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Use Of Assistive Technology In Learning To Read For Autistic Students (Case Study at DeWitt Middle School, Ithaca, New York State)

Maringgar Hangesti Putri, Wiwik Widajati, Budiyanto

Universitas Negeri Surabaya
E-mail: maringgar.h.p@gmail.com

Abstract: This study aims to describe the planning, implementation, obstacles, and supporting factors in the use of assistive technology in reading instruction for students with autism at DeWitt Middle School, Ithaca, New York State. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with data collection techniques through interviews, observations, and documentation. Data analysis utilised data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. The results of the study indicate that the planning of assistive technology utilisation was carried out through Individualised Education Programme (IEP) team meetings, which were responsible for determining the assistive technology appropriate to the students' needs. The procurement process is carried out by the Associate Principal of Inclusion through a submission to the ICSD Technology Department, with a provision time of between five days and one month. In the implementation of learning, assistive technology is used in an integrated manner through various media, including low-tech (printed books, flashcards), medium-tech (speakers, headphones), and high-tech (Chromebooks, various reading applications, and AAC iPads). This technology supports the process of early reading, reading comprehension, and alternative communication for autistic students with verbal impairments. The main obstacles encountered include difficulties for students in focusing their attention, limited ability to operate certain applications, and technical constraints such as unstable audio connections. Factors supporting the successful implementation of assistive technology include support from the school and district (ICSD), collaboration between the IEP team and parents, teacher training, and the availability of assistive technology that suits the needs of each student. This study concluded that the use of assistive technology at DeWitt Middle School has been well planned, implemented, and supported, thereby improving the motivation, participation, and reading skills of autistic students.

Keywords: assistive technology, reading learning, autistic students, inclusive education, case study

INTRODUCTION

Currently, literacy skills remain a concern for many parties, especially in the field of education. Reading is one of the basic skills that students must master. Reading skills require the mastery, integration, and application of various interrelated abilities and knowledge. Reading skills require students to not only decipher vocabulary and statements, but also to form a comprehensive understanding of the entire text (Almutairi, 2018). In some schools, including inclusive schools, there are still many students who experience difficulties in reading. Among these students are those with special needs, such as autism. (Nally et al., 2018) which included: word reading, comprehension, phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, reading rate, vocabulary, accuracy and non-word reading. Results The data demonstrated impaired reading skills across reading components in both groups, with the exception of word reading pre-requisites for Group 1 and reading rate for Group 2. An analysis of the full sample found that many participants performed within the lowest possible range on standardized tests (standard score ≤ 55 in his research, he mentions that

children with autism spectrum disorder generally have letter recognition skills comparable to children without developmental disorders, but they still experience delays in understanding basic concepts about written text, vocabulary mastery, and the ability to recognise and manipulate sounds in language (phonological awareness).

To overcome these obstacles, assistive technology and learning strategies are needed to support them in developing their reading skills optimally. Assistive technology refers to devices, software, and systems designed to enhance, maintain, or maximise the functional abilities of individuals with disabilities (Ayon & Dillon, 2021) this paper focuses on understanding the experiences of learners with disabilities. This article discusses challenges faced when adopting such technology and the effects of the current well-intentioned but flawed implementation of assistive technology. The authors highlight the limitations and shortcomings of the existing approaches portrayed in previous research and educational practices. The article concludes with a call for a socio-technical approach to adopting assistive technology to

augment the learning experience for a more inclusive atmosphere and encourages a deeper appreciation for the interrelatedness between people, educational organizations, and technology (Ayon & Dillon, 2021). Previous research has shown that teachers have utilised several assistive technologies in the process of teaching reading to students with disabilities. Text-to-speech assistive technology has been proven to develop reading skills and maximise visual and auditory abilities in individuals with dyslexia. (Ashshidiqi & Wijastuti, 2020). However, the implementation of assistive technology in reading instruction in inclusive schools in Indonesia still faces various obstacles, such as a lack of understanding among teachers, limited facilities, and a lack of training in the use of technology for students and educators. The results of the study (Hata et al., 2023) shows that around 40% of teachers from inclusive schools and special needs schools lack adequate skills, and 39% of teachers in inclusive schools do not yet have the knowledge to use assistive technology for students with disabilities.

