



Can Schedule Usage Training Include Elements of Literacy Instruction?

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At the beginning of the new school year, Mrs. Owen noted that she had several students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) assigned to her resource room. She was aware that it is an established practice to use schedules with students with autism spectrum disorder. So, she compiled a list of potential needs regarding schedules based on each student's past record. She found that:

- Thomas was a non-reader and used a tangible symbol schedule to guide his understanding of his day.
- Sean was a reader and used a text based (hand written or typed) schedule; with guidance, he was able to type his own daily schedule.
- Stephen used a picture based schedule which also contained printed words above the picture; he was able to use the schedule with minimum support from staff.
- Jeremy was learning to use a picture/text schedule last year; checking his schedule was still an adult assisted routine and did not appear to be driven by his need to know what was next.
- Adam had not yet been taught to use a schedule; he appeared to find meaning in pictures and maybe was an early emerging reader.

As Mrs. Owen reviewed their needs, she became excited at the opportunity to implement some new strategies into her program; she wanted to incorporate new ideas from a workshop on literacy development. Although there would be many opportunities within the day for each student to get some experiences with literacy, she decided to use the daily schedule as ONE opportunity for Adam since he was an ideal candidate for this type of situational instruction.

Her rationale for the selection of Adam and not the others for this procedure included the following:

- Thomas needed a concrete schedule. He also needed to focus on only one thing at a time. His emergent literacy training would occur in other settings. At another time juncture however, he too might be a candidate for literacy instruction relating to the schedule.
- Sean was already a reader so there was no need for this novice level training.
- Stephen had moved into a level of independent use with his schedule. It would be a step backwards to again include an adult in his daily schedule use. He also could work on literacy in other situations.
- Jeremy could be a possible candidate if he returned to school still dependent on adult support and still uninterested in the schedule information. His parents, however, were going to use a schedule at home over the summer so his skill level and attitude might have changed over the summer recess.
- Adam had not previously learned a routine relative to a schedule. Therefore, there would be no violation of a previous learned behavioral routine if she incorporated some literacy training along with schedule use. Interference with independent use was not an issue. His interest in pictures was an asset.

Mrs. Owen carefully considered what she had learned in her workshops as she formulated her ideas for offering literacy training to Adam within his training for schedule use. She rationalized that through learning his schedule...

- Adam would be introduced to key words that conveyed information that might be important to him. If the

information reduced anxiety or helped him “steel” himself for a challenging situation, the words/information on a schedule might have a huge impact on his daily life. The impact may exceed the importance of many other words encountered in other literacy orientation activities. Adam may have special motivation to learn the vocabulary.

- The schedule by its nature would represent a limited set of vocabulary that Adam would be learning to recognize and read. Picture cues would always accompany the text and their presence would provide support for him in his role as an emergent literacy learner. A limited set of highly motivating words would seem to be an asset for learning.
- A schedule would also present numerous opportunities for learning the specific vocabulary. Adam would consult the schedule many times EACH day. Mrs. Owen recalled that repetition was considered as a pre-requisite for developing automaticity for reading. In other words, by frequent exposure, Adam could potentially learn to quickly identify the various printed words without on-going adult help or long term reliance on the picture cues.
- The addition of a literacy component to the task of teaching Adam to use his schedule might not add more than a minute or so to each training episode, but it might represent a good investment in terms of payoff.
- The literacy learning opportunity, however, might be ideal for Adam for only a limited period of time, (i.e., the training situation could not endure indefinitely). Once the vocabulary has been mastered, some of the motivational aspects of literacy learning would be lost since the set of words would be limited. More importantly, the literacy training opportunity would need to be sacrificed after a period of time because self-management and independent use of the schedule were still the primary goals.

