The interactive read-aloud: A case study of two children with an Intellectual Disability

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Abstract

This instrumental case study explored the experiences of two children diagnosed with an Intellectual Disability (ID) during interactive read-alouds delivered at home. Participating parents implemented interactive read-aloud strategies with ease and reported joy in the experience. The uniqueness of each child and the role of choice in reading emerged as prominent themes.

About the Author

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Introduction

The pioneering work of Whitehurst et al. (1988) in dialogic reading was based on the following principle: "The use of *evocative* techniques by the parent that encourage the child to talk about pictured materials is preferable to techniques that place the child in a more passive role" (p. 553). A read-aloud, in its noun form, presents children with an opportunity to listen to text that is more linguistically and cognitively complex than words spoken during casual conversation with children (Massaro, 2017). The notion of parents or caregivers implementing conversational techniques while reading picture books aloud to their children established the framework for this study, which is focused primarily on the adult usage of dialogic, or interactive, strategies when reading aloud to children with an Intellectual Disability (ID). One of the major purposes of the interactive read-aloud is for adults to guide children in making sense of text (Scanlon et al., 2017). Research has also demonstrated that the interactive read-aloud promotes students' development in oral language and increases reading motivation (Fisher et al., 2004).

Purpose

The purpose of this case study was to take a necessary initial step in discovering how children with ID experience dialogic interactions during read-alouds through qualitative research. Within an instrumental case study design, data is used to illuminate a certain issue or theme (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In this case, the issue is that elementary school aged children with ID are not well-represented in dialogic read-aloud literature. Currently, qualitative methods and instruments are embraced in interactive read-aloud research, but it might also be advantageous for researchers to consider implementing more instrumental case studies in an effort to better inform read-aloud practices for children with disabilities. Within an instrumental case study design, an exploration of participants within a bounded system can help to bring clarity to an issue or theme (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), a bounded system might include an "activity, event, process, or individuals" (p. 477). The bounded system separated out for this research included children with ID and their parents ("individuals") engaging in an interactive read-aloud (an "activity"). The instrumental case study model depicted in Figure 1 helped to illuminate the issues surrounding the paucity of read-aloud research for children with ID.

Research Questions

Although case study data is not generalizable (Stake, 1995), the research provided key insights in response to the question: *What are the affordances and limitations of interactive read-alouds for children with ID?* This question was more specifically addressed through the following three sub-questions: (1) What are the read-aloud habits and routines of families with children with ID? (2) What are the observed and reported outcomes of human-to-human interactive read-alouds for children with ID? (3) Which interactive read-aloud strategies do parents/caregivers report are useful for encouraging communication?

Literature Review

Becoming a Nation of Readers (Anderson et al., 1985) was a seminal work that promoted the practice of reading aloud to children. This document referred to the read-aloud as "the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading" (Anderson et al., 1985, p. 23). Years later, Trelease (2019) confirmed this idea and praised the read-aloud as a learning tool more valuable than any others commonly used in school, such as worksheets or flashcards. Trelease referred to the read-aloud as the catalyst for independent reading. Research has also shown that read-alouds can help to foster an improved understanding of narrative discourse (Fisher et al., 2004). In sum, read-alouds are useful for promoting active engagement while also contributing to language and literacy growth (Collins & Glover, 2015; Lennox, 2013; Riojas-Cortez & Martinez, 2022).

Engaging in dialogue during read-alouds can positively influence children's language development (Acosta-Tello, 2019; Fisher et al., 2004; Lane & Wright, 2007; Whitehurst et al., 1988). The significant work of Whitehurst et al. (1988) revealed improvement in posttest scores on children's expressive language abilities when parents incorporated dialogic reading strategies, such as open-ended questions and verbal feedback, while reading aloud. This evidence points to the value of interaction during a read-aloud to promote and accelerate language development (Whitehurst et al.,

