Strategies for Students with Autism who are Non-Verbal

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Portfolio Entry for Wisconsin Teacher Standard 3 & 5

EDUW 694 The Classroom Environment

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Selected Wisconsin Teacher Standard Descriptors

Wisconsin Teacher Standard (WTS) 3: Teachers know how to create a positive workspace

The teacher uses an understanding of individual and group motivation and behavior to create a learning environment that encourages positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation.

Knowledge. The teacher understands how to create an environment that supports each individual as well as collaborative learning while also creating an encouraging and positive atmosphere.

Dispositions. The teacher appreciates learner differences and is dedicated to making sure the classroom is engaging and includes positive social interactions amongst the difference students.

Performances. The teacher takes each student's individual preferences and needs into consideration so that the classroom environment is welcoming and inclusive for all the unique students.

Wisconsin Teacher Standard (WTS) 5: Teachers know how to meet the needs of learners

The teacher understands how students differ in their approaches to learning and the barriers that impede learning and can adapt instruction to meet the diverse needs of students, including those with disabilities and exceptionalities.

Knowledge. The teacher understands that all students learn differently and have their own diverse needs.

Dispositions. The teacher appreciates multiple ways of teaching material to meet the needs of different learners to ensure they are successful.

Performances. The teacher can use many different ways of teaching the content so that students are able to engage in critical thinking, being creative, and problem solving.

Danielson Domains

Domain 2: The Classroom Environment

Component 2a: Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport

Component 3b: Establish a Culture for Learning

Component 2c: Managing Classroom Procedures

Component 2d: Managing Student Behavior

Component 2e: Organizing Physical Space

Pre-assessments

Self-assessment of Instruction Related to WTS and Targeted Student Learning Objective(s)

For Wisconsin Teaching standards (WTS) 3 and 5, I want to focus on students who have autism that are non-verbal. I teach high school special education. Last year I taught the mathematics side but this year moving to a new district I will be teaching the language arts side. Having not met these students yet it is hard to know what their range of ability is. I do know that there is a higher ability group and a lower ability group. Each of the students in my class will have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Furthermore, each student has some type of learning disability. We will be focusing on two major aspects: reading and writing. Some of my students will be able to read and write under grade level and some of them will still need to learn the conventions and basic skills before doing this.

The knowledge descriptors that I chose for WTS 3 and 5 both focus on how students have their own individual needs that need to be met. For WTS 3, I chose a descriptor that talks about each student's individual differences and pulling that together to create a positive and welcoming learning environment. As a teacher, it is my job to make sure students feel safe and happy while in my classroom. Ensuring this will help create a positive learning environment where students actually want to learn. For example, if a student feels pressured or unhappy in my classroom, they are not going to want to focus on learning. I need to do my best to prevent this from happening. For WTS 5, I chose a descriptor about the teacher understanding that each student learns differently and has diverse needs. Some students learn better by doing while some learn better by hearing or seeing. Similarly, a student who has a learning disability will learn different than someone who does not have a learning disability. The students in my classes who are autistic and non-verbal may need some extra strategies put in place to help them to be successful.

It is my job to make sure this gets done so that each student's diverse needs are met in my classroom.

The performance descriptors relate to the goal I have for myself of using strategies to best help benefit students with autism who are non-verbal. The first descriptor I chose focuses on using each student's individual differences to make a positive and welcoming environment. This is always my goal when it comes to my own classroom. In the classroom each student needs to feel safe and accepted as themselves. Doing things such as implementing different strategies for learning or accommodating each student's needs will help to increase a positive environment. The second descriptor I chose was about how the teacher understands that each student learns differently. Each and every person has their own way of learning things. As stated previously, this could be done by implementing different strategies that can appeal to different types of students. Getting to know how each student learns will be important in making sure they are successful in class. It is my job to teach in a way that benefits my students so I can ensure they are going to be as successful as possible in my class.

The dispositions I chose show appreciation for a teacher who has a welcoming classroom environment and who appreciates different ways of learning and teaching. The first disposition is about how the teacher makes a positive and engaging classroom environment while still appreciating each student's differences. I know the importance of accepting each student as they are and bringing that all together to create one big, happy classroom. Each person can grow as a person and as a team player this way. When getting to know everyone and their differences, students are learning to be more accepting and more knowledgeable. For instance, talking about different abilities, backgrounds, religions, etc. The second disposition talks about the teacher enjoying teaching in many different ways so all students can learn in a way that makes sense to

them. For instance, I learn best by doing something while someone else learns best by listening to something. Teaching in ways that incorporates multiple different modes of presentation and many different strategies will help to ensure that the students are getting the lesson in an easy to understand way. If a teacher teaches in the same way everyday not only are the students going to get bored, but they will not be getting as much out of their education as they should be.

