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Effect of Wh-Question Graphic Organizer on Reading Comprehension in Students with Autism

Spectrum Disorders

Josh Connelly

Marshall University

Abstract

Many students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) struggle with reading comprehension. The study examined the efficacy of using a wh-question graphic organizer to improve reading comprehension of students with ASD. Two eighth grade students in a middle school, self-contained classroom participated in the study. The data revealed that the graphic organizer was beneficial to Student A in improving comprehension. Student B saw a decrease in scores after the introduction of the organizer. Further research is necessary to determine the efficacy of the intervention. As characteristics of ASD can vary greatly from one individual to another, it may be the case that while one intervention is beneficial to one student, the intervention may not be as effective for another.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) is the term given to a group of developmental disorders that commonly feature deficits in communication and social skills. Those with ASD also have narrow interests and exhibit repetitive behaviors (Ricketts, Jones, Happe, & Charman, 2013). Some signs of ASD, such as avoiding eye contact, can be seen in the early developmental period; however, behavioral and social issues may not be noticed until the individual begins school and interacts with peers. Individuals with ASD experience functional limitations, like fine motor deficits, which can develop over time. These limitations can differ greatly from individual to individual (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009).

Prevalence

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009), a sizeable increase in the number of individuals diagnosed with ASD has occurred. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was estimated that one in 2,500 children had ASD. It is now estimated that one in 68 children have been identified with ASD. Improved awareness and recognition of the disorder, along with changes in the availability and manner in which diagnoses are made, have contributed to the increase in prevalence. Limited data exists to determine definitive underlying causes of ASD (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009).

As more individuals are being diagnosed with ASD, it is important that educational strategies are developed and empirically examined to support these individuals' success academically. Previous interventions for students with ASD were predicated solely on addressing challenging behavior and improving communication. Adaptive behavior analysis (ABA) has provided numerous strategies, supported by evidence, concerning behavior and communication. However, few strategies have shown to be equally effective in encouraging

academic achievement. Reading comprehension is an area in which many students with ASD experience difficulty (Zein, Solis, Vaughn, & McCulley, 2014).

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is a skill that is composed of an individual's language skills, pertinent knowledge, and cognitive processes (Zein, Solis, Vaughn, & McCulley, 2014). To understand text, an individual must not only be able to recognize words, but also understand the meaning of those words. The reader must connect the text to background knowledge, make inferences, and self-monitor while reading (Carnahan, Williamson, & Christman, 2011). Deficiencies in any of these areas can lead to poor reading comprehension (Zein, Solis, Vaughn, & McCulley, 2014). Students with ASD have an impaired ability to comprehend text (Nation, Clarke, Wright, & Williams, 2006).

As previously noted, two of the central characteristics of ASD are difficulties with communication and social skills, which hamper the ability to understand what is read (Ricketts, Jones, Happe, & Charman, 2013). Furthermore, individuals with ASD often focus on details when reading, rather main ideas. It is also difficult for those with ASD to understand characters' thinking, sarcasm, or irony (Gately, 2008). Because of these issues, a focus must be placed on utilizing strategies to aide students with ASD in reading comprehension.

Reading is a skill that is found across content areas in the academic setting. As such, comprehension of what is read is paramount to academic achievement. However, students with ASD face many unique challenges in attempting to understand text, and the number of students with ASD is increasing. Because of this, it is imperative that instructional strategies be evaluated for their efficacy in helping students with ASD improve reading comprehension skills.

Hypothesis

The purpose of this study is to determine if the independent variable, wh-question graphic organizers, can improve the dependent variable, reading comprehension ability, of eight grade students with ASD. The operational definition of reading comprehension is that the students will comprehend what is read by answering 90% of the questions correctly on a multiple choice assessment about the text.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Reading comprehension is an essential component of learning. If an individual experiences difficulty comprehending text, learning across content areas will be impacted (Carnahan, Williamson, & Christman, 2011). Additionally, an individual's quality of life can be adversely affected if reading comprehension skills are lacking, as some level of reading comprehension is required for employment and in many areas of daily life. Being able to comprehend what is read encourages success in life (Mahdavi & Tensfeldt, 2013). These are challenges individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) face as they have difficulty comprehending text (Nation, Clarke, Wright, & Williams, 2006).

