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 am Chris Reeve. Thank you for listening. This month, we are talking all about training classroom staff. This is a pretty big topic for a lot of reasons. For one, it's one that isn't necessarily what we all went to school to do so it might not have been on your agenda. I know a lot of teachers who often will say that they went into this to teach the students, not to be a manager of adults, and I get it. I really do. But unfortunately, it truly takes a village, a clinic, a team, and a massive number of collaborators around the table to educate our special ed students.

In the special ed classroom, the little team we have managing that caseload needs a leader, and that leader is the teacher. Now, when I say leader, I don't mean the "I am the boss of you" leader. I don't mean that "you're fired" leader, because trust me, you don't have any power as the teacher, and let's not kid ourselves, I've had a ton of different positions over the years including administration and I never had any kind of power. I mean, what some people might call a servant leader, I tend to think of us as collaborative leaders.

So far in this series, I've talked about how you set the stage and the structure for leaving and training in the classroom in Episode 131. In the last episode, I talked about how you address three of the most common roadblocks to training in the classroom. That included how to find time to make training happen. In today's episode, I want to continue with how we provide training by talking about how we can give meaningful feedback in the classroom when we have no time for one-to-one collaboration.

Giving feedback is a critical tool in training because people don't improve and learn without it. It would be like teaching a student how to write an essay, but never returning any of his writing samples with any kind of feedback. How would he improve if you never told him what he wrote was good and what needed improvement and why? It's the same for implementing strategies in the classroom. No one can improve if we don't tell them what's going well and what they need to do better.

But let me also plant this one seed as well: Feedback doesn't have to be a one-way street. In a collaborative training model, don't assume that you're the only one giving feedback. Encourage your staff to give you feedback too, and you'll have a happier team.

In addition to three ways to give feedback to staff, I'll also talk about how staff can give you feedback as well. As we talk about collaborating with the team in the classroom, I know this is something that most educators aren't trained for in school so it is something we talk about and have resources for in the Special Educator Academy.

Our job as a classroom leader is to lead the collaboration. We aren't leading just for people to follow, we're leading a group of people who are all like moving parts of an engine. They aren't a row of ducks following their mom, they're a big engine of moving parts who all I have to do their part for the car to move and they are all doing something different at the same time. One person's performance obviously affects the actions of another. That is one of the things that makes it so complicated. I know. So giving timely feedback about performance is even more important in this situation.

It's not a situation in which you can sit around and wait for a two-week evaluation to come around. You don't want to wait because if you're training and nurturing new skills, you don't want bad habits to get set up. You want to take advantage of the fact that you're on site and able to provide feedback quickly before patterns get to set and have to be changed. Before, for example, a verbal prompt gets used every day, multiple times a day for two weeks, and now you have to unteach the student to use it and fade it out.

But how do you give that feedback in the midst of everything else going on in the classroom while you're working with your own students and in a way that's respectful to the person who's getting the feedback? You obviously don't want to shout across the room, "Hey, watch out. You're using too much verbal prompting again" to the person, that's not going to go over well. At least it wouldn't go over well if you yell it at me, so please don't yell it at me. So you're going to have to get a bit creative in how we provide timely feedback in a supportive manner within the classroom to make it meaningful and effective. Make feedback go both ways is my first tip.

Almost everything we train classroom staff to do is something that we are doing ourselves. I probably shouldn't have said almost. I can't think of anything that I would ask staff to do that I wouldn't be doing myself. In fact, that's kind of my mantra. Therefore, since I know I'm certainly not perfect, there's going to be nothing that they do that I won't be doing as well as far as needing feedback. There won't be anything I'm giving them feedback on that they couldn't give me a heads up about that they seem to do it either. If they're making that mistake, chances are good I'm making that same mistake.

For instance, let's take prompting. Let's assume that we're training them to use the least-intrusive prompt, lessening verbal prompts, and fading out prompts. We're trying to get them to prompt less frequently and wait longer. I would say that is definitely something that I can use reminding on most of the time in the heat of the moment in the classroom. Does it mean that I have to have some humility and fess up and tell them that I'm not perfect? Well, yeah, but newsflash, they already know that. Let's face it, none of us are perfect. Can we just agree to start with that as our assumption?