Figure 1
The Instrumental Case Study Design
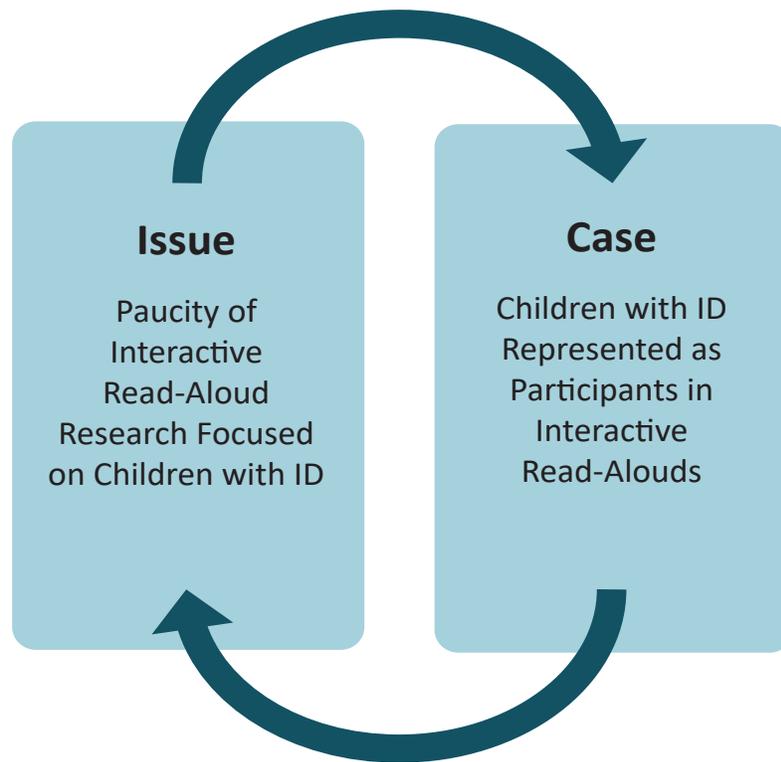
Note. The figure displays a modified version of the model suggested by Creswell and Guetterman (2019). A relationship is portrayed between the "issue" and "case". In this study, the issue was illuminated through case study research, and case study research served to provide insights on the issue.

1988). When implementing dialogic reading strategies, teachers (or other adult readers) can raise the level of complexity in conversations by incorporating more sophisticated language that is a level above the student's ability (Lane & Wright, 2007). Acosta-Tello (2019) confirmed research findings about the effectiveness of dialogic reading and recommended that teachers engage students with dialogic reading strategies while reading aloud by actively asking questions and initiating text-related conversations. A study by Towson et al. (2021) also showed interactive book reading to have a positive impact on language development for children up to 6 years old with developmental disabilities or delays.

An interactive read-aloud supports and extends students' reading development through the use of dialogue and encourages active thinking while reading (Scanlon et al., 2017; Wiseman, 2011). Within the interactive read-aloud, "authority" is genuinely shared with children (Lennox, 2013; Smolkin & Donovan,

2002). Ultimately, these interactions can lead to improved outcomes for students (Lennox, 2013). During a classroom interactive read-aloud, teachers skillfully implement dialogic reading strategies *before, during, and after reading* to enrich students' language and thinking skills (Lennox, 2013). The following before, during, and after reading (BDA) techniques described within a classroom environment can easily be replicated by parents or caregivers in a home setting.

According to Scanlon et al. (2017), comments and questions should be woven throughout an interactive read-aloud to initiate conversations. For example, *before reading*, teachers can create anticipation and guide students in making predictions (Acosta-Tello, 2019). They can preview and discuss text then set a purpose for listening (Scanlon et al., 2017). *During reading*, teachers might ask questions or encourage students to make connections (Acosta-Tello, 2019). Although teachers should anticipate points of confusion and address those prior to the interactive read-aloud,

spontaneous student and teacher-initiated discussions and transactions with text should also occur during the interactive read-aloud (Scanlon et al., 2017). *After reading*, children might reflect on what they learned or why the author may have written the book (Scanlon et al., 2017). The goal of the interactive read aloud is for children to internalize the ways of thinking initiated through dialogue so that they will hopefully learn to transact with text independently (Scanlon et al., 2017).

When teachers or other adults model these types of metacognitive processes to children, they engage in extensive oral communication while unpacking their thinking; yet according to Van Der Molen et al. (2009), even children with mild ID experience extreme difficulty with both the storing and manipulating of verbal information. Therefore, children with ID must learn metacognitive strategies to build reading skills in a way that is suited to their instructional needs. Although students with ID can learn reading strategies, their reading behavior patterns differ from children who do not have ID (Fajardo et al., 2014; Perovic, 2006).

