

Fall 2008

Reading Comprehension Strategies for Students with Autism: a Guide and Social Skills Unit Plan

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READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM:
A GUIDE AND SOCIAL SKILLS UNIT PLAN

by

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A Research Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

REGIS UNIVERSITY

December, 2008

ABSTRACT

Successful Reading Comprehension Strategies for Students with Autism

This project was initiated in order to help general and special education teachers in elementary classrooms with successful strategies, to assess and teach students with autism how to better comprehend text. The unit developed does two things: one, it educates teachers and students on a number of strategies to use in reading comprehension, and two, it helps students with autism gain important social skills. Each lesson is designed to incorporate Colorado Content Reading and Writing Standards, with aligned Social and Access skills.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The number of students with autism is steadily increasing, and these students are being mainstreamed in the general education classrooms more and more (O'Connor & Klein, 2004). Reading achievement is an important issue in the United States, and the reauthorization of the Individuals With Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEA) in 2004, as well as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (both cited in Lanter & Wilson, 2008) requires students with autism to achieve curricular standards in literacy and prepare for standardized tests in order to, ultimately, achieve higher levels of success in academics, employment, and other life skills (Lanter & Watson). Autism is a wide spectrum, yet researchers and educators see a gap between reading decoding and fluency and reading comprehension among students with autism. Reading comprehension is important for all students to learn, and while there are successful strategies used with students without disabilities, there are tools to differentiate and accommodate students with autism when they learn to comprehend text.

Statement of the Problem

Historically, reading comprehension strategies have been utilized in the general education classrooms, but how can they be used to help students with special needs? With the increasing number of students who are: (a) identified with autism disorder, (b) mainstreamed, and (c) work in the community, it is important that these students and adults learn to read well. Many high functioning people with autism show a wide gap

between their ability to decode and comprehend reading. It is important that educators differentiate the use of their literacy models and teaching tools to meet the needs of the diverse classroom and try new strategies geared toward the unique challenges that students with autism face when they comprehend text.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project will be to inform educators about the difficulties that students with autism experience with reading comprehension, as well as to include the best practices to incorporate for improvements in this area. Based on the literature, the author will demonstrate in a curricular unit a few of the successful reading comprehension strategies that can be used in the general and special education classrooms for students with autism.

Chapter Summary

It is this researcher's position that educators should realize that students with autism, while it appears that many are good readers, tend to have difficulty in comprehension of text and need strategies tailored to their strengths and challenges. As stated by Akin and MacKinney (2004), "the range of autism requires an individual approach to best serve the needs of the child" (p. 38). In order for students with autism to attain their literacy goals, it is necessary to: (a) get to know the students, (b) communicate with one another, (c) differentiate, (d) use accommodations, and (e) follow the individualized education plans (IEPs). In Chapter 2, the Review of Literature, this researcher presents the background material to support the position that reading comprehension is crucial in literacy development, and students with autism need revised instructional strategies.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this review of literature, the author will analyze and interpret the numerous findings about the unique challenges students with autism experience when they try to comprehend text. Then, this author will incorporate a scope and sequence of successful, research based reading comprehension strategies used in general education classrooms, and detail how strategies can be differentiated for students with autism. For this project, the author will develop a curricular unit, which is presented in Chapter 4.

Educators have noticed that many students with autism show a disjunction between decoding and reading comprehension (O'Connor & Klein, 2004). Difficulties in reading comprehension can be hard to detect, especially in students with autism who are able to decode and are fluent readers. The ultimate goal of reading is to understand what has been written, and although the ability to decode individual words is a crucial first step, it is no guarantee that adequate comprehension will follow (Nation & Norbury, 2005).

An Overview of Autism

According to the staff of Autism Speaks (2008), 1 in 150 children is diagnosed with autism today, which means it occurs more frequently than pediatric cancer, diabetes, and AIDS combined. It is the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States. Boys are four times more likely than girls to have autism, and it occurs in all racial, ethnic, and social groups. Its causes are uncertain, and there is no cure; most

researchers believe autism is the result of a combination of genetic vulnerabilities and environmental triggers (Wallis, 2006).

As reported by the staff of Autism Speaks (2008), autism was first described by Dr. Leo Kanner, an American psychologist, in 1943 and has since been defined as a spectrum disorder. Also, in 1943, Dr. Hans Asperger, a German scientist described a milder form of the disorder that is now known as Asperger's. The five developmental disorders that fall under the umbrella of Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD) include: (a) Autism; (b) Asperger's; (c) Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (CDD); (d) Rett's Syndrome; and (e) PDD, not otherwise specified. These five disorders are characterized by varying degrees of impairment in: (a) communication skills, (b) social abilities, and (c) repetitive behaviors. "Autism can occur in combination with any other disability, or as a distinct and singular disorder" (Akin & MacKinney, 2004, p. 36).

Also reported by the staff of Autism Speaks (2008), autism impairs a person's ability to communicate and relate to others. It is associated with rigid routines and repetitive behaviors, such as the obsessive arrangement of objects or the need to follow very specific routines. Transitions can be a challenge. Many students with autism have sensory processing difficulties and may display self-stimulatory behaviors, such as: (a) the need to body rock, (b) flap arms, and (c) flick fingers (Akin & MacKinney, 2004). It can be difficult for students with autism to make eye contact, so educators should be aware that it is not a sign of disrespect. Hyperactivity and aggressive behaviors may be a concern in the classroom, as well as peers who perceive the student with autism as being odd or eccentric. Gately (2008) stated that students with autism "often have deficits in language and social cognition and difficulty interpreting and labeling emotions and

incorporating or integrating each of these aspects of communication to gain meaning in social situations” (p. 40). Frequently, it is difficult for these students to understand what others think, as well as understand: (a) sarcasm, (b) irony, and (c) metaphors (Gately). Usually, students with autism have average to above average intelligence and have exceptional rote memory, as well as excellent letter or number recognition (Akin & MacKinney).

Autism and Literacy

Many high functioning students with autism show good decoding skills yet poor reading comprehension. O’Connor and Klein (2004) found that most of these students show reading comprehension that is impaired but not entirely lacking, while their decoding skills are generally equal to, or above age level norms. The exception is single words, which appear to be automatic for high functioning students with autism. O’Connor and Klein found that students with autism had difficulties with grammatical ability and the integration of information, especially if they had low verbal ability. Also, it is difficult for these students to understand pronouns and find references in the text, which affects reading comprehension.

Nation and Norbury (2005) reported that, although the ability to decode individual words is a crucial first step, it is no guarantee that adequate comprehension will follow. Also, weaknesses in oral language are correlated with reading comprehension difficulties. Since 40% of the students with autism are nonverbal (Autism Speaks, 2008), this is a common challenge. Another factor is the function of language, which is typically confusing to many students with autism. Educators are encouraged to promote these

students' functional understanding of literacy by the provision of instruction within natural contexts (Lanter & Watson, 2008).

Phonics

How well do students with autism learn phonics? Mirenda (2003) stated:

many students with autism spend considerable instructional time trying to master phonics, the ability to recognize letter-sound relationships, which is considered by some to be an essential prerequisite skill for reading. However, the decontextualized nature of traditional phonics instruction makes it almost impossible for many of them to demonstrate mastery of the subskills in this area. (p. 272)

Broun (2004) found that many students with autism were able to learn phonics very well but were unable to apply that knowledge to decoding. Broun stated:

students do not need a thorough understanding of the alphabet to learn to read. Letters and their sounds can initially be too abstract, and letters in isolation are meaningless – many children with developmental disabilities do not perceive them as the building blocks of words. This does not mean that phonics are omitted or neglected; rather they are simply not the starting point for building reading skills for these students. (p. 37)

Hyperlexia

Some students with autism may have a condition known as *hyperlexia*, in which word recognition and decoding skills are advanced, perhaps exceptionally, but students cannot derive meaning from the written words (Craig & Telfer, 2005). Mirenda (2005) found that, usually, students with autism and hyperlexia excelled in phonics. According to Mirenda, other characteristics of hyperlexia include:

1. word reading skills that exceed what would be predicted or expected, based on cognitive and language scores on standardized tests;
2. compulsive reading of words;
3. onset of these abilities when the child is 2-5 years old; and
4. onset of these abilities in the absence of direct instruction. (p. 272)

Mirenda (2005) noted that problems with comprehension in students with autism and hyperlexia is due to an inability to understand general receptive language. Students with autism and hyperlexia are capable of learning to comprehend text, but they should not be expected to comprehend all of the words they can decode. Also, it is important to remember that not all students with autism have hyperlexia. Hyperlexia is found among students with other developmental disabilities, but the incidence is higher among students with autism (Lanter & Watson, 2008).

Differences in Language Abilities

Lanter and Watson (2008) cited Paul (1995) and stated that “it is important to understand that the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder is based in part on the presence of a communication disorder rather than a structural language disorder” (p. 37). Due to the wide range of ability on the autism spectrum, it can be expected that language abilities will vary widely from one student with autism to another. As previously reported in this review of literature, 40% of students with autism are nonverbal (Autism Speaks, 2008). Akin and MacKinney (2004) reported that language skills among students with autism range from nonverbal to extensive vocabularies and, frequently, they exhibit echolalia, a speech pattern that copies the speech of others. Although some students with autism have mature sounding vocabularies, one should not assume that they comprehend what is being said to them or what they say aloud. Also, as described by Akin and MacKinney, a student with autism may use correct grammar, but not in the correct context.

Lanter and Watson (2008) stated that: “Research suggests that the literacy skills of many students with autism spectrum disorder parallel their oral language abilities”

(p. 41). However, this is a debatable issue and raises provocative questions. For example, how many students with autism, who cannot speak, are hyperlexic and cannot demonstrate this ability? How many students with autism might be able to read and write but are never provided with the necessary supports to do so?

According to Lanter and Watson (2008), the promotion of reading skills can help students with autism advance their oral reading skills. There is no set time to teach reading. Lanter and Watson concluded that, “spoken language abilities should not be viewed as a prerequisite for literacy learning” (p. 35). Assistive technology devices should be provided for students with limited language skills, as well as alternative ways for the student to respond.

While teaching reading comprehension to special needs students is the responsibility of general and special education teachers, currently, the roles and duties of other IEP team members is being examined. As reported by Lanter and Watson (2008), school speech therapists are being urged to modify their interventions to include a literacy focus, because of their “understanding of the links between oral language abilities and reading development of students with autism positions them to serve as knowledgeable members of interdisciplinary literacy teams who are capable of illuminating and explaining certain reading difficulties” (p. 33).

The Importance of Reading Comprehension

Reading is a process in which one must make sense of text and construct meaning (Cooper & Kiger, 2006). It involves both decoding and comprehension. A strong argument can be made that reading comprehension is the most important skill to be taught in schools, since not only is it required throughout the school experience, but also

to meet the demands of functional adult living (Polloway, Patton, & Serna, 2008). Reading comprehension can be a difficult, complex skill for many general and special education students to learn. Nation and Norbury (2005) stated that “comprehension is clearly a highly complex process that may fail for a number of different reasons, even for readers without disorders” (p. 26). Carnine, Silbert, Kame’enui, & Tarver (2004, as cited in Polloway et al.) maintained that, “Unfortunately, reading comprehension has been an area to which inadequate amounts of instructional time and attention have too often been dedicated” (p. 197). It is important that educators emphasize that comprehension is the reason for reading; if a student can read the words, but he or she does not understand what is being read, this is not really reading (Partnership for Reading, 2003). Good readers are active and purposeful. Therefore, reading comprehension should be taught so that students can understand, remember, and communicate with others about what they have read. Phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary are the stepping stones that lead the way to comprehension. However, educators should not wait until students have mastered the basics of reading; reading comprehension should be emphasized from the very beginning (Partnership for Reading). All students need to understand that the ultimate goal of reading is comprehension.

The Process of Comprehension

Reading is an interactive process. For students to learn to comprehend text, they must gain skills in phonics, decoding, whole (i.e., sight) words, and use prior knowledge (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). Students with autism face unique challenges due to their disability. Many educators spend considerable amount of instructional time teaching phonics, the ability to recognize letter/sound relationships, as a prerequisite skill

for reading. This does not appear to be the best approach for students with autism, as they have difficulties with the decontextualized nature of traditional phonics instruction (Mirenda, 2003). Broun (2004) suggested that phonics should not be used as the starting point to build reading skills for students with autism, because “letters and their sounds can initially be too abstract, and letters in isolation are meaningless – many children with developmental disabilities do not perceive them as the building blocks of words” (p. 37). Comprehension is lost when words become a slow combination of separate sounds. Students with autism may find it easier and more efficient to learn to read by recognition of whole words, or sight words.

