategies that can be utilized in order to facilitate and support the comprehension of students with disabilities. The goal of my study is for me to learn how to best support reading comprehension in students with disabilities. I

hope to give students like Paul the ability to comprehend text. Reading comprehension facilitates a joy of reading, and I want all students to have that joy and be motivated to read independently.

Problem Statement

Students with disabilities rarely have developed grade level skills at the same pace as a typically developing child. As a result, there is a heavy focus on decoding and accuracy. Many students with disabilities, particularly autism spectrum disorder (ASD), are able to read books that are below their grade level, but are still unable to comprehend what they read. The term for this pattern is hyperlexia. With the focus on decoding and accuracy, little is being done to support the reading comprehension of students with disabilities (Gately, 2008). Students with disabilities, particularly students with ASD, already struggle to comprehend what they read and need differentiated reading instruction in order to learn how to comprehend what they read.

“The incidence of hyperlexia in the ASD population is increasingly being noted” (Gately, 2008, p. 40). In order to comprehend what they are reading, students need to understand emotions of the characters, motivations of the characters, goals, and actions within a story setting. Students with disabilities need explicit instruction on how to understand each of these aspects. Gonzalez (2014) defines scaffolds as a support that can enable a student to carry out a task, solve a problem or achieve a goal which would be beyond his or her unassisted efforts. Differentiated instruction can provide scaffolds that students need in order to successfully comprehend text.

Significance of Problem

“In 2013, 60% of eighth graders with disabilities scored below the prescribed grade level reading standard on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test, indicating performance well below grade-level expectations” (Solis, Miciak, Vaughn, & Fletcher, 2014, p. 218). Reading comprehension is difficult for students with disabilities, in particular students with ASD. Lanter, Watson, Erickson, and Freeman (2012) conducted a study to describe emergent literacy skills, print motivation, and home literacy environment in a linguistically diverse group of children with ASD. They found that “students with ASD have possible relative strengths in discrete skills and weaknesses in more holistic skills requiring the application of meaning. These findings parallel the accomplishments of older individuals with ASD.” (p. 321-322). Reading comprehension presents a struggle to students with disabilities, even if they are able to decode words. This data indicates that educational instruction is not meeting the educational needs of many students with disabilities.

As part of my self-study research, I learned how to best differentiate reading instruction in my classroom so that my students with disabilities, in grades six through eight, can learn the same material through different means of instruction, responsive to their individual needs. I found ways to teach with a high level of expectation for each student, giving them an equal opportunity to succeed within their scope of abilities, focusing on reading comprehension.

Waldron and Mcleskey explained in an interview, “Differentiating instruction means that teachers will create different levels of expectations for task completion within a lesson or unit” (Walther-Thomas & Bownell, 2001, p. 176). Differentiated instruction is important both for students who find school easy and those who find school work difficult. As Diana Lawrence-

Brown (2004) illustrates, “all students benefit from the availability of a variety of methods and supports and an appropriate balance of challenge and success” (p. 37).

Purpose

My project is a self-study designed to assist me in my thinking and understanding as a Special Education teacher, with the aim for me to become a better educator and share my findings with other teachers and educators on how to effectively differentiate reading comprehension instruction for students with disabilities, in particular those with ASD. I researched various reading comprehension instructional strategies that students with disabilities benefit from, and used those strategies, as appropriate, with my students in order to effectively differentiate instruction. It is well known that students with disabilities read below grade level. I found and used different instructional materials, such as the three-step paraphrasing strategy, to incorporate in the facilitation of my literacy instruction as deemed appropriate and necessary with my students, in order to differentiate instruction to address their individual needs. Through critically studying my beliefs, insights, interactions, and responses as I instructed students with disabilities, I found insight on how to effectively differentiate reading instruction for students with disabilities in grades six to eight.

The purpose of my study is to explore effective differentiated reading instruction for students with disabilities. Thus my research questions are as follows:

- How can I plan lessons that will meet each student’s different Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)?

- What are the best literacy instructional strategies for teaching reading comprehension to students with disabilities?

Throughout my study, I documented my instructional practices and my observations of students in a research journal. In addition, I continued to research for effective strategies for teaching reading comprehension to students with disabilities by reading books and articles related to the topic. I integrated into my research the instructional strategies most appropriate for my students given their ZPD.

Study Approach

I conducted my research following a self-study method that Samaras (2011) deems *Living Educational Theory*. *Living Educational Theory* is a method researchers use when they are “interested in examining the alignment and authenticity of their beliefs and practices and generating theories of their own lived practice” (p. 98). I followed a self-study protocol that allowed me to reflect on my own teaching, and improve my instruction through reflection. I shared my findings and provided implications for future instruction. Through trial and error, I practiced reading comprehension instruction strategies that I have researched to be proven effective, based on the needs of my students. The findings from this study have enabled me as a teacher to differentiate reading instruction for any student of any ability in order to best support him or her. I used a qualitative, narrative based approach to the research through the collection of data grounded in daily observations and reflections of my teaching. With the use of a self-generated questionnaire and a reflection journal, I recorded my observations on how students applied the reading comprehension strategies I taught them, and reflected on every reading comprehension lesson I did with the intent to expand my knowledge on how to differentiate

reading instruction for students with disabilities. I conducted a six week study while teaching reading in a 12:1:4 self-contained classroom with students who are in grades six to eight.

Rationale

As a teaching assistant in a 12:1:4 classroom, with students in grades six to eight, it is necessary to differentiate reading instruction, since each student has different strengths and weaknesses as readers. With the desire to become a Special Education teacher, this study provided me with the ability to effectively differentiate instruction for students with disabilities. I chose to focus particularly on reading comprehension because students with disabilities often struggle more with reading comprehension than with decoding words. Students with disabilities have a harder time applying what they have read to their own life and interests, which hinders their comprehension. It is a special educator's job to modify instruction in order to address the individual needs of their students, while still holding the students to high expectations.

I differentiate instruction currently by having students read different level texts on the same subject, and participating in different comprehension activities to which take into consideration their individual needs.

Definition of Terms

Autism Spectrum Disorder is defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014) as a group of developmental disabilities that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges.

