RECALL: A Dialogic Reading Approach for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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**Abstract**

In this project, we focused on the effects of RECALL, or Reading to Engage Children with Autism in Language and Learning, on students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. We accomplished this by reviewing professional or peer-reviewed articles. Through our research, we have found that, more specifically, younger students in elementary school grades have been shown to greatly benefit from the use of a routine in the classroom that incorporates RECALL dialogic reading. There has been a correlation in many studies showing that the more students with ASD use dialogic reading, the more their oral and written skills increase, while the number of incorrect responses to questions has decreased. We found that the use of the RECALL dialogic reading approach for young children with ASD in schools is beneficial. After our investigation, we suspect that this program will work best for students with ASD in the younger elementary school years.

**Understanding of Students With Special Needs**

Autism Spectrum Disorder can be a difficult disability to manage without the proper care and advice from a doctor. Sometimes, children go undiagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder and this will make life much more difficult for the parents, affected children, teachers, and other people involved in that child’s life. There will also be a multitude of questions that will go unanswered if they are undiagnosed. Autism Spectrum Disorder occurs everywhere in the world. It is not specific to any one race, gender, or ethnicity. It is prevalent all around the world and although we do not yet have a cure, medicine and therapy have come a long way in treating the symptoms (Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2018). It is a challenging disability whether it is diagnosed or not, so staying informed and alert for warning signs is very important.

To begin, there are several supposed causes of Autism Spectrum Disorder and they include genetic predispositions, abnormal brain chemistry, abnormal brain development, pregnancy complications, as well as environmental factors (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2017, pp. 336-337). Although some of the “why’s” have been answered, as in *why* does my child have Autism, not all of the *how’s* have been. For example, we know that genetic predispositions are a factor in developing Autism; however, we do not yet know how a specific genetic predisposition causes it, or even which one. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, certain factors include being born at a very low weight, having a sibling with ASD, and having parents who were older when the child was born (Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2018). There has been much debate about the causes for years. Most debate has some from the idea behind the environmental causes. Vaccines and technology have been under harsh criticism for being causing factors, but we now know that this is definitely not the case. As Barbara Boroson said in her book *Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Inclusive Classroom*, a doctor in Britain falsely made a claim saying that vaccinations were the cause of Autism. The “study” was conducted with completely incorrect data and there were multiple accounts of ethical violations throughout. However, it was unfortunate that the public took to this myth without fact checking the study. Although vaccines are not the cause, there are still factors that we are not yet sure of (Boroson, 2016, p.12). It is a complicated disorder and plenty of research still needs to be conducted before we determine the exact causes for Autism Spectrum Disorder (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2017, p. 337).

Autism Spectrum Disorder falls between a range of severities and the symptoms of which differ for each child. Some of these symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder involve the intellect of a child. Just because someone suffers with ASD, does not necessarily make them any less capable than others who do not suffer from it. Often times, those individuals who are high functioning with ASD are extraordinarily smart in specialized areas. Some research suggests that although they can be incredibly smart in areas such as academics, their social skills can be hindered. They can become fixated on a very specific field of study, such as penguins or dinosaurs and lose themselves in it. One example of this is empathy. Those with Autism Spectrum Disorder are not always able to relate to those around them. It is not always easy for them to understand how someone is feeling or to realize that everyone has different opinions and points of view. They can tend to be “stuck in their own ways.” Other social areas that an individual with ASD may suffer in is regarding conversations. They can be difficult because eye contact is not particularly easy for them. Some individuals who are affected by Autism Spectrum Disorder have a difficult time speaking at all. For those who do speak, an issue can be an inconsistency in words and facial expressions. Their phrases or sentences can be physically saying one thing, but their body language can be saying something completely different. Communication is an area that takes a hard hit, especially if the problem is not addressed with early intervention. As children, some do not respond to their mother or father or disregard sounds around them in general. Some do not start babbling until much later on, around 9 months and some children with Autism do not speak at all (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2017, pp. 338-339).