In addition, the use of background, or prior knowledge, is a crucial skill for reading comprehension (Partnership for Reading, 2003). This is a notable challenge for students with autism when they read text. Frequently, students with autism make limited use of background knowledge during reading, and/or they use incorrect background knowledge (O’Connor & Klein, 2004). According to O’Connor and Klein, it is difficult for students with autism to: (a) resolve pronouns in text, and (b) integrate information. Also, they may have delayed grammatical abilities, which can negatively affect reading comprehension. Gately (2008) stated:

To obtain reading comprehension, students must understand the author’s vocabulary, style of writing, and story structure as well as characters’ social experiences and how these contribute to the development of motivations, goals, and actions within a story setting. Students need to develop sensitivity to the emotions of characters and how these emotions play a role in characters’ choices. Intuiting the motivation of characters and appreciating their intent are higher level comprehension skills which may be difficult for children with ASD. (p. 40)

Best Practices: A Scope and Sequence of Comprehension Strategies

Harvey and Goudvis (2007) identified specific comprehension strategies, which include: (a) make connections, (b) question, (c) visualize, (d) infer, and (e) synthesize.

Also, according to the staff of the Partnership for Reading (2003), explicit, or direct instruction, is best to teach reading comprehension. The steps of explicit instruction are:

1. Direct explanation: the teacher explains to students why the strategy helps comprehension and when to apply the strategy;
2. Modeling: the teacher models, or demonstrates, how to apply the strategy, usually by “thinking aloud” while reading the text that the students are using;
3. Guided practice: the teacher guides and assists students as they learn how and when to apply the strategy;
4. Application: the teacher helps students practice the strategy until they can apply it independently. (p. 53)

Making Connections

As reported by Cooper and Kiger (2006), students need to be taught strategies in order to activate and develop prior knowledge, thus, they can gain independence in reading comprehension. The authors provided a checklist of the strategies for the construction of meaning:

1. Visualize: use mental images;
2. Monitor: ask if it makes sense. If not, then reread, read ahead, look at illustrations, ask for help, think about words;
3. Infer/predict: look for important information, think about what may happen;
4. Identify important information: story elements, main ideas;
5. Generate and answer questions: think while reading, look for answers;
6. Synthesize: combine what is known with what is read, may need to change predictions;
7. Summarize: think about story parts, main ideas and details. (p. 136)

It is important that students know they need to relate the text to prior knowledge and life experiences; they should be aware of this process (O'Connor & Klein, 2004).

The more readers know about a topic, the easier it is to connect the text with background knowledge (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). The use of topics of interest would help to motivate the student with autism and increase their use of their knowledge on the subject. Also, it is helpful to give students with autism pertinent, accurate background knowledge in order to enhance reading comprehension (Gately, 2008). Questions should be asked, related to the big ideas of the text, to determine if the student has some background knowledge.

Activation of Background Knowledge Strategies

Cooper and Kiger (2006) stated that “two basic strategies students can use to activate their prior knowledge and set their own purposes for reading are preview and predict and K-W-L” (p. 87). With assistance and accommodations, students with autism could benefit greatly from these strategies. For preview and predict, the student is to skim the text and predict what he or she thinks will happen or what will be learned, depending on the text. One way to do this is the use of a traditional picture walk. Gately (2008) stated,

To ensure that incorrect assumptions are repaired and not reinforced while conducting picture walks with children with autism, it is essential to maintain a more structured picture walk than may be needed for typically developing peers. Focusing children with autism on pictures satisfies their tendency to learn visually and is more effective than simply talking or reading a summary of the book jacket. (p. 41)

Setting the purpose in advance was described by Polloway et al. (2008) as an effective strategy to stimulate background knowledge and teach students to take responsibility. For example, a teacher can introduce a text and say, “As you read, think

about what would you do if you were caught in a flood as Van is in this story” (Polloway et al., p. 211).

Students with autism could benefit from the use of a strategy poster for preview and predict, which gives examples of questions to ask oneself before, during, and after reading. The K-W-L strategy is used to activate prior knowledge, students list: (a) what they *know*, (b) what they *want* to learn, and (c) what they *learned* or still need to learn after reading the text. Also, a personal K-W-L strategy sheet could be beneficial and an easy accommodation for the student with autism. Graphic and semantic organizers, which can look like maps, webs, graphs, charts, frames or clusters can be used to connect and organize the concepts and information from the text, which activate prior knowledge and assist in comprehension (Partnership for Reading, 2003). The use of tools, such as picture walks, charts, and graphic organizers, provide support to ensure that text is easier to understand (Gately, 2008). Modeling these strategies can be effective for all students to help them learn how to comprehend text.

Another strategy, which was developed by O’Connor and Klein (2004) to use with students with autism and reading comprehension, is procedural facilitation. Three forms of procedural facilitation were identified by O’Connor and Klein, based on their effectiveness and relevance, “given the metacognitive difficulties of students with autism” (p. 117). These forms are:

1. Prereading questions, a form of priming, helped to activate prior knowledge.

2. Anaphoric cuing, which prompted readers to pause and monitor for comprehension. Students were prompted to choose from three possible referents of a pronoun to check for understanding.
3. Cloze task, which required students to make predictions as they read, in order to make use of the text.

O'Connor and Klein concluded that most of the students with autism in the study demonstrated only modest comprehension of the passages. Use of the anaphoric cueing passages provided the biggest gains in students' reading comprehension, especially among those students with lower grammatical ability. Also, O'Connor and Klein found that the students with the poorest comprehension scores in the anaphoric cueing passages used all their attention for decoding, and motivation appeared to be a critical issue.

O'Connor and Klein stated that the "prereading questions appeared to contribute more to the comprehension of students whose comprehension ability was higher to begin with" (p. 123). The cloze effects were similar to the prereading passages. Overall, the students did well with the cloze items, but O'Connor and Klein concluded that it is vital that students complete cloze items correctly for reading comprehension improvements to be seen. In the findings from the O'Connor and Klein study, several educational strategies were identified that could benefit students with autism and reading comprehension: (a) the use of anaphoric cueing, (b) prompt students to check the antecedents of pronouns as they read, and (c) the use of computer software could be a successful independent strategy for the identification of antecedents and increase motivation in the process.

Questioning Strategies

Harvey and Goudvis (2007) stated that, “Questions are at the heart of teaching and learning. Questions open the doors to understanding. We need to celebrate kids’ questions and help facilitate their answers” (p. 18). A successful technique is to teach students to read to remember and give a purpose for reading. According to Polloway et al. (2008), successful questioning strategies can be teacher directed, student directed, and peer directed. Typically, questioning by teachers is the strategy used most often to teach reading comprehension. If the teacher models the use of questions before, during, and after reading, this approach can be effective. “Factual, inferential, and analytical questions are all essential for comprehension development” (Polloway et al., p. 210). However, the authors cautioned against teachers’ use of too many factual questions and suggested the use of higher level questioning, especially for students with autism. They stated, “Questions that stimulate thought and motivate students to higher levels of comprehension can be asked on material at any readability level” (p. 210). Lanter and Watson (2008) recommended that the focus should be on deep rather than surface questions, since factual questions do not help students with autism draw inferences, which is a common challenge. Another form of teacher directed questioning, which can specifically benefit students with autism, is the use of “wh” questions, which can increase communication skills (Akin & MacKinney, 2004).

The important facet of student directed questioning is that students learn to ask themselves questions, thus, they become active, independent readers (Polloway et al., 2008). The challenge that students with autism experience is the lack of metacognitive skills, and the inability to monitor their comprehension. Harvey and Goudvis (2007)

defined metacognitive knowledge as “an awareness and understanding of how one thinks and uses strategies during reading” (p. 25). Self-questioning can stimulate and develop these skills (Polloway et al.). If students with autism are given direct instruction and see the strategies modeled, their metacognitive skills will be enhanced. Also, the use of prompt cards, or laminated reminders, will help students find the main idea and help them to paraphrase and summarize. One example was provided by Polloway et al.,

1. Who (or what) is the subject?
2. What is the action?
3. Why (or where, when) did something occur?
4. How was something done (or how did it look)? (p. 212)

With careful consideration, the use of peer directed, or reciprocal teaching, can greatly benefit students with autism (Gately, 2008). Use of this format increases social interactions, which are needed by students with autism. Polloway et al. (2008) stated, “The key to the effectiveness of reciprocal teaching is that the approach enables students to learn specific strategies that foster their comprehension rather than simply asking them questions about what they have read” (p. 213). Think aloud is another form of reciprocal teaching, in which the teacher or peer models thinking about text to the student. This is recommended for students with disabilities who have difficulty with metacognition, and it helps with: (a) prediction, (b) questions, (c) clarification, and (d) summarization (Gately). Harvey and Goudvis (2007) provided tips for thinking aloud: (a) share aspects of the inner conversation, that is, the many thoughts, reactions, connections, confusions, and questions that pop up as one reads; (b) share how one activates and connects background knowledge; (c) share questions; (d) share inferences; (e) verbalize confusing points and demonstrate fix up strategies; and (f) share how one sorts and sifts information

to determine important ideas. Think aloud is yet another example of direct, or explicit, instruction.

Visualization Strategies

Visualizing and inference are intertwined in the process of reading comprehension. Harvey and Goudvis (2007) stated, “When we visualize, we are in fact inferring, but with mental images rather than words and thoughts. Inferring is the proverbial reading between the lines” (p. 131). Usually, students with autism are strong in visualization, but have difficulty with inference, since they are required to use background knowledge and gain meaning based on their ability to read: (a) faces, (b) body language, (c) emotions, (d) expressions, and (e) tone. Students need to be taught that the author of the text may not give all the information and so they will need to infer to gain meaning.

As reported by staff of the Partnership for Reading (2003), the use of mental imagery helps readers to understand and remember what they read better than readers who do not visualize. Two effective visualization strategies are to ask students with autism to draw pictures and use wordless picture books. “Many times kids can express through drawing what they may have difficulty articulating in oral or written words” (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007, p. 149). To teach inference to students with autism, concrete strategies should be used, like: role play, play charades, and share unfamiliar items.

Visual aids, such as graphic organizers, props, and color coding, are very beneficial to students with autism when they learn to comprehend text. Grandin (2006), a gifted animal scientist and professor at Colorado State University, who has autism, discussed how she thinks in pictures and not in language in her book, titled *Thinking in*

Pictures: My Life with Autism. Many students with autism use picture schedules or visual cue cards to help transition between activities. Akin and MacKinney (2004) reported that “A high number of autistic people show a marked preference for visual stimulation over auditory. For literate autistic children, word processing may be easier than verbal communication” (p. 37). Students with autism could benefit when oral and written forms of language are paired, such as listen to books on tape as they read the book, or use computer software that says the students’ written text aloud (Craig & Telfer, 2005). Lanter and Watson (2008) emphasized that, “Visual aids always should be coupled with supportive, interactive dialogue” (p. 41). There are several computer software programs that incorporate pictures to text and repeat the words aloud, such as: (a) PixWriter (Slater Software, 2008); (b) Co:Writer (Don Johnston, Inc., 2008), and (c) Read:OutLoud (Don Johnston, Inc.). From the Don Johnston Incorporation, the Start-to-Finish Publishing series provides narrative and informational texts that are written for two reading levels and delivered in three media formats. Kidspiration and Inspiration, both from Inspiration Software, Inc. (2008), are excellent tools to create personal graphic organizers on the computer, such as: (a) webs, (b) concept maps, and (c) Venn Diagrams. Also, there are free websites that are very beneficial for students with and without disabilities: www.starfall.com and <http://pbskids.org>. These computer programs can be used to successfully motivate and help students with autism to focus and enjoy the task at hand. Akin and MacKinney stated, “Students with autism exhibit less disruptive or stim behaviors when using computers, and they experience increases in attending, response time, and problems solving” (p. 37).

The use of visuals does not have to be time consuming nor expensive; even post it notes can be used to help students with autism when they need to organize information (Gately, 2008). Flashcards, puppets, the use of pictures from magazines for students to match sentences to, all can be successful strategies that are inexpensive and easy to create and can be used to retell stories. For some students, the use of thought bubbles, or cartoon sketches, can help them understand the story outline and what the main characters might be feeling. Also, post it notes can aid in the comprehension of stories, by creating sentences of the events and putting them in order. Visual aids can be effective tools at all stages of reading; for example, the use of concept webs and Venn Diagrams to preteach material and story maps or framed outlines to highlight the main idea and characters during and after reading the text (Lanter & Watson, 2008). Gately stated, “Incorporating visually cued instruction, such as graphics and color, provides tangible and concrete information important for focusing on relevant parts of the story. Visually cued instruction also helps students remember what to do or say, decrease reliance on other prompts, and increase independence” (p. 41).

The Right Text

According to Harvey and Goudvis (2007), “Text matters – a lot. When students read and respond to text that provokes thinking, they are much more likely to become active, engaged readers. How we choose text and how kids choose their own makes a difference in their literate lives” (p. 61). In order for the student with autism to learn how to engage and comprehend stories, the text should be meaningful to him or her. Lanter and Watson (2008) found that “students with autism often have particular areas of interest, such as trains, and may be highly motivated to listen to informational texts on

the subject and willing to engage in conversations or other language and literacy activities built around such texts” (p. 35). In the same method of differentiation, students should be able to find a variety of texts in the classrooms, such as: (a) picture books, (b) nonfiction and fiction text, (c) magazines, (d) comic books, and (e) newspapers. Picture books are especially important for students with autism, because of their visual learning style. While picture books are abundant in elementary schools, it would be helpful for older students with autism to use them as well. In addition, teachers should keep in mind that students without disabilities could benefit from picture books, too; differentiation strategies benefit everyone. Harvey and Goudvis stated, “Of all literature that lends itself to reading comprehension strategy instruction, picture books top the list” (p. 66). Also, it is very helpful to the student, when he or she learns to comprehend and for assessment purposes, to use stories one or two grade levels below the student’s decoding and word recognition level (Broun, 2004). Lanter and Watson (2008) cited Vaughn et al. (2000) and stated, “Control of task difficulty has been found to be a major factor in the achievement outcomes for students with learning disabilities” (p. 40).