Based on observations conducted at DeWitt Middle School, Ithaca, New York, it was found that there were nine students with autism who still had difficulties in reading, both in the early stages of recognising sounds and letters, and in the stage of text comprehension. To support reading learning for students with autism, DeWitt Middle School utilises various assistive technologies, ranging from low, medium, to high technology. One form of support is that each student at DeWitt Middle School, including students with autism, is provided with a Chromebook equipped with various applications that can support learning. However, in the implementation of the reading learning programme, obstacles were still encountered, such as some students having difficulty focusing their attention and others not yet being able to operate some reading learning applications independently.

Based on the problems identified, this study is necessary to determine the planning, implementation, obstacles, and supporting factors for the successful implementation of assistive technology in reading instruction for students with autism at DeWitt Middle School, Ithaca, New York State. This study will explore how assistive technology is designed, utilised in reading instruction, the challenges in its utilisation, and the factors supporting its successful implementation. Using a descriptive qualitative research approach and case study design, this study will provide a more comprehensive picture of the effective use of assistive technology in reading instruction to support autistic students.

METHOD

This study applies a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study design. According to

(Miles et al., 2014) *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, updates and streamlines the late authors' unique work for a new generation of qualitative researchers as well as for the dedicated followers of their methods over the past three decades. I have been honored to join them, in spirit, as the third author of this revised text. To this day, qualitative data analysis seems to remain a somewhat mysterious and elusive process for newcomers to the field. This is due in part to the wide variety of genres, methodologies, and methods available to researchers, making it sometimes difficult to choose the "best" ones for the particular study in hand. In addition, qualitative research has a solid foundation of analytic traditions but no current standardization of practice—there is no official qualitative executive board out there mandating exactly how analysis must be conducted. Ours is "designer research," customized to the particular goals and needs of the enterprise and interpreted through each researcher's unique analytic lens and filter. Books on research methods can no longer require; they can only recommend. This book offers its readers practical guidance in recommended methods for assembling and analyzing primarily text-based data. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* is designed for researchers in virtually all fields and disciplines that honor what their human participants have to say, treasure the products and artifacts they create, and respect the complexity of social action as it happens all around us. It is intended for students in graduate degree programs who are learning how to investigate the human condition through qualitative research coursework and for established scholars and practitioners continuing their professional development by reading the literature on current methods. Meanwhile, according to (Yin, 2011) A case study is a research method that aims to observe and analyse a case in the actual environment or situation where the phenomenon occurs.

The research was conducted at DeWitt Middle School, Ithaca, New York State, from September to November 2025. The focus of this research was to examine the planning, implementation, obstacles, and factors that support the successful use of assistive technology in reading instruction for students with autism at DeWitt Middle School, Ithaca, New York State. According to (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) The data collection steps in this study included establishing study boundaries through sampling and recruitment processes; collecting data through unstructured or semi-structured observations and interviews; collecting documents and visual materials; and establishing protocols for recording information. Specifically, the data collection procedures applied in this study included interviews, observations, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted with the school principal, inclusion coordinator, three classroom teachers, one special assistant teacher, and one autistic student. Observations were conducted to determine

