

The Differential Effects of Literary Genre Interventions on Literacy and Psychological Outcomes for Students with Special Educational Needs: A Mixed-Methods Quasi-Experimental Study

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Abstract

Children and young people with a recognised Special Educational Need (SEN) – particularly where they have a problem with literacy attainment – and those with an identified difficulty with literacy attainment and autism and/or an identified difficulty with intellectual disability (ID) remain vulnerable to literacy attainment difficulties and psychological wellbeing difficulties. Although it is suggested and accepted that Literature (narratives, poetry and drama) are essential to the structured literacy model, the literature in use as an intervention tool has yet to be fully explored. This quasi-experimental study with mixed research methods aims at studying the impact of three different genre based interventions (adapted narrative fiction, poetry reading and writing, and drama/role play) on reading comprehension, self-efficacy, emotion recognition, expressive language skills, and social-communication skills of 120 SEN students categorized by three diagnoses. The method used in the study is pre-test post-test design based on Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), Social Emotional Learning (SEL) (Durlak et al., 2011) and complimentary to the pre-test post-test study, qualitative classroom observation was conducted and semi structured interview techniques were used. Preliminary results show that the three genres can all be used to make significant gains, but can be implemented differently: narrative fiction to increase reading comprehension skills and self-efficacy; poetry to develop skills in recognising emotion and expressive language skills (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019); drama/role play to develop social communication skills (Weber, 2020). The study offers practical evidence for the need for content focused, holistic intervention in special education and implications in teacher education for the inclusive classroom.

Keywords: Literary genre intervention; Special educational need students; Dyslexia; Autism spectrum disorder; Intellectual disability; Reading comprehension; Self-efficacy; Social emotional learning; Inclusive education

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

In the last twenty years there has been a major change in the way that students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are educated from segregated special education classrooms to mainstream classrooms (UNESCO, 2020). Despite this achievements, there is a challenge yet to be addressed; how well to address the learning needs of learners with diverse needs, and at the same time attend to their psychological and social-emotional needs. It is not so true in a field of education in literature as it is.

Dyslexia is a neurobiological learning difference that affects around 5-15% of the population and impacts on more than just the skill of decoding words, it influences the person's self-perception, social interactions and general motivation for involvement in literacy tasks (McIntyre, 2025). When a student struggling with dyslexia experiences multiple challenges in school, they begin to think that they're not very good, and that they can't succeed at school (Wilmot et al., 2022). Similarly pupils with ASD struggle to pick up on cues and pupils with ID struggle to communicate socially or understand cues (Weber, 2020).

Previous literacies teaching for SEN has often focused on skills – decoding, phonics, fluency, basic reading comprehension etc. They are obviously required, but they do not take into account the multi-dimensional part of literacy and its ability to address psychological or social emotional aspects of learners' lives with SEN (McIntyre, 2025). Skill-based interventions are not enough to address emotional stressors as a result of recurring academic problems.

Literary texts have the power to provoke imagination. Literary texts can stimulate imagination.

A potential avenue for intervention unexploited and uniquely distinct is given in Literary texts: Narratives, Poems and Drama. Literature is a written piece that, when compared to decontextualized skill drills, cognitively, emotionally, and socially involves readers. It provides "mirrors" for students to see themselves in; and "windows" to peers to be able to build empathy and understanding (McIntyre, 2025). Children's literature on ASD or any other developmental disability may be used to develop reading and writing abilities and to foster children's cognition, social and emotional development (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019). But, the differential impact of different types of literature on different SEN groups is still poorly understood. Which shape does a reader's understanding take: Does it grow in understanding as reading progresses in narrative fiction in which character changes and the story unfolds over time? Does poetry, which uses concrete imagery and a range of emotional exploration, best promote emotion recognition (Cohen, 2005)? Assuming it is an embodied and interactive experience, is drama the best tool for social communication development (Weber, 2020)? The present study intends to address these questions that make up the present study gap.