Teaching text structure is important, so that students with autism can visually see the layout and learn how to find and gather information from the text (Cooper & Kiger, 2006). Also, it helps to tie in the purpose and the function of the text. Lanter and Watson (2008) found that, if teachers and speech therapists provide reading instruction within natural contexts, which are built around routine events in the classroom, it promotes the students’ functional understanding of literacy. The table of contents, chapter titles, section headings, and charts are in the text for a reason, and they will help students with understanding and comprehension. Location of the main idea and transition words

should be taught, and a list of common transition words such as *before*, *after*, *while*, *during*, should be provided for students. Another visual strategy to use for transition words is to have the students highlight the words in a story.

It may be difficult for students with autism to recognize the differences between narrative and expository texts, and they may need appropriate strategies (Cooper & Kiger, 2006). Narrative text is similar to storytelling and includes: (a) characters, (b) setting, (c) events, (d) problem, and (e) solution; it is sequential and has a beginning, middle, and end (Polloway et al., 2008). One visual strategy to teach narrative text format to students with autism is to take their favorite movie that tells a story and display how it follows the same format. Gately (2008) suggested the use of simple who-did-what sequence charts with sentence strips. Also, visual cues, such as color coding, could be helpful, as well as story maps and graphic organizers to help see the order of action and the relationship of actions between the characters, which can be difficult for students with autism to grasp (Gately). Emotional thermometers are another visual aid strategy, to help students see the feelings and emotions of characters in a story, with the use of shades of color.

Expository text is factual and includes textbooks, newspapers, and magazines. Even though the story elements are not found in expository texts, students need to know the features of cause and effect and compare and contrast (Polloway et al., 2008). This is where headings, charts, and location of the main idea and transition words can help students. Usually, nonfiction text is less complicated for students with autism. Broun (2004) stated that “the use of nonfiction may be a viable alternative when students with

autism demonstrate significant difficulty with understanding the social and emotional aspects of fiction” (p. 39).

Another type of text, that speech therapists and special education teachers use regularly with students with autism, are social stories (Gately, 2008). Social stories are based on the students’ personal vocabulary and written in first person. They can be created on any topic and may include pictures. The use of social stories can help decrease anxiety in regard to transitions and help the student remember routines, and they can help students to understand their actions and how those actions affect others. The student may need guidance, but a social story can show cause and effect and problem solving strategies as well. For example: *I like to hum. When I hum in class, Mrs. Brown tells me to stop because the class can’t hear her and so they won’t learn. I will hum at recess and everyone will be happy.*

When the right text has been chosen, repeated reading of the text helps students with autism to make connections and comprehend the text. Polloway et al. (2008) stated, “Comprehension improves because the attention required for decoding is minimized and automaticity is enhanced” (p. 216). Also these researchers recommended a longer oral reading stage for students with autism. The students will need direction and encouragement to transition to silent reading, which is the critical skill to develop.

Assessments

According to Polloway et al. (2008), many formal general achievement tests include subtests that measure reading comprehension, such as: (a) the Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Achievement (Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001); (b) the Peabody Individual Achievement Tests (Markwardt, 1998); (c) the Gray Oral Reading

Tests (Wiederholt & Bryant, 2001); and (d) the Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests (Woodcock, 1998, all cited in Polloway et al.). The Test of Reading Comprehension, Third Edition (TORC-3; Brown, Hammill, & Wiederholt, 1995; as cited in Polloway et al.) is a popular formal assessment that focuses only on reading comprehension and includes eight subtests, all with multiple choice items (Polloway et al.), which is helpful for students with autism. There is a wide range of informal techniques to assess how well a student with autism can comprehend text. As noted before, it is beneficial to use stories one or two grade levels below the students' decoding and word recognition level (Broun, 2004). The students can be asked to: (a) draw pictures, (b) match sentences to pictures, or (c) retell a story to effectively measure comprehension. In assessment, one should remember that students with autism are very susceptible to changes. Broun stated that, "Factors such as hunger, fatigue, seizure activity, distractability, or even the weather may all contribute to a child's inability to recall or retrieve certain words on a given day. Look for a general consistency rate of approximately 70% over a period of days" (p. 39). Review and ongoing checks are essential, and students should be provided with options during the assessment. For example, allow for: (a) yes and no, (b) true and false, (c) point to or circle answers, or (d) multiple choice formats. It should be noted that factual questions will be easier to answer (Broun). The use of assistive technology, such as the portable writing device, AlphaSmart 3000 (Renaissance Learning, 2008), helps students with autism for whom it is difficult to handwrite or express their answers verbally. Also, the text for assessments should be chosen carefully; nonfiction text and repeated readings will help students with autism. Lastly, as stated by Broun, "When evaluating comprehension, allow for accommodations and modifications. If exercises in

comprehension are graded, it may be fairer to evaluate work on the basis of what the student is able to do rather than penalize him or her for weaknesses that are an expression of autism” (p. 39).

Chapter Summary

Students with autism benefit from a supportive and structured learning environment that is consistent in regard to: (a) instruction, (b) rules, and (c) routines. It takes patience, understanding, and creativity to be able to find the best strategies for these students when they learn to comprehend text. Still, there are numerous resources, and with the use of technology, differentiation strategies, scaffolding, and the mind frame that it is best to teach to the strengths of the student, it can be very rewarding for the student and everyone involved in the process. Other factors that play important roles are: (a) motivation, (b) home environments rich in communication, and (c) high expectations from the parents and teachers (Mirenda, 2003). The strategies listed in this review of literature are easy to implement and can be easily taught to general education staff. Gately (2008) stated, “using these strategies with all students in the general education classroom will not only benefit students with autism within general education classrooms, but can enhance the instruction of all students” (p. 45). In Chapter 3, Methods, the procedures for the development of this project are detailed.

Chapter 3

METHOD

The purpose of this project was to provide a scope and sequence of successful reading comprehension strategies, as well as develop a unit plan for teachers to use for students with autism to improve their reading comprehension. The gap between reading fluency and reading comprehension came to the attention of this researcher when she worked as a special education paraprofessional in an elementary school for 3 years. Several problems became apparent. It was through this teaching experience, conversations with general and special education teachers, and reading journal articles that this researcher saw the need to provide students with the instruction and accommodations they need to successfully comprehend what they read.

Target Audience

This project was designed for application with students with autism in Grades 1-5, but could be adapted for those in higher grades. General and special education teachers, who need a guide to teach reading comprehension strategies for students with autism, as well as paraprofessionals and support staff who work with students with autism, and the parents of these students will be interested in this project.

Goals and Procedures

The goal of this project was to provide general and special education teachers with a resource to facilitate the complex process of reading comprehension, specifically for students with autism. In Chapter 2, the review of literature demonstrated the need for

the differentiation of instruction for students with autism. Subsequent chapters were organized to include an overview of autism, typical reading strengths, challenges of students with autism and the importance of reading comprehension and the relationship between reading skills. Additionally, current trends in general and special education and best practices were presented. In Chapter 4, the author provided a curricular unit and, more specifically, lessons that illustrated the practical uses of the strategies presented.

Colleague Assessment

Assessment of the curricular unit was obtained from several colleagues through formal feedback, recommendations, and suggestions for further research. Each colleague was given a copy of the unit plan and asked to review it for timeliness, ease of use, and relevancy. The author will use the information from the feedback to make changes in the future, and the feedback will be addressed in Chapter 5.

Chapter Summary

Autism is a complex disorder, and reading comprehension is a complex process. Through this project, this researcher used knowledge gained from an extensive review of literature and personal teaching experience to provide teachers with the timely and meaningful tools needed to address the problems that students with autism experience with reading comprehension.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

This project was initiated in order to help general and special education teachers in elementary classrooms with successful strategies, to assess and teach students with autism how to better comprehend text. The unit developed does two things: one, it educates teachers and students on a number of strategies to use in reading comprehension, and two, the focus is on friendships and social skills. Getting along with others is a major topic in elementary grades, and it is especially important to aid students with autism in social skills acquisition. All of these lessons have been created so that students of all levels can participate and be challenged in their different strengths and learning abilities. The unit was developed for first and second grade level readers, but can be modified for most early elementary classrooms.

An important part of this unit is the assessment of students' actual use and understanding of the comprehension strategies. It can be difficult for teachers to realize a student is having difficulties with reading comprehension, especially if the student is good at fluency and decoding. It should also be noted that one strategy might be successful for one student with autism and may have no effect on another student with autism. As with all students, it is important to get to know the student's strengths, and differentiate. Accommodations and modifications should be used for students with autism in the general education classrooms, as needed, as well as assistive technology. Teaching

to the students' strengths and developing their talents is an important goal, especially for students with autism.

The unit is focused on two common difficulties students with autism face: (a) comprehending text, and (b) learning valuable social skills. There are a total of 15 lessons; teachers can decide how many lessons to use each week. This project covers many of the Colorado Content Standards for Reading and Writing, as well as aligned Social and Access skills. Materials supporting the strategies and classroom applications are provided in the appendices. Teaching tips and strategies for students with autism are found in Appendix A; resources to use for the social skills lessons in Appendix B; graphic organizers to use during the lessons, in Appendix C; and the teacher survey Likert scale used for the peer assessment in Appendix D. The author introduces these assessors in the following section of this chapter. In chapter 5, the suggestions made by these assessors for future research is discussed in detail.

Colleague Assessors

The author requested three colleagues to review the work. These colleagues were chosen for their expertise and represent different aspects of teaching within the United States. Teacher A is a first grade teacher who has been teaching for nine years. Teacher B has taught special education for 28 years, and Teacher C is a literacy specialist in a Title 1 elementary school, with seven years of experience. All three teachers have masters' degrees.

Colleague Recommendations

The author requested that these three colleagues preview and critique the unit plan. Each colleague completed a survey (See Appendix D) which comprised of seven

Likert scale questions and five discussion questions. The colleagues were asked to respond to the Likert scale questions by circling one of the following choices: (a) 5=strongly agree, (b) 4=agree, (c) 3=not sure, (d) 2=disagree, (e) 1=strongly disagree, and (f) N/A=non applicable.

Evaluation of the reading comprehension and social skills unit plan was well received. One assessor stated, “Many new teachers are graduating from teaching institutions with minimal exposure to the needs of students with autism. Students with autism often need revised instructional strategies. This unit provides lessons for grades 1-5, which will encompass a variety of skill levels. It also incorporates many of the best instructional practices found in current research.”

Specifically, the results of the Likert scale questions were as follows:

1. Unit meets curriculum standards for literacy and social skills for lower elementary.

Total score: 15/15.

2. This unit details the best practices to use for students with autism.

Total score: 14/15.

3. The resources found in the appendices are helpful for comprehension lessons.

Total score: 15/15.

4. This unit is easy to understand and follow.

Total score: 15/15.

5. This unit takes into account many different types of learners.

Total score: 15/15.

6. The needs of all abilities can be met with this unit.

Total score: 15/15. One assessor noted, “as long as the teacher has para, volunteer, or specialist assistance.”

7. Lesson plans meet stated objectives.

Total score: 15/15.

The three assessors noted specific areas of strength in the unit plan. Teacher A thought the unit plan would benefit general education students as well, in their socialization, and she felt it heightened her awareness and need to dialogue and create opportunities to teach social skills. Teacher B thought the graphic organizers and resources were very valuable for her work with students with autism. She felt the lessons were hands on and user friendly. Teacher C thought the greatest strength of the unit plan was the focus on comprehension. She especially liked the visuals, modeling and explicit instruction included in the lessons.

Chapter 5 is a detailed discussion of the comments that the three assessors made regarding the unit plan, which begins on the following page. Their discussion includes comments regarding the contributions, limitations and recommendations for future study.

UNIT PLAN

Name:		
Title: Learning about social skills using reading comprehension strategies for students with autism		
Content Area: Reading comprehension, Social skills acquisition	Grades: 1-5	Duration: 15 lessons, 40 minutes for each lesson. 2 weeks before: begin search for DVD's, books, and other resources.
<p>Standards/Benchmarks: Colorado Content Standards for Reading and Writing</p> <p><u>Standard 1: Students read and understand a variety of materials.</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use comprehension skills such as previewing, predicting, inferring, comparing and contrasting, re-reading and self-monitoring, summarizing, identifying the author's purpose, and determining the main idea. • make connections between their reading and what they already know, and identify what they need to know about a topic before reading about it. <p><u>Standard 2: Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences.</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use strategies such as lists, outlining, cause/effect relationships, comparison/contrast, and problem/solution. • use handwriting or word processing to produce a product that is legible. <p><u>Standard 3: Students write and speak using conventional grammar, usage, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use correct sentence structure. <p><u>Standard 4: Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make predictions, analyze, and draw conclusions. • use reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing to define and solve problems. <p><u>Standard 5: Students read to locate, select, and make use of relevant information from a variety of media, reference, and technological sources.</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • paraphrase, summarize, organize, and synthesize information. <p><u>Standard 6: Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience.</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • know and use literary terminology. • read literature to understand places, people, events, and vocabulary. 		