the process teachers use in planning, implementing, and identifying obstacles and factors that support the successful use of assistive technology in teaching autistic students to read. The documentation process was carried out by reviewing documents related to the process of utilising assistive technology in reading instruction. Data analysis in this study was conducted through data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2014) *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, updates and streamlines the late authors' unique work for a new generation of qualitative researchers as well as for the dedicated followers of their methods over the past three decades. I have been honored to join them, in spirit, as the third author of this revised text. To this day, qualitative data analysis seems to remain a somewhat mysterious and elusive process for newcomers to the field. This is due in part to the wide variety of genres, methodologies, and methods available to researchers, making it sometimes difficult to choose the "best" ones for the particular study in hand. In addition, qualitative research has a solid foundation of analytic traditions but no current standardization of practice—there is no official qualitative executive board out there mandating exactly how analysis must be conducted. Ours is "designer research," customized to the particular goals and needs of the enterprise and interpreted through each researcher's unique analytic lens and filter. Books on research methods can no longer require; they can only recommend. This book offers its readers practical guidance in recommended methods for assembling and analyzing primarily text-based data. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* is designed for researchers in virtually all fields and disciplines that honor what their human participants have to say, treasure the products and artifacts they create, and respect the complexity of social action as it happens all around us. It is intended for students in graduate degree programs who are learning how to investigate the human condition through qualitative research coursework and for established scholars and practitioners continuing their professional development by reading the literature on current methods. SAGE (United State. The process of checking data validity is carried out through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability tests.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

DeWitt Middle School is one of two public middle schools under the auspices of the Ithaca City School District (ICSD). DeWitt Middle School is located at 560 Warren Road, Ithaca, New York State. The school implements an inclusive education system that accepts students from various countries, cultures, languages, and with special needs, including students with autism.

Based on a review of Individualised Educational Programme (IEP) documents, it was found that DeWitt Middle School has 135 students with special needs. These 135 students with special needs have a variety of conditions, namely 21 students with ADHD, 7 students with speech and language disorders, 29 students with health disorders, 40 students with learning disorders, 7 students with mental and physical disorders, 16 students with autism, 7 students with neurological disorders, 1 student with diabetes, 1 deaf student, 2 students with intellectual disorders, 1 student with stuttering, and 3 students with multiple special needs.

DeWitt Middle School has a special education department with 12 special education teachers, 13 assistant teachers, 1 speech therapist, 1 occupational therapist, and 1 physical therapist. The learning process for students with special needs is divided into several classes, namely Community Based Class, Resource Room, and General Class. This placement is based on the results of assessments of several aspects and cognitive tests (IQ).

For students with an IQ below 70, most of their learning takes place in Community Based Classes. The Resource Room is intended for students with special needs who study in General Classes but have additional difficulties in certain subjects, such as mathematics, reading, writing, natural sciences, and social studies, so they need guidance and extra time to overcome their difficulties. Students with special needs who only study in General Classes are those who are sufficiently independent and can follow the same lessons as regular students, but some of them require 1:1 assistance from a support teacher because they have behaviours that need to be controlled or they feel easily anxious or frustrated with their environment. Based on these class division criteria, there are 4 autistic students in the Community-Based Class; 5 autistic students study in the General Class and receive additional learning in the Resource Room; and 7 autistic students receive learning only in the General Class.

Discussion

Planning the Use of Assistive Technology in Reading Learning for Students with Autism

Based on the results of interviews, observations, and reviews of several documents, the planning for the use of assistive technology at DeWitt Middle School was carried out in a structured and collaborative manner. Special education teachers, general education teachers, speech therapists, and occupational therapists separately conducted diagnostic assessments of each student with special needs. The results of these assessments were used as the basis for meetings to develop Individualised Education Programmes (IEPs) for students with special needs. The team involved in developing the IEP consists of the inclusion coordinator,

special education teacher, general education teacher, teaching assistant, speech therapist, occupational therapist, and parents or caregivers of students with special needs. This meeting is held once a year and can be conducted online or offline. During this meeting, the results of the student's assessment in each aspect are discussed, such as occupation (physical motor skills, behaviour, emotions, and daily skills), speech/language, reading, writing, mathematics, and social skills. The team determines the learning strategies, the appropriate types of assistive technology, and the targets that the student is expected to achieve in the coming year.

After the Individualised Education Programme (IEP) team has determined the list of assistive technology needs for students, the Associate Principal of Inclusion will submit a formal request to the ICSD Technology Department using a procurement form. The department will then follow up by providing the necessary equipment or installing the relevant applications on school computers. The procurement or installation process typically takes between five days and one month, depending on the availability of the devices and the ease of access to the requested software.