In order for successful reading comprehension to occur, words must be accurately decoded and correctly interpreted for meaning. Previous research has focused on the patterns of reading ability in those with ASD and how aspects of the disorder affect reading comprehension. Previous research has also examined the efficacy of classroom strategies with improving comprehension skills (Nation, Clarke, Wright, & Williams, 2006). The following is a review of previous research.

Comprehension Ability

Many of the defining characteristics of ASD have been evaluated to determine the impact on reading comprehension ability. Many individuals with ASD exhibit poor oral language skills. It is widely accepted that oral language skills play a major role in learning to read, as oral language supplies the basis for developing reading ability (Nation, Clarke, Wright, & Williams, 2006; Ricketts, Jones, Happe, & Charman, 2013). Therefore, it is likely that this deficiency contributes to the difficulty those with ASD experience when reading (Nation, Clarke, Wright, & Williams, 2006).

In addition to weaknesses with oral language skills, those with ASD also demonstrate impairments with social interactions, which have shown to be connected to reading comprehension. Individuals who have more significant social impairments also have a greater inability to comprehend text. Limitations in social skills make it difficult to understand another's mental reasoning. This leads to difficulties with comprehension for readers with ASD as they struggle to understand the emotions and make predictions of characters in stories (Ricketts, Jones, Happe, & Charman, 2013). This makes relating to text extremely complicated (Zein, Solis, Vaughn, & McCulley, 2014).

Theory of Mind. In addition to language and social skills influencing comprehension, researchers have proposed three theories to explain the difficulties those with ASD experience when attempting to understand text (Carnahan, Williamson, & Christman, 2011). The first theory is known as the Theory of Mind (ToM). ToM is the understanding of others' thinking or reasoning (Gately, 2008). ToM consists of knowing that other people have feelings and views which differ from our own. ToM also is compreised of understanding that these feelings and views influence others' actions (Carnahan, Williamson, & Christman, 2011). This contributes to difficulties with reading comprehension as individuals with ASD have difficulty understanding characters' actions or motives (Gately, 2008).

Weak Central Coherence. The second theory developed to explain text comprehension issues individuals with ASD experience is the theory of Weak Central Coherence (WCC). According to WCC, those with ASD focus on specific details rather than the whole idea (Zein, Solis, Vaughn, & McCulley, 2014). For example, in reading a story about a boy taking a trip, an individual with ASD is likely to focus on the type of car that is being driven or the different highways being taken, instead of the reason for the trip or how characters' feel about traveling.

Because of this, these individuals are unable to relate to central themes, identify main ideas, or even recognize large components of stories (Carnahan, Williamson, & Christman, 2011). As a result of this inability to connect or follow main ideas, students with ASD have trouble summarizing text, limiting comprehension (Zein, Solis, Vaughn, & McCulley, 2014).

  Executive Dysfunction Theory. Lastly, Executive Dysfunction Theory (EDF) states that individuals with ASD have difficulty with organization, processing, and self-monitoring. Successful readers self-monitor and will reread text if it is not comprehended. Those with ASD will continue reading regardless of whether or not what is being read is understood (Carnahan, Williamson, & Christman, 2011). This is a tremendous obstacle for understanding what is read. Furthermore, this can lead to frustration and anxiety becoming associated with reading (Azano, & Tuckwiller, 2011).

  Combined, the three theories discussed elaborate on the obstacles individuals with ASD face in connecting to, monitoring, and ultimately comprehending text. ToM explains the challenges that those with ASD face with understanding the thoughts or emotions of others. Students with ASD have difficulty relating to characters and understanding the characters' actions (Zein, Solis, Vaughn, & McCulley, 2014). The theory of WCC notes the struggle those with ASD face with ignoring specific details and realizing main ideas. Finally, EDF claims that those with ASD lack the ability to adequately organize, plan, and self-monitor (Carnahan, Williamson, & Christman, 2011).