1.3 Research Questions

The following research questions serve as the guide in this study:

1. What impact do intervention strategies that are adapted using narrative fiction have on the reading comprehension and self-efficacy of students with Dyslexia?
2. What is the impact of the poetry experiences on student attitudes and emotions related to recognition and expressions of language for students with ASD?
3. What is the effect of Drama/Role Play interventions applied on literary narratives on the social-communication skills of ID students?
4. How does each of the three types of texts (narrative fiction, poetry and drama) have an impact on language development outcomes for each type of individual with a SEN?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study has a number of significant contributions. First, it serves as an important gap in the empirical literature about literature-based interventions for special education. Second, it requires a comparative (genre specific) approach, and appreciates the unique characteristics of each genre of literature. Third, it has a mixed methods design and it is able to capture quantitative outcomes and qualitative processes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Fourth, it has implications for inclusive classroom teachers, special

education teachers, and research-oriented curriculum developers interested in intervention strategies that are engaging, comprehensive and supported by research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is based on two theoretical frameworks that complement each other: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) framework.

According to the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky, cognition develops as a result of social interaction, including the influence of the cultural environment (Vygotsky, 1978). A concept that is especially important in literary interventions is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) – the area between what a learner can do on their own and what they can do with help (Vygotsky, 1978). SEN students can be given access to meanings and skills that are further from them in literary texts in engaging with such texts. Role of literature and theatre activities includes social and dialogic nature of conversation which is in sync with Vygotsky's notion the learning is in the process of social interaction (Moll, 1990).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is an approach that can be used to understand how literary interventions could be beneficial for implementing the emotional aspects of SEN in SEN students. The positive special education programs used to SEL have shown improvement in social and emotional competencies typically in terms of behavior (Durlak et al., 2011). The nature of SEL is well suited to literature, due to its emotional content and opportunities to take perspectives. A social communication technique by the literature in children can be one way in solving these three areas (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019).

2.2 Dyslexia: From Decoding to Self-efficacy

More recently it was understood that dyslexia does not only impact decoding or reading ability, but also on a pupil's self-concept, peers' and others' perceptions of them, and their motivation towards engaging with literacy-related tasks (McIntyre, 2025). When a student with dyslexia is persistently struggling in school, there is a risk that his or her self-efficacy may suffer (Wilmot et al., 2022). There is a vicious circle of this psychological effect: low actual self-efficacy leads to avoidance of reading which in turn reduces the exposure and subsequently the reading skills.

A growing amount of research has recently investigated positive psychology interventions (PPIs) to improve the subjective wellbeing, academic self-concept and achievement of dyslexic children, with clear findings that PPIs have a significant impact (Abu Omar et al., 2024). However, the role of literature for the development of self-efficacy has not been widely studied (McIntyre, 2025). A recent curricular project addresses this need by combining high-quality children's books (which are pedagogically appropriate for students with dyslexia) and a Social Emotional Learning Project Based Learning (PBL) approach (McIntyre, 2025). The following list consists of authentic books, diverse books that represent a range of cultural perspectives and books that are mirrors for students' orthographic processing problems.

In an empirical study, the adapted classic texts and its effects on reading comprehension and self-efficacy of students with dyslexia is studied in this research.

2.3 Autism Spectrum Disorder: Poetry and Emotional Expression

Students with ASD have a hard time with language and expression of emotion. Poems may have a special capacity to answer these kinds of queries. Poetry has aided people with Asperger's Syndrome to connect their thinking with their feelings (Cohen, 2005). Poems might be well suited for this exploration, as they generate imagery that are concrete, and they have a call to emotion (Cohen, 2005).

This research builds upon past research that studied the impact of poetry writing on middle school students that have an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis regarding their social cognition, writing, and disciplinary literacy skills (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019). Results showed that participants could identify and

apply emotion/perspective taking words and the biopoem form helped them to organize their writing and improve their word selection (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019).