Applications for assistive technology are generally made during the summer holidays, but can also be made during the school year if there are new recommendations from the IEP team. This is adjusted according to the results of routine evaluations conducted every five weeks to review the progress and needs of students.

Specifically for reading, the planned assistive technology includes Chromebooks provided for each student, interactive reading applications, audiobooks, headphones, augmentative communication aids (only for autistic students who have communication difficulties), and text-to-speech applications. Teachers develop lesson plans that integrate the use of these technologies into reading activities for the whole class, small groups, and individual learning. In addition, teachers ensure that the devices are ready for use and tailored to the needs of each student.

Implementation of Assistive Technology in Reading Learning for Students with Autism

The implementation of learning shows that teachers use assistive technology ranging from low-tech to high-tech. Low-tech assistive technology uses printed books with various reading levels; spelling puzzle cards; word building sliders vowel teams; sight word pop-up packs; alphabet flash cards from the Really Great Reading programme; the Really Great Reading Student Kit, which consists of 55 consonant and consonant combination letter magnets (black), 5 vowel letter magnets (red), 4 coloured magnets (blue, yellow, green, and red), a syllable board (mini), board markers, a board eraser (mini), and a magnetic board

to show the requested word; and the Edmark Reading Programme Kit, which consists of picture match cards and boards, phrase match cards and boards, word cards, display masks, and reading and social skills board games.

The medium-tech assistive technology used consists of speakers and headphones (designed to muffle and focus sound). Meanwhile, the high-tech assistive technology used includes Chromebooks, the Really Great Reading app, the CommonLit app, the Reading a-z app, the Epic! app, the Readwork app, the Literably app, the IXL reading app, the amplify reading app, the Pebble Go app, text-to-speech websites, iPads as augmentative communication aids (specifically for autistic students with communication disorders), Google Docs, Google Slides, YouTube, interactive whiteboards, and projectors.



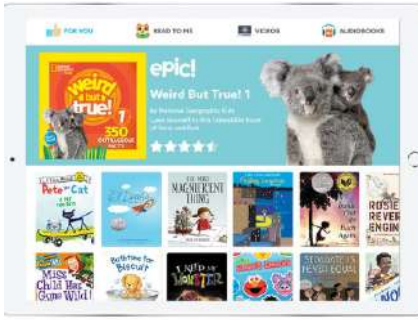

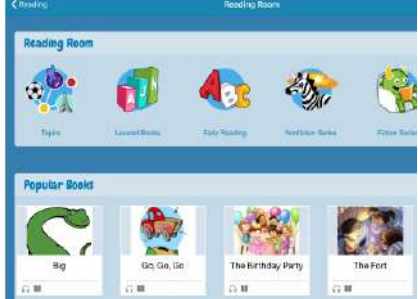

The Really Great Reading Programme is a programme that takes a comprehensive and explicitly structured approach to phonics and phonemic awareness, involving multiple senses (multisensory). (Templeton Elementary School, 2025). This programme helps students improve their reading skills gradually, starting from recognising letters, sounds, written forms, reading and writing single-syllable words, simple two-syllable words, four types of syllables, six types of syllables, and practical strategies for reading long words.


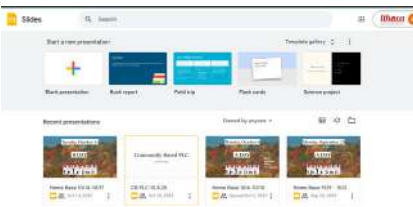
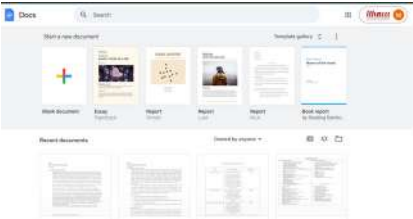


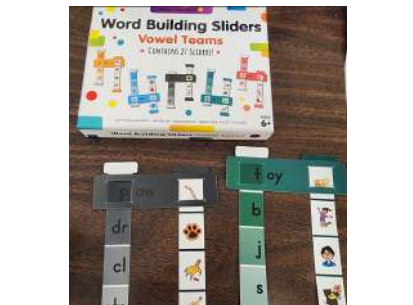
The Edmark Reading Programme is designed based on a systematic and repetitive word recognition strategy, as well as the application of errorless learning principles that can help students build confidence when reading. (Brook et al., 2012). Learning begins with the introduction of individual words and progresses to their use in sentences and narrative texts.







