



AutismCRC

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Providing early literacy sessions in libraries to preschoolers on the autism spectrum and their parents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC)

The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC) is the world's first national, cooperative research effort focused on autism. Taking a whole-of-life approach to autism focusing on diagnosis, education and adult life, Autism CRC researchers are working with end-users to provide evidence-based outcomes which can be translated into practical solutions for governments, service providers, education and health professionals, families and people on the autism spectrum.

A note on terminology

We recognise that when referring to individuals on the autism spectrum, there is no one term that suits all people. In our published material and other work, when speaking of adults we use the terms 'autistic person', 'person on the autism spectrum' or 'person on the spectrum'. The term 'autistic person' uses identity first language, which reflects the belief that being autistic is a core part of a person's identity.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is diagnostic terminology used by the healthcare sector, and is used in the context of a person being 'diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder'.

1. Introduction

For this project we partnered with the First 5 Forever team in Brisbane City Council (BCC) Libraries. Currently, more than 160 early literacy sessions, sometimes referred to as Story Time sessions, are conducted in BCC libraries each week, with more than 300,000 adults and children attending annually. To prepare for the study, we conducted an online survey on home literacy practices (as used in our previous projects *Shared book reading intervention* and *Predicting optimal literacy outcomes in children with ASD in the first year of schooling*) of families of children with typical development (TD) as well as parents of children with disabilities, including children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Simpson, Paynter, Wicks, & Westerveld, 2020). This study aimed to understand parents' /caregivers' expectations/beliefs/views on literacy, book selection, visits to library, child interests and home literacy practices. Results indicated that the frequency of shared book reading was significantly higher in the TD group than in the group of preschoolers on the autism spectrum. Similarly, the frequency with which parents and children accessed their local library and attended early literacy sessions was reported to be higher in the TD group than in families with a child on the autism spectrum. Whilst the range of reasons for not attending early literacy sessions at the local library were mixed across groups, a lack of child interest and unsuitability of the environment was reported by a significantly higher proportion of parents with children on the autism spectrum than those with typically developing preschoolers. Results of this survey were used to justify the need for autism-friendly Story Time sessions in Brisbane City Council libraries as well as inform library staff of the current literacy practices of families living in the BCC catchment.

To enable more inclusive participation of children on the autism spectrum in Story Time sessions, the BCC Libraries team was keen to learn how to provide more 'autism-friendly' sessions. The current project aimed to address this aim through:

1. building knowledge of: i) autism (diagnosis and cognitive characteristics that may influence literacy development); ii) emergent literacy development in preschoolers on the autism spectrum; iii) specific strategies for working with children on the autism spectrum; through provision of professional development for librarians involved in children's early literacy sessions.
2. in collaboration with library staff, developing an 'autism-friendly Story Times' program for parents of preschoolers on the spectrum, and delivered by library staff; and
3. embedding the autism-friendly Story Times program into community practice through development of a multimedia professional development package for ongoing use.

