Rethinking Dialogic Reading for Children with Specific Learning Disorder: Enhancing Reading Attitude and Social Skills

Özel Öğrenme Güçlüğü Olan Çocuklar İçin Etkileşimli Okumayı Yeniden Düşünmek: Okuma Tutumunu ve Sosyal Becerileri Geliştirme Turkish Journal of Special Education Research and Practice 2025, Volume 7, Number 1, p 29–40 https://dergipark.org.tr/trsped DOI: 10.37233/trsped.drr.1514671

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Gizem Yağmur Değirmenci¹, Çiğdem Kaymaz¹, Emre Yıldız¹, Aslı İzoğlu Tok ¹, Semra Şahin⁵

Abstract

Programs for children with specific learning disorder (SLD) often aim to improve reading and related academic skills. However, children with SLD are known to develop negative attitudes toward reading, which may reduce their engagement in academic activities. Supporting all developmental areas of children with SLD is essential for a successful school life. This position paper was developed based on a program designed to promote children's development through dialogic reading. It provides a detailed explanation of how to use dialogic reading with children with SLD and how to support their cognitive, language, and motor development. In addition, this paper offers a roadmap for planning, implementing, and evaluating the program, which can be used by teachers and other professionals working with children in school or clinical settings.

Keywords: Specific learning disorder, social skills, reading attitude.

Öz

Özel öğrenme güçlüğü olan çocuklar için geliştirilen programlar çoğu kez akademik becerilerle ilişkilendirilmektedir. Ancak güçlüğün doğası ile uyumlu biçimde, bu grupta yer alan çocukların okumaya karşı negatif tutumları olabilmekte ve çoğu zaman akademik becerilerin geliştirilmesinde engelleyici bir rol üstlenebilmektedir. Oysa, başarılı bir okul yaşamı için bütüncül ve gelişimsel bir bakış açısı gereklidir. Bu çalışma, özel öğrenme güçlüğü olan çocukların okumaya karşı tutumlarını iyileştirmeyi ve başarılı bir okul hayatı için gerekli olan sosyal becerilerini artırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Geliştirilen öğretim uygulaması örneği etkileşimli okuma yoluyla çocukların gelişimini desteklemeyi amaçlayan bir programa dayalı olarak hazırlanmıştır. Özel öğrenme güçlüğü olan çocuklarla etkileşimli okumanın nasıl kullanılacağı ve sosyal, bilişsel, dil ve motor gelişim alanlarının nasıl desteklenebileceği konusunda ayrıntılı açıklamalar içermektedir. Çocuklarla okul ve klinik ortamlarda çalışan profesyoneller tarafından programın kullanılabilmesi için gerekli olan tüm basamaklar: programın planlanması, uygulanması ve değerlendirilmesi için bir yol haritası da sunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Özel öğrenme güçlüğü, etkileşimli okuma, sosyal beceri.

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¹Hacettepe University, School of Health Sciences, Department of Child Development, Ankara, Türkiye, e-mail: gytuncer@hacettepe.edu.tr, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7690-7931

³Kirikkale University, Keskin Vocational School, Department of Child Care and Youth Services, Kirikkale, Türkiye, e-mail: emreyildiz@kku.edu.tr, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3060-5081

⁴Kirsehir Ahi Evran University, Faculty of Health Science, Department of Child Development, Kirsehir, Türkiye, e-mail: asli.izoglu@ahievran.edu.tr, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0063-8448

⁵Hacettepe University, School of Health Sciences, Department of Child Development, Ankara, Türkiye, e-mail: semra.sahin@hacettepe.edu.tr, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5132-1451

Corresponding Author: Gizem Yağmur Değirmenci

²Nigde University, Zübeyde Hanım Vocational School of Health Service, Department of Child Development, Nigde, Türkiye, e-mail: cigdemkaymaz@ohu.edu.tr, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9962-0159