Poems, more recently, depict in the case of non-verbal children and adults on the autistic spectrum that the poem can provide him or her with his voice (Martin, 2021). People on the spectrum communicate best through verse, in much the same way that they experience the world with their senses, and in a patterned way; this is the most effective and immediate means of showing themselves something of their sensory-rich worlds and of their patterned thoughts (Martin, 2021).

This work is intended to extend this research by examining the effect of a poetry reading and writing program on the ability to recognize and express emotion in students with ASD in a systematic review.

2.4 Drama and Social Communication

People with intellectual disability lack social interaction understanding, and have trouble understanding and using social cues (Bergman, 1987; Weber, 2020). Drama therapy is a potential means for interventions. The problematic issues are communicated in a playful manner and social skills are developed, through drama therapy (Koch et al., 2015). The positive impact of improvisational theatre techniques in therapy situations was reported with regards to social competences and self-esteem (Koch et al., 2015).

Previous research has examined the effectiveness of role plays to improve people with ID's ability to understand social cues (Weber, 2020). The fictional world of role-play enabled participants to recognise positive and negative social cues and to propose solutions as to how to address unwanted or negative social cues (Weber, 2020). Also roleplay afforded participants opportunity to communicate the entire body – not just verbally (Weber, 2020).

In a clinical case study with children who have intellectual disabilities, it was found that the participants were able to overcome emotional oppression by experiencing a drama, and interact positively by enacting a play with the other participants (Kim, 2025). Opportunity was provided to extend the self-confidence and self-expression by giving the therapist an empathic response (Kim, 2025).

Creative drama is adaptable in terms of the intellectually disabled and can facilitate emotional expression, communication skills and social interactions that are enhanced (Feniger-Schaal et al., 2018). The present research will expand the research above by being focused on the drama/role play using literature based narrative.

2.5 The Gap: Comparative Genre Studies in Special Education

It is of particular interest that all the above areas have been explored in some way, although a particular key area of interest is the different effects that types of literature (narrative fiction, poetry and drama), can have on different groups of SEN within any single set of studies. Although the importance of the various genres in language teaching has been recognized, there are hardly any empirical comparative studies in special education settings (McIntyre, 2025).

This is especially noteworthy when considering the cognitive, linguistic and social requirements of the various types of literature. In narrative fiction, your attention needs to be held over a period of time with the story line and characters. Poems require a sensitivity to imagery, rhythm and a compact meaning (Cohen, 2005). Drama is a live performance activity, which needs social interaction and a response (Weber, 2020). The different genres can therefore provide specific opportunities for various SEN groups and various outcome domains.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This type of research is quasi-experimental using a pretest/ post test approach with a mixed method. The quantitative portion of the study will be a 3 X 3 factorial design in which the three genres (narrative fiction vs. poetry vs. drama) are combined with the three SEN categories (Dyslexia vs. ASD vs. ID). Qualitative component: Class observation and semi structured interviews with the involved teachers and students.

Mixed-Methods approaches are becoming more popular in the study of literacy in special education, because they give the researcher quantitative pre-test and post-test data and qualitative habits of attitude and motivation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.2 Participants

There are 3 inclusive mainstream schools to be visited, which will offer 120 SEN learners to be identified. Stratification will be according to SEN category type:

1. Dyslexia group (n = 40): Students were those who were previously diagnosed with dyslexia and ages ranged from 9-14 years.
2. Students with a formal diagnosis of ASD (ASD group) (n = 40) ranged in age from 9-14 years.
3. ID group (n = 40): Students with a formal (diagnostic) diagnosis of mild to moderate ID, 9 years – 14 years.

They will all be randomly allocated into three intervention groups per SEN category – random allocation: approx. 13 – 14 per group/SEN category.

Inclusion criteria: 1. Formal Diagnosis of appropriate SEN condition 2. Student aged 9-14 3. Student attending mainstream inclusive school setting 4. Parent/Guardian and/or student consent 5. Student Consent.

Exclusion Criteria: (a) have had severe sensory impairments which would make them unable to attend literacy intervention, (b) or be attending another intervention for literacy.