Graphic Organizers

  One strategy that has been studied and shown to be effective in assisting readers with ASD to comprehend text is the use of graphic organizers. Graphic organizers provide a visual guide that shows what information is important in text and can be used before, during, and after

reading (Stenson, 2006). They use boxes, lines, and arrows to show connections among ideas from readings. This can help readers more easily compare and contrast, determine cause and effect, and identify main ideas (Hall, Kent, McCulley, Davis, & Wanzek, 2013). Graphic organizers can include picture walks, visual maps, or social stories. These organizers feature illustrations to assist with following and understanding readings. Graphic organizers also include Venn diagrams or sequential organizers, which focus on comparison or cause and effect (Gately, 2008). After being introduced and the students have had extensive practice with assistance from the teacher, support can then be steadily reduced and the students can use the organizers independently (Hall, Kent, McCulley, Davis, & Wanzek, 2013). Research on graphic organizers has shown to be effective in improving students' ability to recall information from text (Ozmen, 2011).

Research

In a previous study, a wh-question (who, what, where, when, why) graphic organizer was utilized with three elementary-age students with ASD to measure the organizer's affect on reading comprehension. The students were required to sort words into the correct wh-question category and answer questions about the text. The results showed that the accuracy of the students' responses improved. On average, each of the three students answered three more problems correctly after the organizer was introduced. The students maintained their ability to use the graphic organizer and answered questions correctly three to five weeks after use of the organizer ceased (Bethune, & Wood, 2013).

Additional research found the use of graphic organizers to be successful with assisting fourth and fifth grade students with learning disabilities in comprehending social studies text. These students with learning disabilities face similar issues as those with ASD; including

sequencing, identifying main ideas, and making inferences. In the study, the students were

provided with a partially completed graphic organizer after reading. The organizer featured

boxes that required the students to record the big idea question, people or groups, vocabulary,

events, and how the topic changed American and people's lives. Every one out of three sessions,

two of the boxes were left empty. The organizers were completed with teacher assistance to

ensure the students remained engaged with the reading. Afterwards, the students took a quiz on

the reading. With each student involved in the study, quiz scores were far higher than those

during the baseline administration of the quiz (Ciullo, Falcomata, & Vaughn, 2015).

In another study involving partially completed graphic organizers, Robinson et al. (2006)

found that students who received partially completed graphic organizers scored higher than

students who received a completed graphic organizer on quizzes and tests covered in the course.

The completed graphic organizer featured all the information that was covered during lectures

prior to quizzes and tests. The partially completed organizer featured blank sections which were

completed by the students during the lectures. The participants were 120 students enrolled in

two different undergraduate educational psychology courses featuring the same instructor. The

study also revealed that the students took more complete notes during lectures when presented

with the partially completed organizers.

In reference to whether the graphic organizer should be provided before, during, or after

reading, Ozmen (2011) found that the students' ability to recall information in compare and

contrast text was more effective when the organizer was completed after reading. First, Ozmen

presented graphic organizers to five students with intellectual disabilities before reading and

recorded their ability to recall information about the reading. Data was then collected on the

students' ability to recall information when the graphic organizer was completed after reading.

The results indicated that the majority of students were able to more easily recall information when the graphic organizer was utilized after reading. Again, the students were able to more easily comprehend and recall information through the use of graphic organizers.

Conclusion

In summary, research has shown that individuals with ASD have difficulty comprehending text due to deficits with oral language and social skills. Difficulties with comprehension are further explained by ToM, WCC, and EDF. However, research has supported the efficacy of graphic organizers in improving comprehension skills across demographics. The research showed that the students comprehended the text more completely when provided with partially completed organizers. Comprehension also improved when the organizer was provided after reading. While further information is needed to determine which specific organizer may be best suited for those with ASD, enough data exists to support the use of graphic organizers to assist in reading comprehension.