Individuals who suffer from Autism Spectrum Disorder often times have a symptom of “repetitive and restrictive behaviors.” These behaviors can include a multitude of characteristics. Repeating words or phrases or being intensely invested in a certain topic are a few. Other symptoms that can be difficult to prevent are being extremely sensitive to loud noises, bright lights, or other “intense” stimuli. Again, it is a range, so they can have hypersensitivity, or hyposensitivity (Boroson, 2016, pp. 14-15). An example of this would be standing in the center of Times Square in New York City. It is a sensory overload for many people, but those with Autism Spectrum Disorder would be extremely uncomfortable in a situation such as this. They may show as though they are in pain or have a panic attack-like reaction. It is also difficult for someone with Autism to change their routine on a whim. Most people can switch directions on something they are working on fairly easily, but someone with ASD needs plenty of warning time and preparation before their routine is disturbed (Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2018). While children or people with Autism Spectrum Disorder can present themselves in a certain light, no one should misjudge them. Some people affected with ASD are the most brilliant people there are, and as Barbara Boroson says, “don’t judge a book by its cover.” (Boroson, 2016, p.18).

**Introduction of an Evidence-based Practice**

Dialogic reading is a system that was created in the 1980’s to help and increase the reading level of young elementary school students. It was created by a collaboration of many different people working together and it is a program that allows the student to read a book and then recall the information to the teacher. It is a way for the individual to step out of their role as student and become a teacher. The Dialogic Reading system is designed so that it can assess students in a few different areas. According to What Works ClearingHouse, these areas include oral language, print knowledge, phonological processing, and early reading/writing, cognition, and math (Dialogic Reading, 2007).

This program was designed to be utilized in a way that teachers can use when in groups or centers. Students can be working on reading, writing, oral skills, and other areas, while simultaneously working one on one with the teacher to increase reading level as well as understanding of their literature. According to the What Works Clearinghouse, there is a method in which teachers can use Dialogic Reading and there is an acronym that is associated with it. “C.R.O.W.D.” stands for C-completion, R-recall, O-open-ended, W-”wh”, and D-Distancing (Dialogic Reading, 2007). Completion is questioning after the student reads their book. The teacher or aid will ask the student specific questions about their book in a way that allows the student to essentially “fill in a word.” This is similar to closed notes, except it is done aloud. Recall is similar to completion; it is just a broader question. The child is able to answer the question slightly more in depth than just a single word. Open-ended utilizes the pictures that are included in the book to allow the child a chance to explain. The teacher or aid can point to a certain picture and ask the student what is going on in this part of the book, or another question to that extent. This gives the child an opportunity to show what they know just based on context clues included in the picture. If the child does not know the book they read, it should be very obvious by this stage. “Wh” is asking the what, where, why, when, and how questions to the student. This part can also include pictures if using a reference is helpful. This gives the student the chance to reason through a problem in the story or a decision that a character made. For example, a teacher or aid could ask “why did the cat run away from the dog?,” or “where was the boy when he got hurt?” Lastly, Distancing is a technique in which the teacher has the student relate the book to their own life experiences. The child can make connections so that they truly understand what is going on or maybe how a character feels in the book. For example, the teacher or aid could ask “was there a time in your life when you have felt scared like the little boy did?,” or “Remember when the little girl was so happy that she screamed, have you ever been that happy before?” The Dialogic Reading tool is very useful for teachers and students (Dialogic Reading, 2007). Overall, it really gives the child a better, more in depth understanding of the books they read.

Reading to Engage Children with Autism in Language and Learning, or RECALL, is a shared reading approach similar to dialogic reading that is adapted to better aid students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ASD. RECALL combines elements of dialogic reading as well as other evidence-based practices to better target areas or skills that individuals with ASD may have trouble developing or acquiring. RECALL works to enhance joint attention, social reciprocity, inference making, and works with different language levels. In order to do this, RECALL uses the CROWD prompts of dialogic reading as well as the four addition prompts “emotion identification, secure attention, intentional pause, and initiation” (Whalon, Delano, & Hanline, 2013).