Children with ID have the capacity to learn, but as a result of language processing difficulties, it cannot be assumed that their learning follows the same progression as children who do not have ID (Fajardo et al., 2014; Van Der Molen et al., 2009). Although children with ID can learn to read – and there is strong evidence to support word learning through sight word practice (Browder et al., 2006) – read-alouds, specifically, may be the only means by which students with severe ID are able to access literature throughout their lives (Browder et al., 2008). According to Hudson and Browder (2014), "So much of learning depends on good listening comprehension skills for these students" (p. 27). Graphic organizers, such as Venn diagrams, and systematic instruction can also help children with moderate to severe ID to comprehend and interpret text (Dieruf et al., 2020).

Educators with a growth mindset understand that intelligence is not a fixed number and can change (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015). According to Dweck's theory, "Adopting a growth mind-set helps…students [laboring under a negative stereotype about their abilities] remain engaged and achieve well, even in the face of stereotypes" (Dweck, 2010, p. 26). A growth mindset is focused on effort and motivates students to persevere when faced with challenging tasks (Dweck,

2010). Teachers or other adults who espouse a growth mindset acknowledge that students can develop their abilities through effort. A growth mindset motivates students to persevere when faced with challenging tasks. The use of "envisioning language" during interactive read-alouds for children with ID can set a positive tone and convey to children a belief in them (Denton, 2013, p. 36).
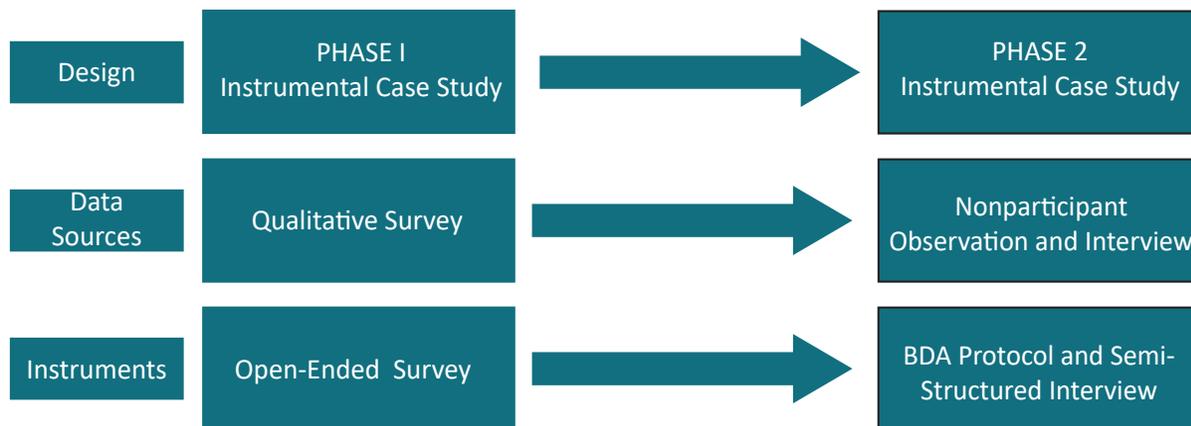
Methodology

This study occurred in two distinct phases; therefore, it was framed through a two-phase research lens as illustrated in Figure 2. The objective of the two-part study was first to gather open-ended qualitative survey data about the read-aloud habits and routines of families with children with ID. During the next phase, the researcher analyzed video-recordings of the two elementary school aged children with ID engaged in interactive read-alouds at home. Each parent reader incorporated BDA questioning prompts using a BDA protocol instrument. The parents of the children then participated in follow-up interviews and were asked questions about the interactive read-aloud experience. Using the constant comparative analysis method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the researcher analyzed the data gathered from the surveys, the four read-aloud sessions, and the interviews to develop codes and themes.

Phase One

The data collection process began with a qualitative survey that opened in mid-November 2023. For the purposes of this study, the survey posed mostly open-ended questions, which permitted respondents to provide responses in their own words. Not only did the initial survey relate information about the read-aloud habits and routines of families with children with ID, but it also contained data that helped to inform the remainder of the case study. Four respondents completed the survey and agreed to take part in the interactive read-alouds and the semi-structured interview. Based on specific survey responses, books were chosen for the interactive read-aloud sessions, and questions were formulated for the follow-up semi-structured interviews. Each of the four families received a shipment of eight children's books; however, only two survey respondents completed the second phase of the study.