Chapter 3: Procedures and Methods

Hypothesis

The purpose of this study was to determine if a wh-question graphic organizer can improve the reading comprehension ability of eighth grade students with ASD. The operational definition of reading comprehension was that the students would comprehend what was read by answering 75% of the questions correctly on a multiple choice assessment about the text.

Setting and Participants

The setting for this study was a middle school, self-contained classroom for students with ASD. The students in this setting spent less than 40% of the school day with the general education population. Students received direct instruction from the teacher with additional support from a classroom aide. The classroom consisted of two students.

The participants were two eighth grade students with ASD. Student A was 15 years old and was non verbal. The student used an iPad with a text to speech application and gestures as his primary means of communication. For student A, the teacher typed the story to be read into the iPad application. The student selected the book and page number to play the story, then followed along in the text. Student B was 14 and was verbal, but typically spoke in short and repetitive responses. The student was able to read, but did so slowly. Student B read roughly 40 words per minute. Both students struggled with comprehension. Repeated reading and teacher provided notes were necessary for the students to recall and answer questions regarding the text in reading assignments given prior to the study.

Variables

In this study, the independent variable was the use of a wh-question graphic organizer. This graphic organizer required the student to answer who, what, where, and when, as it pertains

to the reading. The teacher guided the students through the completion of the organizer after

reading the text. The dependant variable was the reading comprehension level of the students.

Students showed that they comprehended the text by scoring 75% or higher on a multiple choice

assessment.

Threats to Validity

One of the threats to validity and generalizability was the number of students serving as

participants. The small sample made it difficult to generalize the effects of the intervention.

Additionally, the time allotted for the study was also a threat to validity. Due to limited

availability of both the researcher and the participants, the study was completed over a 6 week

period.

Treatment

After the pretest was administered and baseline data was collected, the teacher introduced

a wh-question graphic organizer. The teacher guided the students through the completion of the

graphic organizer after each reading. The organizer required the student to identify who, what,

where, and when relating to the text. For the first three weeks of the study, the students read the

story and took the corresponding assessment. In the remaining three weeks of the study, the

teacher guided the students through the completion of the graphic organizer after the reading.

Then, the assessment was completed.

Measures

For this study, the PCI Reading Program was utilized. Both the stories that were read and

the assessments are a part of this program. The PCI Reading Program was used in self-contained

classrooms county wide. The program was specifically designed for students with intellectual

disabilities, ASD, and profound learning disabilities. The assessments for each story feature four

questions. The assessments measure comprehension by requiring the students to answer

questions that are literal, address key details, and make inferences based on the reading (Haugen-

McLane, Hohlt, & Haney, 2007).

Chapter 4: Results

The intention of this study was to examine the efficacy of using wh-question graphic organizers to improve reading comprehension in students with ASD. Two students in a middle school, self-contained ASD classroom participated in the study. Both are eighth grade students and read on a second grade level. Student A is non-verbal and each story was programmed into the student's iPad for the study. Student A would locate the correct story and page in his iPad, and follow along in the text as the text to speech software on the device recited the story. Student B read each story aloud independently. In the first three weeks of the study, the students read books 23, 24, and 25 of the PCI Reading Program. After each book was read, the students took the corresponding assessment specific to each book. Each assessment consisted of four questions. The results for this portion of the study are presented below in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1.