The dialogic reading CROWD prompts and the four additional prompts that make up the RECALL approach attempt to encourage more interactions between the student and adult, as well as further certain skills that students with ASD may have difficulty developing. The first of the four prompts, emotion identification, asks children to identify how a character in the story feels. The article states that this prompt is important because children with ASD often have trouble “recognizing and understanding thoughts and feelings of others in language and text” (Whalon et al., 2013). This prompt requires students to not only identify the feelings of characters in a story, but also allows them to practice making inferences. The secure attention prompt works to enhance joint attention and there are multiple ways that RECALL works to develop joint attention for students with ASD. Throughout reading, it is recommended that the adults “label objects and apply visual and/or verbal prompts” (Whalon et al., 2013) in order to keep or hone the attention of the student. One way to label objects is through wh-questioning which involves prompts with asking who, what, where, when, why, and how. Joint attention can also be evoked by phrases such as “Look!” or “See that!” (Whalon et al., 2013) to point the student’s attention to a certain picture or sentence in the book or choosing books that relate to the student’s interests. In order to promote initiation, RECALL uses intentional pauses throughout the reading. With this strategy, the teacher or adult will pause about three different times throughout the story either right before or after turning a page. These pauses last three to five seconds and the adult looks expectantly at the child in order to encourage them to initiate a response (Whalon et al., 2013). If this strategy does not work to initiate a response, then the teacher or adult may provide other, more specific questions or prompts in order to initiate a response or interaction from the student. The RECALL approach, which combines prompts from the dialogic reading approach and other evidence-based prompts, is aimed at further developing or enhancing both language and literacy skills in students with ASD.

**Research-based Support**

**Study 1.**

The first study we found, called *A Rationale and Strategy for Adapting Dialogic Reading for Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder: RECALL,* was conducted in an elementary school in rural Ohio. The setting was in a low income school and the participants were a variety of races, genders, and socioeconomic classes, with 8 total student participants. The study was to determine if learning site words worked more efficiently in a dialogic reading format versus in a normal, listed format. The dialogic reading-style words were laid out in a “race track” format. This allowed a fun and topical way for the students to have a better understanding of the words. The second list-style set of words was just that; a list (Sullivan, Konrad, Joseph, Luu, 2013, pp. 102-108). The 7 words were given in each set, and each student had the same amount of time to complete their word study. Each word was allowed 3 seconds, and if the student had not read the word in that allotted time, they would be prompted to move onto the next word. Each of these tests was completed three times per student who participated to ensure repetition and consistency in the trials. The results of this study showed that all but one of the students greatly benefited from having the race track style words over the listed words. One child performed faster with the list, but the rest performed faster with the race track, and all but two said they preferred the race track over the list. When words are taught in a way that is more engaging and fun for the students, they are more likely to learn faster and with more accuracy, and the same goes for students with ASD (Sullivan et al., 2013, pp. 102-108).

This study, *A Rationale and Strategy for Adapting Dialogic Reading for Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder: RECALL lays* out the basic purpose of this program. While Dialogic Reading is a great tool for all students, it may not be as effective for students with ASD. The main program allows for students to learn more about their readings by diving into them and becoming a teacher. This approach is very effective for most typical students; however, this may not be enough for students with Autism. By using RECALL: DIalogic Reading, those students can also get exposure to skills they may not develop naturally due to their condition. Social and emotional can be greatly benefitted by using RECALL methods with students who may need it (Sullivan et al., 2013, pp. 93-97).

According to this study, there are a few distinct areas that can be targeted. One specific area is called “joint attention.” This is when attention between two objects, two people, or a person and an object can be held simultaneously. This is a skill that typical students may be decent at using, but someone with ASD may have a more difficult time with. It can be developed through reading with a partner and engaging with them (Sullivan et al., 2013, pp. 93-97). Another targeted area is “social reciprocity.” Social cues and relating to peers can often be lost upon in those students the ASD, so having peers and teachers prompt the child with questions or an opportunity to explain how certain situation may feel is an important lesson for these students to learn. Inference making, and Language and Communication skills are a few other areas that are greatly benefited by RECALL: Dialogic Reading. Exposure to working with others, speaking to others, sharing emotions and thoughts, and reading are all very important factors that a child with Autism may be missing, so a program such as this one has the potential to turn around a child’s life who is in need of help (Sullivan et al., 2013, pp. 93-97).