Differentiated Instructional Planning is explained by Lawrence-Brown (2004) as a strategy that recognizes and supports the classroom as a community to which peers belong, where they can and should be nourished as individual learners.

Intellectual Disability is defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013) as a disability that involves impairments of general mental abilities that impact adaptive functioning in the following three domains: conceptual (skills in language, reading, writing, math, reasoning, knowledge, and memory), social (empathy, social judgment, interpersonal communication skills, the ability to make and retain friendships), and practical (self-management in areas such as personal care, job responsibilities, money management, recreation, and organizing school and work tasks).

Carnahan, Williamson, and Christman (2011) describe *reading comprehension* as the ultimate instructional goal for all students. They go on to explain reading comprehension as “both the ability to decode words and the ability to comprehend the meaning of those words. Characteristics related to the reader, the text, and the learning situation all influence comprehension” (p. 54).

Summary

Working in a 12:1:4 self-contained classroom with eight students who have a range of abilities, it is important to support their learning by differentiated instruction which takes into account each individual student’s needs and abilities. Through my self-study, I explored the most effective literacy instructional practices when it comes to reading instruction, to promote their comprehension. In order to differentiate, I used scaffolds in my instruction to best fit the needs of

the individual learner. My reflections and observations helped me fine-tune the lessons to best fit my students, and provided insight on how to use ZPD to create individualized literacy instruction that is challenging, at the student's level of ability, and provides him/her the opportunity to learn, feel empowered, and experience academic success.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

I realize that as an educator it is my responsibility to support the literacy development of all students, including reading comprehension for students with disabilities. Finding and using strategies that will help me effectively differentiate reading instruction for my students across grade levels and abilities will help me answer the research question: How can I differentiate reading instruction across grade levels and abilities to support the reading comprehension of my students with disabilities? In preparation for conducting my self-study research, I reviewed literature related to reading comprehension in students with disabilities, differentiated instruction, and instructional tools I can implement to support my students' reading comprehension.

I began this chapter by examining the importance of reading comprehension, and why it is especially difficult for students with disabilities. I then moved into a discussion of what it means to differentiate instruction, and how it supports the individual learner. Next, I explored specific methods of enhancing reading instruction. I concluded by discussing how differentiated instruction supports all learners, not only students with disabilities.

Reading Comprehension and Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities often have stronger decoding skills than reading comprehension skills. The reason for this is partly due to the developmental delays that many students with disabilities have. Students with very high needs are often taught life skills over academic skills. Hua, Woods-Groves, Ford, and Nobles (2014) explain that only 45% of educators who work with students with intellectual disabilities (ID) considered academic skills to be important

educational objectives for these learners. This low expectation results in most students with ID never receiving extensive reading instruction. Differentiated instruction keeps expectations high for students who require more support in order to be successful.

Carnahan, Williamson, and Christman (2011) address three cognitive theories that affect reading comprehension in students with ASD. These three theories are: theory of mind, executive function, and weak central coherence.

Theory of mind is the ability to understand and recognize that people have different feelings and thoughts, and the ability to understand that individual thoughts and feelings influence actions. This can affect students with ASD in their ability to understand the motivation of characters and to predict what characters will do based on emotional states. Students with ASD have a very literal understanding of the world, which translates into a literal understanding of the text (Carnahan, Williamson, & Christman, 2011). This affects reading comprehension in students with ASD, as they often do not understand metaphorical language or character motivation based on how he or she feels.

Executive function addresses the ability to organize, plan, and self monitor. It allows individuals to recognize and respond appropriately to the salient features of a situation. This process supports self-monitoring and self correction when thoughts and actions do not match a setting or context. Specific challenges related to executive function can influence reading comprehension, identifying a purpose for reading, and self-monitoring. As a result, students with ASD will often read on, even when their thoughts about the text make little sense (Carnahan, Williamson, & Christman, 2011). One instructional tool that can promote executive function in students with ASD is explicit instruction about how to set a purpose for reading.

Weak central coherence describes the tendency of students with ASD to attend to details rather than the story as a whole. This contributes to comprehension difficulties by restricting meaningful learning as students have difficulty relating big ideas with details, or recognizing big ideas at all (Carnahan, Williamson, & Christman, 2011). Weak central coherence influences students' abilities to identify the main idea and summarize what they have read, two key components of reading comprehension.

Carnahan, Williamson, and Christman (2011) go on to explain that “literacy skills, especially silent reading comprehension, serve as the foundation for learning, independence, and quality of life for all individuals” (p. 54). I want my students to have the best quality of life, and one way I can possibly assist them in accomplishing the aforementioned is to effectively support their reading comprehension.

Differentiated Instruction

“If students with disabilities are to reach higher general curriculum standards, they need to learn in classrooms where they can both access the general curriculum, and reap the benefits of high expectations” (Lawrence-Brown, 2004, p. 37). This quotation demonstrates the importance of providing differentiated instruction to students with disabilities. Lawrence-Brown goes on to identify two broad goals that differentiation serves: to maximize attainment of the grade-level general curriculum standards for all students and provide adapted curricula for students who need it.

There are four guiding principles of differentiated instruction according to Demos and Foshay (2009): a focus on essential ideas and skills in content areas, responsiveness to individual

student differences, the integration of assessment and instruction, and an ongoing adjustment of content, process, and products to meet individual needs. I will be constantly evaluating my use of these four guiding principles in conducting my research. Reading comprehension is supported in part by responsiveness to individual student differences, and knowing how a concept or theme will relate to him or her.

In researching how eBooks can support reading comprehension in students with disabilities, Gonzalez (2014) explored Vygotsky's notion of ZPD. It is defined in Gonzalez's work as "The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 112). In other words, it is the difference between what a child can do with help from an adult or more capable peer and what that child can do without help from an adult or capable peer. In order to provide adequate instruction, teachers must provide necessary supports, or scaffolds.

Scaffolds enable children to solve problems, carry out tasks, or achieve goals which would be beyond unassisted efforts. Students with disabilities especially benefit from scaffolds in reading instruction as an aid that bridges the connection between the story and their understanding of the world. Gonzalez (2011) suggests that environments where scaffolds are provided for learning are effective because they allow novice learners to solve problems, complete tasks or accomplish goals that they could not do independently.