Reading A-Z supports the implementation of Science of Reading-based learning through a collection of high-quality books and reading materials, such as vocabulary exercises, everyday language exercises, visual aids (graphic organisers), and careful reading of texts tailored to the ability level of students. These materials can be used flexibly for the whole class, small groups, or individual practice (Borgh, 2021b).





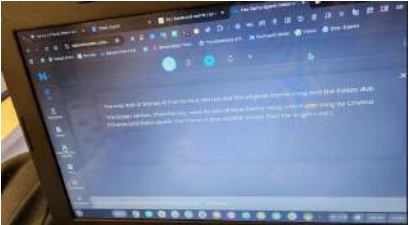


The Amplify reading programme provides explicit and systematic instruction in basic reading skills, starting with simple skills such as phonological and phonemic awareness and progressing to more complex skills, delivered through games (Andrea, 2019). IXL Reading is a programme that builds early literacy skills using a phonics approach, develops new vocabulary according to the level of the learner, builds reading fluency, and develops reading comprehension. (Diamond & Hochstein, 2023). IXL is equipped with multisensory audio, image and video features, creating engaging learning experiences that foster an interest in reading. The CommonLit application provides literacy materials and assessments in line with national education standards (Common Core Standards),



Table 1 Assistive Technology, Images, and Their Functions in Reading Learning for Students with Autism at DeWitt Middle School

No.	Assistive Technology	Images	Functions
1.	Chromebook		Accessing all applications or digital materials used in reading instruction.
2.	CommonLit App		Assessment, helping students understand the meaning of words, reading comprehension from various texts with different levels of ability.
3.	Epic! App		Independent reading, helping students follow the text while listening to the story through the audiobook or read-to-me feature.
4.	Really Great Reading App		Assisting students in gradually improving their reading skills through a phonics approach.
5.	Aplikasi Reading A-Z		Practising phonics, reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary.
6.	Readwork App		Developing a reading routine, improving comprehension, expanding vocabulary.

7.	Literably App		Monitoring and assessing pupils' reading fluency.
8.	Google Slide		Assisting teachers and students in creating presentations of material or assignments.
9.	Google Doc		Assisting teachers in preparing materials.
10.	Headphone		Reduces noise distractions and aids concentration.
11.	Textbooks (with or without level grades)		Developing a reading routine, improving comprehension, expanding vocabulary.
12.	Word Building Sliders vowel teams		Recognising and reading combinations of vowels, expanding vocabulary.

13.	Math it! Spelling		Practising spelling skills and expanding vocabulary.
14.	Pop for Sight Words		Practise reading words and expanding vocabulary.
15.	Youtube		Means of reading aloud and sources of learning materials.
16.	Projector		Displaying the material that the teacher would like to teach.
17.	Really Great Reading Crosslinguistic Alphabet Cards		Getting to know letters and letter sounds.
18.	Blast Foundations Student Kit Really Great Reading		Assisting learners in forming words, dividing words into smaller parts for reading and spelling.

19.	iPad Augmentative and alternative communication		Assisting learners with language impairments in expressing their ideas and answers, and facilitating two-way communication.
20.	Interactive whiteboard		A place to display material that teachers want to convey. Teachers or students can write notes or answers using interactive pens.
21.	Bluetooth Speaker		Turn up the volume of the media being shown by the teacher.
22.	Edmark Reading Program Kit		Helping with word recognition and reading comprehension.
23.	Text to speech		Assisting students in following the text while listening.
24.	Printer		Printing the required text or material.
25.	IXL Reading App		Practising reading and comprehension skills through level-based exercises.