CDE Social Skills Integration:

- Empathy –detecting and identifying one’s own feelings.
- Verbal/Non-verbal communication – using “I Messages”, employing active listening and using body language to convey messages.
- Conflict Management – address a conflict using de-escalating techniques.

CDE Access Skills Integration:

- Communication and Basic Language skills –responding to others, acknowledging and honoring other’s statement of needs, wants, and feelings, and using alternative communication methods.
- Decision making and Problem solving – using conflict resolution, self-monitoring behavior, transitioning from one environment/activity to another.
- Self Advocacy – asking for and/or accepting peer support, expressing simple feeling states and others’ feeling states.
- Inter/Intrapersonal – demonstrating socially acceptable behaviors for the situation, cooperatively working with others in group situations, applying conflict management techniques.

Objectives: Students will:

- Use strategies to effectively comprehend text
- Build skills in social awareness
- Express feelings
- Explore the theme of friendship and the relationships that empower non-violent methods of problem solving

Resources and Materials: See lesson plans and Appendices.

Enduring Understandings and Essential Questions: It is important for everyone to be able to comprehend what you read, and use appropriate social skills in school, home and community, in order to get along well with others and gain and sustain friendships.

Prerequisite Knowledge: basic literacy skills, reading at a first grade level or above.

Assessment: Ongoing observations, worksheets, role playing, reflections, and discussions should be recorded. Formative, summative, and rubric assessments will be used throughout the unit plan.

Students with autism are very susceptible to changes. Look for a general consistency rate of approximately 70% over a period of days.

Data Collection: Portfolio of work – graphic organizers, reflections, comprehension games and worksheets, participation, assessments.

Lessons and Activities:Lesson 1: Learning about friends centers

Pre-assessment centers

Lesson 2: What it means to be nice

Model Me DVD, T-chart

Lesson 3: Reading about friends

Preview & Predict, graphic organizers

Lesson 4: Making connections card game

Comprehension strategies, taking turns

Lesson 5: How to play together

Visualizing activity: creating social stories

Lesson 6: Good sportsmanship

Sequencing activity

Lesson 7: It's fun to share

Summarizing, identifying important info

Lesson 8: Do you like questions?

Questioning activity

Lesson 9: Bullies are Bad

Role playing, sentence structure

Lesson 10: More about Bullies

K-W-L, role playing

Lesson 11: You & I

Compare & contrast

Lesson 12: Labeling emotions

Emotional thermometers, emotion words

Lesson 13: You affect me!

Cause & Effect

Lesson 14: How to be a good friend

Answer questions, retell the story

Lesson 15: I'm a good reader & a good friend!

Assessment centers

Differentiation:

This has been designed to meet differentiation needs of all students. See lesson plans.

Independent Practice: (Homework and Practice) Reading, games, graphic organizers, reflections. Repeated readings will be encouraged.	Differentiation: Assistive technology, word processing, extra time and assistance.
Summarize/Evaluate/Reflect: Getting along with others is a major topic in elementary grades, and it is especially important to aid students with autism in social skills acquisition. This unit plan utilizes the best practices and strategies found in research, to help students with and without autism how to more successfully comprehend text.	

Lesson 1

Title:	Learning about friends centers		
Content Area:	Social skills, Reading comprehension	Grades: 1-5	Duration: 40 min.
Standards and Benchmarks:	Colorado Reading & Writing Standards 1, 2, 4, 5, 6. CDE Social Skills & Access Skills Integration		
Objectives:	Students will be pre-assessed of their reading comprehension strategies and skills, as well as social skills, in centers.		
Resources and Materials:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Books from the library, about how to get along with one another and why friendships are important (Appendix B, p. 72). - Graphic organizers (Appendix C, p. 75). - Paper, pencils or keyboard, colored utensils. - White board/chart paper. - Flash cards with parts of a book (title, author, front cover, etc.). - Pre made questions related to book read aloud. - Pre made questions for preview and predict center. 		
Differentiation:	Keyboarding instead of handwriting, if handwriting or fine motor skill is a challenge. Written response if student is nonverbal. Extra assistance.		
Preparing Students for the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions To be used as a general or special education classroom or small group activity, during regular literacy time. Explain that <i>first</i> you'll review the friendship unit and comprehension strategies, <i>then</i> you'll travel through 4 centers.		
Teaching the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set • Pre-Assessment/Activating Background Knowledge • Teacher Input, Modeling, & Checking for Understanding • Guided Practice • Independent Practice • Closure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher will discuss the theme and what social skills and comprehension strategies will be learned, and write on board. - Teacher will read aloud a book based on social skills/friendships. - Teacher will have three centers set up for assessment and explain the purpose to students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preview & Predict center – match flashcards to parts of a book, if no teacher/helper/paraprofessional at table, then have a book with numbers on the parts, have a numbered sheet of paper per student and they can either write in the answers or have multiple choices and they circle the answer. Have students write, draw or choose from multiple choices what they think the story will be about, what their predictions are. - Graphic organizers center - complete 2 graphic organizers of the students' choice, based on the book read aloud. Be sure to explain how to fill out the graphic organizers first. - Answering questions – a short list of general and detailed questions from the story. Include multiple choice, yes/no choices, and/or allow for drawings. Have a copy of the book at the center so that students can read again or find answers in the text. 		

	- Praise and reward students. Discuss why it's important to learn about getting along with others and understanding and remembering what you read.
Assessment:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Keep as a baseline for a running record and ongoing observations. - Matching parts of a book, predictions. - Question sheet. - Graphic organizers, determining comprehension and reflection.
Notes & Reflections:	This lesson will be used again, for the last lesson of the unit plan, to get an accurate assessment of the social skills and reading comprehension strategies students learned.

Lesson 2

Title:	What it means to be nice		
Content Area:	Social skills, Reading comprehension	Grades: 1-5	Duration: 40 min.
Standards and Benchmarks:	Colorado Reading & Writing Standards 1, 2, 4, 5. CDE Social Skills & Access Skills Integration		
Objectives:	Students will learn basic social skills; what it looks and feels like to be nice to one another.		
Resources and Materials:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Model Me Kids <i>Time for a playdate</i> or <i>Time for school</i> DVD, or a similar video/DVD that focuses on social skills and friendship (Appendix B, p. 72). - Graphic organizers: T-chart (Appendix C, p. 75). - White board/chart paper. - Paper, pencils or keyboard. - Emotional thermometer 		
Differentiation:	Keyboarding instead of handwriting, if handwriting or fine motor skill is a challenge. Written response if student is nonverbal. Use closed captioning for additional reading reinforcement and for students who have hearing difficulties.		
Preparing Students for the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions To be used as a general or special education classroom or small group activity, during regular literacy time. Explain that <i>first</i> we'll talk about being nice, <i>then</i> we'll watch a movie, and <i>last</i> , we'll talk about what we learned.		
Teaching the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set • Pre-Assessment/Activating Background Knowledge • Teacher Input, Modeling, & Checking for Understanding • Guided Practice • Independent Practice • Closure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher will discuss what it looks like to be nice to one another, drawing a T-chart (looks like, sounds like) on the white board and recording responses in the appropriate places. - Students should be encouraged to move around the classroom to find a comfortable spot to watch the program. They may either have T-charts or paper with them to take notes or draw pictures for comprehension, or wait until after the program is over. - After the program is over, encourage students to turn to their classmate and tell them 2 things they learned or liked from the program. If it's a small group, have a group discussion. - Refer back to the T-chart. Did the actors from the program display what was written? Add more. Depending on ability, have students copy or create their own T-chart, so they have a copy for themselves. May use nonlinguistic representations. - Ask students to think about how they feel when someone is mean to them, and then when someone is nice. Display an emotional thermometer, use 1 color for being mean (going down), another color for being nice (going up). 		
Assessment:	- Observation: participation, responses in discussion. T-charts.		
Notes & Reflections:	Good visual activity for students with autism; watching the program, utilizing a T-chart and emotional thermometer.		

Lesson 3

Title:	Reading about Friends		
Content Area:	Social skills, Reading comprehension	Grades: 1-5	Duration: 40 min.
Standards and Benchmarks:	Colorado Reading & Writing Standards 1, 2, 4. CDE Social Skills & Access Skills Integration		
Objectives:	Students will learn and practice basic social and friendship skills, using stories and comprehension strategies and reflecting on what they have read.		
Resources and Materials:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Books from the library, about how to get along with one another and why friendships are important. (Appendix B, p. 72). - Graphic organizers: Venn Diagram, T-chart, K-W-L. (Appendix C, p. 75) - Paper, pencils or keyboard. - Cd or tape players. - White board/chart paper/overhead projector. - Flash cards with simple greetings. - Flash cards with parts of a book (title, author, front cover, etc.) 		
Differentiation:	Keyboarding instead of handwriting, if handwriting or fine motor skill is a challenge. Written response if student is nonverbal. Books on tape/cd or having the books read to the student by the teacher, paraprofessional or peer helper.		
Preparing Students for the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions To be used as a general or special education classroom or small group activity, during regular literacy time. Explain that <i>first</i> you'll practice greeting each other, <i>then</i> the teacher will read a book, and <i>last</i> , we'll use graphic organizers.		
Teaching the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set • Pre-Assessment/Activating Background Knowledge • Teacher Input, Modeling, & Checking for Understanding • Guided Practice • Independent Practice • Closure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher will share a story with students about why he/she likes their friends and what he/she does to be a good friend. Teacher will ask the students about their friends, what they like to do together. - Teacher will pick a student to model basic social skills with; such as <i>Hi Tyler, how was your weekend? Would you like to read this book with me?</i> The teacher could then ask the students to practice greeting one another and asking a similar question. Assist students who need more guidance. Could have flash cards with simple greetings to hand out for students who are stuck. - Show the students the books collected for this unit, based on friendships and social skills. Pick one book to read aloud. Model how to preview and predict, with think aloud strategies. Review the names of parts of a book by matching flashcards with these parts when pointing to the location on the book: title, author, illustrator, front cover, back cover, and spine. This provides a visual aid for the students with autism to go along with the spoken words. A modification for preview and predict is to point to a character on the book cover, ask <i>What is this?</i> And, after the 		

	<p>student responds, say something like, <i>Yes, that's right. The story might be about a bully.</i> This introduces the concept of making a prediction based on the cover art.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Praise/reward the students for looking at the book or responding to questions about the book. - After reading aloud the book, choose a graphic organizer for comprehension and reflection, such as: Venn Diagram, 3 column notes, a web, K-W-L, compare/contrast, making a nonlinguistic representation. Model on the board by thinking aloud and writing the answers. - Let the students pick a book. Depending on ability levels and classroom set up, decide on silent independent reading, partner reading, books on tape/cd or let students choose. Afterwards have them choose a graphic organizer to complete, may need assistance.
Assessment:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participation during pre-assessment partner activity, discussing friends and how to greet one another. - Pre-assess for ongoing observations on parts of a book; preview and predict skills. - Graphic organizer, determining comprehension and reflection.
Notes & Reflections:	<p>Show the students where they can find the books in the classroom throughout the unit (a few of these books would be good to keep in the classroom throughout the school year, though). When they have free time, they can read these books, and they may be used again in a lesson. Show students where they can find various graphic organizers, keep in the same place throughout the school year. Explain that these are to help students organize their thoughts to better understand what they read.</p>

Lesson 4

Title:	Making connections card game		
Content Area: Social skills, Reading comprehension	Grades: 1-5	Duration: 40 min.	
Standards and Benchmarks:	Colorado Reading & Writing Standards 1, 4, 5. CDE Social Skills & Access Skills Integration		
Objectives:	Students will practice taking turns and learn how to make connections, using reading comprehension strategies.		
Resources and Materials:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Several copies of a book based on social skills/friendship (Appendix B, p. 72). - Make colored cards with characters from the book chosen for read aloud time (picture & name) and scenarios (picture & sentence, such as <i>Sam said hi to Susie; Ann was being mean to George</i>). One side needs to remain blank. - Make different colored cards with comprehension strategies, 1 per card, with 1 side of the card remaining blank: <i>Background knowledge (What do you know about this?); Make a connection (Can you think of an experience or story that relates?); Favorite part in the story.</i> - Two containers for the two groups of cards. 		
Differentiation:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Make the comprehension cards easier or more challenging. Could include cards that are used during preview and predict, such as finding parts of a book: <i>title, author, illustrator</i>. Could make the cards simply list characters and scenarios, have the student find in the book and discuss. - Could be used during groups, partners, one-on-one instruction, assessment, and as a filler/free time/take home activity. - Written response if student is nonverbal. Keyboarding is an option. - Extra assistance. 		
Preparing Students for the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions <p>To be used as a general or special education classroom or small group activity, during regular literacy time. Explain that <i>first</i> you'll read a book aloud and <i>then</i> students will play a game.</p>		
Teaching the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set • Pre-Assessment/Activating Background Knowledge • Teacher Input, Modeling, & Checking for <p>- Teacher will choose a book that is based on social skills or friendships (see list of resources in Appendix A) and will read aloud. Model how to preview and predict, with think aloud strategies. Review the names of parts of a book by matching flashcards with these parts when pointing to the location on the book: title, author, illustrator, front cover, back cover, and spine. This provides a visual aid for the students with autism to go along with the spoken words. Praise/reward students for looking at the book and/or responding to questions.</p> <p>- Next, show students the 2 containers with the colored cards. Show each card; find the characters and scenarios from the story, explain the comprehension strategy cards.</p>		