Reading Instruction

Carnahan, Williamson, and Christman (2011) identify five steps to support reading comprehension: 1) Begin with students' special interests, 2) Link text to relevant background knowledge, 3) Adapt the text to meet learner needs, 4) Teach specific strategies, 5) Use a variety of instructional techniques.

Beginning with students' special interests helps them to apply the text to their own lives, a difficulty for many students with disabilities. Interviews and surveys are great ways to identify student interests. One area of caution is students with ASD may perseverate on one particular topic, especially if it is of interest to them, which will hinder their ability to focus on the text as a whole.

Linking the text to relevant background knowledge for the student provides a scaffold to support his or her comprehension. As I have researched, scaffolds are extremely effective in teaching reading comprehension.

Adapting the text to meet learner needs relates back to differentiating instruction and teaching in a student's ZPD. This requires diligence in selecting text for a specific purpose, and knowing your reader.

Students with disabilities benefit from explicit instruction when it comes to reading comprehension. Teachers can support their reading comprehension by explicitly teaching different strategies. Some strategies include: summarizing, identifying the main idea along with specific question, and answer strategies.

A variety of instructional techniques support students with disabilities as they build comprehension. These instructional techniques include: small group instruction, large group instruction, partner reading, and individualized lessons (Carnahan, Williamson, & Christman, 2011).

Instructional Tools and Strategies

Paraphrasing Strategy

The paraphrasing strategy is researched by Hua, Woods-Groves, Ford, and Nobles (2014). It contains three steps: 1) Read a paragraph, 2) Ask myself “what was the main idea and two details?”, 3) Put it into my own words. This strategy addresses reading comprehension of expository text, the most common type of text that students are expected to comprehend throughout their lives. Research suggests that teaching students the cognitive processes to monitor and evaluate their comprehension may circumvent deficits associated with a disability.

Current research demonstrates that the paraphrasing strategy benefits young adults with intellectual disabilities in their reading comprehension of expository text. Hua, Woods-Groves, Ford, and Nobles (2014) suggest that “teaching students the ability to derive meaning from the expository reading materials may result in independent functioning in daily living, places of employment, and education” (p. 37).

Graphic Organizers/Visual Maps

Graphic organizers are defined in the *Encyclopedia of Special Education* as “visual representations of concepts, knowledge or information that incorporate both text and pictures.

They make it easier for a person to understand the information by allowing the mind to see complex relationships.” Examples are flow diagrams, Venn diagrams, tree diagrams, semantic maps, and matrices. Graphic organizers are linked to schema theory, in which new learning is seen as building upon the learner’s pre-existing knowledge. Graphic organizers help students with disabilities identify main idea statements and summarize text (Taylor, 2007). Visual maps also help “prime” students for what they will read by giving information about characters, setting, and the problem faced by the characters. When reading a text without visual representations, it is helpful for students with disabilities to put the information into a visual, so they can organize it in their brains (Gately, 2008).

Think Alouds and Reciprocal Teaching

Think alouds help students with disabilities learn four strategies: predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing. By carefully selecting a passage based on the strategy modeled, teachers can explicitly teach students the four strategies by modeling thinking through the story with the students. Explicit teaching helps students gradually assume responsibility for using the four strategies. This scaffolding is essential to help students become independent in their ability to understand text (Gately, 2008).

Emotional Thermometers

Helping students understand feelings and emotions of characters is important in enhancing student’s appreciation of why characters make certain choices. Using emotional thermometers by shading colors and varying vocabulary helps children gain a sense of various intensities of feelings. This can be used to help children with ASD understand and describe

feelings and emotions for themselves as well as characters in stories, and motivations for the actions of the characters. Different shades of color can be used to help children see the intensity of a feeling in a concrete manner, identify characters' feelings, display the difference between protagonists and antagonists, illustrate how characters' feelings may change with different events, and demonstrate how feelings often affect characters' choices. By making a concrete representation of emotions for the students to see, they can better understand and relate the story to their lives, supporting their comprehension (Gately, 2008).

Understanding Narrative Text Structures

Students with disabilities, especially with ASD, have an easier time comprehending expository text. If we help students understand narrative text structures, we can help them improve comprehension skills and organize narrative text into a coherent whole. Teachers can help students understand narrative text structures by discovering the main character and what he/she did, teaching basic actor words and action words, and then combining the two words to make a complete thought to help develop text structure. When students are able to combine actor and action words (ex: "he jumped"), they can then develop a who-did-what sequence and list it in a story frame. With the ability of students to identify the sequence of action by listing who-did-what, students can then be shown how to insert transitional words to write a series of who-did-what sentences. This sequencing skill will help students with disabilities understand the narrative text structure as a whole story, rather than focusing on one detail (Gately, 2008).

Differentiated Instruction for All Learners

It is important to include all learners in differentiated instruction. While I conducted my research in a self-contained classroom, general education classrooms need differentiated instruction as well. Differentiated instruction helps students who struggle become successful, but it also helps students who are already successful expand their learning experience.

Rather than talking about “best practice”, it is important to think of instruction as many effective practices to choose from. “Effective differentiation of curriculum and instruction really grows out of thoughtful teacher reflection. Teachers and specialists need the skills to differentiate effectively, and they need the time to think about how these procedures can help all students” (Walther-Thomas & Bownell, 2001, p. 177). Through my self-study, I examined my beliefs and biases of the academic potential and capabilities of students with disabilities, in particular those with ASD; my thoughts and pedagogy regarding differentiated literacy instruction, and my role in the facilitation of it as a future teacher in a classroom of students with disabilities. I used thoughtful reflection in order to effectively differentiate reading instruction for my students.