Assessment of Student Performance Related to Targeted Student Learning Objective(s)

I had a student in my class who was autistic and non-verbal. I saw him three times a week, for 88 minutes at a time to teach him math. He was a sophomore in high school but was at a first-grade level for math. At this point in his education he was still trying to learn basic math skills. While teaching this student it was difficult to get him to pay attention as he was always playing with the laptop and power rangers that he carried around. Due to not paying attention, he struggled with the worksheets, activities, and assessments. I could not ask this student why he was not paying attention or what I could do to help him because he was non-verbal. All I could do was try my best to make the lesson engaging for him and then provide him with some one-on-one help when it came time for the students to work individually. This student fell into a cycle of not paying attention, not doing his work, and not accepting help. I saw his grade start to fall. I wanted to help him, but it seemed like everything I tried would not work.

I tried a few different things such as taking away his laptop and power rangers, giving him an incentive of his favorite candy, or even calling in his paraprofessional. This only worked about 20% of the time though. I was in need of finding something that worked a majority of the time. When I would do thing such as take away his laptop or power rangers, he would get angry and grab them out of my hand or scream. This was a disruption to the class and a safety concern. The paraprofessional that he had a close relationship with suggested offering up a Milkyway if

he did his job. This was still not motivating enough for him. Calling in his paraprofessional would help him get focused and get the job done but this is not something I wanted to rely on. I wanted to be able to ensure he was successful in my classroom with or without his paraprofessional. I was feeling defeated and did not want to see his grade suffer. I spent a lot of time working one-on-one with him so he could stay caught up and still receive a high grade. This did work but then it took away time from the whole class. I continued to make do by doing this but then the school closure came from the Coronavirus. It was my goal to ensure I could come up with some positive strategies to use with students like him to ensure they were successful and happy in my classroom.

Assessment of Learning Environment While Learning Targeted Objective(s)

Starting my first ever teaching position and coming in mid-year, was difficult. I struggled finding a happy medium between the easy-going teacher and the strict teacher. I wanted the students to like me, but I also wanted them to listen to me. I fell into a trap of being the "cool" teacher. I lost my power to be assertive because of this. Students would interrupt me, talk over me, say disrespectful things, and flat out just not listen. For example, one student told me he did not need to listen to me because he was 18 and I was only 22. This made it hard to teach and it made it hard for other students to learn. I hated this and know I wanted to make a change. In order for my classes and my students to be successful it would be necessary to try new things and implement new ideas.

All of the students in my classroom were special education students and therefore all had very unique needs. The student who was autistic and non-verbal was my biggest challenge due to the fact that I could not verbally communicate with him. When this student got angry and acted out, it put the rest of the class on edge and then other students would begin acting out.

Once the class went down this path for the day, it was very difficult to get them out of it. I was always looking for ways to make things simpler and ways to make sure the students were getting the most out of their education.

After making these observations, I have decided that it is up to me to change the classroom and make sure it is more suit for learning. I need to come up with a plan where students are positive, focused, and ready to learn. If I could fix these problems, the students would get more out of the lessons and would have a better attitude while doing so. My hopes are that by implementing some new strategies into my teaching next year that students will accomplish more. I believe that if this happens then both myself and my students will be happier.

Assessment Conclusion and Essential Question to Guide Research

The self-assessment, assessment of student performance, and learning environment assessment show that my expectations for a better classroom environment and for students to be more successful, needs to come from implementing different strategies into my classroom that appeal to different students. My learning goal, stated as an essential question to guide research, draws its wording from WTS 3 and 5: How can teachers create a learning environment to meet the diverse needs of non-verbal students with autism?

Research Summary

The exceptional condition I have chosen to research is students with autism that are non-verbal. The reason I chose this is because I had a student in my class this year who fell into this category. It was very difficult for me to connect with him and understand what he wanted or needed. I had wished there was a way for me to better reach this student. I realize the importance of building relationships with these students and I struggled to do this. I am hoping

this research will help me and I will be able to connect better with other students that have this disability, in the future. I assume that throughout my special education career I will encounter many students who have autism and be non-verbal.