Figure 2

Two Distinct Phases of the Instrumental Case Study

Design	PHASE I Instrumental Case Study	→	PHASE 2 Instrumental Case Study
Data Sources	Qualitative Survey	→	Nonparticipant Observation and Interview
Instruments	Open-Ended Survey	→	BDA Protocol and Semi-Structured Interview

Note. The instrumental case study research design was carried out in two phases. The open-ended survey preceded the implementation of the other case study instruments. The survey informed the other components of research and provided supplemental data.

Phase Two

The second phase of research employed additional case study methodology to help address the research questions. Data sources included: (1) nonparticipant observation of four video recordings taken within participants' homes, and (2) transcriptions of follow-up Zoom interviews. After each interactive read-aloud session was completed, the two families submitted their recordings to a secure file storage for the researcher's viewing. According to Leko et al. (2021), nonparticipant observation can take place "after the fact via a video recording" (p. 4), as was accomplished in this study. Finally, the researcher conducted separate semi-structured Zoom interviews with each participating parent in mid-February 2024 to learn more about their perspectives on their child's read-aloud experiences and their perceptions of interactive strategies while utilizing the BDA protocol.

Participants

Brett and his mother, Kara, and Ava and her mother, Lisa, all participated in the second phase of the case study. (Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the privacy of the families.) Both children, Brett and Ava, were identified by their parent as having an ID diagnosis. At the time of the study, both families resided in the Northeastern United States. According to Stake (1995), with case study research, "There is emphasis on uniqueness…but the first emphasis is on un-

derstanding the case itself" (p. 8). The uniqueness of each of the participating children was evident as the researcher developed a more intimate understanding of each distinct case.

Brett, the youngest of six children, was 8 years old at the time of the study. Kara reported on the survey that Brett enjoyed the following types of books: "graphic novels, adventure, animal nonfiction, and comedy" (Kara, Survey).

Ava was 9 years old at the time of the study. Her one older brother joined as a listener in one of the recorded read-aloud sessions. Lisa said during the semi-structured interview that Ava usually enjoyed reading books about other girls, such as The Baby-Sitters Club series by Ann M. Martin, but she also noted that after participating in the interactive read-alouds, she realized her daughter enjoyed nonfiction texts too (Lisa, Interview).

Key Findings

After data coding and analysis, certain themes emerged. Table 1 displays how these themes align with each research question. Both participating families reported that the interactive read-alouds were a positive bonding experience. The role of choice emerged as one of the more prominent themes. Both child participants showed preferences for nonfiction books, but each one also displayed uniqueness regarding the types and amounts of responsive verbal feedback they generated

Table 1

Themes Related to Research Questions

Research Questions	Themes
What are the affordances and limitations of interactive read-alouds for children with ID?	• Positive read-aloud response • Varying degrees of interactiveness
What are the read-aloud habits and routines of families with children with ID?	• Time obstacles
What are the observed and reported outcomes of human-to-human interactive read-alouds for children with ID?	• Ease in implementation of interactive read-aloud procedures • The role of choice in interactive read-alouds
Which interactive read-aloud strategies do parents/caregivers report are useful for encouraging communication?	• "During Reading" Questioning

Note. The main research question is noted in italics, and sub-questions are listed below. The themes listed connect to findings from triangulated data.

in response to the texts read to them.

Unfortunately, time was noted as an obstacle preventing each family from establishing a regular read-aloud routine; however, when presented with the read-aloud task, both adult participants demonstrated ease in incorporating the recommended interactive strategies and successfully encouraged communication with their child. The researcher created a five-minute Loom video with a corresponding slide presentation to provide participating parents with interactive read-aloud directions. Parents were also given an instructional sheet, or BDA protocol, with sample questions to ask before, during, and after reading. The BDA protocol appeared useful, as each parent could be viewed looking down at it during the recordings, but both parents relied rather heavily on "during reading" questioning, which disrupted the flow of some of the reading.

Discussion

The Uniqueness of the Case Study Participants
In terms of similarities, both children were third-grade students identified as having ID. In addition, both displayed a preference for nonfiction when presented with the assortment of books provided for the study. Apart from these similarities, each child participant was very unique. The demographic information, and the other reported and observed data, showed the dis-

tinctiveness of each case. As for demographics, Brett belonged to a large family and lived in an urban area. Conversely, Ava resided with a smaller family in a suburban community. The video recordings also showed that each child displayed different manners of interacting. Ava conversed freely during the interactive read-alouds, often without prompting, while Brett spoke very few words only when asked.