Chapter 3: Methods and Procedures

Working as a teaching assistant in a 12:1:4 self contained classroom, I often have to modify class work assignments for each individual learner. Through reading and ELA instruction, I have noticed that my students do not comprehend what they read without excessive prompting. While they each are able to decode words to a certain extent, they do not apply information from the text to their own lives. I understand that students with disabilities and high needs, such as mine, do not have the cognitive tools to independently comprehend text. My ultimate goal is to differentiate my reading instruction to support my students' reading comprehension in their ZPD. Another goal of mine is to provide my students with comprehension strategies and tools that they can eventually use independently to comprehend text.

I conducted my self-study research in order to become more effective at teaching reading comprehension. Through my six week self-study, I sought answers to the question: How can I differentiate reading instruction across grade levels and abilities to support the reading comprehension of my students with disabilities?

Participant

I am the sole participant of my self-study. I am a teaching assistant in a 12:1:4 classroom with eight students in grades six through eight, who have a wide range of abilities. I am in the classroom on a daily basis from 7:45 in the morning to 2:06 in the afternoon. In my daily work as a teaching assistant, I usually work with students in small group settings, and facilitate their literacy instruction according to the literacy materials supplied to me by the teacher. Since I am a

certified teacher, the classroom teacher I work with allows me to teach my own lessons. This allowed me to reflect on my reading instruction throughout the six week period of my study.

Context of the Study

I conducted my study in a 12:1:4 classroom, in a suburban middle school located in western New York State. The district in which I work and conducted my study has a diverse population of students in regards to religious and ethnic backgrounds. There are eight students in the classroom, all with a high needs disability. The classroom teacher and I have a mutual understanding that we will hold our students to high expectations. We often incorporate the Smart Board and computer software in our lessons.

My Positionality as the Participant and the Researcher

I am a 24 year old white female. I was raised in a middle class family in a suburban neighborhood in western New York State. I completed my undergraduate studies at The College at Fredonia, State University of New York. I earned a Bachelor of Science degree and teacher certification in Childhood Inclusive Education grades one through six. Currently, I am pursuing my Master of Science degree in Literacy Education at The College at Brockport, State University of New York. I have substitute taught for two years, been a long term substitute for first grade special education, and this is my first year working as a teaching assistant.

My teaching philosophy is constantly changing with the different experiences I have. I believe every new piece of knowledge is built from previous experience. In my work with students with disabilities I have found if you have high expectations for them, they will reach those expectations through meaningful learning experiences. Students with disabilities have the

capacity to learn skills similar to those of typical development when their needs are met. These needs might include a longer time period to learn a set of skills, alternative instruction and assessment, and more explicit instruction.

Data Collection and Analysis

Through my self-study, I documented my experience as a teaching assistant, specifically how I teach reading comprehension strategies to students with disabilities. I used my knowledge about each individual learner and differentiated reading instruction to support their reading comprehension, using strategies I have researched.

I planned reading lessons for my students with disabilities, using differentiated supports, based on what the student needs. I used differentiated instruction to teach reading comprehension strategies to my students. Each week I taught two lessons. I assessed my ability to differentiate reading instruction to address their needs through observations and anecdotal notes. In order to assess my ability to effectively differentiate reading instruction, I used a self-generated questionnaire with observations and reflections on how each student received and responded to each reading lesson.

Questionnaire

I used a self-generated questionnaire (Appendix 1) to document my observations and reflections. My questionnaire has a space to document student behaviors before the lesson, in anticipation for any behaviors during the lesson. This allowed me to differentiate between outcomes of the lesson that resulted from student behavior, and outcomes of the lesson that resulted from my instruction. I completed the rest of the questionnaire after each lesson. Since I

completed a questionnaire before and after each lesson I taught, I was able to find and reflect on what I did in each lesson that was different or the same.

Analyzing Data

First, I observed and recorded student behavior for thirty minutes before I taught my lesson. I followed the students' behavior plans accordingly during the lessons. Then I taught the lesson I planned for that day. I took anecdotal notes and assessed students' reading comprehension, mainly through discussion and observations. Immediately after the lesson, I completed a self-generated questionnaire that required me to reflect on my practices and the outcome of each lesson. This questionnaire not only helped me to reflect on my instruction, but also helped me plan the next lesson, based on the outcome of the previous lesson. Throughout the six weeks of data collection, I coded my questionnaires using different colored highlighters to find common themes and trends in my research.

Procedures

I taught two reading lessons each week for six weeks, focusing on one of the strategies I researched. I also collected about eighteen days' worth of data. For each lesson I taught, I observed before, during, and after. Before the lesson, I wrote down anything I noticed about the students' behaviors that particular day. During the lesson, I wrote down how the students responded to my instruction, and their level of engagement. After the lesson, I reflected on my ability to effectively differentiate instruction for my students.

Criteria for Trustworthiness

As a teacher-researcher, it is crucial that I accurately conducted my study in an ethical and unbiased manner. It is imperative that all aspects of the research I conducted are taken into consideration, to ensure accuracy, authenticity, validity, and reliability. I kept a research journal to reflect on my teaching, as well as a questionnaire that I filled out every day I taught a reading lesson. Throughout my self-study I constantly looked back at my research question and found ways to support my students through differentiated reading instruction. After my daily reflections, I went and found new ways to support my students' reading comprehension.

Throughout the six weeks that I conducted research in the classroom, I examined what lessons and strategies seemed to work, and why. Through discussion and informal observations, I assessed my students' reading comprehension during each lesson. As I conducted observations, I looked for commonalities between each successful lesson to see if there is one thing or multiple things I was doing that makes the lesson work.

At the end of each lesson, I completed a questionnaire that I created to compare different components of planning and teaching using differentiated instruction, and find commonalities in my research. Each day, I recorded observations about my classroom and reading instruction in my reflection journal. Through my reflection journal and questionnaire, I found effective ways to differentiate instruction in order to promote reading comprehension in students with disabilities, particularly those with ASD.

Limitations

One limitation of my study is the students that I work with. They have very high needs, and depending on the day and what they are experiencing internally during the lesson, they might respond favorably to a lesson, negatively to a lesson, or not at all. That is why I will observe student behavior prior to my lessons in the hopes of knowing what it is that can affect the way they receive instruction. Some behaviors of my students force me to take a step back from teaching and follow their behavior plan, which might affect my procedure schedule.