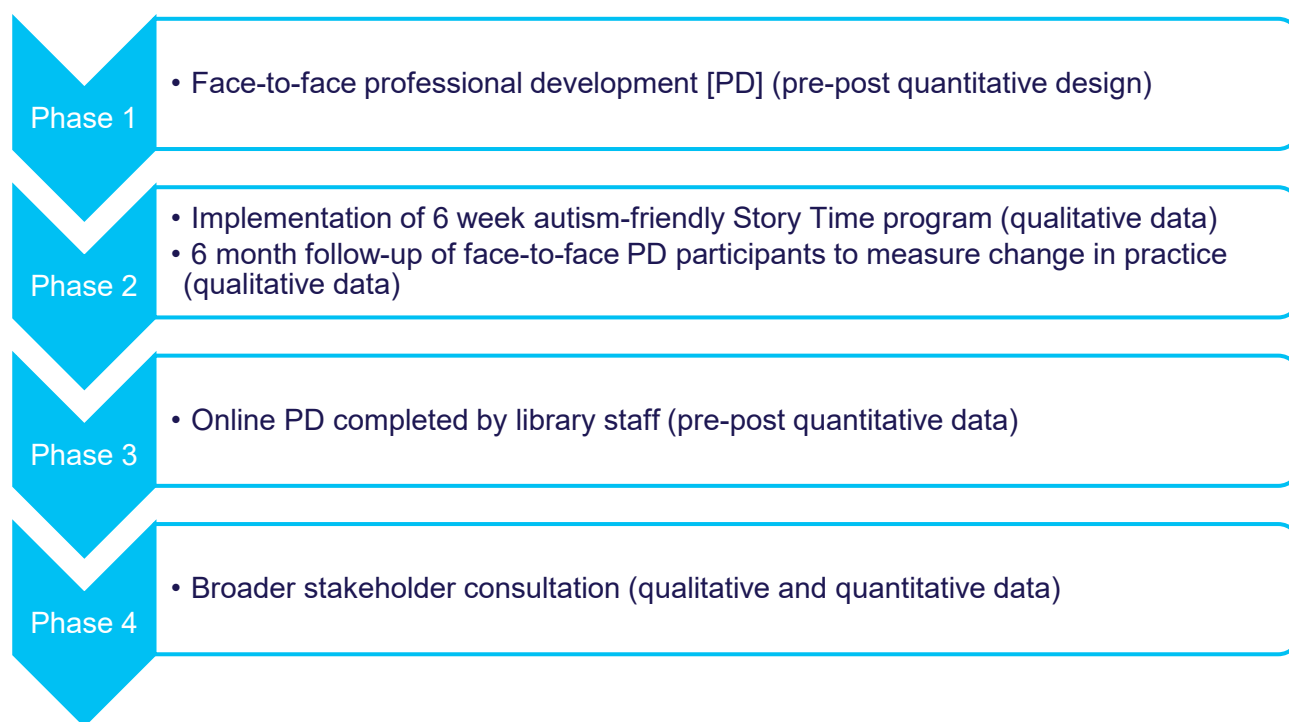
2. Research design

This project utilised a Design-Based Research (DBR) methodology in the development of an autism-friendly Story Time program. There were four phases with the following key research questions addressed in each phase:

- 1) Was the professional development considered socially valid?
- 2) What modifications of the professional development were recommended (i.e. feedback for refinement)?
- 3) Did the professional development increase participant knowledge and self-efficacy?

This DBR methodology was implemented in four phases, as shown in Figure 1

Figure 1: Schematic diagram of the multiphase layout of the project



3. Phase 1: Face-to-face professional development

A total of 22 library staff from across 17 Brisbane City Council libraries attended the face-to-face professional development day, conducted over eight hours by four members of the research team. The content presented sought to increase librarian knowledge of the following four areas: 1) What is autism; 2) (Emergent) literacy development in children on the spectrum; 3) Strategies for working

with children on the autism spectrum; 4) Adapted shared book reading for preschool children on the autism spectrum.

Results from Phase 1 indicated that librarian participation in a face-to-face professional development presentation led to increased knowledge of autism, emergent literacy, and strategies to make Story Time sessions more autism-friendly. Staff also reported greater confidence in including children on the autism spectrum in Story Times. Feedback from librarians was used to inform the next iteration of training, described in Phase 3. The social validity of the PD was highly rated across all domains with qualitative data similarly expressing participant support for the PD.

4. Phase 2: Implementation (pilot project)

In Phase 2, we sought to investigate whether training was subsequently implemented in practice, either with support from the research team to implement a series of Story Times early literacy sessions, or without further supports.

Two library staff (who attended Phase 1 PD) implemented the weekly Story Time sessions for parents of preschoolers on the autism spectrum and participated in semi-formal interviews following completion of the six Story Time sessions. The remaining participants of the Phase 1 PD were encouraged to implement practices at their own libraries. Feedback was sought from these participants six months post-PD, using an on-line survey, to determine whether the training had influenced their story time practice.