Scores without the Graphic Organizer
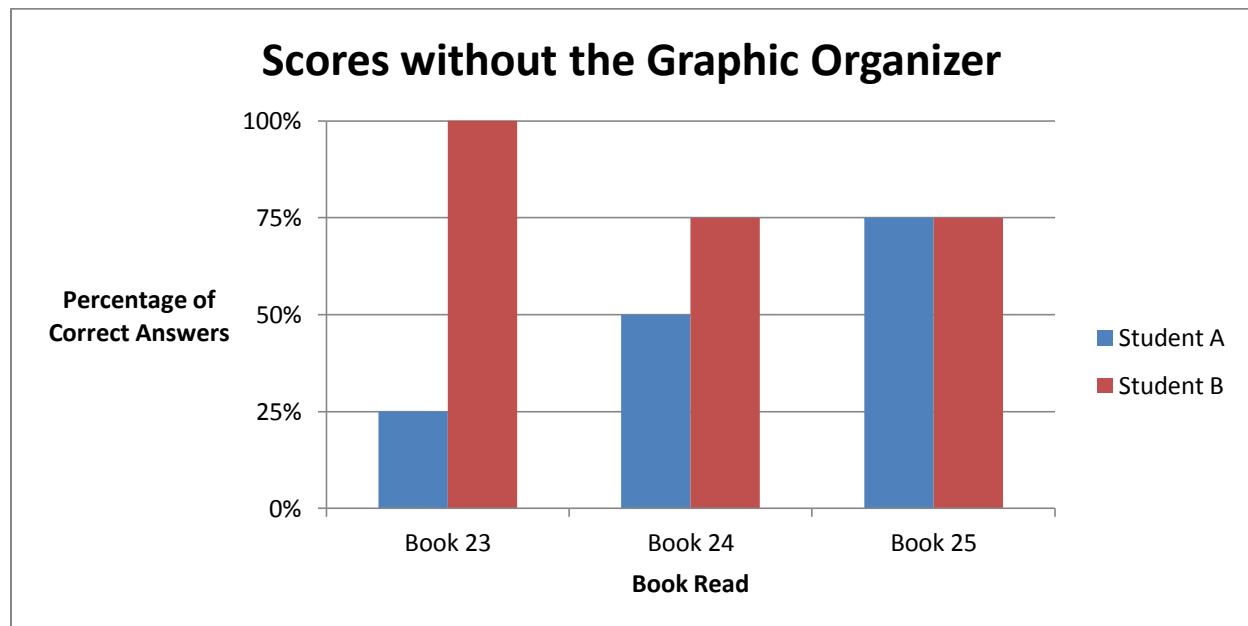
In the weeks prior to the introduction of the organizer, Student A showed improvement with each assessment. Student A had a mean score of 50%. Student B met the operational

definition of reading comprehension used for this study, by scoring at least 75% or higher on

each assessment. Student B's average for the three assessments was 83%.

     For the remainder of the study, both students read books 26, 27, and 28 of the PCI

Reading Program independently. However, before each assessment was given, the students

completed a wh-question graphic organizer. The graphic organizer required that the students

identify the main character, the setting, main idea, and when the story took place. See Figure 4.2

for the results from the second portion of the study. Figure 4.3 shows all data collected and

compares pre and post test scores for both students.

 Figure 4.2.

Scores with the Graphic Organizer
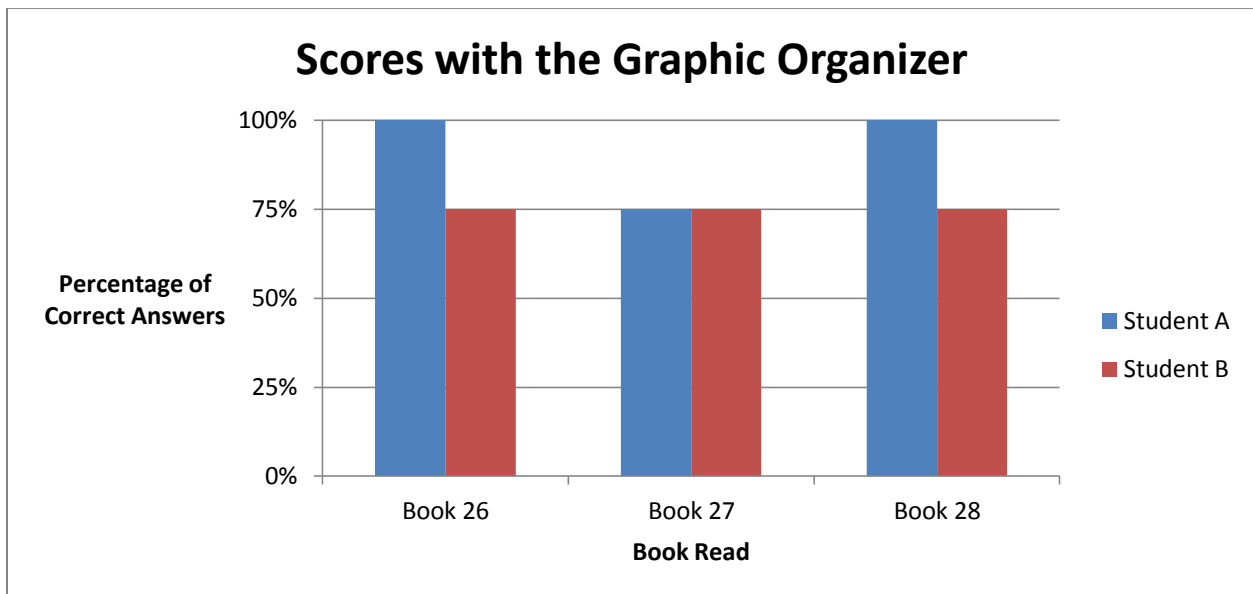
Figure 4.3.