Another limitation I found while collecting my data was the time spent teaching each reading strategy. I was required to teach the same strategy in two or three lessons for the students to really learn the set of comprehension skills I was teaching. In order to best support their reading comprehension, I taught each strategy until my students were able to use the strategy with minimal teacher prompting. This limited the amount of strategies I was able to teach within the six weeks, but provided valuable feedback for my research.

Chapter 4: Findings and Results

Findings

The purpose of my self-study was to analyze how I, as a teaching assistant, could modify reading lessons in order to provide differentiated literacy instruction and supports in order to increase reading comprehension in students with ASD and other disabilities. The results of my study will impact my future reading instruction. I conducted this study with the intention of being able to use self-reflections to improve upon my reading instruction and influence my future work as a Special Education teacher. The data for my study originated from my six weeks as a teaching assistant at a suburban middle school located in western New York. In order to reflect on my teaching, I self-produced a list of questions to answer at the end of every day that I taught a reading lesson. I also wrote in a journal at the end of each lesson in order to self-reflect on my experience and how my teaching affected my students' reading comprehension. Using these methods for data collection helped me look for areas where I can improve my reading instruction, as well as areas where my reading instruction is beneficial to my students. I used a coding system to find common trends in my data so I could more easily analyze my findings. To do this I went through my journal and looked to see if I had similar observations.

Throughout the six weeks of my study, I tried five different instructional strategies including a paraphrasing strategy, graphic organizers and visual maps, think alouds and visual procedures, emotional thermometers, and understanding narrative text structures. I kept a journal before and after each lesson I taught, noting student behaviors, and reception of the lesson. Throughout my journals, I used my coding system to find recurring themes in my data. I found several situations within my observations throughout my data collection period that had to be

further analyzed due to patterns that had formed. The three themes I found in my data collection were Planning, Instruction, and Assessment. Within these themes, I analyzed the following patterns: prompting, scaffolding, explicit instruction, and repetition.

Theme One: Planning

I prepared two lessons for each of the six weeks I would be collecting data. Every lesson was prepared before data collection began. At the end of each lesson, I found myself re-writing the lesson plan for the next day to maintain consistent instruction for my students. In order to best support their needs, I had to create lessons that would flow together, one being based off of the other. Constant self-reflection and self-evaluation is the mark of a highly effective teacher.

Prompting

Many students with ASD are extremely prompt-dependent, which means they do not fulfill expected behaviors in the classroom without a verbal direction or a visual direction, from the teacher, that shows them what they need to do next. When it comes to differentiated instruction, different students need different amounts of prompting to learn effectively in their ZPD. Some students with ASD are able to function independently when verbal and visual prompts are gradually taken away and they use clues from their environment in order to know what they need to do next. Other students are more prompt dependent for a longer period of time.

My students respond better to visual prompts than verbal prompts, because their ASD includes a language/communication disorder. They are better able to follow instruction when they are visually shown what to do, rather than just being told what to do. While planning my instruction, I found it useful to create posters of each strategy that students could refer to as they

practiced the strategy independently. I had to incorporate this component into my lesson planning in order to provide my students with the necessary visuals during instruction. I also found that I could make a poster with the students after they learned the strategy. With their input, the poster is a useful resource for them to use when they are expected to use each reading strategy independently.

While planning lessons, I was required to plan instruction that would be delivered in each student's ZPD, which required me to know each student's individual abilities. At first, I did not have a good idea of their ZPD, and then as I taught and reflected on each lesson, I was able to better plan instruction that would best support each student. Through reflection, I found that if my expectations were beyond the students' ability, they were not engaged in the lesson. Engagement on the students' behalf is necessary if they are expected to be able to comprehend what they are reading. Alternatively, if the instruction is planned below their ZPD, students do not learn new skills; rather they practice skills they already have. This can be an effective strategy when you would like students to perfect or expand on a certain skill set, however, ineffective when you would like students to learn a new skill set. The aforementioned is important when anticipating prompts students will need in order to be successful in each lesson. Too much prompting does not allow students to learn, and not enough prompting makes expectations unclear for students.

Scaffolding

As research demonstrates, students with ASD often have difficulty comprehending texts with information that are not of interest to them. Scaffolding instruction helps to capture their interest, and support their comprehension. Scaffolding stimulates students' background

knowledge, and builds upon it using the new information learned. When teaching reading comprehension, it is important to scaffold information for students with disabilities who do not yet have the ability to scaffold the information for themselves.

Through my data collection, I found that I was able to plan scaffolds that I would use in my lessons when I put in extra time to analyze each text I was using in my lesson plans and anticipate students' background knowledge that I would be able to build upon. Lessons where I planned the scaffolds flowed better than lessons in which I did not plan or anticipate scaffolding the information.

Planning instruction with scaffolds is a component of differentiated instruction, because the teacher is required to use each individual student's background knowledge and apply it to the information being taught. The instruction is differentiated because each student has different experiences which influence their reception of the new information being taught or read. It is unrealistic to expect each student to have the same experiences or expect them to receive information in a uniform manner.

Explicit Instruction

Reading comprehension is not something that comes naturally to students with disabilities, particularly students with ASD. With that knowledge, I planned instruction that would give students strategies and steps they could follow to comprehend what they read. Each strategy researched in this study helps students with disabilities comprehend text. Through self-reflection, I found that each strategy needed to be modeled explicitly for my students if I was going to expect them to use the strategy themselves.

As I collected data, I noticed that in order to explicitly teach each strategy I spent the same amount or more time teaching the reading strategy as I did reading and practicing the strategy with the students. Originally, I planned most of the lesson to be used reading the text with the students, than teaching the actual reading comprehension. As I reflected on each lesson, I found that students were not able to use the reading comprehension strategies I was teaching as independently as I expected them to. As a result, I planned more time in each lesson to teach and model the reading strategy using a think aloud model of instruction.

It became evident to me that in order to support my students' comprehension, it was beneficial for them to have a purpose for reading. I incorporated the use of book introductions and also set a purpose while planning my instruction.

From this experience, I have concluded that planning more time to teach the actual reading comprehension strategy gave my students the ability to learn the strategy, and practice the reading comprehension strategy with minimal support from me.