Introduction

Studies investigating the reading achievement of children with specific learning disorder (SLD) provide valuable insights into strategies that enhance reading speed, fluency, and comprehension skills. However, these studies leave unanswered the critical question of how to help children develop a positive attitude toward reading. Teachers and families of children with SLD often focus primarily on academic skills, yet successful schooling requires support across all developmental areas. Practitioners working with children with SLD frequently recognize that social difficulties are as challenging as academic deficits.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, SLD is characterized by lower levels of mathematical, reading, and writing skills despite an individual's measured intelligence on standardized tests. These difficulties are severe enough to negatively affect both academic achievement and daily functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Since the impact of SLD is multifaceted, the supports developed for these children must also be versatile. Nevertheless, interventions designed for children with SLD typically concentrate on academic skills (Cavioni et al., 2017). Research further shows that academic interventions alone do not sufficiently improve social and behavioral development in children with learning disabilities (Roberts et al., 2015).

Dialogic reading (DR), first introduced by Whitehurst et al. (1988), is an interactive technique in which the adult follows the child's interests, poses questions, and encourages shared book reading by expanding on responses. Numerous studies demonstrate that DR is an effective method for school-age children. For example, Gutiérrez (2016) found that DR not only supports conceptual learning but also improves reading comprehension, while research also indicates its effectiveness in developing pragmatic skills in school-age children (Kim & Hall, 2002).

To address this gap, and based on previous research findings, we developed a program designed to provide solutions to two major challenges experienced by children with SLD: negative attitudes toward reading and difficulties with social skills. At the core of this program is dialogic reading. Picture books are widely recommended to promote social-emotional learning in educational contexts (Gunn et al., 2022). Relevant studies have highlighted the positive effects of book reading on children's vocabulary, comprehension, and social development (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). These outcomes are highly consistent with the needs of children with SLD.

Program Stages

The program is designed for 10 children in grades 1 to 4 and can be implemented in both school and clinical settings. Each session lasts an average of 120 minutes and is conducted once a week. The program is organized into three distinct phases: planning, implementation, and analysis.

Stage 1: Planning

Sub-Step 1. Assessment of Reading Performance: The first step in the program is to assess children's reading skills. We believe that grouping children based on their reading abilities enhances overall performance. Standardized tests provide a reliable method for tracking progress. Batteries developed for school-age children, which measure reading across multiple dimensions, can be utilized (Ergül et al., 2021). Alternatively, tools that focus on a single aspect of reading may also be appropriate (Ülper & Yağmur, 2016). Language-specific instruments are available for evaluating the reading proficiency of children at school age.

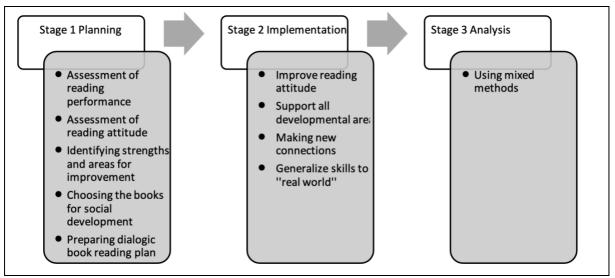


Figure 1. Stages of the Program

In Türkiye, standardized reading tools and intelligence tests are commonly used to diagnose SLD. A child's current reading performance can be determined by calculating the time required and the errors made when reading a standardized text. When standardized tests are not feasible, sub-skills such as reading speed and spelling ability should be assessed. For example, the child's speed in reading a standardized passage may be measured, or spelling tasks may be administered and the accuracy rate recorded.

Sub-Step 2. Assessment of Reading Attitude. The second step in the planning stage involves objectively evaluating children's attitudes toward reading. Improving reading attitude is one of the two primary goals of the program; therefore, accurate assessment is essential. This can be accomplished by using child-friendly scales or conducting structured family interviews. One such scale, developed by McKenna and Kear (1990) and later adapted into Turkish, has demonstrated high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .88, and can be used for students in grades 1 through 5 (Kocaarslan, 2016).