<p>Understanding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided Practice • Independent Practice • Closure 	<p>- Model how to choose 1 card from each container, and how to connect the two cards and think aloud for your answer. For example, after picking a card from the first box, say <i>I picked Sam</i>. Then, choose your second card, <i>I picked Make a Connection (Can you think of an experience or story that relates?)</i>. Let's see, in the story Sam feels scared and nervous about making a new friend. I felt like that when I moved to a new school!</p> <p>- Some combination of cards will be more challenging than others. Model a few times, can start as a group activity, than to pairs, than to 1:1, depending on the class/group/student. Some students will need more prompting and guided practice.</p> <p>- Inform the students of how many cards they'll need to complete, so they know when they are done.</p> <p>- Praise and reward the students!</p>
<p>Assessment:</p>	<p>- This would be a good ongoing activity. Use as a pre-assessment as well, of the student's comprehension skills.</p> <p>- Observe students with how well they are able to take turns and play with others.</p> <p>- Ongoing observation for parts of book, preview and predict skills.</p>
<p>Notes & Reflections:</p>	<p>Lots of easy, flexible variations can be used for this activity. These are challenging skills for students with autism to learn. This visual game format can be a fun way for students to make connections with the text and become familiar with reading comprehension terms and strategies. It also helps students with autism take turns, follow directions, and play with others.</p>

Lesson 5

Title:	How to play together		
Content Area:	Social skills, Reading comprehension	Grades: 1-5	Duration: 40 min.
Standards and Benchmarks:	Colorado Reading & Writing Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. CDE Social Skills & Access Skills Integration		
Objectives:	Students will learn visualizing techniques for reading comprehension, based on social scenarios.		
Resources and Materials:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Books from the library, about how to get along with one another and why friendships are important (Appendix B, p. 72). - Computer lab or word processors. - Paper, pencils, crayons/markers. - Example of a social story. - Flash cards with parts of a book (title, author, front cover, etc.) 		
Differentiation:	Keyboarding instead of handwriting, if handwriting or fine motor skill is a challenge. PixWriter.		
Preparing Students for the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions To be used as a general or special education classroom or small group activity, during regular literacy time. Explain that <i>first</i> you'll read a book aloud and <i>then</i> students will create their own story.		
Teaching the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set • Pre-Assessment/Activating Background Knowledge • Teacher Input, Modeling, & Checking for Understanding • Guided Practice • Independent Practice • Closure <p>- Teacher will choose a book that is based on social skills or friendships and will read aloud. Model how to preview and predict, with think aloud strategies. Review the names of parts of a book by matching flashcards with these parts when pointing to the location on the book: title, author, illustrator, front cover, back cover, and spine. This provides a visual aid for the students with autism to go along with the spoken words. Praise/reward students for looking at the book and/or responding to questions.</p> <p>- Show students a social story. Social stories are based on the students' vocabulary and written in first person. They can help students remember routines, understand their actions and how those actions affect others. Social stories can show cause and effect and problem solving strategies as well. For example, <i>I like to play with blocks. When Johnny has the blocks I want to take them away so I can play with them. Johnny gets mad and I get in trouble. I will ask Johnny if we can play together or I will wait until he is done with the blocks.</i></p> <p>- Students may need assistance thinking of a scenario for their social story. May use a social skill the student has difficulties with, or use a scenario from the book used in read aloud. Have the students type their social story or stories, print and make into a book and let the students add pictures and decorate as they choose. Could add labels used during preview and predict, such as <i>author, illustrator, front cover, etc.</i> Have the students read their social story aloud to the teacher or group.</p>		

Assessment:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ongoing observation for parts of book, preview and predict skills.- Social stories.
Notes & Reflections:	Let the students keep the social story in their desk for repeated readings. Encourage students to make social stories when needed, they can be used as a tool to help remember things.

Lesson 6

Title:	Good sportsmanship		
Content Area:	Social skills, Reading comprehension	Grades: 1-5	Duration: 40 min.
Standards and Benchmarks:	Colorado Reading & Writing Standards 1, 2, 4, 5, 6. CDE Social Skills & Access Skills Integration		
Objectives:	Students will learn good sportsmanship skills and use graphic organizers and sequencing for reading comprehension.		
Resources and Materials:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Books from the library, about good sportsmanship (Appendix B, p. 72). - Sequencing cards, or worksheet. - Graphic organizers: K-W-L, T-chart, beginning/middle/end (Appendix C, p. 75). - Flash cards with parts of a book (title, author, front cover, etc.) - White board/chart paper. 		
Differentiation:	DVD/video instead of books. Keyboarding instead of handwriting, if handwriting or fine motor skill is a challenge.		
Preparing Students for the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions To be used as a general or special education classroom or small group activity, during regular literacy time. Explain that <i>first</i> you'll read a book aloud and <i>then</i> students will put the story in the correct order.		
Teaching the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set • Pre-Assessment/Activating Background Knowledge • Teacher Input, Modeling, & Checking for Understanding • Guided Practice • Independent Practice • Closure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher will ask students what they think it means to be a good sport. This term could be difficult for students with autism to comprehend, since it is not literal, it is slang. Use a K-W-L strategy sheet on chart paper or board, then a T-chart (looks like, sounds like). Ask students to share their experiences. - Teacher will choose a book (or DVD) that is based on good sportsmanship and will read aloud. Model how to preview and predict, with think aloud strategies. Review the names of parts of a book by matching flashcards with these parts when pointing to the location on the book: title, author, illustrator, front cover, back cover, and spine. This provides a visual aid for the students with autism to go along with the spoken words. Praise/reward students for looking at the book and/or responding to questions. - Model how to fill out a graphic organizer that divides beginning, middle and end of story. - Use premade cards from the story, using pictures and words of characters and scenarios from the story, for students to sequence. Start with just a few cards, gradually add more cards. - If time allows, practice role playing how to be a good sport. 		
Assessment:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ongoing observation for parts of book, preview and predict skills. - Sequencing observation. - Participation during graphic organizers. 		

Notes &
Reflections:

This lesson teaches many challenging skills for students with autism. Good visual, concrete activities. Students should be getting comfortable with preview and predict strategy and graphic organizers.

Lesson 7

Title:	It's fun to share!		
Content Area:	Social skills, Reading comprehension	Grades: 1-5	Duration: 40 min.
Standards and Benchmarks:	Colorado Reading & Writing Standards 1, 5, 6. CDE Social Skills & Access Skills Integration		
Objectives:	Students will learn and practice sharing objects with classmates. Students will practice identifying important text information, such as main idea, story parts, in order to aid reading comprehension.		
Resources and Materials:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Books (with tape/cd) about how to share (Appendix B, p. 72). - Tape/cd players with headphones - Emotional thermometer (made out of cardboard, or draw on board) - Highlighters - Copies of text (include table of contents, cover) - Copies of text already highlighted (see <i>Teaching the lesson</i>) 		
Differentiation:	Extra assistance. Written response if student is nonverbal. Keyboarding is an option.		
Preparing Students for the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions <p>To be used as a general or special education classroom or small group activity, during regular literacy time. Explain that <i>first</i> you'll talk about sharing and practice sharing, <i>then</i> you'll listen to books on tape, <i>and last</i>, you'll find the important parts of the story.</p>		
Teaching the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set • Pre-Assessment/Activating Background Knowledge • Teacher Input, Modeling, & Checking for Understanding • Guided Practice • Independent Practice • Closure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher will tell a personal story to students about what he/she likes to share with friends, how it makes everyone feel. Display an emotional thermometer, so that students can <i>see</i> the feelings and emotions with colors. - Show the students the book that will be listened to on tape or cd. Have the student read while listening, pairing oral and written language. - When the story is finished, pick a student to model what it looks like to share. Have students practice with each other or 1:1 with teacher. Assist students who need more guidance. - Ask the students to sit at their desks. Have a copy of text from the story about sharing on their desks with highlighters. Students with autism typically have difficulties copying information from overhead projectors, so it's helpful to have information on their desk, to be copied. Depending on age and ability level, have students color code important text information, using the teacher's copy as a guide. For example, highlight <i>table of contents</i> in yellow, <i>main idea</i> in green, <i>main characters</i> in pink. - Discuss how knowing what and how to find important information from the text can help us remember and comprehend what we read. 		

Assessment:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Participation during sharing exercise.- Copying, color coding important information on text.
Notes & Reflections:	When students get more familiar with story parts, there are easy and fun variations on assessing this area; for example it can be made into a speed game, using flashcards. Students with autism benefit from repeated readings and activities and should be aware of the reading comprehension process. If they know there is a reason for color coding the main idea, they are more likely to remember that it is a useful strategy.

Lesson 8

Title:	Do you like questions?		
Content Area:	Social skills, Reading comprehension	Grades: 1-5	Duration: 40 min.
Standards and Benchmarks:	Colorado Reading & Writing Standards 1, 2, 3, 5, 6. CDE Social Skills & Access Skills Integration		
Objectives:	Students will learn questioning strategies, in order to strengthen their social skills and reading comprehension skills.		
Resources and Materials:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Books from the library, about how to get along with one another and why friendships are important (Appendix B, p. 72). - Question prompt cards: <i>wh</i> questions. - Preview & Predict strategy poster (Appendix C, p. 75). - Paper, pencils or keyboard. - Question game cards: boxes with simple questions inside - Flash cards with parts of a book (title, author, front cover, etc.) 		
Differentiation:	Keyboarding instead of handwriting, if handwriting or fine motor skill is a challenge. Written response if student is nonverbal.		
Preparing Students for the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions <p>To be used as a general or special education classroom or small group activity, during regular literacy time. Explain that <i>first</i> you'll talk about the importance of questions, <i>then</i> you'll listen to a book and look at notes, <i>and last</i>, you'll ask each other fun questions.</p>		
Teaching the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set • Pre-Assessment/Activating Background Knowledge • Teacher Input, Modeling, & Checking for Understanding • Guided Practice • Independent Practice • Closure <p>- Teacher will hand out laminated prompt cards with questions, for the students to keep. Read aloud together. The questions should be higher level thinking and <i>wh</i> questions, which students with autism typically have difficulties with. Who is the subject? What is the action? Why did something occur? How was something done? It's helpful for students with autism to pre read questions before reading the text, so they know what to look for. Explain that asking ourselves questions and finding the answers in the text help us remember, or comprehend, what we read.</p> <p>- Display a preview & predict strategy poster (see Appendix B), examine how it is similar to the <i>wh</i> questions prompt card. Teacher will choose a book based on social skills/friendships and will read aloud. Model how to preview and predict, with think aloud strategies. Review the names of parts of a book by matching flashcards with these parts when pointing to the location on the book: title, author, illustrator, front cover, back cover, and spine. This provides a visual aid for the students with autism to go along with the spoken words.</p> <p>- Encourage students to write/type notes or draw pictures during the reading, when they find answers to the questions.</p> <p>- After the reading, review the questions, encourage discussion by asking questions and assess who took notes. Some students</p>		

	<p>might have an easier time writing notes/drawing pictures immediately after the reading, rather than during; acknowledge that we all learn differently and praise students for their efforts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For the social skills piece, hand out a paper that has about 6 boxes of questions, a common game used in classrooms, for students to walk around asking classmates if they fit the box. For example, <i>Do you have a dog? How many sisters do you have?</i> Sometimes this game is played to see who matches your answers, but the main goal of this exercise is to ask questions (encourage eye contact and positive body language), give an appropriate answer, and learn a little bit about your classmates. Let students know this is the purpose of the game before they start. Discuss afterwards.
Assessment:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ongoing observation for parts of book, preview and predict skills. - Questioning observation. - Participation during question game.
Notes & Reflections:	<p>Questions open the doors to understanding; we should teach students to read to remember and give a purpose for reading. Asking questions to peers seems like a very simple exercise, but it can be challenging for students with autism.</p>