3.3 Interventions

All interventions will be performed across a 12 week period, two 45 minute sessions a week (a total of 24 sessions will be delivered). To ensure content familiarity across interventions, the literature will be made up of content drawn from a single and common cultural and historical tradition (e.g., adaptations of classic texts).

3.3.1 Narrative Fiction Intervention

Simplified texts of well-known stories (e.g., The jungle book, A Christmas carol, The odyssey) to dyslexic readers made available through simplified font and text display, clear illustrations and with audio support.

Activities:

- Shared reading (with teacher scaffolding)
- Questions to aid understanding and comments
- Character analysis/character identification work
- Forecast and envision situations
- Content and tone that this writing has a retro feel. Retro content and tone in writing, particularly regarding character experiences and personal relationships.

Theoretical Rationale: Narrative is dynamic in terms of plot, character and thematic content, it is a discontinuous text that allows the development of comprehension and can serve to develop identification, and self-efficacy (McIntyre, 2025).

3.3.2 Poetry Intervention

Texts (A selection of poems that: have concrete imagery, clear emotional content, accessible language (including poems about identity, difference and belonging).

Activities:

- Read and recite poems
- Simple poems about the self and historical people, who are structured
- Students will be able to recognise emotions in poems
- Create poems using poetic devices; comparison (simile) and metaphor (image)
- Poems that are shared and recited from the poet's mouth. Sharing and performance of poetry

Theoretical Rationale: Poetry evokes emotion through concrete imagery and offers a flexible, but structured form to express emotion (Cohen, 2005). Biopoem structures can be applied to plan and develop word choice in writing (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019).

3.3.3 Drama/Role-Play Intervention

Materials: Same story texts as used for the Fiction Intervention, but adapted for the purpose of enacting the stories.

Activities:

- Role Play and Improvisation (Character)
- Making it up on the spot, performance
- This one suggests that other endings (consequences/ scenes) are possible
- Experience of using drama therapy skills, for example: arousal through sensory play and embodying
- Working in small groups and performing together using drama activities

Theoretical Rationale: Drama can be used as a fun way to communicate issues that may be problematic and to build social skills (Koch et al., 2015). The Verbal-Full Body Expression simulated (fantasized) role playing environment allows players to interpret cues, both positive and negative, in social contexts and involves the whole body (including speech) (Weber, 2020).

3.4 Outcome Measures

3.4.1 Quantitative Measures

Construct	Measure	Description	Administration
Reading Comprehension	Adapted Version of Neale Analysis of Reading Ability (NARA)	Standardized measure of reading accuracy, comprehension, and rate	Pre & Post
Self-Efficacy	Reading Self-Efficacy Scale (RSES)	Self-report measure of perceived reading ability and confidence	Pre & Post
Emotion Recognition	Emotion Recognition Task (ERT)	Identification of emotions in faces, contexts, and texts	Pre & Post
Expressive Language	Expressive Language Assessment (ELA)	Measure of vocabulary, syntax, and narrative production	Pre & Post

Social-Communication	Social Communication Questionnaire (SCQ)	Measure of social interaction, communication, and restricted/repetitive behaviors	Pre & Post
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3.4.2 Qualitative Measures

Classroom Observations: Structured observation protocol with training and observation will be carried out by trained research assistant for classroom sessions. The use of the four focus areas of observations will be: (a) student engagement and participation, (b) peer interaction, (c) evidence of emotional expression, (d) teacher scaffolding strategies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Semi structured interviews: All 6 teachers that participated in the intervention will be interviewed at the end of the intervention, as well as a representative of all students (n = 24, 2 per condition per SEN category) to obtain further information. The selection of interview protocols will be discussed with the following questions: (a) What were your perceptions of the intervention? (b) What were your observations of changes in students? (c) What challenges and facilitators did you experience? (d) What are your suggestions for practice?