All Data

After the introduction of the graphic organizer, Student A met the definition of reading

comprehension used for this study with each assessment. Student A's mean score was 92%.

Student B also met the measure of reading comprehension and scored 75% correct on each

assessment, but this average was lower than in the pre-test. A *t*-test for paired samples was used

to determine the significance of the difference between the pre- and post-test scores for each

student in table 4.1.

Table 4.1.

Pre- and Post-Test Score Differences

	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Difference	*t*-ratio
Student A	50%	92%	42%	.04
Student B	83%	75%	-8%	.21

The *t*-ratio indicates a significant difference as p< 0.05 for Student A. The *t*-ratio for Student B did not indicate a significant difference. These results indicate that the wh-question graphic organizer was likely beneficial to Student A. For Student B, the results indicate the organizer may have caused some confusion prior to the assessment. Yet, Student B met the operational definition of reading comprehension for this study by answering three out of four questions correctly on the assessment.

Limitations

This study faced multiple limitations. The most profound would be the sample size as only two students were used in the study, hindering generalizability. Additionally, the time frame of the study was limited to six weeks as seven school days were missed due to inclement weather. Both students also missed one school day each due to illness.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study focused on the potential influence a wh-question graphic organizer has on aiding students with ASD with reading comprehension. Two students participated in the study. The results of the study showed that with Student A, the graphic organizer was somewhat significant in improving comprehension. Student A's scores progressed steadily throughout the study, but the operational definition of reading comprehension used for this study was only met once during the pre-test period. After the organizer was introduced, Student A met the definition for reading comprehension all three times during the post-test period.

However, for Student B, the average assessment scores dropped after the introduction of the organizer. Student B had an average score of 83% during the pre-test period. After the organizer was introduced, Student B's average score dropped to 75%. It would be reasonable to infer that perhaps the organizer caused some confusion with Student B. Nevertheless, Student B continued to meet the operational definition of reading comprehension for this study.

The limitations of the study also likely influenced the data. Data collection was restricted to 6 weeks due to school closings due to weather and being limited to the spring semester. If more time was available for the study, scores may have improved as the students would have been able to become more comfortable with using the organizer. An additional limitation was the number of available participants. Because only two students served as participants for the study, future research should include a larger number of participants to more clearly demonstrate the relationship between the wh-question graphic organizer and reading comprehension. Having more students involved would also make the results more generalizable. In spite of the limitations, the data shows that using the wh-question graphic organizer may be beneficial for aiding reading comprehension for some students with ASD.

As far as the classroom implications of the intervention, the potential for improving reading comprehension exists, but the level of comprehension may vary from student to student. As noted above, Student A's average score increased after the introduction of the graphic organizer. Conversely, Student B's average score decreased slightly after the organizer was introduced, but continued to show material from the story was being comprehended. The organizer helps to arrange and highlight main ideas and important details in the text, encouraging comprehension. However, the organizer does not ensure each student will experience the same level of success.