There are a lot of different things I would like to know about this exceptional condition. The most important thing being, how I can help these students to be successful. I want these students to feel comfortable in my class and be able to learn and I want to know what I can do to make this possible. The student in my class did well but I would have liked to have seen him thrive in my class. It really helped that he had a positive relationship with the paraprofessional. My hopes would he that eventually I was able to build a relationship like that with him. Some of my current strengths with working with these students are that I am patient with them, I give them the incentives they are used to, and I am understanding of their disability. One particular student in my class carried around Power Rangers and teachers used that as an incentive for him. For example, if he got his work done, he was able to play with his Power Rangers. Remaining patient and understanding with these students is very important. Some of the challenges I have faced while working with these students is understanding what they are communicating and finding a way to build our relationship. I find it difficult to understand what these students are trying to communicate due to the fact that they are non-verbal. I also struggle to build relationships with these students because I do not quite understand them as best I should. I plan to really work on this. The student in my class would shut down and refuse to work and I was not sure the reasoning for this or how to help him get out of it. When it comes to parents, one of my strengths is definitely communicating with them. I stay in touch frequently to update parents on how their student is doing in my class. I realize the importance in not only communicating with parents when something negative happens, but also when something positive happens. In

future endears, I would like to take the time to talk in depth with parents about their child so that I can better understand them and where they are coming from. Starting my position mid-year, I did not get as many opportunities to get to know these parents.

Autism is a condition that has many different traits and effects people in many different ways. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication, and behavioral challenges" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). People with autism typically look the same as someone without autism, but they tend to act different when behaving and communicating. By looking at the student in my class I would have never guessed that he was nonverbal. This goes to show how similar all students can look in this regard. Autism has a wide range of signs and significant elements. Some people with autism can take care of themselves throughout their daily lives and others may need help with this.

Anyone can have autism. There are no certain criteria one must match in order to have autism. Furthermore, autism can occur in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups but is about four times more common in boys than girls (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). There is no single known cause for autism however genetics and environment can play a role. Certain genetic changes may affect the brain cells which in turn increase the chances for having autism (Mayo Clinic, 2018). According to mayo clinic, "Researchers are currently exploring whether factors such as viral infections, medications or complications during pregnancy, or air pollutants play a role in triggering autism spectrum disorder" (Mayo Clinic, 2018). With continued research, researchers will learn more about autism and who it affects.

People with autism typically struggle with social, emotional, and communication skills. These people typically learn different than other people or have different ways of reacting to

events (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). There are many, many symptoms that may be signs of Autism. Due to the wide range of symptoms, there is also a wide range of severity among people with autism. Some children show signs of autism as infants and others may not show signs until they grow up more (Mayo Clinic, 2018). The patters in children with autism tend to be very unique whether they are high functioning or low functioning.

The diagnosis of autism can be difficult. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, there is no medical test, like a blood test, to diagnose someone with autism (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). A diagnosis comes from a reflection of the person or child's behavior. Furthermore, a doctor will see how this child is doing when it comes to social, emotional, and communication skills. Based on these observations and how this child is progressing in terms of others their age, the doctor is able to either make a diagnosis of autism or not.

Autism has no cure and there is no way to prevent it. However, there are ways to treat it. In terms of treating it, "Early diagnosis and intervention is most helpful and can improve behavior, skills, and language development" (Mayo Clinic, 2018). With that being said, one does not outgrow autism. However, if treated properly then people with autism may learn to function well with it. There are different ways to treat this, but most relate back to therapy. For instance, therapy to help the child talk, walk, or interact well with others (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

I am choosing to research students who are autistic and non-verbal. After having a student in my class that had this, I became intrigued and wanted to learn more. Non-verbal autistic students do not speak. Kimberly Holland mentioned in Healthline that some reasons for this are that they have apraxia of speech, they have not developed verbal language skills, or they

have lost verbal skills due to this disorder (Holland, 2019). Non-verbal autism is autism with an added step. These students are still autistic, but also cannot speak. Therefore, the symptoms, diagnosis, factors, etc. are the same as those of diagnosing autistic students that can speak.

When it comes to the classroom, these students can fit into the special education or general education classroom. There are important ways that educators can support these students. According to Autism Speaks, the five things to do immediately for these students are connect with the parent, make a list of the child's strengths, understand how the child learns, ask for additional resources, and have a place the child to go when overloaded (Autism Speaks, 2016). It is important to the connect with the parents to better understand this student and become aware of his or her strengths. As a teacher it is important to find out how this student learns best and then use that in your classroom. If additional resources would be helpful, then search those out. Students with autism can experience sensory overload so it is important to have a spot for this student to go when becoming overwhelmed.