Repetition

I planned each lesson so they would progressively build on each other. This required me to use my self-reflections from each previous lesson to plan the next one. I found that I had to spend more than one lesson teaching the same reading strategy. It is important, while differentiating instruction, to remember that instruction needs to be delivered at a pace that will best support the students.

Theme Two: Instruction

While teaching each lesson, I determined that my instruction did not always follow the lesson plans I wrote. Through reflection, I realized that often I anticipated situations while planning that did not happen, or did not anticipate for situations that did end up arising. In teaching, lesson plans are seldom ever followed in the manner they were intended.

Prompting

In the beginning of my data collection, I observed through self reflection of my teaching practices that I was over-prompting during instruction. When I constantly prompted the students, they were never required to think critically about what they read. I found that the more I prompted students, the more they expected me to. After I asked students a comprehension question, they would look at me, and wait for a prompt that would help them find the answer. In an effort to promote their independence and critical thinking abilities, I started to lessen the amount of prompts I used, and started using the phrase “Use your resources, where can you look to find the answer?” I also frequently found myself using wait time for the students to come up with the answer independent of my assistance. My goal was, and still is, for them to be able to know what their resources are, and use the steps of each comprehension strategy to answer reading comprehension questions. Resources they can use include: looking in the text for answers, using posters around the room to remember what each strategy entails, and finding key words in the text.

Prompting can be a useful tool in reading comprehension instruction when used correctly. It is important for Special Education teachers to know what students can do independently, and

know what students can be expected to learn with minimal support. Students with disabilities can be very prompt dependent. In an effort to reduce their dependence, teachers can provide visual prompts around the room and teach their students how to use them as resources. This will provide them with the life skill of using the resources in their environment to solve a problem or know where they need to go. In a reading comprehension capacity, students can benefit from having posters with graphic organizers, steps to a comprehension strategy, examples of an emotional thermometer, etc. in their classroom.

Scaffolding

Along with using reading comprehension strategies, texts can be scaffolded for students to better comprehend them. Using their prior knowledge, I provided scaffolds for students to apply the new information to their lives. I found through scaffolding that my students were better able to understand character emotions, motivations, and cause and effect relationships in the texts we read.

One thing to be aware of when scaffolding instruction for students with ASD is their potential to perseverate on certain topics. While it is beneficial to engage students using topics of interest, students with ASD have a tendency to perseverate on a topic that they are particularly interested in. As students perseverate, they are no longer aware of the expectations of a lesson, rather they are more interested in talking and asking questions about whatever topic they perseverate on. They require extensive redirection when they start perseverating, which I found can disrupt not only the flow of the lesson, but also the attention of the other students. Therefore, when scaffolding instruction, teachers need to exercise caution and know how to redirect

students efficiently should they start perseverating on a topic. I found that I was able to efficiently redirect students by recognizing the initial behavior, and redirecting them right away.

Explicit Instruction

As previously mentioned, students with disabilities benefit from concrete steps they can follow, and they gain more from the lesson when those steps are modeled for them. When teaching reading comprehension, my students benefitted from learning exactly what they should be thinking while they read, and how to set a purpose for reading.

During instruction, I discovered that when students had a purpose for reading, they better comprehended the main idea of the story. The purpose can be worded as a question that needs to be answered from the text, or with the phrase “We are going to read to find out what happens to Goldilocks when she goes into the house”, for example. While teaching, I used the purpose of the story to remind students what information they were looking for as they read. With these reminders, I observed that students remained more focused on the text.

While analyzing my data, I found that the most effective approach to teaching each comprehension strategy was to model the strategy using think alouds. In the think aloud approach, I said out loud what I was thinking while reading the text, to model what students should be thinking while reading the text. I also wrote the components of each strategy on a poster for students to refer to while they are practicing each strategy independently. I believe the think aloud approach is the most effective because it provides a concrete model for students to follow. My students do not have the cognitive ability to self-generate text related comprehension

questions while they read; as a result they need to be taught explicitly what they should be thinking while they read.

Repetition

It was important as I was teaching, to monitor student's progress, to gauge where students are in their learning, compared to what my expectations were. I am a firm believer that it is not in the students' best interest to move on when they have not grasped the objectives of the first lesson. I found repetition was a pattern in my instruction, I repeated instruction as students needed based on my observations.

In analyzing my data, I also found that students were able to better practice the comprehension strategies on texts they already read once before. As a result, I used the same text more than once. Since the expectation of my instruction is for students to learn the comprehension strategy and be able to practice it independently, I allowed them to practice on texts they read in the previous lesson. This supported their fluency and accuracy of reading, which allowed cognitive capacity for their minds to incorporate the comprehension strategy in their reading. I found that when students were able to successfully practice the comprehension strategy on their own, they were more motivated to use it in other settings. I also observed that using the same text boosted their confidence. Many of my students are aware that developmentally they are not the same as other students in the school. This lowers their self esteem and motivation to participate in classroom activities. Setting them up for success by providing them multiple opportunities to read the same text and practice the same strategy increased their motivation to participate.

Theme Three: Assessment

Assessment was necessary in my data collection, in order to determine the effectiveness of each reading comprehension strategy. Since the students I work with are not able to write independently, without copying from the board, my assessments were informal through observations, anecdotal notes, and discussion. I was able to assess how well students comprehended the text through discussions in which I incorporated retelling the story, and comprehension questions. I was able to observe how well students were able to apply each reading comprehension strategy through observations, and wrote those observations down in the form of anecdotal notes.

Prompting

Since my assessments were conducted through discussions, I had to be careful of how much I prompted the students during our conversations. In reflection, I found that it is hard to know exactly what students know on their own when I am required to constantly prompt and redirect them to the question or conversation. It also depended on the day. Sometimes students required more prompting because there was a change in their schedule that affected their attention, or they did not take their medications that day, etc. I started to record the frequency with which I prompted each student, in each lesson, to determine their level of independence. I found that recording the frequency with which I prompted the students helped me to recognize instances where I am over prompting that I did not recognize before. It is a practice I will continue to use in an effort to make my students less dependent on verbal prompts, and promote their independence.