**Study 2.**

The article “Promoting Active Participation in Book Reading for Preschoolers with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Preliminary Study” looks at the effect of the dialogic reading approach on three preschool aged boys who have been diagnosed with ASD. Fleury, Miramontez, Hudson, and Schwartz addressed three main questions with their study which examines the differences between time participating or engaged, the children’s verbal participation, and the effect in eliciting verbal responses for children with ASD when using dialogic book readings as compared with standard book readings (Fleury, Miramontez, Hudson, & Schwartz, 2014, p. 276). This study involved three participants.

The study involved three preschool-aged children from a “university affiliated comprehensive early childhood program” (Fleury et al., 2014, p. 276) who were chosen based on their diagnosis of ASD, ability to sit and engage in activities for five minutes, and ability to communicate verbally with at least two to three word phrases (Fleury et al., 2014, p. 277). The three participants were Alan, aged 4 years, 4 months, Nick, aged 5 years, 11 months, and Frances, aged 3 years, 4 months. Alan communicated verbally using complete sentences and from the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales - Communication Subtest, it was determined that he has a delay in expressive and receptive language, as well as a delay in social abilities (Fleury et al., 2014, p. 277). Nick is also able to communicate using complete sentences; however, Nick’s teacher stated that his communication varies “depending on his level of interest, the number and type of distractions…, and his communicative partner” (Fleury et al., 2014, p. 277). Finally, Frances has primarily communicated with two to three word phrases or using a Picture Exchange Communication System, or PECS. According to his teacher, Frances does not usually use verbal speech to “initiate communication with adults,” and according to the Vineland test, his receptive and expressive language scores places him “significantly below that of chronologically aged peers” (Fleury et al., 2014, p. 277). All of the readings during the study were conducted in a treatment room in which the children were able to choose whether they read at the table or on the floor and had five books to choose from. Throughout the nine reading sessions that took place over five weeks, data was collected regarding the child’s on-task behavior, defined as “sitting upright” at the table or floor, have their body turned towards the book or reader, as well as having their eyes facing the book or reader (Fleury et al., 2014, p. 278).

From the study, it various results on on-task behavior, verbal participation, and responses to specific prompts were examined. The dialogic reading approach had little effect on the three participant’s on-task behavior. However, this can be due to the “high rates of engagement” (Fleury et al., 2014, p. 279) that all three participants exhibited during the baseline reading session. However, the length of the dialogic reading sessions were greater than the length of the baseline sessions for each of the participants with baseline sessions lasting an “average of 2.75 minutes” and dialogic reading sessions lasting an average of “4.48 minutes” (Fleury et al., 2014, p. 279). The data collected for verbal participation was converted to the number of verbalizations made during the reading per minute. The three participants has low levels of participation during the baseline reading sessions, but the study saw an increase in verbal participation during the dialogic reading session (Fleury et al., 2014, p. 281). For the data on responses to specific prompts, the percentage of prompts and types of prompts were analyzed and these results varied between the three participants. While Nick responded to every type of prompt almost equally, Alan most often responded to the distancing and recall prompts but not as consistent responses to the completion prompts. On the other hand, Frances mostly responded to the completion prompts rather than every other type of prompts, especially the open-ended distancing prompts (Fleury et al., 2014, p. 281). With dialogic reading, children are not only hearing and speaking language more, but are also engaged with the text and in discussion with the adult for a longer period of time than with a baseline reading session, or one where the adult reads straight through the text without time for the students to fully engage with the text.

**Study 3.**

In our third study, “A Rationale and Strategy for Adapting Dialogic Reading for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: RECALL,” a report by The National Early Literacy Panel in 2008 found that students who are at risk saw an improvement in oral language, expressive vocabulary, receptive vocabulary, alphabetic knowledge, and phonological sensitivity following shared reading. According to this particular study, “Preliminary evidence correlates the poor performance by children with ASD on reading comprehension measures with low scores on vocabulary and oral language comprehension.” Students with ASD often show difficulties with reading and language, and therefore, may have difficulties with reading comprehension. Because of this, early intervention, especially using shared or dialogic reading, can improve language acquisition in students with ASD (Whalon et al., 2013, p. 94).