In this study, we selected a cartoon-based scale because it was easy for children to read and respond to. When administering the scale, adults can guide children by asking them to mark how they feel after reading each statement. Children who are able to read simple sentences can complete the items independently. Figure 2 illustrates one of the scale items.

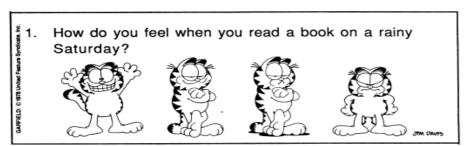


Figure 2. Sample Item from the Attitude Toward Reading Tool

Sub-Step 3. Identifying Strengths and Areas for Improvement. Another important aspect of planning is to identify children's social strengths and weaknesses. This is achieved primarily through family interviews, which provide insights into developmental history and peer relationships since early childhood. Families may be asked questions related to the child's personality, developmental milestones between

ages 2 and 6, ability to form friendships, and the presence of any problematic behaviors. Standardized assessments may also be employed.

Social skills assessments offer valuable information regarding children's behavior and interactions with peers. For this program, we used the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) teacher and parent forms (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). The Turkish adaptation of the SSRS Teacher Form was carried out by Sucuoğlu and Özokçu (2005). This form measures social skills, problem behaviors, and academic competence. The parent form was translated into Turkish by Şahin (2006).

Social skills scales are available across languages and cultures; however, instruments such as the SSRS are especially practical because both teacher and parent forms are harmonized. Typically, an adult familiar with the child is asked to rate the frequency with which the child displays specific skills, with responses recorded across multiple subdimensions. Unfortunately, very few social skills scales include norms for children with neurodevelopmental differences. Tools standardized only on typically developing children should not be applied to those with different developmental characteristics.

Sub-Step 4. Choosing the Books for Social Development. After completing performance assessments and identifying both reading difficulties and social skills requiring improvement, individualized and group-level plans are created. A roadmap is drawn to strengthen specific social skills or reduce problem behaviors. Target areas for school-age children may include lying, coping with bullying, completing homework, managing anger, respecting differences, cooperating, and seeking help.

Book selection should align with the identified needs of participating children. Carefully chosen picture books can promote empathy, support critical thinking, enhance communication, and encourage cooperation and tolerance (Sinamo et al., 2024). Selecting appropriate books is a powerful tool for supporting child development: it strengthens visual and language skills, facilitates information retention by linking text and illustrations (Strouse et al., 2018), stimulates imagination and play, fosters a love of reading, and contributes to the development of a positive reading identity (Niland, 2023).

When using dialogic reading techniques with school-age children, it is important to select illustrated books that match their reading level. For children who demonstrate low reading performance or negative attitudes toward reading, books slightly below their reading level, accompanied by rich visuals, should be used to foster engagement. Research findings show that reading comprehension and reading attitude (Widyasari, 2016) are strongly and positively related to both reading speed and comprehension skills (Soysal, 2022). Table 1 provides a sample selection of Turkish books included in the program.

Table 1	L. Sample	Book	List for	the Progra	m
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Book Name	Author	Year
Ben Yaramaz Degilim	Bengi Semerci	2013
Charles Beyl	Jeanne Kraus	2016
Sally Sore Loser	Frank J. Sileo	2016
Eli's Lie-O Meter	Sandra Levins	2018
Blue Cheese Breath and Stinky Feet	Catherine Depino	2018
Giraffe Aska for Help	Nyasha M.Chikowore	2019
Doug's Dung	Jo Rooks	2020
Band Together	Cloe Douglass	2020

Sub-Step 5. Preparing a Dialogic Book Reading Plan. In Sub-Step 5 of implementation, the well-known CROWD (completion, recall, open-ended questions, whoustions, and distancing) and PEER (prompt, evaluate, expand, and repeat) strategies are applied as part of the dialogic reading (DR) method (Zevenbergen & Whitehurst,

2003). After collecting the necessary information, books are selected according to the needs of the group. A dialogic book reading program (DBRP) is then prepared for the chosen texts. Below is an example of a DBRP created for one book.