It is important that teachers know strategies to use to best help these students in their class. Non-verbal autistic students can benefit from certain different things in the classroom. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools researched the best strategies to use with students who were autistic and non-verbal. The top three strategies that I could see myself using in my classroom are using visual cues, use fidgets, and creating a sensory area. Using visual cues with students who are non-verbal can be a successful strategy because you are able to communicate with one another without talking. Visual supports are a way to make verbal messages concrete (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, n.d.). Verbal words can only last so long, but a concrete visual cue can last forever. If both the student and the teacher know what the visual cue means, then this would be an effective way to get the point across. Some examples of visual cues are notes,

pictures, hand signals, etc. Implementing these in the classroom can be helpful to all students, but especially to students with autism. Furthermore, while the teacher is verbally explaining the lesson, there could also be a hard copy of the notes or pictures on the board that support the lesson. According to the research, many students have stronger visual skills than auditory skills, so visual cues give these students a way to use their visual strengths and in turn decrease their stress levels (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, n.d.). This takes some of the pressure off of these students and they are able to learn more effectively. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools said this helps to decrease stress levels as well as inappropriate behaviors in these students. As stated in Autistic Children and Visual Cues, visual cues are successful in helping students communicate, better understand their environment, and learn new academic concepts (Adrienne Warber, n.d.). Visual cues are helpful because children with autism typically have delayed responses to verbal instruction (Adrienne Warber, n.d.). Visual cues can be used to help improve communication and help students learn better. With proper implementation there is much success. In my own experience, I used visual cues with the student in my class who was autistic and nonverbal and saw a lot of success. I put pictures on the board, gave him certain hand cues, and gave him a hard copy of the work. He was able to use these things to help him understand the lesson.

Fidgets in the classroom can be very useful as well. There are many different types of fidgets such as a Koosh ball or a TheraBand on the legs of a chair (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, n.d.). Some other fidgets I have seen during my time in the schools are putty and sensory bottles. Fidgets are used to help students focus on their work or on the task at hand. To use a fidget in class, the teacher should provide this object to the student and explained what it is used for. In some instances, the teacher will explain this to the whole class since all the other

students are usually curious. The nice thing about these are that they are small and quiet enough that they do not become a huge distraction to other students. This is a way to keep students working but also a way for them to release some of their anxiety. The physical movement helps them to refocus their brain when they are unable to take a brain break. The fidget is something the student is able to either move between their hands or move with their feet. Furthermore, if a student has a Koosh Ball or putty, they are able to use their hands to squeeze the object and release some anxiety and movement. Similarly, the ThereBand, does the same thing but with feet and not hands. In research done by the Noodle Nook, they discovered that fidgets are helpful in sensory processing issues. Students with autism experience sensory overload which leads to acting out or frustration. Providing fidgets to these students helps to focus their mind and drown out the sensory overload (Noodle Nook, 2018). Adding a fidget is successful in quieting the noise of their brain. These students are then able to focus on the lesson or on their work instead of focusing on the things overloading their brain. In order to keep students from getting bored and to continue to have the fidgets make a positive impact, the Noodle Nook had found that switching out fidgets is helpful (Noodle Nook, 2018). The student in my classroom used putty to keep him focused during the lesson. This was really successful and did not seem to be a distraction to the other students. I really liked this because then everyone was able to get their work done without worrying about other things going on in the classroom.

The third strategy I will use in my classroom is using a sensory area. Sensory areas are helpful when an autistic student is feeling overwhelmed and needs a place to calm down. Some good objects for a sensory area are a bean bag chair, rocking chair, or noise blocking headphones (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, n.d.). Incorporating these things into the classroom would create a calm and quiet space for these students. In other sensory areas I have seen bouncy balls,