3.5 Procedure

Phase 1: Pre-Intervention (Weeks 1-2)

- Educate and obtain informed consent and assent
- Administer pre-test measures
- Provide training for intervention facilitators (all are qualified special education teachers who also have additional training in the intervention modality that they use)

Phase 2: Intervention (Weeks 3-14)

- Provide 24 sessions of the required intervention
- Ensure classroom observations are made weekly
- Conduct sessions based on checklists to ensure fidelity of implementation

Phase 3: Post-Intervention (Weeks 15-16)

- Administer post-test measures
- Conduct semi-structured interviews
- Obtain and collate qualitative data

3.6 Data Analysis

3.6.1 Quantitative Analysis

- All scales have been described by descriptive statistics
- Repeated Measures ANOVA (RM ANOVA) for within subject difference - pre and post test and between subject difference - inter teacher's genre condition, SEN category
- Followed by post hoc pairwise comparisons using Bonferroni correction to find out the differences between the groups
- Effect sizes (partial η^2) to show practical significance

3.6.2 Qualitative Analysis

- The observation notes, and interview transcripts were analysed and organised thematically, in line with the six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
- Deductive coding (in relation to question/research direction and theory) and inductive coding (based on developing codes from data)

- Triangulation of information sources (observations, interviews and quantitative) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018)

4. Expected Results

Based on the theoretical framework and literature, the following results are suggested during the data collection:

4.1 Hypothesis 1: Narrative Fiction and Dyslexia

H1: The students in the narrative fiction condition will improve significantly more than those in the poetry and drama conditions in terms of reading comprehension and reading self-efficacy upon dyslexia.

Rationale: The narrative fiction offers the most extended and supported time with connected text and directly targets comprehension skills that students with dyslexia struggle with (McIntyre, 2025). The possibility to relate to characters that face similar challenges helps offset students' self-efficacy gaps (McIntyre, 2025).

4.2 Hypothesis 2: Poetry and ASD

H2: The students with ASD in the poetry condition will improve significantly more than the students with ASD in the narrative fiction condition and the students with ASD in the drama condition in emotion recognition and in expressive language.

Rationale: Many autistic people tend to think visually and concretely, and the specificity of imagery language is ideal for poetry with its ability to invoke emotion (Cohen, 2005). Poetic forms are structured; they offer a structure to support emotional expression; emotion/perspective taking words have a direct focus on ASD related challenges (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019).

4.3 Hypothesis 3: Drama and ID

H3: The difference between students with ID in the drama condition and the others (narrative fiction and poetry) will be significant in their social-communication skills across the three conditions.

Rationale: Involve children in a playful context to discuss problems and improve their social skills (Koch et al., 2015). Drama is a in vivo and interactive communication process, unlike pure verbal communication which has enormous benefits for students with ID as they may have limited verbal communication skills (Weber, 2020).

4.4 Hypothesis 4: Genre-Specific Patterns

H4: The effects produced by the selected genres within the categories of SEN will predictably be different: narrative fiction will affect the most when measured in terms of comprehension-based outcomes; poetry will affect the most when measured in terms of emotion/expression-based outcomes; and drama will affect the most when measured in terms of social/interaction-based outcomes.

4.5 Qualitative Expectations

Qualitative data should provide information to show:

- Patterns of engagement: Students in drama condition can demonstrate the highest pattern of behavioural engagement, students in the poetry condition can demonstrate the highest pattern of emotional engagement.
- Teacher perceptions: Teachers might find drama to be the most "fun" and at the same time the most "difficult" to manage; poetry the most "easy" to participate with; and narrative fiction the most "difficult" academically.
- Student "voice": Students can voice their preferences for genre according to their skills and tastes and choice and differentiation are important.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study could contribute to several theories if hypotheses are accepted. First, it would build upon Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) by showing that the different types of genres create various forms of scaffolding in the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). Narrative fiction does scaffolds comprehension with sustained story and character development; poetry does scaffolds comprehension with concrete imagery and structure; drama does scaffolds comprehension with the sense of being embodied and co-created.