Next, Mrs. Owen considered her teaching and schedule preparation procedures. Several things would need to be altered if she was going to promote literacy awareness and/or sight word recognition while teaching Adam about his schedule. She decided that:

- Schedule words would be selected not only for appropriate meaning but also to visually look distinctive from one another in terms of physical appearance at the beginning and end of the words. For example, Adam might need the word “room” added to the entry “resource” to initially assist distinction vs. the word “recess.”
- The text word or phrase would appear over the picture and should consist of a reasonable font size and boldness. Mrs. Owen thought she would consider a font size of **16, 18, or 20**.
- The picture would be viewed as a cue to help Adam remember the key text word. Thus the picture cue would need to be personalized. She might need to talk to his teacher from last year before selecting pictures. For example, if Adam preferred playing with the balls in the P.E. room, but loved swinging during recess, these associative cues would be used along with the text words on his schedule. If, however, Adam really liked to use the scooter board during free time in the gym while the slide was his favorite play item at recess time, then his personalized picture cues would be different.
- Introduction to the schedule would focus on the text word and the conversation would explain the relationship to the text. For example, “Time for P.E.” (Mrs. Owen would point to the text, P.E.). “Mr. Smith has lots of balls” (as she pointed to the picture of the ball). “P.E.” and she would repeat and point to the text.
- Over time, she could offer different brief comments about P.E. as she drew attention to the word. While still pointing to ‘P.E.’, she could mention an event that happened in that situation; she could end the mini-lesson as she slipped her index finger over the picture. The objective would be to have a more comprehensive meaning of ‘P.E.’ carried by the verbal word vs. the limited meaning that might be suggested by the picture of a ball.
- She imagined things she might say once she knew more about Adam. For example, as the broader meaning of each word was established, she could call attention to the word shape or to the first letter/sound of the word. She could say, “Math begins with ‘m.’ So does Mark (a favored classmate). So does Mickey (a favorite TV show character). So does your favorite food, macaroni. Listen to the ‘m’ sound in math, Mark, Mickey, macaroni.”
- She could make a mental note to be sure to mention to Adam that he and she were **READING** the words on the schedule, even if he was not reading them independently. She would encourage Adam to hear the text word

inside his head and to think about the broader meaning.

- She knew that she would gradually reduce the presence of the picture when it was clear that Adam was focusing on and recognizing the text word. This could be done by progressively reducing the size of the picture via certain computer software or by the progressive mutation of the picture. The latter could involve using increasing layers of wax paper over the picture until an opaque cover developed (Downing, 2005). Other techniques were also available (i.e., such as using various software techniques to decrease embedding of a picture relative to text). But, she concluded, the layering of wax paper seemed an inexpensive and easy technique that still allowed the picture to be available, if the covering needed to be removed.
- She reminded herself of some cautions. If picture cues were excessively emphasized first for each entry instead of the text, she realized that it might be more difficult to get Adam to shift his visual focus to the text. It also might be more difficult to shift his thinking to a broader meaning beyond what was represented by the picture. This was something she might have to monitor and adapt as she began the training.
- She acknowledged that she must choose the extensiveness of the informational content used to help broaden the meaning of each schedule entry. Too much chatter and Adam might get the impression that this was conversation time. She knew she would have a better idea of what was appropriate after she had worked with Adam for a week. The end goal, of course, was still to achieve independence in schedule use.
- She knew she must decide if the target words on the schedule were to be practiced in other activities outside of the schedule. For example, Adam could match schedule words to target pairs. If asked, "Show me 'recess,'" he might pick out the word card from an array of schedule-based or non-schedule based words.
- Generalized recognition of the schedule words might need to be part of her instructional plan.
- She recognized that she would have to choose the timing of transition from step to step. For example, she must decide when to introduce the phonemic awareness information and when to begin the removal or blurring of the picture cues.
- Lastly, she also knew she must monitor Adam's progress. If he was not responding to the literacy training at an appropriate pace, she would need to accomplish all of his literacy instruction in other activities. The goal of obtaining information, self-management, and independence were still the most important functions of learning to use the schedule and this could not be inordinately delayed. If that meant eventually restoring the pictures as cues or even emphasizing them, so be it. She knew she would learn a lot from the experience and be better able to foster some literacy awareness with other children as she introduced them to schedule use skills.

Summary

In summary, this article calls attention to the possibility of incorporating literacy instruction concurrent with an introduction to schedule use. Many teaching/learning opportunities are needed for literacy training. Schedule use time represents a naturally occurring daily activity that could support the piggybacking of informal literacy instruction. Schedules contain a small set of vocabulary for sight word recognition and offer natural opportunities for repetitive exposure to this core set of words. Embedding literacy training opportunities with schedule training represents a strategy that may have surprising and positive outcomes for some students.

References

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