comfortable chairs, and rugs. It is important that the teacher explains to the class what this area is to really be used for. This is a space for the students to calm down and refocus their energy. The sensory area is typically in a separate corner or section of the classroom which allows the student time to disconnect from what is going on in class. According to the resource, the sensory area is used to get students to sit down and attend to a work task (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, n.d.). Sensory areas are typically used for five minutes or less so that the student is not missing too much of the lesson. When the student is ready to learn again, they return to the class. This helps keep everyone on track and the class moving forward. Sensory areas help students with autism regulate their bodies so that they are able to be successful in the classroom (ASD, 2019). The American School for the Deaf has seen success with their autistic students when using a sensory area because it helps to improve their focus. Students feel calm and can find a sense of comfort in these areas. According to the ASD, sensory areas help children improve their visual, auditory, and tactile processing as well as their fine and gross motor skills (ASD, 2019). Sensory areas also can serve as a way of occupational therapy for students who need it. Sensory areas can be successful and serve as many purposes if put into a classroom correctly. I did not have a sensory area in my classroom due to our lack of space. However, when this student needed a quick break, they would walk up and down the hallway. I do think a sensory area would have been nice, but we were able to make do with what we had. The walking in the hallway was productive compared to sitting in class unfocused.

In conclusion, there is a lot to learn about students who are autistic and non-verbal. Autism has many different parts and no two cases are the same. People with autism typically struggle with social, emotional, and communication skills. The diagnosis of autism can be difficult but is typically diagnosed by observations and how this person is developing in

comparison to where they should be. There is no cure for this disorder, however, there are ways to help treat it. Students who are non-verbal do not talk and therefore educators must use some different strategies to work with these students. The three main strategies I am researching are using visual cues, using fidgets, and creating a sensory area. I have found these strategies to be successful in my experience and would like to continue using them more in depth. By putting certain strategies in place, these students can be very successful.

Research Implications

My essential question to guide research was "How can teachers create a learning environment to meet the diverse needs of non-verbal students with autism?" I knew that implementing different strategies would be beneficial to meeting the needs of these students, but I did not know exactly what strategies to implement. After doing my research I realized that the strategies I would be implementing would benefit all students and not just those with autism. I am happy to have found some strategies that will specifically benefit the students in my class who are autistic without taking anything away from the other students. By implementing these strategies in my classroom, I am going to be simultaneously teaching the students strategies to use in their own learning. The three strategies I researched, the use of fidgets, visual cues, and a sensory corner, are all things I have seen at some point while in the schools. I saw that while being implemented correctly, they really helped students. However, if implemented without instruction or explanation, these strategies did more harm than good. I plan to use things such as Power Points, pictures, hand signals, and videos for my visual aids. For my fidgets I plan to use Thera bands, putty, and Koosh balls. Finally, for my sensory area I plan to use a comfy chair, fidgets, stuffed animals, soft music, and a divider to separate the space from the rest of the classroom.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) explained that there is no cure for autism and that each case looks different. I only had one student in my class last year who had autism, but I am moving to a new position this coming year and will have more students that have autism. I struggled finding a way to connect with the one student and I felt as if I was failing him because of it. I would hate to struggle with this same thing next year. For this reason, I like that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (n.d.) gave simple and effective strategies to implement into my classroom. The three strategies I am focusing on are using visual cues, using fidgets, and using a sensory area. I can see myself easily using these in my classroom and having success with them when I do so.

Research-based Action Plan

Action Plan Summary Outline

1. Design lessons and materials that incorporate visual cues. Visual cues are beneficial because the student is able to see something while being taught about it. The picture or the cue along with the message stays in their mind for a longer time this way verses having nothing to physically see.

2. Introduce a sensory area and the use of fidgets to my students so they know what they are and how to use them. Students will learn what these areas are for, how to use them, when to use them, who should use them, etc. I will determine which fidgets would be best for the students and then give them that proper item.

3. Assess my class to see how well the visual cues, sensory area, and fidgets are working. Since this will be new to myself and my students, there may need to be some changes made. Throughout my own observations and student feedback I will be able to come up with the best assets to our classroom and to the student's learning.

Targeted Student Learning Objective(s)

1. Standardized goal: The students will use different strategies to help improve their own learning as well as their overall educational experience. The Illinois Common Core standard we will be focusing on is Grade 3 standard 1 for Language Arts which states "Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking."

2. Targeted learning objective: The students will use different strategies to help improve their own learning as well as their overall educational experience. The Illinois Common Core standard we will be focusing on is Grade 3 standard 1 for Language Arts which states "Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking."

Task(s) and Essential Proficiency Criteria for Targeted Learning Objective(s)

1. Task: Correctly use conventions of standard English grammar to write a paragraph about yourself.

2. Criteria that Prove Proficiency in Meeting Targeted Learning Objective(s)

    a. Use conventions of standard English grammar correctly. This includes upper and lowercase letters, using plural words correctly, using prepositions correctly, and use correct grammar.