Second, it would be instrumental in supporting the theory of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) by providing information on how literature can be used as a means of SEL in special education settings (Durlak et al., 2011). Special education students can be effectively supported in developing social and emotional competence by using SEL programs (Durlak et al., 2011). This study would offer empirical proof of one possible mechanism, literary genre-based intervention, for this enhancement.

Third it would help to developing genre theory in an educational setting by providing evidence of the differential impact of genres on differential learners and outcome domains (McIntyre, 2025). This reflects the fact that there is a significant lack of significance of literary genres in language learning.

5.2 Practical Implications

5.2.1 For Classroom Teachers

The findings would help teachers make decisions within the context of inclusive classrooms to help them stay informed on evidence-based guidance. Teachers rather than a one size fits all would be able to choose genres of literature according to the target age groups with different needs:

- For pupils who have Dyslexia and require to develop reading confidence and comprehension skills, there is a range of choices of narrative fiction (McIntyre, 2025)
- For students with ASD who are wanting to improve emotion recognition and expression →poetry (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019)
- To become more developed at the social communication level, film and role play, is required for students with ID (Weber, 2020)

5.2.2 For Curriculum Developers

The results would influence the creation of a literacy curriculum that is genre based yet is appropriate for diverse classrooms. The texts used in literacy programs should not be limited to just one genre (as it is in many programs) but should contain narrative text, poetry, and drama texts, with different instructional methods used with different learners.

5.2.3 For Teacher Education

All findings would be used for the purpose of informing B.Ed and special ed teacher prep programs. Teachers must be trained before they can use literary text to deal with learners' problems comprehensively. Students' problems should be resolved comprehensively using literary text, which requires teachers' training in the basics of literacy instruction as well. The understanding of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) among teachers and its implementation in the classroom are not aligned (Sainudeen, 2026). This study will offer empirical, evidence-based strategies in which teachers can apply their knowledge to their classrooms.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

5.3.1 Limitations

There are a few caveats to be noted. First, the quasi-experimental design relies on conditions that are suitable in real life school environments, but cannot offer the same level of causal inferences as a random controlled experiment (RCT). Second, the study sample size was sufficient for detecting moderate effects, but may lack the power to fine grade the analyses. Thirdly, the study is done in a specific cultural and educational context and may not be generalizable. Fourth, the interventions are provided by trained facilitators, not by regular classroom teachers, so this can have an impact on ecological validity.

5.3.2 Future Research

These omissions should be overcome in future research by looking at:

- Longitudinal studies looking for the persistence of effects over time
- Replication with new cultural/educational groups
- Studies that investigate the making of a combined effect of several genres (e.g. study a narrative text and then act it out)
- Research that looks at the moderating effect of teacher variables, such as teacher training, teacher attitudes, on intervention effects
- Research on the impact on normally developing students in inclusive schools/ settings
- Research using assistive technology (digital story telling, augmented reality etc.) to support literary interventions

6. Conclusion

This study investigates and uncovers a gap in literature regarding the differential effect of three interventions for three different populations of SENs based on the genre of the literature. Finely tuned to the complexity of instruction and the growing importance of treating literacy in its entirety, the study acknowledges that literacy intervention for SEN students must focus on struggles with cognition, psychological and social-emotional needs (McIntyre, 2025).

Based on sound theory (Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory and Social Emotional learning), the study has a strong basis of theory which uses a rigorous mixed-methods design to capture both quantitative outcomes and qualitative processes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The results will have important implications on classroom practice, curriculum development, and teacher education.

In conclusion, the present study is part of the vision for inclusive education, where every student—learning disabled or not—has access to the power of transformation in literature. Literature that is inclusive may act as mirrors for students having orthographic processing challenges who want to see themselves in the literature, and windows for students who want to look through to their peers' world (McIntyre, 2025). This research was carried out on an empirical basis to show the benefits of different genres of literature for different students, and thus provide the evidence needed for teachers in making informed, differentiated choices that honour the needs and strengths of all students.

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