By asking them to give us feedback when they catch us doing it, it keeps us on our toes to do things the way we train and to be a good model first. Second, it probably keeps them watching us hopefully being a good model. Three, it makes the feedback more equal and fair, rather than being a one-way street. It makes it more balanced because everyone's getting it.

Now, I still wouldn't yell it across the room. But I might walk by and quietly say, "Hey, I noticed you might be using a few too many verbal prompts. Don't forget to use the visuals." Or maybe we would just develop a nonverbal sign that we would use to remind each other so we can give that feedback in real time across the room. We might just say, "Monica," and tug our ear. That might mean "I'm hearing too many words over there."

Next up, another way to give feedback might be a post-it note. This is something I used to do with data collection a lot. I used to review the data on progress of the student and it's amazing what you can get out of data collection about the teaching that was taking place. I could tell what trials were being implemented, how they were being implemented, how many opportunities they were getting. I could use that feedback about the teaching to give feedback.

I would then write out on post-it note what that feedback was and just stick it on the datasheet for the staff member to see the next time they worked with the students. That way, I made sure there were positive statements as well as corrections that I wanted to make. I always wanted to make sure my positives outweigh my corrections, but it was a quick and easy way to share a feedback.

The third way to share feedback when there's no time for collaboration might be to just make a really quick video. I love doing this particularly with positive feedback. Now, if you use a one-man-down zoning plan that I talked about last week and the week before, you may have been able to use that time to observe and coach some during a specific activity.

Let's say you did a one-man-down zoning plan for independent work time and you watched a paraprofessional running independent work. While you were watching them, you noticed that they weren't always making sure that the students completed their work activities. Maybe they got distracted by something else. Maybe you just stepped away at the very end of the time with a couple of minutes left and you went in a closet, or you had an office or something like that, you made a quick video on your phone with the thoughts about how it went.

Now the great thing about independent work is the kids usually are settled at the end and you might be able to pull the para away to have that conversation. But let's say you didn't. You might just make this quick video that says, "Hey, here are the things I saw that looked really good, but I noticed that you didn't let them finish and make sure that they got everything into the finished basket. You let them wander away before they were done. It's really important that they get to the end."

You could share that in a feedback form in writing as well. But sometimes that comes across as more clinical and it takes a bit more time to write it down. It's hard to get the tone right when it's in an email or it's written down. But with video, your voice can communicate how you would communicate it if you were doing it in a one-to-one session.

Now, always when you're giving feedback, you want to give positive feedback, a ratio of five to six positives to every correction is considered the golden ratio. You want to layer your feedback together. Integrate it so it isn't like a list. Talk about what you saw. Talk about how you saw the students react. When you're giving corrections, I often talk about "what you might try", "have you thought about", or "it might work better this way". But also, if you've given feedback for a while and nothing has changed, it really needs to be done differently, then you want to be more direct.

For instance, if Lucy's running independent work and all the students are starting their work system but they're not finishing them because there's no finished basket, this has happened several times before when you need them to be more directive, you might say, "Next time, you need to make sure that all the finished baskets are in place before the students arrive in their centers. Use the independent work checklist to set up the systems when the work systems are set up in the morning. Then just double check to make sure that finished baskets are in place when the students get to their center to make sure that they're set up correctly."

Or perhaps she's using too many verbal prompts. That's something that you want to say, "Make sure that you're not using any verbal prompts in independent work because we only use nonverbal prompts because they're easier to fade." You just might want to be more directive if you've seen something happen over and over and nothing has changed. Those are some quick thoughts of ways to give feedback in an effective way but that can be done when you have no real one-to-one collaborative time.

I would love to hear what inventive ways you've come up with to provide feedback to staff in your classroom. Come, share on our Facebook page at facebook.com/specialeducatoracademy. We've actually transitioned from our Autism Classroom Resources page over to our Special Educators Academy page because of the Facebook hack from a while back.

If you're looking for more ways to support and train staff collaboratively in the classroom, don't forget to grab your seven-day free trial of the Special Educator Academy at specialeducatoracademy.com. I will be back next week with another episode that's focused on troubleshooting when your training efforts aren't working out. Until then, I hope you have a beautiful week.