Method(s) to Assess Progress of Proficiency for Targeted Learning Objective(s)

1. A paragraph written by the student telling about themselves. Students will write a paragraph about themselves telling me anything that I might want to know about them. They will make sure to do their best writing by using the conventions of standard English grammar correctly.

Post-assessments

Instructional Insights Related to WTS and Targeted Student Learning Objective(s)

Due to it being summertime and experiencing a global pandemic, I have not had a chance to implement these strategies into my classroom. As soon as school resumes and I am able to see my students in persona again, I will be using these in my classroom. In the meantime, I have been working on buying fidgets, working on getting items for my sensory area, and creating visual cues. I have also been thinking about my plan for implementation.

My plan is to first start by observing my students. Being new to the district, I am not going to know any of the students. I will need to observe them and see what I think would work best for them. I will also need to communicate with them. Maybe they have used some of these strategies in the past and ad success with them. If that is the case, I would be able to start using them again right away.

Once I get a feel for my students, I will begin implementing these strategies. I will use visual cues, give students a fidget if necessary, and explain the sensory area. We will discuss these things and I am sure the students will have lots of questions. My hope is that students will take advantage of these strategies and I will see a lot of success with them.

The first assignment I plan to give my students is having them write a paragraph about themselves. I will start my implementation through this assignment. Before this assignment I will give the students a short reminder lesson about the conventions of standard English. During this lesson I will not only be talking but I will also be showing a PowerPoint for students to look at. This will allow me to incorporate one of the strategies I researched: visual cues. Students will able to see what I am talking about while also listening to me talk about it. Prior to this lesson I will teach my students about fidgets and show them how they are properly used. During this lesson, students that need a fidget will have one. I will see how they handle their fidgets and

then will have any conversations after the lesson that I may need to. The students will see upon entering my room in the beginning of the year, that there is a sensory area. I will explain what it is for and share the rules. If students feel the need to use the sensory area during the lesson, then they should do that. That is what it is there for. All of the strategies I learned in my research are things I can implement into my classes right away without even observing my students. I will be able to prevent some problems before they even begin.

Prior to this research I would not have thought about visual cues, fidgets, or a sensory area when it came to a lesson. If students were acting out, I would assume it is from behavior issues and not things such as sensory overload. Now I know that there may be other underlying issues. I would have pushed through the lesson even if the students were not paying attention because I was not sure what else to do. This would cause the students to miss the lesson which led to not understanding the work which led to their grade dropping. I then ended up spending a large amount of time working one on one with my student who was autistic and non-verbal to try and get him caught up. I am hoping with the added supports to help increase their focus and understanding, the students in my classes will be able to be successful.

After the lesson, the students will begin their paragraphs. They will use their prior knowledge and what they learned in the lesson to show me their best writing. I will be able to continue using my three strategies throughout this part of the day. Students will still be able to see the visual cues up on the board, they will still have their fidgets, and they will still have access to the sensory corner. The purpose of this assignment is to show me what they know and to get to know them. This will give me a better idea of where each student is with their abilities and also give me some background information on them as a person. Throughout this time I will also have the opportunity to see how they are doing with using these resources provided.

Comparison of Student Performance Related to Targeted Student Learning Objective(s)

The student learning objective for this assignment is "Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking." However, during this lesson I am also working to see how my three strategies work out. The conventions of English are just my learning objective for my students. The students were to write a paragraph about themselves using the conventions of standard English correctly. This assignment was for me to see which ability level each student was at and so that I could get to know them better. During this lesson I was observing my classroom management skills by seeing how well these students did using the strategies I implemented. I chose to use this assignment to first use my strategies because I know I could implement all of them.

As mentioned earlier, I have not been able to implement this into my classroom due to it being summer and the Coronavirus. Since I have not been able to use these strategies, I have been working on plans for implementation. Artifact A shows how I would create a classroom environment to best meet the needs of non-verbal students with autism. I created a mind map to show how my goal of meeting these students' needs can have many different branches. Included in these branches are things I have learned from my research. Artifact B shows a mind map of how I run my special education classes. Some of the things on this mind map are only done once at the beginning of the year and some of the things are repeated over and over throughout the year. Looking at the map it is evident that all of these things go hand in hand in the special education environment. With this plan I am able to make sure everything has as smooth of a transition as possible. Artifact C shows a video about my classroom. In the video I talk about how it is set up and ran to best meet the needs of all of my different students. When setting up my classroom I think about all the diversity in my classroom and how I can best accommodate

all of the students. With the way my classroom is set up and ran, I am able to easily implement the three strategies I researched.