The differences in the results for Student A and B highlight a major issue in the education of those with ASD. Autism is diagnosed as a spectrum disorder, meaning functional and academic limitations can vary widely from one individual to another (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Consequentially, the efficacy of instructional strategies will also vary from person to person. What works for one student, may not be as effective for another. Additional research is needed with the use of graphic organizers to aid reading comprehension as this is an area of tremendous difficulty for students with ASD (Zein, Solis, Vaughn, & McCulley, 2014).

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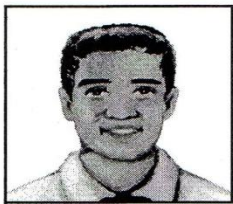   *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders, 44*(6), 1303-1322.

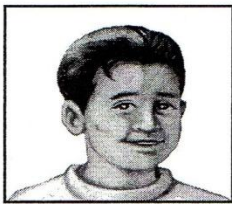**Appendix A Book 23 Assessment**

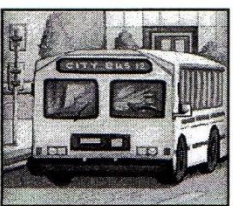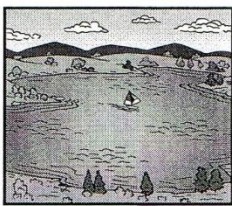Name: _____ Date: _____

Unit Assessment

Book 23

TEACHER DIRECTIONS: Read the question aloud. Then, have the student look at each answer choice and fill in the circle next to the correct answer.

1. Who is the main character in this story?

   ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.
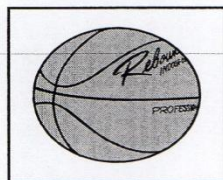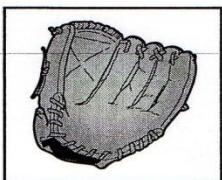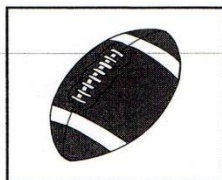
2. Which picture shows the setting of this book?

   ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

3. How can you tell that the boy's team won the game?

   ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

4. What does the boy use to play the game?

   ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

Appendix B Book 24 Assessment

Name: _____ Date: _____

Unit Assessment

Book 24

TEACHER DIRECTIONS: Read the question aloud. Then, have the student read or look at each answer choice and fill in the circle next to the correct answer.
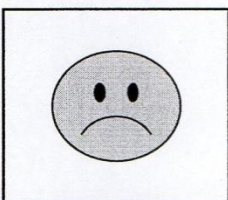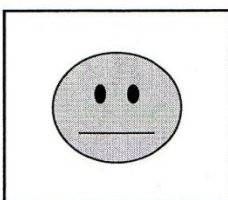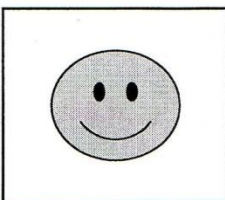
1. Who is the main character in this story?

    ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

2. What is the main idea of this story?

    ○ a. There is much to see and do at the park.

    ○ b. I have to shop for school.

    ○ c. My friend and I play a game.

3. How does the boy feel about going to the park?

    ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

4. Who goes to the park with the boy?

    ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

Appendix C Book 25 Assessment

Name: _____ Date: _____

Unit Assessment
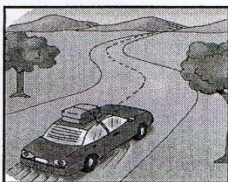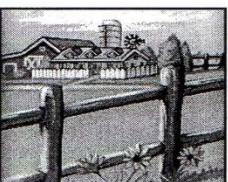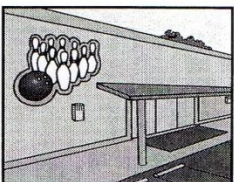
Book 25

TEACHER DIRECTIONS: Read the question aloud. Then, have the student look at each answer choice and fill in the circle next to the correct answer.