This study also presents the notion that students with Autism Spectrum Disorder need a controlled environment in order to function. This is the idea that they should have a strict schedule or routine that can give them structure and help them to feel secure. With the use of these structured routines, a number of students have been shown to improve academically, especially in the area of literacy and language comprehension. Although about 75% of children and students with Autism have been reported to have “gained speech,” there is still a large percentage of children who are left out of this statistic (Whalon et al., 2013, p. 94). However, just because these children are reported to have gained speech, does not necessarily mean that they have skilled speech. Many of these people are still struggling to communicate (Whalon et al., 2013, p. 94). It was documented that their ability to comprehend complex grammar and vocabulary, and actively participate in conversations with others was a major struggle for these children. Another issue that is concerning was the lack of ability to relate or relay character emotions from the stories they read. Social and Emotional skills are lacking in many, many cases of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

All of these issues were concerning and a solution needed to be created for those children who have ASD. The solution that was created was RECALL Dialogic Reading. Dialogic, or shared, reading was the technique that was used for a bit of time with all students, including those with ASD. While it did help a portion of those students, the rest were still falling behind and not developing the skills they desperately needed to thrive (Whalon et al., 2013, p. 94). RECALL Dialogic Reading incorporated elements that shared reading was missing in order to create a more structured program for students who have Autism. This new program was created to fit together all of the pieces that students with ASD were missing in their curriculum. Using the “CROWD” method from shared reading alongside the RECALL method has given these students the chance to further advance in school. Their reading, language, literacy, writing, and oral skills have overall improved, and because of this study with RECALL, so have their social and emotional skills. Now, students with ASD have an opportunity to learn about relating to characters, relative the story to their own lives, and even initiation their own conversations about the stories to their teachers and peers (Whalon et al., 2013, pp. 94-95).

**Study 4.**

In her dissertation “The Effect of Dialogic Reading on Early Literacy Outcomes for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders,” Veronica Pamparo recognizes the lack of research done on certain reading strategies and their effect on children with ASD. Due to this, Pamparo conducts a study with fourteen three to five year old students who have been diagnosed with ASD. Her study includes baseline reading sessions, as well as dialogic reading sessions with teachers or professionals who have been trained on dialogic reading strategies. Through her research, Pamparo concluded that “early literacy skills for children with ASD” (Pamparo, 2012) improved after the use of dialogic reading strategies, demonstrating that this is an effective and beneficial technique for students with ASD.

Throughout the study, multiple areas of language were measured in children with ASD. Both book-specific and definitional vocabulary were measured after the use of dialogic reading. It was found that the student’s recognition of book-specific vocabulary, or words specifically targeted in a certain book, improved with the use of dialogic reading, especially with the use of wh-questions that often require the student to focus on a key word or image (Pamparo, 2012, 59). While there was an observed increase in definitional vocabulary in the students, there was not a statistical significance in this area after the use of dialogic reading (Pamparo, 2012, pp. 59-60); however, this does not mean that this area is excluded while using dialogic reading. This is just an area that may need more specific questions during reading but shows a promising level of improvement. Verbal participation during the reading sessions from the students also increased, especially with the use of special prompts. While these prompts were not being tested as the CROWD prompts for dialogic reading, these prompts provided a little extra support or guidance when prompting the students, allowing them to better engage with the text (Pamparo, 2012, pp. 60-61). From the frequent use of the special prompts, Pamparo determines that this could be evidence that students with ASD may need additional prompts besides the CROWD prompts in normal dialogic reading. This suggestion may support the RECALL approach because this approach includes the CROWD prompts along with four others that are designed to better benefit students with ASD. Listening comprehension in students with ASD also improved with the use of dialogic reading as the students have to be able to “comprehend oral information” (Pamparo, 2012, p. 61) in order to accurately respond to the prompt. Hearing the language is an important aspect of language acquisition or development. Because students are engaged with the text for a longer period of time with dialogic reading, they are hearing or listening to the adult use language by not only reading the story, but by also providing additional information or prompts for a longer period of time. This gives the students more practice with hearing the language, as well as practicing speaking the language, which both work in the development of literacy and language skills. Pamparo states that “language and communication delays are characteristic of ASD” and often place these students at “particular risk for reading difficulties” (Pamparo, 2012, p. 68). However, from her study, Pamparo found that the basic dialogic reading approach was already working to improve various aspects of oral language skills in children with ASD, which will most likely continue to benefit these students in the future with their reading and literacy skills.