Comparison of Learning Environment While Learning Targeted Objective(s)

When implementing these strategies into my classroom I expect there to be a few challenges. However, I anticipate these will be easy challenges to overcome. The reason I am going to be implementing these strategies into my classroom is to try and help students who are non-verbal and autistic to be more successful in my classroom. I struggled with this last school year. These strategies will not only benefit these students but should benefit other students in my classroom as well. These strategies will be ones they can carry over and use in other classes or other aspects of life as well.

The student in my class who was autistic and non-verbal really struggled to pay attention. He was always playing with his power rangers or laptop and when taking these things from here there was backlash. Since he was not paying attention he was beginning to fall behind, and I was having to take time away from the class as a whole to help him. I did not want to see his grade suffer for something that I could be helping. I wanted to find a way to help him to be successful, but I was not sure what to do. I thought that building our relationship would help the issue, but it took his paraprofessional years to build their relationship and I only had him in class two months before the Coronavirus shutdown happened. I wanted to find something to put in place that would help him to be more successful. Although I did not get to implement these strategies with him, my hope is to implement them with other students are to see the success I am hoping for. One positive thing about trying to put these new strategies in place is that I do not think they could hinder students' progress at all. The worst that would happen is that the student would

stay the same and the best that would happen is that the student would find success with them. I had tried some other things in my class prior to this research, things like incentives, but I did not have any luck with them. His attention, grades, and attitude all stayed the same despite being rewarded. I think implementing strategies that help with intrinsic motivation and not extrinsic motivation can be very successful.

Some of the challenges I may be facing are students not knowing how to use the sensory area, students using the fidgets as toys, and students taking advantage of these strategies. Furthermore, a sensory area or fidget could be seen as something "fun" to some students and therefore will try and use these things even if not necessary. It will be my job to explain what the fidgets and sensory area are really used for and then monitor to see how students are doing with them. If I see a problem, I will need to correct it and make any adjustments that I see necessary.

Reflection of Entire Learning Process

The essential question guiding this entry was "How can teachers create a learning environment to meet the diverse needs of non-verbal students with autism?" I knew that there would need to be some type of strategies put into the classroom and I was trying to figure out which ones would work best. I researched three strategies that I can implement into my classroom to help benefit non-verbal students with autism. With the help of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, I was able to find strategies that would not only work for these students but should help benefit all the students in my classroom. Those three strategies were: visual cues, fidgets, and a sensory area. Since I did not get the chance to implement these in my classroom, I am predicting what work and what might not work.

What Worked and Why

1. I anticipate the visual cues to work because students will have something to look at while I am teaching the lesson. Not only can visual cues be show on the board or shown with physical objects, but some visual cues can also be given to students to keep at their desks so that they have constant reminders.

2. I believe using fidgets will work because students are able to keep parts of their body active and moving while focusing on the material in class. In order to increase attention, sometimes physical movement is necessary. Students are able to use these objects between their hands or their feet during class without distracting other students. This will also help students by releasing some of their sensory load. During student teaching I saw this work with certain students.

3. The sensory area should be successful because students will be able to use this area to calm down, focus, and gather their thoughts. This area will be away from the class so the student can be alone. In this area there will be fidgets, a place to sit, and empty space. I believe this space will be used frequently with students who may be struggling to get their mind in the right place or who are struggling to focus on school.

What Did Not Work and Why

1. I think the fidgets could become a toy to some students. Some students may try and use a fidget because they think it will help them, but it may actually just become a distraction to them if they are not using it the right way. I will need to make sure to correct any behavior that I see like this. Demonstrating how to properly use the fidgets would be beneficial as well.

2. The sensory area could be something that is taken advantage of. Students may slip off to the sensory area too often to try and avoid work or the lesson. They may go to this area because they think it is a free pass. As the teacher it will be important to really explain what the

sensory area is used for and to keep an eye on it at all times to make sure it is being used properly. When I was student teaching, I saw this area abused sometimes but I am sure with proper instruction this could be turned around.

My Next Steps

1. Apply the three strategies into my classroom at my new school and make sure I explain everything thoroughly. Demonstrating how to use these strategies will be beneficial as well. This will ensure the strategies are as successful as possible.

2. Continue to improve these strategies and tweak them in ways I see that will benefit my students. As these strategies are implemented into my classroom there will need to be changes made, I am sure. I might eventually find better fidgets, better items to put in the sensory area, and better ways to show visual cues.