Lesson 9

Title:	Bullies are Bad		
Content Area:	Social skills, Reading comprehension	Grades: 1-5	Duration: 40 min.
Standards and Benchmarks:	Colorado Reading & Writing Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, 6. CDE Social Skills & Access Skills Integration		
Objectives:	Students will learn about sentence structure to aid in reading comprehension, as well as learn about bullies.		
Resources and Materials:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Books from the library, about bullies (Appendix B, p. 72). - Questioning prompt card. - Preview & Predict strategy poster (Appendix C, p. 75). - Paper, pencils, markers/crayons. - Long pieces of sturdy paper for sentence strips. - White board/chart paper. - Flash cards with parts of a book (title, author, front cover, etc.) 		
Differentiation:	Keyboarding instead of handwriting, if handwriting or fine motor skill is a challenge. Written response if student is nonverbal.		
Preparing Students for the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions To be used as a general or special education classroom or small group activity, during regular literacy time. Explain that <i>first</i> you'll talk about bullies, <i>then</i> you'll read a book and make notes, <i>and last</i> , you'll create sentences and mix and match.		
Teaching the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set • Pre-Assessment/Activating Background Knowledge • Teacher Input, Modeling, & Checking for Understanding • Guided Practice • Independent Practice • Closure - Teacher will hand out or ask for students to get out their laminated prompt cards with questions. Read aloud together. The questions should be higher level thinking and <i>wh</i> questions, which students with autism typically have difficulties with. Who is the subject? What is the action? Why did something occur? How was something done? It's helpful for students with autism to pre read questions before reading the text, so they know what to look for. Explain that asking ourselves questions and finding the answers in the text help us remember, or comprehend, what we read. - Display a preview & predict strategy poster, examine how it is similar to the <i>wh</i> questions prompt card. Have students read to themselves. - Encourage students to write/type notes or draw pictures during their reading, when they find answers to the questions. - After the reading, review the questions, encourage discussion by asking questions and assess who took notes. Some students might have an easier time writing notes/drawing pictures immediately after the reading, rather than during; acknowledge that we all learn differently and praise students for their efforts. - Next, ask for statements from the book or students' notes, what they learned about bullies. Write on the board. Determine how many of the questions can be answered from the sentence, write		

	<p>a few more.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hand out the long, sturdy pieces of paper, may line beforehand if helpful for the students. Have them write a sentence onto the strip. Cut the strips after the subject and mix and match, determine what makes sense. For closure, and to check for understanding, have the students read the questions from their prompt card and point to the answer on the sentence strip. - Wrap up the lesson by telling the students if they feel like they are being bullied, to always tell an adult, such as teachers, parents, or the school counselor.
Assessment:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sentence strips, observation. - Participation during discussion.
Notes & Reflections:	<p>Special needs students are highly susceptible to school bullies. Peers should be encouraged to look out for one another, and don't let their classmates get bullied. Sentence strips can be a visual, concrete strategy for helping students determine the subject and what is happening in the story, thus aiding in comprehension.</p>

Lesson 10

Title:	More About Bullies		
Content Area:	Social skills, Reading comprehension	Grades: 1-5	Duration: 40 min.
Standards and Benchmarks:	Colorado Reading & Writing Standards 1, 4, 6. CDE Social Skills & Access Skills Integration		
Objectives:	Students will learn to use their prior knowledge about bullies in searching for more information, using graphic organizers, resources, and role playing, to aid comprehension and social skills.		
Resources and Materials:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Books from the library (Appendix B, p. 72), internet. - Graphic organizers: K-W-L (Appendix C, p. 75). - White board/chart paper. - Flash cards with scenarios: being bullied, mean classmates, etc. 		
Differentiation:	Written response if student is nonverbal. Keyboarding.		
Preparing Students for the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions To be used as a general or special education classroom or small group activity, during regular literacy time. Explain that <i>first</i> you'll talk about bullies, <i>then</i> you'll find more information, and <i>last</i> , you'll practice being actors.		
Teaching the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set • Pre-Assessment/Activating Background Knowledge • Teacher Input, Modeling, & Checking for Understanding • Guided Practice • Independent Practice • Closure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Remind students of the previous lesson about bullies. Ask if they have any questions, while writing the K-W-L strategy on the board. Fill in together. - Rephrase, if necessary, the <i>Want to learn</i> section into questions. Ask the students how they think they can find the information. Should we look at the book we already read? Should we find a different book, search on the internet, talk amongst ourselves, ask the school counselor, look for a DVD? Spend some time getting the answers needed. - Next, have some flashcards ready with scenarios of being bullied or encountering mean classmates. Model how to role play a scenario, and have a few phrases on the board to help students remember what to say. Have students practice role playing. - Discuss for closure, explain that we should all feel safe in school. 		
Assessment:	- Observation and participation during discussion, K-W-L, search and questioning for information, and role playing.		
Notes & Reflections:	This lesson asks for prior knowledge, uses a graphic organizer, makes students think about how to find information, and gives them valuable practice in real life scenarios.		

Lesson 11

Title:	You & I		
Content Area:	Social skills, Reading comprehension	Grades: 1-5	Duration: 40 min.
Standards and Benchmarks:	Colorado Reading & Writing Standards 1, 2, 4, 5. CDE Social Skills & Access Skills Integration		
Objectives:	Students will learn compare and contrast strategies for reading comprehension, as well as basic social skills.		
Resources and Materials:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have a paragraph or summary typed from a story previously read aloud, about friends (Appendix B, p. 72). - Graphic organizers: Venn Diagram, Compare & Contrast, T-chart (Appendix C, p. 75). - Paper, pencils, colored utensils. - White board/chart paper. 		
Differentiation:	Keyboarding instead of handwriting, if handwriting or fine motor skill is a challenge. Written response if student is nonverbal.		
Preparing Students for the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions To be used as a general or special education classroom or small group activity, during regular literacy time. Explain that <i>first</i> you'll read a story about friends, <i>then</i> you'll compare & contrast using the story, <i>and last</i> , you'll compare & contrast using someone you know.		
Teaching the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set • Pre-Assessment/Activating Background Knowledge • Teacher Input, Modeling, & Checking for Understanding • Guided Practice • Independent Practice • Closure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher will have typed a paragraph or summary from a book on social skills previously read to the class. Hand out to students, read together or take turns reading. - Ask students to draw a picture of what they've read, paying attention to details; tell them this is to help them remember the story. - Write <i>Compare & Contrast</i> on the board and draw a Venn Diagram underneath, with the two main characters. - Model how to use the Venn Diagram, by thinking aloud and writing the answers. Pass out Venn Diagrams to students and ask them to fill out. - Now, use with the compare/contrast graphic organizer, or a T-chart. - Discuss the comparisons and differences we found and how the graphic organizers help us see them. - Now, have the student think about a friend or classmate and fill out how they compare and contrast, their likes and dislikes, in a graphic organizer of their choice. 		
Assessment:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drawing after they read the summary. - Participation during discussion. - Graphic organizers, determining comprehension and reflection. 		
Notes & Reflections:	It's a good idea to have a variety of graphic organizers to show students how they can help organize information, and it gives		

students a choice and responsibility in the reading comprehension process.

Lesson 12

Title:	Labeling emotions		
Content Area:	Social skills, Reading comprehension	Grades: 1-5	Duration: 40 min.
Standards and Benchmarks:	Colorado Reading & Writing Standards 1, 2, 4, 5. CDE Social Skills & Access Skills Integration		
Objectives:	Students will learn how to label and deal with feelings and emotions while reading text and in social situations.		
Resources and Materials:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Books (with compact disc) about feelings (Appendix B, p. 72). - Compact disc player. - Emotional thermometer (made out of cardboard, or draw on board). - Colored utensils, paper. - White board/chart paper. 		
Differentiation:	Keyboarding instead of handwriting, if handwriting or fine motor skill is a challenge. Written response if student is nonverbal.		
Preparing Students for the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions <p>To be used as a general or special education classroom or small group activity, during regular literacy time. Explain that <i>first</i> you'll talk about feelings and emotions, <i>then</i> you'll listen to a book on the cd player, <i>and last</i>, you'll draw your favorite part and share with the class.</p>		
Teaching the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set • Pre-Assessment/Activating Background Knowledge • Teacher Input, Modeling, & Checking for Understanding • Guided Practice • Independent Practice • Closure <p>- Teacher will discuss with students the purpose of the lesson - why it's important to be able to label feelings and emotions, while reading, in ourselves and in others. If you can, try to borrow a poster of children's faces showing different emotions and review with students. Or, do a picture walk with the book that will be read aloud from the cd player.</p> <p>- Teacher will show students the emotional thermometer and play the book on the cd player for everyone to hear. Use the thermometer during the reading so that students can <i>see</i> the emotions; encourage them to act out the feelings on their faces (smile, frown, look scared or upset, etc.).</p> <p>- Have students draw their favorite part of the story, using colors, and write a few sentences about it, using feeling/emotion words. Teacher could write a few words or sentences for prompting, such as <i>happy, embarrassed, Sam got mad when Sally didn't sit next to him. That made Sally sad</i>, etc.</p> <p>- Have students share their drawing and sentences and act out the scenario. Let them practice with the emotional thermometer.</p> <p>- Discuss how our emotions can hurt other people's feelings (cause & effect, which will be the next lesson). Discuss how, when we know how the characters in the story are feeling, we will be able to understand it more and remember it more, helping our reading comprehension.</p>		

Assessment:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Observation of participation during discussion, displaying emotions, closure.- Drawing, sentences, acting – observations.
Notes & Reflections:	Many students with autism don't realize the effect they can have on others with their emotions, or how to control their feelings. Should aid in reading comprehension, being able to connect with how the characters are feeling.

Lesson 13

Title:	You affect me!		
Content Area:	Social skills, Reading comprehension	Grades: 1-5	Duration: 40 min.
Standards and Benchmarks:	Colorado Reading & Writing Standards 1, 2, 4, 6. CDE Social Skills & Access Skills Integration		
Objectives:	Students will learn cause and effect, and how it's important during reading comprehension and in social situations.		
Resources and Materials:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Book or DVD, friendships/social skills (Appendix B, p. 72). - Cause & Effect worksheet (Appendix C, p. 75). - White board/chart paper. - Flash cards with parts of a book (title, author, front cover, etc.) 		
Differentiation:	Books on cd. Written response, if student is nonverbal. Keyboarding is an option.		
Preparing Students for the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions To be used as a general or special education classroom or small group activity, during regular literacy time. Explain that <i>first</i> you'll talk about cause and effect, <i>then</i> you'll either listen to a book or watch a movie, <i>and last</i> , you'll complete a worksheet.		
Teaching the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set • Pre-Assessment/Activating Background Knowledge • Teacher Input, Modeling, & Checking for Understanding • Guided Practice • Independent Practice • Closure - Teacher will share a story with students about a time that he/she did something and how it affected a classmate or friend. Teacher will ask the students to think of a similar instance and discuss, record responses on board. Some students may need prompting. Connect to previous lesson about feelings. Label on the board how your story was an example of cause & effect. - Teacher will choose a book (or DVD) based on friendships/social skills and will read aloud (or watch). Model how to preview and predict, with think aloud strategies. Review the names of parts of a book by matching flashcards with these parts when pointing to the location on the book: title, author, illustrator, front cover, back cover, and spine. This provides a visual aid for the students with autism to go along with the spoken words. - After reading aloud the book, or watching the movie, ask students for examples of cause & effect from the story. Have them write their responses in the cause & effect worksheet.		
Assessment:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Observation and participation during discussion and worksheet. - Ongoing observation for parts of book, preview and predict skills. 		
Notes & Reflections:	It is important to allow for deeper level questioning and opportunities for communication.		

Lesson 14

Title:	How to be a good friend		
Content Area:	Social skills, Reading comprehension	Grades: 1-5	Duration: 40 min.
Standards and Benchmarks:	Colorado Reading & Writing Standards 1, 4, 5, 6. CDE Social Skills & Access Skills Integration		
Objectives:	Students will learn and review what it takes to be a good friend, and how to retell stories to aid in reading comprehension.		
Resources and Materials:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Books, how to get along with one another & why friendships are important (Appendix B, p. 72). - List of questions directly related to chosen book. - Paper, pencils or keyboard. - White board/chart paper. - Flash cards with parts of a book (title, author, front cover, etc.) 		
Differentiation:	Keyboarding instead of handwriting, if handwriting or fine motor skill is a challenge. Written response if student is nonverbal.		
Preparing Students for the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions To be used as a general or special education classroom or small group activity, during regular literacy time. Explain that <i>first</i> you'll review the friendship unit and comprehension strategies, <i>then</i> you'll listen to a book and read aloud, <i>next</i> , you'll answer 4 questions about the story, <i>and last</i> , you'll tell the story in your own words.		
Teaching the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set • Pre-Assessment/Activating Background Knowledge • Teacher Input, Modeling, & Checking for Understanding • Guided Practice • Independent Practice • Closure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher will discuss the theme and what social skills and comprehension strategies were learned, and write on board. - Students will review their question prompt cards, and pre read a short list of questions to be answered after the story is read (specific questions related to story, rather than general questions on prompt card). - Model how to preview and predict, with think aloud strategies. Review the names of parts of a book by matching flashcards with these parts when pointing to the location on the book: title, author, illustrator, front cover, back cover, and spine. This provides a visual aid for the students with autism to go along with the spoken words. - After the book is read, have students fill out the short list of questions directly related to the story; may need assistance. Read the answers, have the student read the same story silently or to the teacher or peer. Have them review the questions and answers, encourage them to change answers if needed. - Have the student retell the story in their own words, 1:1, assess. 		
Assessment:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ongoing observation for parts of book, preview and predict skills. - Short list of questions, make note if any changes are made after second reading. 		

