Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development.

Christine Reeve: I'm your host, Dr. Christine Reeve. For more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education but my real love is helping special educators like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research-based practices in a practical way in your classroom to make your job easier and more effective.

Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I'm your host, Christine Reeve. I'm very glad that you have joined us today. We have been talking about circle time or morning meeting as we sometimes call it for older students and we've talked in Episode 104 about why group instruction is so important, especially in special education. I talked in 105 about the skills that we teach and in our last episode, I talked about the strategies that we use. Today, I'm going to talk about the giant, giant elephant in the room, data. I know that everyone thinks that that's a four-letter word. It is in fact a four-letter word, but not that kind of four-letter word. Now, we all know that I'm a huge data geek. I'm such a data geek that I wrote a book about it. But I promise you that the data that I'm going to talk about today is going to be something that you can do in a real classroom, with real people and real students because data only helps you if it's real, if it's reliable, and if you can actually teach something either before or during the time that you are taking it. I've got some tips, some tools, and some organizational strategies that I'm going to share. I've got a Free Data Sheet that you can download with a tutorial on how to use it. That is designed specifically for situations like morning meeting or circle time. I don't want you to miss that at the end of this episode.

Before we get started, if you are looking for ideas of how to effectively run your morning meeting in your classroom, check out the links in this post or just come join the Special Educator Academy where we have workshops, quick wins, and even five minute lightning trainings of ideas for early childhood through high school for group activities. If you are listening to this episode for the data tips, we have a whole course and more on data collection. In fact, we have a whole path that's been created on getting started with data in your classroom. Come and grab a seven-day free trial at specialeducatoracademy.com and get started today, making morning meeting your favorite part of the day. Now, let's get started with this episode.

I know that many of you find data collection to be debating of our existence in special education and it can definitely feel that way but it doesn't have to be. The key as with most things is making a plan and I've talked about that in previous episodes. I talk about this in my free webinar on getting started with data collection in the classroom and I'll make sure that that link is in the show notes for you, too. The data sheet that I use for group activities is one of the sheets that I talk about in that webinar. I'll add a picture of it to the blog post for this episode, too. This is a group or a naturalistic data sheet. It has multiple students' data on the sheet in one place. What we do is we're taking samples of the students' demonstration of the skills we're targeting during that activity.

Now, there is science behind this and I'm not going to spend a ton of time going into that here. Interestingly, there is actually not a ton of research on taking instructional data but we do know two things. First, teachers who take and analyze data have students who make more progress.

Second, we can take sample data with three to five data points and get an assessment of a student's progress that is accurate enough to make decisions. The naturalistic data sheet is set up so that it has multiple students listed on the sheet and each student has multiple goals that are being targeted in that specific activity. Each skill being targeted has five spots for trials or opportunities of that particular skill. That's how many opportunities we're expecting to see during that observation. There is no great mystery behind that number, it is because five fits in the box on the form, and five is good for the purposes of math.

In general—I talk about this more in the free webinar and in other posts that I'll link to because it's hard to describe a data sheet in a podcast—we target data collection on one student each day of the week. We take data on Sydney schools in morning meeting on Monday, on Kailyn's goals on Tuesday, and on Nani's goals in morning meeting on Wednesday, and so on. We are looking for multiple opportunities to record during morning meeting on that day. We're looking for multiple opportunities during that activity to get about three to five opportunities and three to five data points in that sample. On the sheet are the goals for all of the students in the class even though we're only taking data on one student each day. The reason for that is that we're teaching every student's goals every day. The sheet serves as a good reminder for everybody about the skills that we're targeting for each student.

Now, I hear you saying to me, "This chick is whacked if she thinks I can run a whole group activity in my classroom and take data on multiple goals on a student at the same time." You are right, I don't think that because I know I can maybe do that in some classes but probably not very well. Here's the answer. Whoever runs the group—and I'll come back to the "whoever" in a minute—doesn't take the data. I'll say that again, whoever runs the group does not take the data. If you, the teacher, run the group activity, you focus on running the group activity and presenting those opportunities to teach all those goals on that sheet. That's a full-time job by itself and the paraprofessionals take the data. Yes, that means you have to train them and I've got some tips for that in a few minutes. But it means, they are supporting the students and taking the data because they're able to concentrate on the performance of the student in a way that you as the runner of the meeting are not.