Neither family was questioned further about the full scope of each child's ID diagnosis. During the interview, Kara mentioed that Brett had a "reading disability" and "visual disability" (Kara, Interview). Lisa, however, did not refer to any disability other than ID. Although children may share a similar disability label, it is important to remember that each one is different and may have alternative needs.

Interactive Read-Alouds Can Be a Positive Bonding Time for Children with ID
Although the topic of "joy" was not specifically addressed in this study, the hope was for the experiences to be positive. Acosta-Tello (2019) noted the value of creating situations for children to fully engage in read-aloud experiences. Serafini (2001) considered the read-aloud as an experience to be savored. Joy stems from the full experience, which includes taking plenty of time to absorb all story illustrations and revisiting

the text multiple times in order to squeeze every bit of goodness out of it (Serafini, 2001).

By incorporating interactive strategies into each read-aloud, the families in this study were able to slow down and savor the experience. The data in this study showed positive responses to the read-aloud experience. Parents used words such as, "enjoy" and "excited" to describe the experience. One parent stated, "I definitely would say that I did enjoy reading aloud to him" (Kara, Interview). In reference to her child, the other parent said, "She…[was] like just so excited about it" (Lisa, Interview). According to Lane and Wright (2007), "Read-alouds provide a wonderful opportunity to promote children's love of literature, and they can be a treasured time together" (p. 673). Participating in interactive reading experiences that encourage active participation can help to infuse joy into the process.

Time Obstacles
Despite the joy found in the interactive read-aloud experience, both families reported "time" as an obstacle preventing them from establishing a daily read-aloud routine. Kara specifically noted "time" on the open-ended survey; however, she said, "I definitely would say that I did enjoy reading aloud to him [Brett]" (Kara, Interview). Lisa also mentioned that the family's busy sports schedule prevented her from reading regularly with her daughter.

In their research on children's attitudes toward being read to at home and at school, Ledger and Merga (2018) noted, "We acknowledge that the reasons for read-aloud infrequency or cessation [at home] may be complex" (p. 135). Ledger and Merga (2018) also emphasized that as a result of any obstacles that may be present on the home front, reading aloud at school is, therefore, critical. That said, schools must also continue to prioritize communication with families about the importance of reading at home (Ledger & Merga, 2018). Although time may be difficult to carve out of busy schedules, families should still be encouraged to read with their children as their circumstances permit.

Ease in Incorporating Interactive Strategies
Both families implemented the BDA interactive strategies with ease as observed in the interactive read-aloud recordings. With brief instructions, the participating parents were successfully able to engage their

child with ID in interactive read-aloud sessions. The children in the study participated in the read-aloud sessions with both nonfiction and fiction texts. Each family recorded two nonfiction reading sessions and two fiction reading sessions, based on the children's choices. Every recorded reading session included interactive questioning from the BDA protocol. During the sessions, each parent glanced at the interactive questions and prompts, either on their phone or on a nearby printout, while engaging in conversation with their child about the read-alouds.

The Role of Choice
This study demonstrated that the role of choice is important when delivering any type of reading instruction. Neither child in this study chose only fictional storybooks as read-alouds. Interestingly, each family submitted two read-aloud recordings specifically using National Geographic Kids books. Both Kara and Lisa specifically noted that their children liked reading nonfiction. Kara recorded on the survey that Brett liked "animal nonfiction" (Kara, Survey), and Lisa said, "I noticed that…she [Ava] would have picked all nonfiction books" (Lisa, Interview).

In the first two videos that Kara sent, the recordings displayed how Kara allowed Brett to choose the books that she read-aloud. In each instance, she held out all eight books to Brett, and he was observed selecting animal nonfiction texts for the first two read-alouds. Ava's book selection process was not captured on video, but Lisa was intrigued by Ava's nonfiction selections and said, "It was really interesting to me, because I don't often give her that choice" (Lisa, Interview). Lennox (2013) reported that research shows teachers prefer to read aloud narrative storybooks, as opposed to informational texts; however, Lennox (2013) noted that nonfiction texts could lead to more "cognitively challenging talk" (p. 383). During the semi-structured interviews, parents shared that the nonfiction texts provided for the study were the preferred selections of the child participants.