	- Retell of story, did the student get the main idea, sequence, characters correct, etc.?
Notes & Reflections:	Repeated readings are helpful for students with autism, as well as routines, such as the preview & predict strategy.

Lesson 15

Title:	I'm a good reader & a good friend!		
Content Area:	Social skills, Reading comprehension	Grades: 1-5	Duration: 40 min.
Standards and Benchmarks:	Colorado Reading & Writing Standards 1, 2, 4, 5, 6. CDE Social Skills & Access Skills Integration		
Objectives:	Students will be assessed of their reading comprehension strategies and skills, as well as social skills, in centers.		
Resources and Materials:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Books, how to get along with one another & why friendships are important (Appendix B, p. 72). - Graphic organizers (Appendix C, p. 75). - Paper, pencils or keyboard, colored utensils. - White board/chart paper. - Flash cards with parts of a book (title, author, front cover, etc.). - Premade questions related to book read aloud. - Premade questions for preview and predict center. 		
Differentiation:	Keyboarding instead of handwriting, if handwriting or fine motor skill is a challenge. Written response if student is nonverbal. Extra assistance.		
Preparing Students for the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitions To be used as a general or special education classroom or small group activity, during regular literacy time. Explain that <i>first</i> you'll review the friendship unit and comprehension strategies, <i>then</i> you'll travel through three centers.		
Teaching the Lesson:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipatory Set • Pre-Assessment/Activating Background Knowledge • Teacher Input, Modeling, & Checking for Understanding • Guided Practice • Independent Practice • Closure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher will discuss the theme and what social skills and comprehension strategies were learned, and write on board. - Teacher will read aloud a book based on social skills/friendships. - Teacher will have three centers set up for assessment and explain the purpose to students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preview & Predict center – match flashcards to parts of a book, if no teacher/helper/paraprofessional at table, then have a book with numbers on the parts, have a numbered sheet of paper per student and they can either write in the answers or have multiple choice and they circle the answer. Have students write, draw or choose from multiple choices what they think the story will be about, what their predictions are. - Graphic organizers center - complete two graphic organizers of the students' choice, based on the book read aloud. - Answering questions – answer general and directed questions from the story. Include multiple choice, true/false, yes/no choices, as well as nonlinguistic representations. Have a copy of the book at the center so that students can read again or find answers in the text. 		

Assessment:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Compare to pre-assessment centers at the beginning of the unit. - Matching parts of a book, predictions. - Question sheet. - Graphic organizers, determining comprehension and reflection.
Notes & Reflections:	After this unit, students with and without autism should have a better understanding of the importance of reading comprehension and social skills.

Chapter Summary

In this author's opinion the created reading comprehension unit plan sufficiently addresses the concerns and needs of an educator, teaching students with autism how to better comprehend text and learn valuable social skills. It incorporates a variety of learning styles that would benefit students without disabilities as well, and can be used in general education and special education classrooms in grades 1-5. In chapter 5 the author concludes this investigation of Best Practices by discussing and reflecting on the comments from colleagues.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this project was to develop a unit plan that could be used to assist teachers in meeting the needs of students with autism in reading comprehension and social skills. This was to be achieved by incorporating a variety of teaching strategies discussed in the Best Practices section of Chapter 2, into each lesson. This project was presented to fellow colleagues for evaluation, approval, and overall application within a classroom; whether it is applied within a general education classroom, a special education classroom, or a Title 1 literacy classroom.

Strengths of the Project

Evaluation by this author's colleagues was very valuable. The following comments reflect what the evaluators felt were the strengths of the project.

1. This unit incorporates many of the best instructional practices found in current research. Specific lessons, resources and graphic organizers are also hands on and user friendly.
2. Great focus on comprehension! Various points of acquisition; clear, concise objectives and ways to achieve and implement.
3. This unit plan could promote sensitivity for our special education students from general education students.
4. The lessons all include visuals, which students with autism absolutely need. Also, there is explicit instruction and modeling incorporated into the lessons.

Limitations of the Project

1. Time constraints; to teach and prepare materials.
2. Incorporate some word strategies into the unit, even though the focus is on comprehension.
3. Scheduling this unit into the ongoing classroom reading program could be a challenge.

Recommendations for Future Research

Autism has been a popular topic in the media. There are several aspects of the disorder that invite further study. Further studies involving these reading comprehension strategies could be done as the students with autism continue their way through elementary school and beyond to see how effective the strategies were for them. One recommendation for future research is to use the reading comprehension and social skills unit plan for older students; in middle schools, high schools, even adults. Another recommendation is to carry the strategies into more subject areas, such as science and social studies, in order to build a comprehension base that goes beyond literacy. Also, utilizing a home and school study, incorporating the strategies used in school to be carried over at home, would be another recommendation for future research.

Project Summary

All students need to understand that the ultimate goal of reading is comprehension. And, it is especially important to aid students with autism in social skills acquisition. The purpose of this project was to inform educators of the difficulties that students with autism face with reading comprehension, as well as to include the best

practices to incorporate for improvements in this area. Based on the research, the author then demonstrated in a unit plan successful reading comprehension strategies that can be used in the general and special education classrooms for students with autism. Based on the feedback from educators, all students can benefit from the various reading comprehension strategies, as well as social skills acquisition. It is the author's hope that this research project can be used to raise awareness of the unique challenges that students with autism face with reading comprehension, and that the strategies meet the needs of the diverse classroom.

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APPENDIX A:
TEACHING TIPS AND STRATEGIES

COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

An Outline from Chapter 2: Best Practices

Making Connections

- Prompt and check for understanding – student’s prior knowledge may be incorrect and they may have limited use of background knowledge.
- Students should be aware of the process; they need to know to relate text to background knowledge and life experiences.
- Preview & predict: ask questions, use flashcards to match words to book parts, picture walk, strategy poster.
- K-W-L strategy: I **K**now, **W**ant to learn, what we **L**earned.
- Set the purpose in advance.
- Use graphic organizers to connect and organize concepts and information.
- Have students pre read questions before reading the text.

Questioning Strategies

- Use higher level questioning, ask deep questions and “wh” questions. Who is the subject? What is the action? Why did something occur? How was something done?
- Utilize prompt cards, laminated reminders.
- Think aloud; model thinking about text aloud.

Visualization Strategies

- Ask students to draw pictures.
- Use visual aids: graphic organizers, props, color coding, picture schedules.
- Use role play.
- Pair oral & written forms of language.
- Utilize computer programs.

The Right Text

- Use text 1-2 grade levels below student's decoding and word recognition level.
- Use wordless picture books.
- Teach text structure and transition words.
- Social stories decrease anxiety, helps students remember routines and actions.
- Nonfiction is less complicated.
- Repeated readings help students make connections and comprehend the text.

Assessments

- Students can be asked to draw pictures, match sentences to pictures, or retell a story to measure comprehension.
- Students with autism are very susceptible to changes. Look for a general consistency rate of approximately 70% over a period of days.
- Provide students with options: yes and no, true and false, circle answers, multiple choice.
- Evaluate work on the basis of what the student is able to do, rather than penalize him or her for weaknesses that are an expression of autism.

TEACHING TIPS TO USE FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

- Be clear, direct and concise. Use simple precise language.
- Speak slowly and use transition words: *First we'll read this book. Then, we'll do this worksheet. Last, we'll do this activity.* Avoid long strings of verbal instruction; students with autism may be unable to remember sequences.
- Get the student's attention before talking. Wait and allow time for processing of information and to receive a response. Repeat/rephrase instructions.
- Let the students have breaks, but be clear for how long the break will be and what they can do during the break. A digital timer works well.
- Task strips, or simply lining up the work are good visual cues that show students what they are expected to do. Students with autism need to know what is expected, refrain from surprising them with more work. Use visuals whenever possible.
- Be organized and prepare for transitions, write the agenda on the board. Provide clear expectations.
- Make the work meaningful and fun. Use the student's fixations for motivation.
- Encourage eye contact, but do not demand.
- Be aware of communication, attention, and fine motor challenges. Refer to the accommodations and modifications page in the student's IEP.

TEACHER INFORMATION SHEET: AUTISM & SOCIAL SKILLS

Social skills are important for all students to learn. Before you can help students improve their social skills, they need to understand why these skills are important. According to the Colorado Department of Education, integrating social skills into the school day is an essential part of creating a safe, civil learning environment, to increase students' personal strengths and challenge barriers to academic success. There are excellent opportunities within Academic Content Standards, for social skills to be integrated into academic subjects and practiced by students.

Students with Autism have difficulty with social interaction. Difficulties that may be displayed:

- Appear egocentric and lack sensitivity to others.
- Lack an awareness of their own and others emotions.
- Do not understand the effect of their behavior has upon others.
- Over sensitive to criticism.
- Does not initiate social interaction, does not know how to go about it.
- Needs help to problem solve.
- Difficulty taking turns, making eye contact, controlling anger, asking for help, communicating common courtesies such as *hello, please, thank you*.

Strategies to try:

- Teach rules and social interaction.
- Incorporate social skills into regular curriculum.
- Teach turn taking and sharing.
- Role model.
- Use visual cues, such as videos and pictures.
- Use social stories.
- Teach relaxing strategies, how to control anger and anxiety.

APPENDIX B:
SOCIAL SKILLS RESOURCES

RESOURCES FOR SOCIAL SKILLS, FRIENDSHIP LESSONS

- Berenstain, S. (1982). *The Berenstain bears get in a fight*. New York: Random House.
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- Bourgeois, P. (1997). *Franklin's new friend*. New York: Scholastic.
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- I can do it!* (2008). DVD. Delaware: Model Me Kids, LLC.
- Time for a playdate*. (2008). DVD. Delaware: Model Me Kids, LLC.
- Time for school*. (2008). DVD. Delaware: Model Me Kids, LLC.

APPENDIX C:
GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS

PREVIEW AND PREDICT

BEFORE READING:

1. What is this about?
 2. I think this story/informational text is going to....
-

DURING READING:

3. Am I confirming my predictions? Do I need to change my predictions?
-

AFTER READING:

4. Were my predictions confirmed or changed?
-

K-W-L STRATEGY

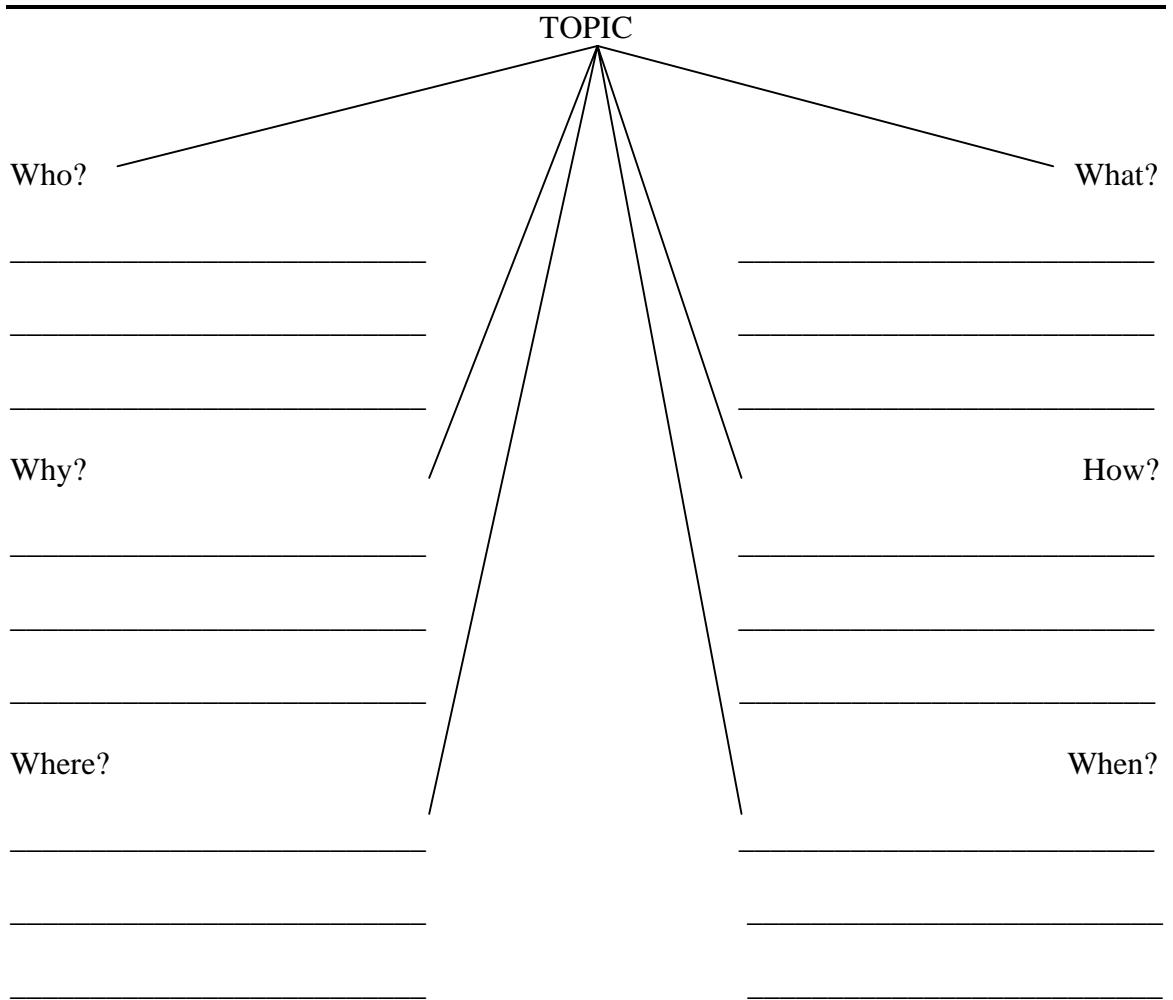
K – What we KNOW

W – What we WANT to find out

L – What we LEARNED

Categories of information we expect to use:

WEB



COMPARISON CHART

TOPIC

TOPIC

HOW ALIKE?

