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

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. And we have been talking about the CORE, the classroom organization results and effectiveness framework. And today, I want to talk about ways of building your core team for collaboration in your special ed class.

And you can find more information about the CORE itself in Episode 146. So that's autismclassroomresources.com/episode 146. And I'll make sure that I get that link in the show notes as well.

Now, the CORE model is highly dependent on staff working together as a team in order to have a smooth running classroom. Let's face it, the classrooms that we work in for our students with autism, our students with severe disabilities, and even our students who are included in Gen Ed, we're not living in a world in which they are able to kind of handle it with one teacher.

Usually, we've got a staff of several people working in a classroom or going in and out of different classrooms in the school to support our students. And for that reason, the staff component of it and how well the staff works together is a really key element in the CORE.

I know that it doesn't always feel as if all of the staff is on the same page. And I know that there are many times when the staffing is an issue because you're dealing with staff shortages, conflict among staff, some of you are still training staff. Sometimes the staff isn't always a great fit. But you know,

it's our team. And it's what we have. So we have to figure out how to make it work.

And I'll be exploring some strategies in this episode for addressing some of the bumps that we all have in working with other adults in close quarters, like a special ed room, over the next couple of episodes.

So I'm going to take this episode to talk about strategies that we can use to develop collaboration within the CORE team. Now these are the elements that set the team up for success. I like to be proactive and prevent issues from happening. So these are the elements that can really make a big difference between you wanting to go to work every day and you're not wanting to be part of it.

I have a free tool that will help you set the classroom up for success or do some remediation if we need to go back and revisit some of the basics. And I'll talk about that in the episode today as well. So let's get started.

There are lots of different opinions about how to do things best in the classroom. A lot of times teachers might be younger than the staff or have less experience with the population or teaching in general and that can create friction. Sometimes the role expectations for each person are different than the person has themselves.

Team members often come from very different backgrounds and cultures and often have different ways of interacting with students, handling behavior, implementing strategies, believing that strategies need to be implemented. But whether they are the team you shows, or they are the team you ended up in, it's kind of like family. You often are not going to change it so you have to figure out how to make it work.

Our jobs in the classroom can be really stressful with challenging behavior, challenges of administration, challenges with family members, challenges with trying to help our students learn as best they can. So it's doubly difficult to work in that environment if there's tension going on between the members of the team.

So I'm going to start off with this general point, which is what I often always come back to. Those of you who have seen me do training have heard me talk about this before or Academy members, I'm sure have heard me say this before.

It's a quote that I found it in a guidance counselor's office. It's by Judas Billings who at the time was the superintendent of Washington State schools. And the quote is, "Children are the priority. Change is the reality. Collaboration is the strategy."

And So I think that really sums up kind of what I think of when I think of a classroom. We are all there to help the student make progress. We need to keep our focus on that and not get derailed by our own differences, because the only way that we're going to make this happen is if we learn to work together.

So how do we make sure that we are keeping the student at the center of all of our decisions? Well, first, I establish a classroom vision. Imagine that what you want your classrooms culture to be.

Gather ideas from staff. It might be if you don't have any time to talk to staff, put a sheet of paper up by the door, give them each a post it note, and ask them to write one thing that they think the classroom needs to focus on or that they feel strongly about needs to be included in the way the classroom works.

Have them give that to you before the checkout. They could text it to you, they could put it in a Google document, there's a tons of different ways that you can do it. But what you're trying to do is you're trying to get some input from the people working in the classroom, so that they are part of this plan. So they are part of the vision.

People need to see themselves reflected in the vision in order for it to be a shared vision. That is truly what we want of the classroom vision. It cannot be something where as a teacher, I say here is the vision of what we're doing. If everyone has collaborated on it, it's going to be much stronger, and it's going to be easier to lead the class to follow the vision.

Ask them what you think they're important elements of the classroom are. So the classroom vision is going to focus on the values that the classroom staff have for the classroom. What you want the outcomes to be for your students. What you want to make sure everybody stays focused on. It can include a lot of different elements, and no two classrooms are likely to have the exact same classroom vision, because they're made up of different students, and they're made up of different adults.

So for instance, an early childhood classroom might have part of the vision be that play is an important part of early learning. So there will be play time given during the day. And there will be instruction for students who don't know how to play naturally, to learn how to play with others.

For older high school students, it might be that they will be independent and given the opportunity to explore their community for opportunities for employment and community living.

It can include what the team values in the interactions with students. It could be your students should

It can include what the team values in the interactions with students. It could be your students should hear and see positive models of behavior from the staff. Or every student should always have access to their communication system throughout the day.

And the vision is a great place to start to develop those values for the classroom. It's true that not everyone on the team is going to have the exact same vision. And that as the team leader, the teacher is going to have to work with everyone collaboratively to develop a common vision.

So as a leader in the classroom, you can suggest things, you can ask for input, you can also reframe something that's happening. So if you have a staff member who really feel strongly that they really need to be helping with students hand over hand 100% of the time, because they just want to be nice to them.

That's something you can reframe and say, there may be times when the students are going to need more support, but wouldn't you agree that we want them to be more independent. And in order to get to independence, we're going to have to let them try things on their own. And you can, you know, appeal to if they've ever had to do that with their own child or something like that, or an example of something you've seen, they've seen you deal with in the classroom is even better.

It gives you the opportunity when you ask for that input to see what their beliefs are. And that may give you some information about why you're butting heads about things. And then you can talk about it. Think about what you might be able to do to compromise or give a new approach to try to see if it works.

It can't be you sharing the vision. It has to be collaborative. So the point of a collaborative vision is that it's a vision that you can come back to regularly and revisit, particularly if there are disagreements or conflicts about what's going on. It's a really good thing to rest your training on because you can bring why you're doing it back to your classroom vision.