Table 2. Sample Dialogic Book Reading Plan for Sally Sore Loser

Target Word/Idiom Meaning		Preparation			
patronize	to speak or behave towards someone as if you were superior				
opponent	someone who you compete against in a game or competition				
overshoot	to go farther than the intended target				
* Additional words may be selected as needed.					
	Target Phoneme: B and D	Before reading			

- Each child is given word cards beginning with the letters B and D in mixed order.
- The same cards are also displayed in the reading area.
- The teacher says: "You can sit in the place matching the card in your hand."
- Then, children move to the area where the reading will take place.

Children are seated, if possible, in a U-shape so they can see the book's pictures comfortably.

- Children are first asked to look at the cover picture and describe what they see.
 - o What do you see in this picture?
 - What do you think these children are doing?
- Their answers are listened to carefully and expanded.

Next, the teacher introduces the book, author, illustrator, publisher, and spine.

Children are then asked open-ended questions about the title and cover, such as what the book might be about and what events might happen in the story. Equal speaking opportunities are encouraged, supporting communication skills. The teacher expands children's responses.

• The text on the first page is read aloud.

During Reading

- Children examine the illustrations and are asked about the characters' facial expressions and possible feelings.
- The word *patronize* is introduced:
 - What does it mean to patronize?
- Children's answers are expanded, then clarified.
- Follow-up prompts include:
 - What kinds of behaviors does a bossy person show?
 - o What did the other children do when Sally was bossy?
 - o What would you do if you were in that situation?
- On page 10, the teacher asks: "Does this remind you of anything from last week's story?" to connect prior reading and emphasize recall.

^{*}Similar planning is done for each page.

• Children are asked to summarize the story using open-ended prompts such as:

After Reading

- O What was the title of the book?
- o Which friends were in your class?
- O Which adults were in the story?
- O What happened to the child in the story?
- o What do you call people who behave like Sally?
- What were the rules of being a good player?
- Finally, the teacher asks: "If you wanted to give this book another name, what would you call it?"

Phoneme Awareness

Objective: Distinguish between the sounds B and D.

- Children are divided into two groups.
- Embossed B and D sound cards are prepared.
- Blindfolded children take turns identifying the sound by touch and producing a word beginning with that sound.

Lexical Knowledge

Objective: Match synonyms with target words.

- Example words: *drawing*, *illustrator*, *illustration*, *patronize*, *show off*, *obtain*, *win*.
- Cards with words such as *defeat* and *lose* are placed in a box.
- Children take turns drawing a word card. When music starts, they try to find peers holding synonym cards.
- Groups that form correctly are applauded, and the meanings of words are discussed.

Writing Awareness

Objective: Match text with visuals.

- Children sit at tables with bingo cards containing pictures.
- The adult draws words from a bag and reads them aloud.
- Children check their bingo cards.
- The child who completes their card first is applauded.

Stage 2: Implementation

Sub-Step1. Improve Reading Attitude. Encouraging children to read periodically during practice is a method frequently used in the program. The implementer should provide affirmation through positive body language as the children read. For children experiencing significant difficulties, the presence of a supportive practitioner may be especially helpful. Facilitators should provide verbal or physical cues only when a child is genuinely struggling.

Selecting picture books that are entertaining and focus on social situations that children encounter in their own lives often attracts greater interest. Parents are also encouraged to obtain the same book to use at home for further discussion and rereading. After each session, children are invited to share their opinions about the book they read (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Children sharing thoughts about the book

Sub-Step 2. Support All Developmental Areas. Although language and cognitive development are directly targeted through activities planned before, during, and after the DBRP, social development is also supported by the content of the books. Additionally, children's participation in structured social activities with peers positively contributes to their social growth.

Physical development, one of the four core developmental domains, is integrated into the program through activities such as balance, running, jumping, and throwing—skills that typically develop during the school years. In this way, children with SLD receive developmental support across multiple domains.