TOPIC

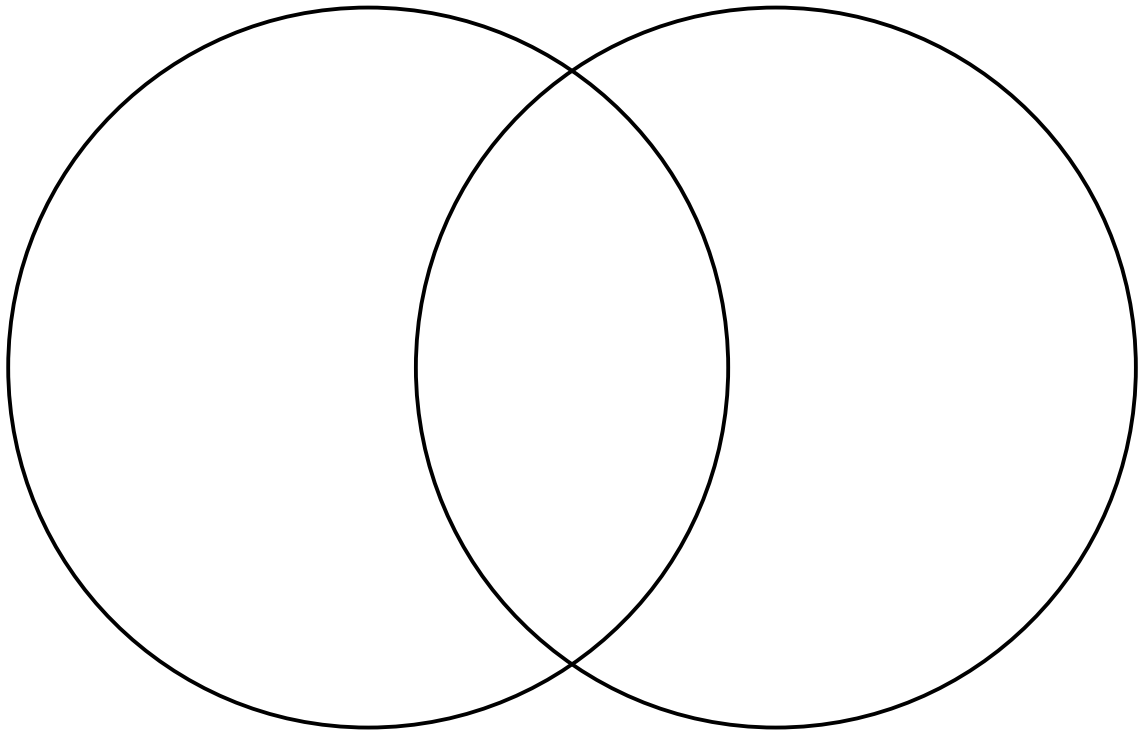
TOPIC

HOW DIFFERENT?

T-CHART

LOOKS LIKE	SOUNDS LIKE

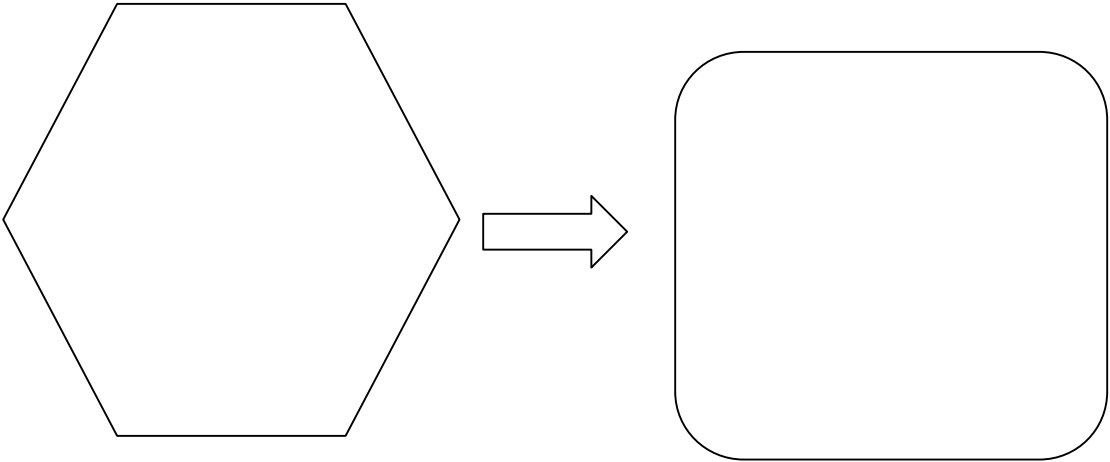
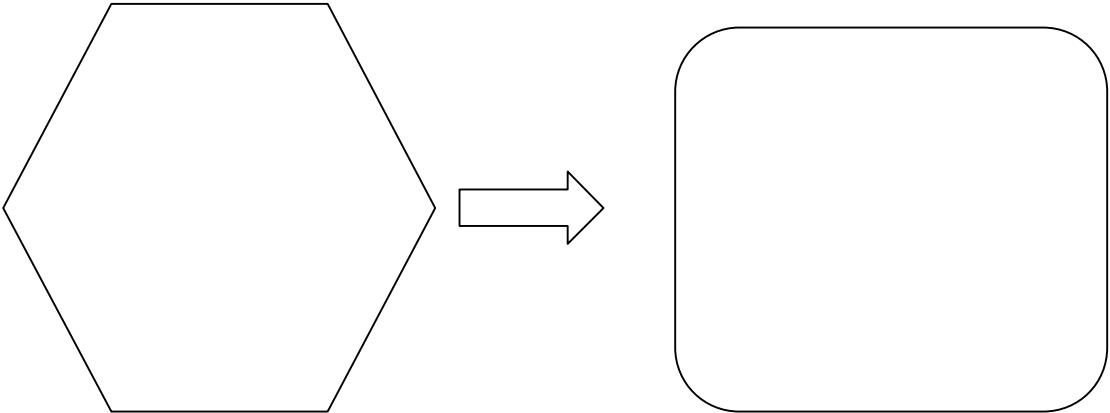
VENN DIAGRAM



CAUSE & EFFECT

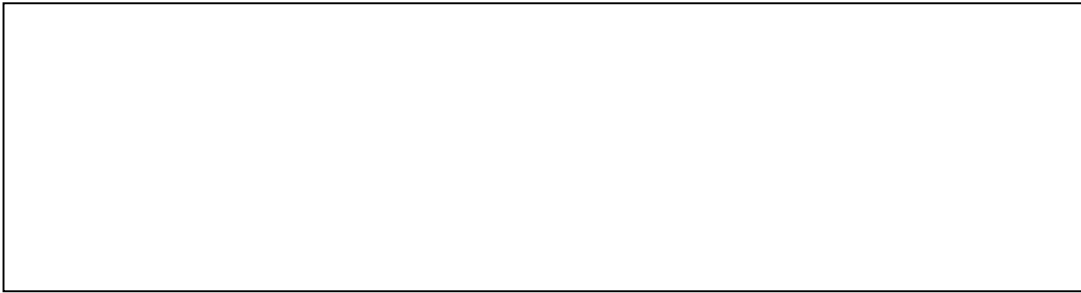
CAUSE

EFFECT

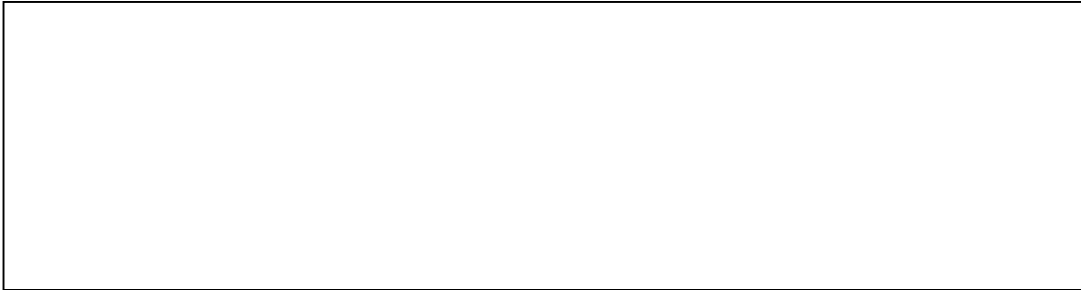


STORY MAP

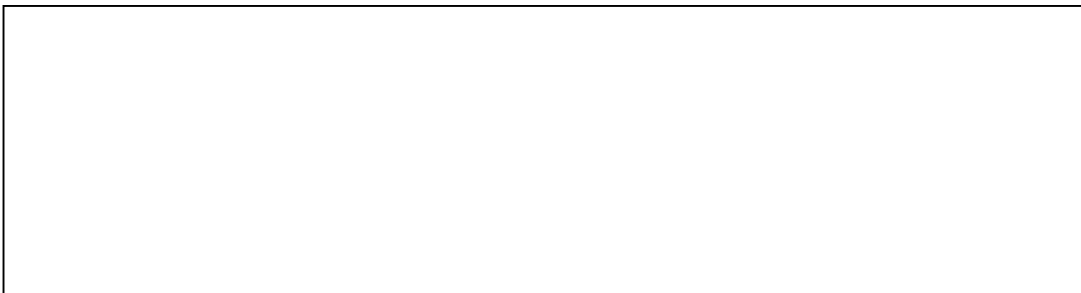
SETTING:



CHARACTERS:



PROBLEM:

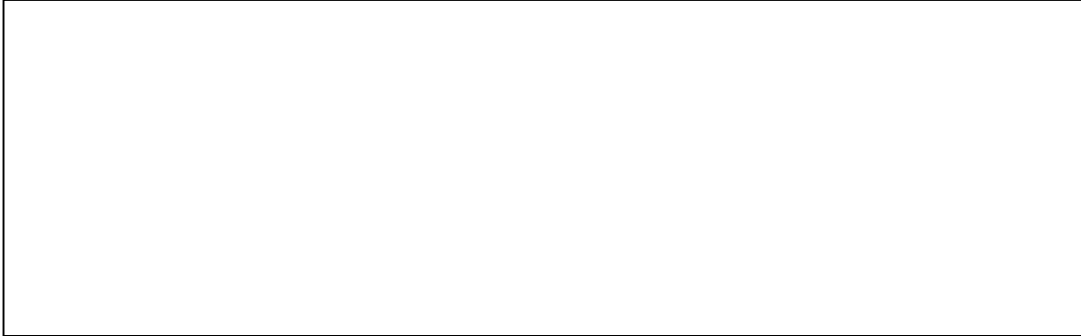


SOLUTION:



BEGINNING, MIDDLE, END

BEGINNING:



MIDDLE:



END:



APPENDIX D:
TEACHER SURVEY FOR PEER ASSESSMENT

TEACHER SURVEY FOR PEER ASSESSMENT

What grade(s) do you teach? _____

How long have you been teaching? _____

Evaluation of Reading Comprehension/Social Skills Unit

Please use this scale to evaluate the following unit plan: 5=strongly agree 4=agree 3=not sure 2=disagree 1=strongly disagree N/A=non applicable

1. Unit meets curriculum standards for literacy and social skills for lower elementary.
5 4 3 2 1 N/A
2. This unit details the best practices to use for students with autism.
5 4 3 2 1 N/A
3. The resources found in the appendices are helpful for comprehension lessons.
5 4 3 2 1 N/A
4. This unit is easy to understand and follow.
5 4 3 2 1 N/A
5. This unit takes into account many different types of learners.
5 4 3 2 1 N/A
6. The needs of all abilities can be met with this unit.
5 4 3 2 1 N/A
7. Lesson plans meet stated objectives.
5 4 3 2 1 N/A

Please answer the following questions about the unit in short answer format.

1. Would you consider implementing this unit in your classroom? Why or why not?

2. What do you see are the strengths of this unit?

3. What do you see are the weaknesses of this unit?

4. What would you add, omit, or change to improve this unit?

5. Other comments?