Scaffolding

Assessment of reading comprehension is difficult in my classroom because depending on the day, students may know the answer but not share it, or may not know the answer at all. The purpose of assessment is to know what students have learned, and what a teacher needs to re-teach. Another difficulty when it comes to assessment, which I found during my data collection, was the amount of information that was scaffolded for students, while they were answering reading comprehension questions. I assessed students on their comprehension of the text we read together, using the reading comprehension strategy that was taught. I used the results of each assessment to evaluate the effectiveness of each strategy, and my teaching.

I often used purposeful discussion in order to assess how well students comprehended the text they read, and how effective the reading comprehension strategy was. I used this discussion strategy because the students I worked with are unable to write independently. Through discussion, I found that scaffolding the information for the students did not demonstrate an accurate description of how well they were able to comprehend the text. I started to make a point of asking the reading comprehension question only, then using wait time for the answers. While it was difficult to prevent myself from supporting my students as much as I usually do, I found that with enough wait time, they were able to come to an acceptable answer more than I expected. I will remember this when I become a Special Education teacher in any setting, to always keep my expectations high.

Explicit Instruction

Using explicit instruction helped students in the assessment portion of each lesson because the expected reading behaviors were modeled for them. The lessons where I used more explicit instruction supported students better than when I used student-centered learning. While I believe it is important to incorporate student choice and student-centered learning in a classroom, I found that the students I worked with did not have the same intrinsic motivation as students I have worked with in the past, who are developing typically. Since the assessment results demonstrated a pattern that explicit instruction yielded better reading comprehension and understanding of the reading comprehension strategy being taught, I have come to the conclusion that student-centered learning should be incorporated in other areas of instruction.

Repetition

Repetition, along with explicit instruction, supported students' comprehension of the material read. I teach with an attitude that rushes me through the material, moving on without giving the students an opportunity to build knowledge constructively. I used the assessment results after each lesson as a deciding factor in whether the students were ready to move on to a new text, or would benefit from reading the same text next lesson as well.

I found, through informal observations and assessment discussions that students had an easier time applying the new reading comprehension strategies they learned to text they have already read. Repeating the texts allowed students to focus on following the steps of the reading comprehension strategy with information they already knew, providing more cognitive capacity to focus on the reading strategy they are using. While my hope is to make reading

comprehension more automatic for my students, it is not realistic that they will have the capability to automatically comprehend text as they read. Teaching them explicit reading strategies is the next best option, so my students are still able to participate in active reading.

Just as instruction needs to be differentiated to support all learners, assessments need to be differentiated to support all learners as well. Instead of using typical essay questions and writing prompts to assess my students, I used informal observations and verbal prompts to assess their reading comprehension. A written assessment would not provide an accurate depiction of what they remember reading from the text, as their writing and spelling skills are not at grade level.

Further Results

With each lesson I taught, I found that actually teaching the strategy in a way students will understand and use it was the most difficult aspect of instruction. My students do not naturally read for comprehension in the same way other, typically developing students do. That is a reality many Special Education teachers face. From my observations, it is apparent that my students, in grades six through eight, do not use reading comprehension strategies they learned in previous grades. It could be that they were never taught comprehension strategies, or that they were not taught in a way that they would retain the skills necessary to comprehend what they read.

Through consistent, explicit instruction, I am seeing progress as my students learn new strategies for reading comprehension. Since each student responds to different means of instruction, I am constantly planning for each individual learner. I have noticed with some

strategies, that I am able to release responsibility of completing the task to my students, gradually. For example, when we write graphic organizers using the terms first, then, next, and last, I am able to prompt the students with the question “What words do we use when we summarize a story?”. When they hear that question, they automatically know that I am referring to the first, then, next, last organizer we use. It is exciting to see this progress, and it takes constant repetition on my part in order to promote their independence. Since it is a reality that many of the students in this program will always be dependent in certain areas, we strive to teach our students how to use resources available to them, and where they can find resources for certain situations. For reading comprehension, resources might include posters with the graphic organizers they are required to make independently that the students can refer to as they work.

When I become a Special Education teacher I will take into account all of the planning and preparation it takes in order to teach students effectively. I will keep an open mind when I have a student who learns in a drastically different way than others. In order to effectively teach my students, I will constantly progress monitor and differentiate instruction as I see fit. One important aspect from my research is to teach students in their ZPD, in other words do not teach students material they are not ready to learn, and do not teach them material they can already do on their own. Lessons should be planned so the material being taught builds on the students’ abilities.

Summary

Through my observations in my data collection, I was able to identify three themes. Within these themes I was able to pick out four important findings. Prompting refers to re-directing students through visual and/or verbal prompts to help them stay on task or remember

what the direction was. Scaffolding is used to teach new information, using information the students already know. Explicit instruction was found to be the most effective instruction delivery method, because it offered students a concrete example of what was expected. Repetition refers to reading the same text more than once, to achieve a deeper comprehension of the text. Repetition was also used to practice new reading comprehension strategies on text that students were familiar with, therefore they were able to practice the new strategy with confidence. Differentiating instruction takes a lot of extra planning; however, once you incorporate it in your classroom everyday it becomes easier to recognize what modifications best benefit your students.

Chapter 5: Implications and Conclusions

Through my entire study, I have not only learned new strategies for teaching reading comprehension to students with disabilities, I was able to practice teaching those strategies and reflect on my own planning, instruction, and assessments. Through experience, I have found that many teachers have the attitude that students with disabilities do not need to be required to fulfill all academic expectations. This attitude is dangerous, and leads to a school culture that does not expect any learning from students with disabilities who are very low functioning, or lowers its academic expectations of such students. Going into my study, I held the belief that students with disabilities can comprehend what they read if they are taught how to. I found that with consistent, explicit instruction, students with disabilities are able to develop reading comprehension skills. Although it is at a different pace, and through a different method of instruction, the students I worked with started to actively read text when they were given a purpose. My goal was to evaluate my own teaching in order to better support my students' reading comprehension. I was able to accomplish my goal through research, data collection, and applying research-based reading comprehension strategies to my current teaching practices.