Focus on "During Reading" Questioning
Finally, during the read-aloud sessions, both parents asked multiple questions using the BDA protocol, but a significant amount of the questioning occurred "during reading." In just one read-aloud session, for example, Kara asked Brett a total of 23 "during reading" ques-

tions. Lisa verbalized her thoughts about using too many "during reading" questions while she read with Ava. She said, "I noticed that...the questioning on every page, got a little tedious for her, and I felt like she was getting distracted" (Lisa, Interview). Similarly, Ness and Kenny (2016) noted that asking too many questions while reading can disrupt the flow of a story and interfere with the comprehension process. In Beck and McKeown's (2001) groundbreaking work on the topic of Text Talk, which encourages the use of conversational techniques to build meaning and vocabulary knowledge while reading aloud to children, the authors noted, "Simply asking more questions will not necessarily prompt richer comments" (p. 16). If the study were repeated, future participants would be encouraged to pause "during reading" no more than five-to-seven times (Ness & Kenny, 2016).

Limitations

Due to the study's time constraints, the researcher did not meet the families prior to the recorded read-aloud sessions. The researcher tried to select books that were of interest to the participants based on survey responses; however, without really knowing each child or the child's reading level, the researcher made assumptions about which books might be most appropriate and appealing for each child. Additionally, the video recording process had its limitations. Both children displayed a keen awareness of being recorded. This visible distraction could have affected the children's read-aloud responses, but it is difficult to determine how without knowing the children.

Clearly, a case study such as this would best be conducted over a long stretch of time. Stake (1995) noted that case study research is focused on getting to know a particular case well. The researcher could not get to know the cases "well" as a result of research time constraints. Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) stated that "qualitative data collection and analysis often require more time than what is needed for quantitative data" (p. 15). That said, although the study's time allotment was limited, the participants still were able to contribute snapshots of the routines and experiences occurring within their households. With extended time, perhaps a researcher could request a larger number of video recordings. This would give participants more time to become accustomed to the routine. If, for ex-

ample, the same study was posed as a three-month read-aloud challenge, child participants might begin to act more naturally over time.

Finally, a mixed-methods research design might have provided richer data for the study. The instrumental case study data presented in this research was analyzed through constant comparative analysis. A quantitative data source could be used to enhance findings and extend themes. For example, a Likert scale survey could be administered to the adult participants following the video recorded sessions, either in addition to or in lieu of the semi-structured interviews. The quantitative survey might consist of questions asking parents to evaluate the effectiveness of specific before, during, and after read-aloud strategies utilized, their perceptions of strategy effectiveness, and their overall impressions of the child's oral responses during the interactive read-aloud. The survey data would provide a more in-depth understanding of the effectiveness of specific read-aloud strategies. Results could be analyzed using a Pearson correlation to determine if a positive relationship exists between the literacy strategies employed during an interactive read-aloud and the oral responses of children with ID.

Recommendations for Educational Practice

The results of this study elucidate the value of establishing a strong home-school connection. The five-minute instructional Loom video coupled with the BDA protocol, which included recommended questions and think-aloud prompts, seemed to adequately equip the parent participants in the study with the tools necessary for implementation of an interactive read-aloud. The parents in the study utilized the tools provided as a springboard to launch into discussion of text and help their children make meaning. Given the ease with which parents were able to follow the BDA instructions, teachers should continually think of ways to enhance home-school connections by creating and disseminating tools to support students' learning at home.

Next, choice can be a powerful motivator for students of all ages. Educators should not limit themselves to fictional stories when reading aloud to children. In Lu and Gordon's (2008) study on the effects of free choice in reading for high school students, the authors concluded, "On average, students agreed that giving them

more choices enriched their reading experiences" (p. 50). Although the participants in this case study were younger children with ID, free choice was motivational for them and positively contributed to their interactive read-aloud sessions. In this study, both children chose informational texts that helped to enrich their reading experiences. Although they were offered only eight titles to choose from, both chose information-rich books. Offering a variety of books and allowing for choice can help to entice even the most hesitant readers.

Finally, and most importantly, educators must recognize the uniqueness of students and differentiate instruction accordingly. Although students may possess a similar disability such as ID, each child is different; therefore, it is essential to get to know each learner as an individual. Adherence to a growth mindset provides a foundational cornerstone. Additionally, teachers must consider the unique needs of each family when partnering with them and intervening with advice on educational practices at home. Although this case study focused on children with ID in their home settings, it highlighted very important practices that can be carried over into the classroom. The research also illustrated that human-to-human interactive read-alouds promoted positive parent-child interactions and served to nurture the children's growth as readers.

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