Below, we provide examples of how motor and cognitive development are incorporated into the program. It is important that no developmental area is overlooked at this stage, although the emphasis on each area may vary depending on the session.

Figure 4 illustrates a phonological awareness activity designed to support language development, where children read words pasted on a mirror and match words that begin with the same sound. Other activities that support cognitive development, such as weighing objects or engaging in tasks related to the book of the day, are also included.

Sub-Step 3. Making New Connections. Circle time is a widely used practice that supports group dynamics, social interaction, and emotional expression (Zhang et al., 2015). After the DBRP, complementary activities are conducted to help children acquire social skills. Circle time, placed at the end of DBRP activities, emphasizes both the book of the day and targeted social skills.

During this activity, the practitioner models how to discuss the book and complementary tasks. Children are encouraged -but never forced-to participate. The speaking child holds an object related to the session's theme and then passes it to the next participant. During circle time, neither peers nor adults interrupt the child who is sharing their feelings and thoughts.





Phonological awareness-language development

Expressing emotions through creative dance social development



Balance - physical development



Weighing - cognitive development





Balance - physical development Lateralization - cognitive development

Figure 4. Example of a Phonological Awareness Activity Supporting Language Development

This process is an important step toward fostering friendships and encouraging emotional sharing. The practitioner facilitates discussion, prompts participation with guiding questions, and models appropriate responses by expressing their own thoughts and feelings. Each child is given the opportunity to speak, ensuring an egalitarian atmosphere. Sample circle time questions include the following (see *Figure 5* for an illustration of a circle time activity):

Questions about the book:

- Which character did you like the most in today's story? Why?
- If you could change something at the end of the story, what would you change?
- How do you think [character] felt in this situation? What would you do if you were in their place?

Questions about social skills:

- How did the characters in the story solve a problem?
- How did [character] help their friend in the story?

Questions about emotions:

- What made you the happiest/saddest/most surprised in today's story?
- How would you feel if [event] happened to you in the story?



Figure 5. Circle Time

Sub-Step 4. Generalize skills to real world. It is essential that the skills targeted within the DBRP extend beyond the reading environment. Generalization plays a key role in ensuring the permanence of newly acquired skills. To this end, children are given small tasks that have real-world applications. Examples include shopping, giving a short presentation to classmates, or explaining how to care for a pet (see Figure 6).

When children are assigned tasks with real-life relevance and these tasks are integrated with reading, they not only strengthen the targeted social and academic skills but also develop a more positive reading attitude.



Making a shopping list and shopping according to instructions



Recording the shopping experience in writing and pictures



Preparing sandwiches by following written instructions

Figure 6. Generalization Activity Examples

Stage 3: Analysis

The final stage of the program is the analysis of the results. At this point, it is essential to collect information for comparing pre- and post-program outcomes. Evaluations should include children's reading achievement, reading attitudes, and observed changes in social skills and adaptation, all of which should be recorded. These assessments should be supported by standardized tools as well as structured interviews. Children's portfolios may also be used as supplementary evidence.

Information regarding the benefits children gain from the program should be gathered through both family and teacher interviews. Additionally, data from circle timewhere children evaluate their own emotional and social development-should be analyzed as part of this stage. Practitioner self-assessment is also an important element of analysis. At this point, the appropriateness of the books selected and the effectiveness of the DBRP should be reviewed to inform future implementations.

Conclusion

The program provides a strong foundation by tailoring its content to the individual needs of children. In addition to addressing areas of difficulty, it emphasizes children's strengths through the use of multiple sources of information. Parents reported that their children developed more positive attitudes toward reading, while teachers observed greater engagement in the school environment and increased interest in classroom activities. Program participants also became more adaptable and demonstrated fewer problem behaviors in relation to the social skills targeted with their peers. These findings, supported by the evaluations outlined in *Stage 3: Analysis* and summarized in *Table 3*, highlight the program's potential to foster both academic and social development in children with specific learning disorder.

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