And to help you set that up. I've got a free download in the resource library that has templates for both creating the vision statements, and it also has a sheet of possible vision statements that you might consider including. There classroom values that you might want to think about. It's a big list, it's designed to be a jumping off point.

It can be helpful to share it with staff, when they tell you they don't know what you want in a vision. And you can grab that in the free resource library, if you're a member, just sign in and grab it. And if you're not, you can join free on the blog at the page for this episode at autismclassroomresources.com/episode 156.

So the second thing that we want to think about in building our core team is we want to make sure

that we value what others say, and that we demonstrate that we value it. And that's obviously going to come into play when you're creating your classroom vision. It seems fairly obvious, but it's really important to show that you are listening.

Too many times conflict comes because people don't feel that they have been listened to or heard. And sometimes that's all they need is just to know that you've heard them. And then you can talk about what you disagree about. Or maybe you'll find out you're not disagreeing at all. You want to recognize that others have other points of view and they're going to provide that input from that point of view. That information may help to make your classroom stronger and better.

And I have a blog post that I'll make sure goes in the show notes about listening strategies and how you can demonstrate active listening so that staff knows that you really are hearing them and attending to them.

Number three, is to use "I messages." So when I'm listening in an IEP, or a team meeting, or a consultation, I always want to bring back what I'm saying to something I will take responsibility for. I want to give suggestions using myself as the person who's doing it.

So it can often really soften, a redirection or correction or not so positive feedback, to say, "So many times, I have lost my cool with X student, and I had to just walk away and take a break." That makes a big difference versus you need to do this. You're saying I've had this too, and chances are good that you have or that you've at least thought about it.

And so you want to use that as a way of making it more relatable. Acknowledging that it's not just them, and that what you're asking them to do is a challenge. And you know, sometimes we've been in the classroom so long that we forget, it's really hard to ignore behavior problems, because we do it so readily, that we forget that we really have to teach staff how to do it, and they have to get used to it because it doesn't come naturally.

So by acknowledging that you've had some of those same struggles, that's going to make it easier for them to hear what you have to say.

The fourth thing is to keep the focus on the students the outcomes and the goals. I said that at the beginning. But specifically when you're talking about a problem, or you're giving feedback. Make sure that you're stating it in a way that makes it clear that you're focused on doing it this way, because it's best for the students. And that you can give them tangible examples of that. Having a vision statement that we talked about earlier really helps because you can refer back to it.

So for instance, rather than saying, "You can't yell at the students, it focuses on the negative

So for instance, rather than saying, "You can't yell at the students, it focuses on the negative behavior. And it only makes the behaviors happen more frequently." Try saying, "I have a really hard time when Brian screams too. And I have to walk away sometimes and take a break to keep myself from yelling at him to stop. Because that's what I really want to do. And I know it's really frustrating. But our data shows that being positive with Brian and redirecting calmly, is more likely to calm him down. So we have to try to help each other."

Another example might be when a staff member is providing too much support for a student so they're doing his art project for him, for instance. You might have said, "I know it's really hard to wait Sydney out when he's working in art because he's so slow to follow directions. It's sometimes hard because I know (there's that I statement) that I think the rest of the class needs to move on, but we're still waiting for him. But it's okay, if Sydney doesn't finish parts of the project. The important thing is that we want Sydney in all of our students to learn to be as independent as they can be, just like we talked about in our classroom vision. So focusing on him doing a smaller part on his own is probably more important than him finishing the whole project."

So I've used an "I statement," I've referred us back to the classroom vision. It's all just a way of helping them see that you're on their side and we're working for the good of the student.

And number five is to ask how you can help. When there is problem, instead of jumping in with a solution, you might want to try, and I have a hard time remembering this one, to ask what support they need. Don't assume that they need help and jump in right away. And don't leave them out there hanging on their own either.

When I ran a program for students with severe behavior, I frequently would walk down the hallway, and there would be a student who had fallen on the floor, refusing to get up and go back to the classroom. And there would be about five people hanging around, around the student who all we're paying attention to him.

Rather than saying, "Hey, everybody stop attending to the kids who fall on the floor." I set the example, I know that this is becoming an issue in the back of my head. So I said to the staff, "Okay, guys, when I'm walking down the hallway, I'm going to keep walking if you have a student on the floor, but if you need me, flag me, like, I will stop if you tell me that you need me. But I'm not going to stop and attend to the student because I know that's part of the problem. And I know that that makes it harder to get him back to class."

That way, I'm letting them know that I'm not ignoring you. I'm not leaving you out on your own and hanging out there. Instead, I am letting you know that I'm going to try to do this because I think it's better for the situation. But they have a way to access me if they need it.

Our goal is always to solve a problem rather than being right. So we may want to give them the right

but get the problem solved and not focus on that. So instead of, "I know it's really hard to stay right on top of Sally in the hallway, but you have to make sure she does pull the hair of the other kids." You might try, "I know it's really hard to stay right on top of Sally in the hallway. And you've done a really great job of that. And sometimes it's really hard to catch her before she tries to pull hair. How can I help you with that?"

I would love to hear your classroom visions, your frustrations, and your questions. So hop over to IG @autismclassroomresources and DM me. And if you have done a classroom vision, I would love to see it if you want to share it and tag me in a post, I think that would be amazing.

And if you want more help and support around building classroom teams or anything in the classroom, come and join us in the Special Educator Academy with a free seven day trial and find out how it feels to be in a community that gets what you do. And access tons of tools that help you with your job at the same time.

My job is to make your job easier so you can get back to watching your students progress. You can learn more about the academy at specialeducatoracademy.com.

I hope you'll come back next week when I will be talking on the challenging topic of ways to improve difficult relationships in the classroom with adults and strategies to help with conflict resolution. Until then, have a great week.