Do you remember that "whoever runs the group" thing? Let me come back to that. What if you didn't run the group? What if a paraprofessional ran the group, or a speech pathologist came in, and ran the group? Let's have a paraprofessional run the group in this example. Running a group may not be your thing. In Episode 105, I talked about the fact how it definitely was not my thing when I started out, there's nothing wrong with that. Different people in classrooms have different strengths and you make a stronger classroom when you use people's strengths accordingly in the classroom. That's how you build a good team. Maybe you have a paraprofessional who is great at it or maybe they're just better than you are. We certainly have had that in classrooms I've been in; they're just better than me. Think about if they ran the group and you got to watch your students and train your other staff. You take the data for one student, keep an eye out, and train the other paraprofessional to take data on another student. Or have that paraprofessional watch you and you can model prompting and data collection at first. Think what you can do when you aren't the one trying to keep the whole group engaged. I'll leave that out there for you to think about that and how that might work.

Paraprofessionals need to take data in many different activities in the day. One of the things I frequently hear when I bring this up is, "I can't have the parapros taking data, I just can't do that." Well, in actuality we need our parapros to take data because it's how you should be getting information about how your students are performing when you aren't there. Training them to take data really has got to be a key element of what's going on in the classroom. That's a topic of a whole different episode or series but one way to do that is to be able to set up your classroom so that someone else runs the group, you stand back and can do some modeling. One strategy, too, is to not take data on everybody all at the same time. Maybe you say, "I'm going to take one student. I'm going to take that data and have the other para watch me. I'll model and show them how to do it so that then they can do it. I'll watch them and coach. Then when they get comfortable, we'll start adding students."

Let's look at some tips for how to make this work. Think about not starting your data collection system all at once for every student. Focus on one student to begin and then increase by students until you've hit all of your kids. You're just taking data in morning meeting on one student every day. If you do one student every day, let's say, you had 10 students and you've got two people taking data, you'd have data on the first week. If you took data on one student, five by the end of the week. If you did five this week and you did a different five next week, then maybe you modeled this week, then they did it and you coached next week on five other kids then you would have a sample for each one within the first two weeks. Then you could start doubling them up where you're taking it and they're taking it and get everybody in that third week. You're really not losing that much time. You're also going to want to make sure that the skills that you plan out for morning meeting are also going to be taught and tracked in a sample someplace else in the day. The skills that you're teaching in morning meeting are probably also going to be targeted in another group activity.

Now, I plan the data collection systems out and where I'm targeting these skills in the Teaching Implementation Plan or the TIP. I'll make sure there's a link to that in the blog post as well but that's where I determine that I've got at least two places that are hitting a goal for a sample of data. That way I know if he's absent on a day we're not losing our only weekly opportunity for data on that skill. I do want to try to get at least three to five data points on each of the skills for each student during the week in that morning meeting activity. That's really useful for a couple reasons. One is that research tells us that that gives us enough information for problem solving for interpreting our data. This becomes information for you as the instructor about how things are going as well. When I see that they're not getting that many opportunities, when they're not filling out all five boxes, then I know that there might be an issue with how many opportunities are being created for that skill. I know that there's some training or some problem solving about, "Is this a good fit for this skill or do we need to work on how we create more opportunities for the student to practice?" Because we do also know that our students need multiple opportunities to practice skills in order to make progress.

We also know that with this data sheet, you're going to need to transfer the data to graph. Remember I told you that teachers who take data and analyze their data have students who make better progress. Part of analyzing their data is graphing their data. I've got you covered there as well. I have an Excel and a Google Sheets document that you can grab in the

Resource Library along with video tutorials that come directly from the Special Educator Academy that will walk you through how to input your data directly into those spreadsheets and they will magically graph your data for you. If every week you just make a habit of inputting that data weekly for each student, your graphs will be created for problem solving, for figuring out what's going right, or what's not going right so you can solve the problem before they get out of hand, and they will be ready for your progress reports as well. I'll make sure that those links are in the episode notes also.

I will tell you that using this system is something I've done for many, many years. It is not only possible but it actually works really, really well. We've been using this system for about 15 years or more in many different kinds of classrooms. It does take some getting used to it, does take some practice for it to become a habit but it is a system that is one piece of a classroom's data system. It's not the whole solution but it is a good way to take data on that morning meeting time. You can download this data sheet and get the link to the tutorial, the graphing templates, and sign up for the Free Data Webinar, and grab that seven-day free trial of the Special Educator Academy, with the whole course on data collection and even more, all at autismclassroomresources.com/episode107. Thank you so much for joining me for this series of effective group activities in special ed. I will be back next week with a new topic. I hope that you will come back then and join me for that. Until then, have an amazing week. I will be sitting over here thinking about what topic I should talk to you about next.