Results of the online survey indicated that most participants had changed their story-time practice following the PD. Three key ideas were expressed in the comments: 1) increased knowledge of autism 2) increased confidence in working with children on the autism spectrum, and 3) changes to the structure or environment of the Story Time sessions.

Consistent with the survey results, interviews suggested that the PD increased participant knowledge of autism and led to greater confidence in supporting those on the spectrum and their families. Key themes were: 1) confidence in providing a more supportive environment; 2) valuing the Story Time session as an early literacy learning experience; 3) developing skills.

Feedback from the interviews was incorporated into the Phase 3 online professional development package.

5.Phase 3: Online training and implementation

The online training was delivered through the Griffith University online learning site via BlackBoard. The training consisted of the same four modules covered in the face-to-face training (Phase 1), with reading material and videos provided to educate participants. Participants were informed that the training would take approximately four hours to complete, however they were able to close the site and return to it as required over the course of eight weeks.

A total of 22 participants from 11 different libraries completed the online multimedia training entitled “Story time for preschoolers on the autism spectrum”. These participants were all library staff currently employed by Brisbane City Council. Data collection occurred through the completion of pre- and post-training surveys in the online learning platform designed to measure 1) changes in participant knowledge, and 2) attitudes towards autism and inclusion of children on the autism spectrum, in response to PD. These surveys reflected those used in the Phase 1 training.

Following the online training, 4 participants completed the six-weekly Story Time program in their library. Upon completion of the six Story Time sessions, the four librarians were invited to share their experiences through an online survey. This survey consisted of nine questions which were similar to those asked in the Phase 2 interviews. A range of open-ended questions, multiple-choice questions and rating scales were included. This survey aimed to capture participant experiences in implementing autism-friendly Story Time sessions at the library after completing the online PD.

The transition of the face-to-face PD to an online learning platform was viewed as socially valid and the four librarians who implemented the Story Time program within their library reported that most elements were useful. Use of a coaching model with the First 5 Forever team member was viewed as valuable in supporting librarian practice. These results indicate implementation following online training is a viable option for librarians, when combined with existing internal resources.

6.Phase 4: Broader stakeholder consultation

The final phase focussed on evaluating whether the PD would be viewed as useful/socially valid for broader professional groups. The aim of this phase was to evaluate whether further refinements or changes would be required to make the training useful/applicable to a broader stakeholder group.

Participants included eight professionals who had experience working with children on the autism spectrum across early learning and care and/or allied health. Their experience ranged from under

one year to over 10 years. Participants had qualifications in Psychology ($n = 2$), Speech Pathology ($n = 2$), Education ($n = 3$), and Occupational Therapy ($n = 1$).

Results from phase 4 indicated this broader stakeholder group drawn from allied health and education viewed the online training components and training as useful and indicated suggestions for refinements to align more closely with their discipline needs.

7. Future directions

In this project we have provided an overview of the development and refinement of an online professional development package to support autism-friendly Story Time sessions delivered by librarians in the community libraries. At a practical level, the BCC is offering this online PD to librarians across the BCC region, with almost 50 librarians currently enrolled to complete the training. We were pleased to obtain positive feedback from the broader stakeholder group, including allied health professionals and educators who completed the online professional development package. Refining the online PD for use by other professionals involved with children on the autism spectrum, including undergraduate students in speech pathology, education or psychology, will be an important next step.

8. References

Simpson, K., Paynter, J., Wicks, R. T., & Westerveld, M. F. (2020). Early literacy learning experiences across home and community libraries for young children who have autism. *Advances in Neurodevelopmental Disorders*, 4(1), 74-84. doi:10.1007/s41252-019-00145-7

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Our values

**Inclusion**

Working together with those with the lived experience of autism in all we do

**Innovation**

New solutions for long term challenges

**Independence**

Guided by evidence based research, integrity and peer review

**Cooperation**

Bringing benefits to our partners; capturing opportunities they cannot capture alone



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