**Discussion**

We found numerous examples of how RECALL positively affected students with ASD. With the typical dialogic reading approach, as well as the RECALL approach, students are more engaged with the text for a longer period of time. This results in the students spending more time hearing and practicing speaking the language, which benefits their communication skills. The RECALL approach, specifically, helps students with ASD develop in other areas, such as social and emotional, by adding different prompts that require students to identify how characters in the story are feeling, as well as physically speaking or initiating conversation with the teacher or other students. From the study in “Promoting Active Participation in Book Reading for Preschoolers with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Preliminary Study,” it was found that, on average, dialogic reading sessions lasted longer than baseline reading sessions with the dialogic session lasting an average of 4.48 minutes and the baseline session lasting 2.75 minutes (Fleury, Miramontez, Hudson, & Schwartz, 2014, p. 279). Verbal participation also saw an increase from all three participants from the baseline reading session to the dialogic reading session (Fleury et al., 2014, p. 281). In the study *A Rationale and Strategy for Adapting Dialogic Reading for Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder: RECALL,* when given a choice between reading in a RECALL style versus a listed format of words, the majority of students tested preferred the RECALL approach. Not only did the students prefer this method, but their memory of the words was also memorized in a more efficient manner than those who chose the list format (Sullivan, Konrad, Joseph, Luu, 2013, pp. 102-108). Overall, the RECALL approach is more effective for students with ASD.

**Recommendations & Future Directions**

From our findings it seems that Dialogic Reading has been very beneficial to those who have Autism Spectrum Disorder as well as their teachers. Children with Autism can have a very difficult time with communication, as we have mentioned before, so having a system that can help and encourage them to communicate is beneficial for both the teacher and the student. Through dialogic reading, as we have mentioned, the student is able to take on a new role as being the teacher themselves. They read their book and essentially teach the teacher or aid about it. It is good for expressing words and developing language skills. This is a wonderful program; however, what is there to be done for a student who does not communicate verbally? As we know, Autism Spectrum Disorder can sometimes cause a child to be nonverbal altogether, so it would be in the student’s best interest to have an alternate version of the program that could at least aid them in transitioning to communication. Perhaps a model of the program through online or app style could be designed. This would allow even the nonverbal students to be able to express their knowledge of the book. Interactive selections or a place to type descriptions would give those nonverbal students a chance to show what they know in a way that is most comfortable for them. As we covered in the sections above, people with Autism Spectrum Disorder do not cope well with over stimulation, so a group station setting such as one that is used for Dialogic reading may not suit them well. Giving these students a quiet place to discuss their book will provide a much calmer environment to do their work. Dialogic reading is a fantastic program in itself, but with this small adjustment, it would be able to benefit so many more people along with those who already are reaping the benefits.

**Conclusion**

After reviewing various research articles, studies, and multiple books, we have concluded that our hypothesis was supported.Initially, we hypothesized that we would find that the use of RECALL Dialogic Reading approach for young children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in schools will be beneficial in many ways, more than just the standard literacy skill improvement that comes with dialogic reading. That is exactly what we found in every study and article that we reviewed. They all concluded that RECALL Dialogic Reading greatly helps students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in reading, writing, oral skills, as well as social and emotional skills. Through the use of this program, students with ASD are allowed the opportunity to practice their social and emotional skills by engaging with the teacher and relating to the characters in the stories they read. These are skills that some people with ASD are greatly lacking in, so the opportunity to develop these skills while simultaneously increasing literacy skills, especially at such a young age, is an amazing opportunity. Overall, we feel that the use of RECALL Dialogic Reading for students with ASD is very effective, and teachers with inclusion classes should highly consider utilizing this tool.

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