26.	Pebble Go App		Providing informative reading materials and encyclopaedias with supporting audio and images.
27.	Amplify App		Improving reading comprehension through games and interactive narratives.

offering a range of graded reading texts online that can also be downloaded in PDF format (Edwards, 2023b). CommonLit also provides various forms of assessment to measure student understanding, ranging from multiple-choice questions to open-ended questions.

PebbleGo is a digital learning platform that can help every student develop literacy skills while building basic knowledge in science and social studies through age-appropriate texts in English and Spanish, read-aloud features, interactive vocabulary, and multimodal learning tools (images, graphics, videos, and animations) (Borgh, 2021a).

The Epic! app is an interactive digital library that provides access to thousands of books and videos online, allowing students to read using various devices such as laptops, tablets, and smartphones. (Edwards, 2023a). The Readwork application provides fiction and non-fiction texts that can improve students' reading comprehension, assessments that allow teachers to monitor students' learning progress, and implement differentiated learning based on interest and text difficulty level. (Rogowski, 2021).

The Literably application is a digital tool for monitoring and assessing pupils' reading fluency (Bindel, 2018). As students' reading skills improve, teachers can choose to automatically adjust the difficulty level of the text based on assessment results or determine it manually.

Spelling card puzzle games help students learn while playing through fun puzzle-solving activities. (areyougame.com, 2023). Word building sliders vowel teams game trains students to recognise and read vowel combinations (vowel teams) (Stuff, 2024). Played by sliding the sound card to form a word, then matching the picture card with that word.

The pop for sight words game consists of cards that can help students develop early literacy, expand their vocabulary, and improve reading fluency (Resources, 2020). These cards can be used independently or played with 2–5 students in a competitive game. During the

learning process, teachers monitor the use of assistive technology for students who can learn independently and provide guidance to students who need assistance in operating the assistive technology. The following is a summary table of assistive technologies used in teaching reading to students with autism.

Barriers to the Use of Assistive Technology in Teaching Reading to Students with Autism

Some barriers encountered in implementing learning with assistive technology include; 1) Not all students are able to operate the devices independently; 2) Damage to devices due to students having tantrums; 3) Technical problems such as audio or projectors that cannot be connected; 4) Technical problems such as Chromebook microphones not being able to capture students' voices clearly; 5) Students' dependence on Chromebooks, resulting in a lack of focus when listening to and following the teacher's instructions; 6) Not all digital media are appealing to students; 7) and Students' Chromebooks running out of power during lessons.

These obstacles indicate that the successful use of assistive technology is highly dependent on technical support, availability of time, and the competence of teachers in adapting teaching strategies to the characteristics of students with autism.

Factors Supporting the Successful Use of Assistive Technology in Teaching Reading to Students with Autism

The successful use of assistive technology for students with autism is supported by several factors, namely: policy support from the school and Ithaca City School District (ICSD) in providing various facilities for teachers and the needs of each student; collaboration between teachers, therapists, parents, and support staff; an inclusive school environment that is open to innovation; and training for teachers. These factors form a collaborative and responsive learning

ecosystem for the needs of autistic students, enabling assistive technology to function optimally to improve reading skills.

CONCLUSSION AND SUGGESTION

Conclusion

Based on the results of interviews, observations, and documentation reviews, it can be concluded that the planning and implementation of assistive technology for autistic students is carried out in a structured and collaborative manner. However, the use of assistive technology for autistic students faces several obstacles, both in terms of the students' conditions and technical constraints, as well as the support from the district, collaboration between teams at school and parents, and an inclusive and adaptive school environment can be supporting factors for the successful use of assistive technology for autistic students.

Suggestion

Based on the above description, it is hoped that teachers will balance the use of digital media with conventional reading activities so that students do not become completely dependent on electronic devices. Assistant teachers are expected to continue to improve their professional skills in using various types of assistive technology through training. parents are expected to actively participate in monitoring and continuing the use of assistive technology at home. Family support and guidance can reinforce the reading learning outcomes that have been practised at school. Furthermore, this research is expected to be developed further with a focus on the effectiveness of using certain types of assistive technology.

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