1. Who is the main character in this story?

   ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.
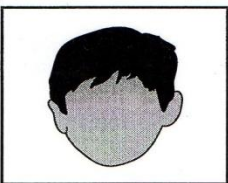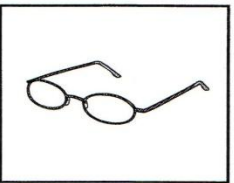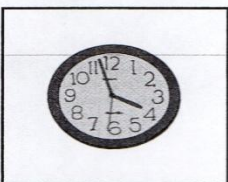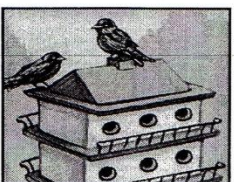
2. Which picture shows the setting of this book?

   ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

3. What is one of the girl's character traits?

   ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

4. How can you tell that it is spring in the story?

   ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

Appendix D Book 26 Graphic Organizer

Name:_____

Date:_____

Who is the main character in this story? 1. B_____	What is the main idea of the story? 1. F_____
Where does the story take place? 1. L_____	When does this story take place? 1. D_____

Appendix E Book 26 Assessment

Name: _____ Date: _____

Unit Assessment

Book 26

TEACHER DIRECTIONS: Read the question aloud. Then, have the student look at each answer choice and fill in the circle next to the correct answer.
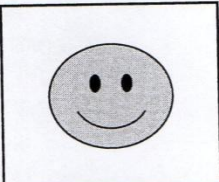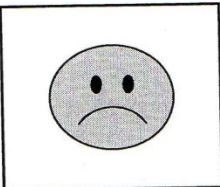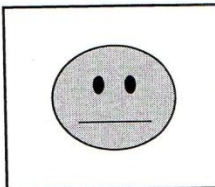
1. Who is the main character in this story?

   ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

2. Which picture shows the setting of this book?

   ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

3. What is the main idea of this story?

   ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

4. Who catches the most fish?

   ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

Appendix F Book 27 Graphic Organizer

Name:_____

Date:_____

Who is the main character in this story? 2. B_____	What is the main idea of the story? 2. R_____
Where does the story take place? 2. T_____	When does this story take place? 2. D_____

Appendix G Book 27 Assessment

Name: _____   Date: _____

Unit Assessment

Book 27

TEACHER DIRECTIONS: Read the question aloud. Then, have the student look at each answer choice and fill in the circle next to the correct answer.

1. Who is the main character in this story?

   ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.
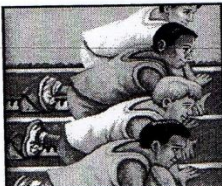
2. Who does the boy run a race against?

   ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

3. How does the boy feel about coming in third place?

   ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

4. What happens in the middle of the story?

   ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

Appendix H Book 28 Graphic Organizer

Name: _____

Date:_____

Who is the main character in this story? 3. G_____	What is the main idea of the story? 3. E_____ _
Where does the story take place? 3. R_____ _	When does this story take place? 3. N_____

Appendix I Book 28 Assessment
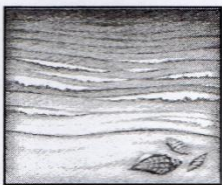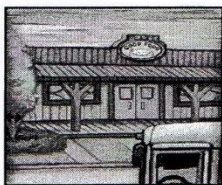
Name: _____   Date: _____

Unit Assessment

Book 28

TEACHER DIRECTIONS: Read the question aloud. Then, have the student read or look at each answer choice and fill in the circle next to the correct answer.

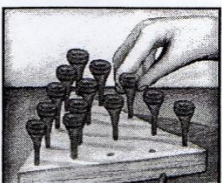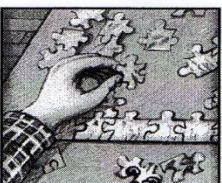1. Who is the main character in this story?

    ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

2. Which picture shows the setting of this book?

    ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

3. What is the main idea of this story?

    ○ a. We live on a farm.

    ○ b. We go out to eat.

    ○ c. We go to the show.

4. What game do I play at the restaurant?

    ○ a.   ○ b.   ○ c.

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