

# Literacy as a Priority: An Evaluation of Individualized Education Plans for Children with Autism

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## Abstract

The inclusion of literacy goals within Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) was evaluated for 23 preschool and elementary students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). A rubric was created to examine the extent of inclusion of goals and objectives in the IEPs pertaining to pivotal reading skills, as evidenced by criteria and recommendations from research, educational mandates, and best practices for literacy education. Results indicated that the majority of IEPs surveyed did not fully include literacy skills for students with ASD, which was not related to the students' present levels of performance in academic functioning.

## Introduction

### Access to the General Education Curriculum

- In 2002 and in 2004, mandates from No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) recognized the need for all students to have access to the general education curriculum, as well as proficiency in reading, writing and mathematics by 2014 (Lynch & Adams, 2008).
- Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) require goals and objectives that reflect individual needs as well as general curriculum standards; however, children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) often do not have the same exposure to literacy experiences as children without disabilities (Koppenhaver & Erickson, 2003).

### Literacy Needs for Students with ASD

- According to Koppenhaver and Erickson (2003), the literature on literacy for students with autism has been clustered around four domains: 1) sight-word learning; 2) hyperlexia; 3) validation of facilitated communication; and 4) specific skill deficits in reading.
- The common theme amongst these studies is a focus on later reading achievement, without evidencing the instructional supports used to facilitate growth in reading skills.

## Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to evaluate both the extent of inclusion of literacy-related annual goals and short-term objectives as included in IEPs for preschool and elementary students with Autism Spectrum Disorders.

- Specific research questions include:

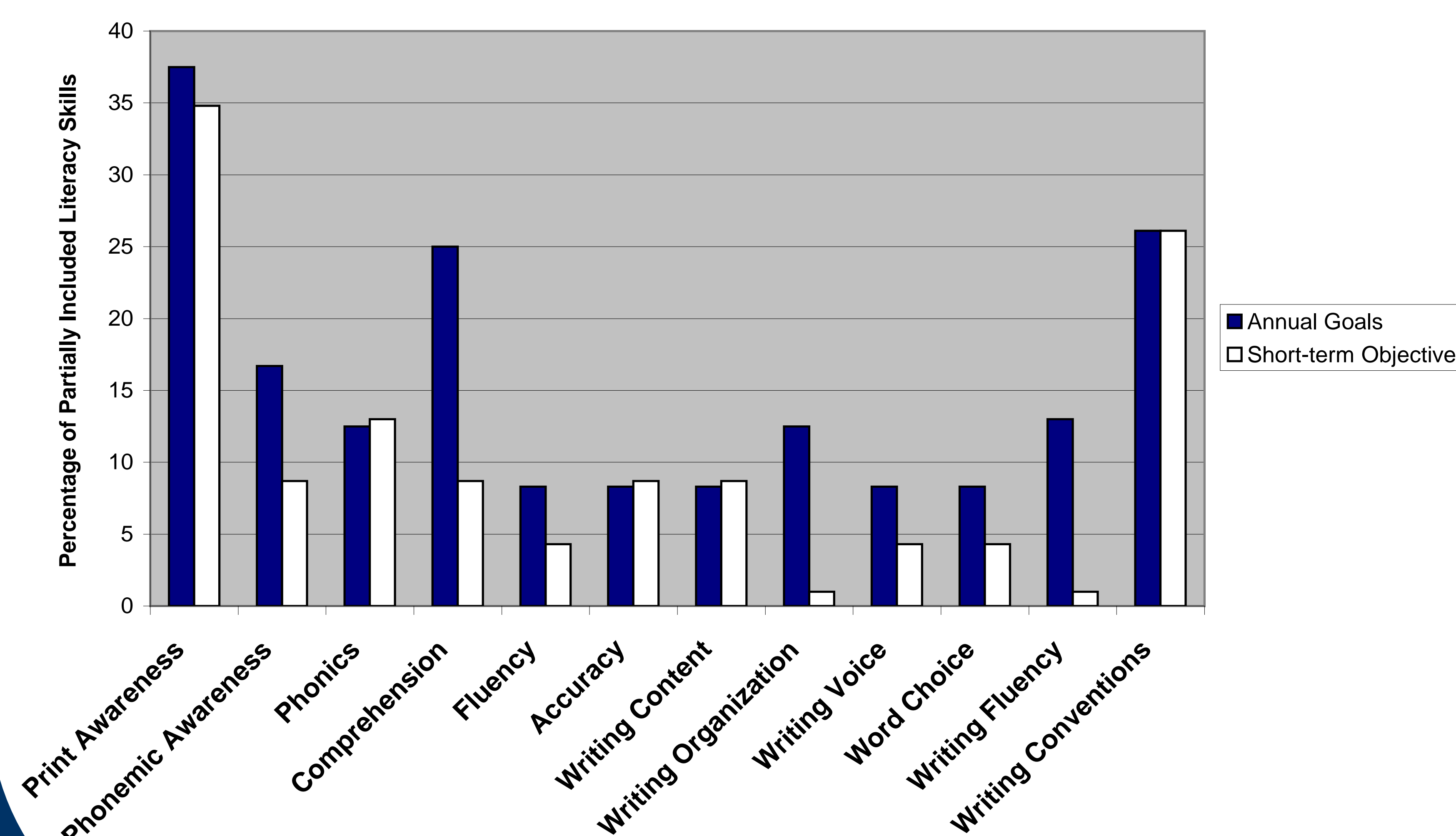
- 1) Are annual goals and short-term objectives related to reading included within the IEPs for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders?
- 2) Is the student's present level performance in academic functioning related to the inclusion of reading-related annual goals and short-term objectives within the IEPs?