As a result of my study, I wanted to improve my ability to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of my students through self-reflection and self-evaluation. My research has demonstrated how students with disabilities can be taught similar skill sets as students who are typically developing, with differentiated instruction that is explicit and consistent. Planning and self-evaluation are extremely important in supporting the reading comprehension of students with disabilities. I found that I had to change each lesson plan based on the previous lesson plan, in order to ensure complete understanding on the students' behalf. I also observed that I can

promote independence in my students' usage of new reading strategies through the use of a gradual release of responsibility model. As students gained responsibility and independence, the prompting and scaffolding on my behalf decreased; furthermore, I found wait time to be an effective tool in assessment. My instruction plan did not move as fast as I had expected, which resulted in my inability to teach every reading comprehension lesson I intended through the course of my study. This demonstrates the importance of flexibility in a Special Education teacher's planning, and using constant informal assessments to gauge students' abilities before moving on to the next idea or concept. I learned that complete independence in some of my students is not a reality, and it is my job as a future Special Education teacher to best promote their independence by teaching them how they can use resources provided in their environment to be successful.

The use of self-reflection and self-evaluation for teachers is a very helpful tool when it comes to instructing students with disabilities. Often, pride and experience get in the way of a teacher changing their instructional methods, which can hinder students' learning as their world around them is constantly changing. I used self-reflections and self-evaluations to assess how my teaching was meeting the needs of my students throughout this study. I was able to find instructional practices that worked well and instructional practices that did not work for this particular setting. Self-reflections and self-evaluations are a tool I will use throughout my teaching career to constantly better myself.

My project was completed on my own. I only used personal observations, nobody observed me but myself. Being observed by another adult or specialist would have proved helpful, and helped me notice patterns in students' learning behaviors that I may have missed.

Through the six weeks of my study, I was able to see growth in my teaching and in my students' learning. Although my lessons did not go as I had originally planned, I was able to modify them to best fit the needs of the learners I worked with. One of the most important concepts taken away from my study is instruction should be tailored to meet the needs of the students in order to be effective. I had to constantly re-write lesson plans and repeat certain concepts in order for my students to move on successfully. With the expectation that they would succeed, I was able to teach my students reading comprehension strategies that helped them to complete a cognitive task that does not come naturally to them as it does other students. A new goal of mine is to apply this method to planning for instruction in all areas of teaching students with disabilities, not only teaching reading comprehension.

Students with disabilities relate to text in different ways. They use their interpretation of the world to comprehend what they read, which is often far from the norm. In order to help them comprehend what the author intended the text to mean, they need to be taught explicitly how to use evidence from the text to support a main idea, or create a cause and effect scenario in retelling the text. Students with ASD are motivated to read expository texts on a topic of their interest, but often are distracted by their perseveration of the topic, and do not comprehend much of what they read. When the teacher sets a purpose for reading and provides a strategy for the students to use while reading, they have a better idea of what is expected.

Implications for Teachers

Holding students with disabilities to high standards pushes their learning to levels that some would not expect. When realistic objectives are made, students with disabilities are able to

reach them with consistent support and explicit instruction. Special Education teachers need to expect more from their students, in order to get more out of them.

Reading comprehension was not taught to my students at an early age in a way that they were able to retain that skill set. The students I worked with are in grades six through eight, and did not show any evidence of active reading comprehension strategies they already use. Through a balanced literacy program started in Kindergarten, Special Education teachers can reduce the amount of students who have hyperlexia, and teach them reading strategies that support their fluency, accuracy, comprehension, and vocabulary. This avoids the phenomenon of students with disabilities being stronger in one reading skill than the other, and encourages them to use all aspects of active reading together.

Differentiated instruction is effective in enhancing reading comprehension in students with disabilities because it puts instruction at the students' level, not above or below it. Differentiation requires constant progress monitoring of students, and constant planning for different learning styles. Many teachers worry about the amount of work outside of teaching that it takes to plan successful differentiated instruction, but I found through this study that when time is managed wisely, and items are prioritized, the effort put into differentiating instruction for students was well worth the reward. All teachers should make an effort to differentiate instruction to fit the needs of their learners. Differentiated instruction also leads to more engaged learning on the students' behalf, which results in better classroom management.

I now know that students with disabilities, particularly ASD, struggle with reading comprehension because they do not understand the motivation behind character actions. They are also not as intrinsically motivated to read as students who are typically developing. I have

learned five reading comprehension strategies that aid students with disabilities while they read. Putting those strategies to use in my study, I learned that students with disabilities get the most out of learning the strategy when they are explicitly taught how to use it. Creating visual prompts, such as emotional thermometers, helps students to understand what thinking processes they are expected to use while they read which in turn helps them remember information that they read. Using texts more than once aids their comprehension because students are then given a chance to absorb what they have read. The best thing a teacher can do to support his or her students is to get to know them, and learn the most effective ways to support them.

Appendix 1

Questionnaire

Date:

Strategy:

1. How are students' behaviors before the lesson?

2. How was the text introduced?

3. On a scale of 1-4 how interested were students in the text?

4. What method of instruction did you use (explicit or student-centered) to teach the strategy?

5. Were the students able to practice the strategy successfully with little guidance?

6. How well did the strategy help students comprehend the text (use assessment results)?

7. What went well in the lesson?

8. What did not go well?

9. How can I improve the next lesson to fit the needs of each individual learner?

7. Other observations during this lesson:

Appendix 2

Schedule

Date	Reading Comprehension Strategy
2/23/15	Paraphrasing Strategy
2/25/15	Paraphrasing Strategy
3/3/15	Graphic Organizer (Venn diagram)
3/5/15	Graphic Organizer (First, next, then, last)
3/9/15	Graphic Organizer (First, next, then, last)
3/11/15	Emotional Thermometer
3/17/15	Emotional Thermometer
3/19/15	Think Aloud: Predicting
3/23/15	Think Aloud: Questioning
3/25/15	Think Aloud: Clarifying
3/31/15	Think Aloud: Summarizing
4/2/15	Understanding Narrative Text Structures

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