## Methods

- IEPs for preschool and elementary students (n = 23) between the ages of two and eight years old with ASD from across Kentucky were collected and sampled from a previous study (Ruble, Dalrymple, McGrew, Brown, & Cartwright, 2007).
- A rubric was created using criteria described by the National Research Council, requirements mandated by IDEA, as well as recommendations for best practices for literacy education to assess the extent of literacy-related annual goals and short-term objectives within the IEPs.
- Pivotal reading skills detailed in the rubric included print awareness, phonemic awareness, phonics, reading comprehension, fluency, accuracy, writing ideas and content, writing organization, writing voice, word choice, writing fluency, and writing conventions.
- All indicators were rated using a 3-point Likert scale, where a score of 0 is equal to no inclusion of the reading skill within the annual goals or short-term objectives, and a score of 2 is equal to inclusion of the skill as well as information provided to improve the student's development in the skill within the annual goals and short-term objectives.
- Raters were trained to use the rubric until an inter-rater reliability of 80% was established.

## Results

Figure 1. Percentage of IEP Annual Goals and Short-term Objectives Related to Literacy Skills



- Results indicated that the majority of IEPs for children with ASD did not fully include literacy skills within annual goals and short-term objectives, with the exception of short-term objectives pertaining to comprehension (17.4%), fluency (17.4%), accuracy (21.7%), and writing conventions (21.7%).
- However, varying results were obtained when the partial inclusion of literacy-related skills within the IEPs was examined (Figure 1).
- Results further indicated that students' present levels of performance for academic functioning was not associated with inclusion of annual goals and short-term objectives related to reading within the students' IEPs ( $r = .440$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).

## Discussion

### Recommendations for Researchers and Practitioners

- More emphasis should be placed on examining the process used in developing IEPs for students with ASD, particularly when creating annual goals and short-term objectives.
- Additional consideration should also be given to the inclusion of literacy-related annual goals and short-term objectives for all students with ASD, particularly with more complex reading and writing skills, such as phonics and writing content.
- Future research should examine the inclusion of literacy-related annual goals and short-term objectives for older students with ASD.

### Limitations

- Given that the sample consisted of students with ASD only from Kentucky, the results indicated may not generalize to all students with ASD due to the differences in state special education requirements and regulations.
- Maturation effects may also be in an issue, since the design of the IEPs may not reflect the developmental periods consistent with literacy development within typically developing peers; thus, these skills may be addressed in later grades for students with ASD.

## References

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