Going into a new teaching position, in a new state, in a new district will be challenging. Last semester was challenging as is due to starting mid-year and fresh out of college. I felt like I was always struggling between being the fun teacher and being the strict teacher. I also really struggled to connect with some of my students. I hope that by implementing these new strategies into my classroom it will help things fall into place. Students will feel more relaxed and ready to learn which will help to improve the overall classroom environment. I also think I will be able to build relationships with my students more effectively because I am working to do thing to meet their own personal needs. We will be able to get more learning done instead of worrying about negative behavior going on.

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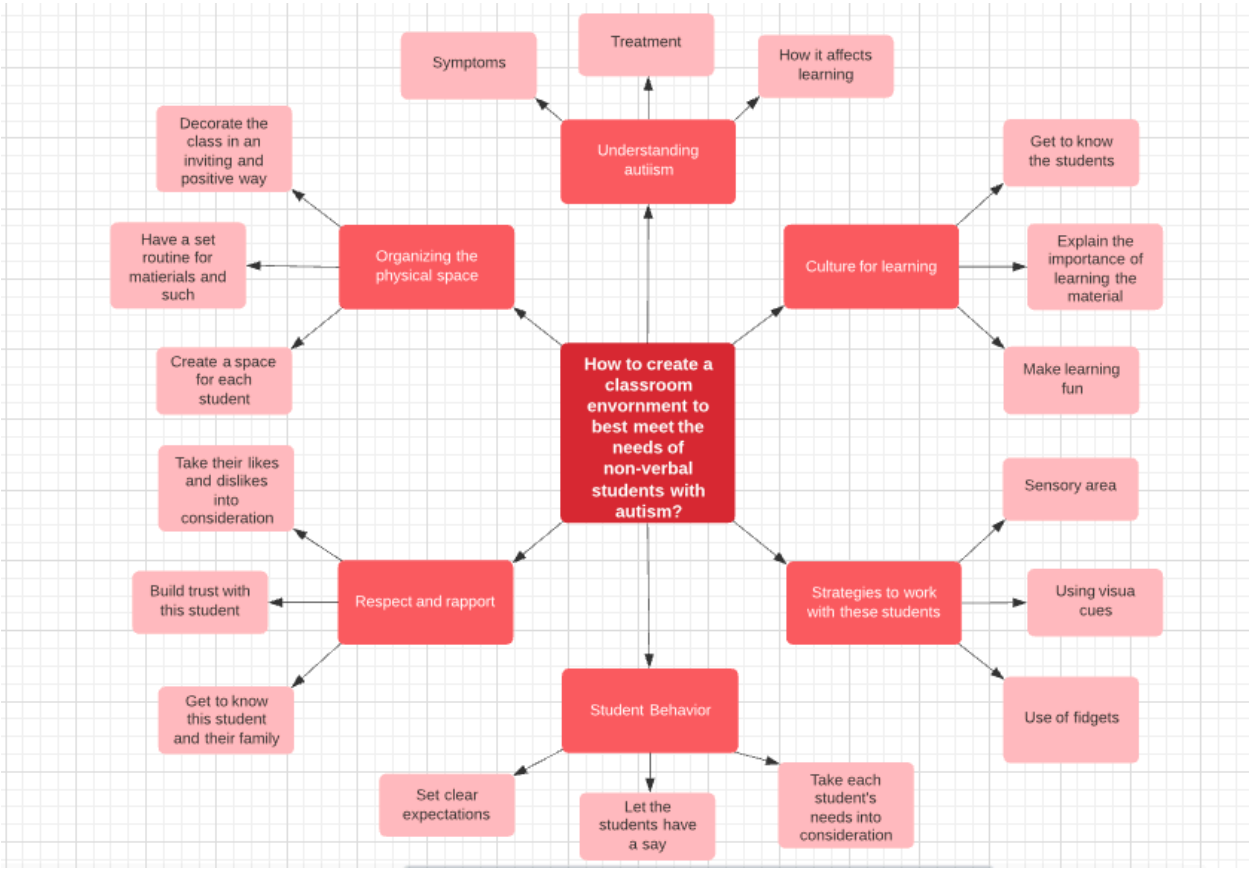
Artifact A: Classroom Environment Mind Map

This is a mind map of how I create my classroom environment to best meet the needs of non-verbal students with autism. The six main categories are: understanding autism, culture for learning, strategies to work with these students, student behavior, respect and rapport, and

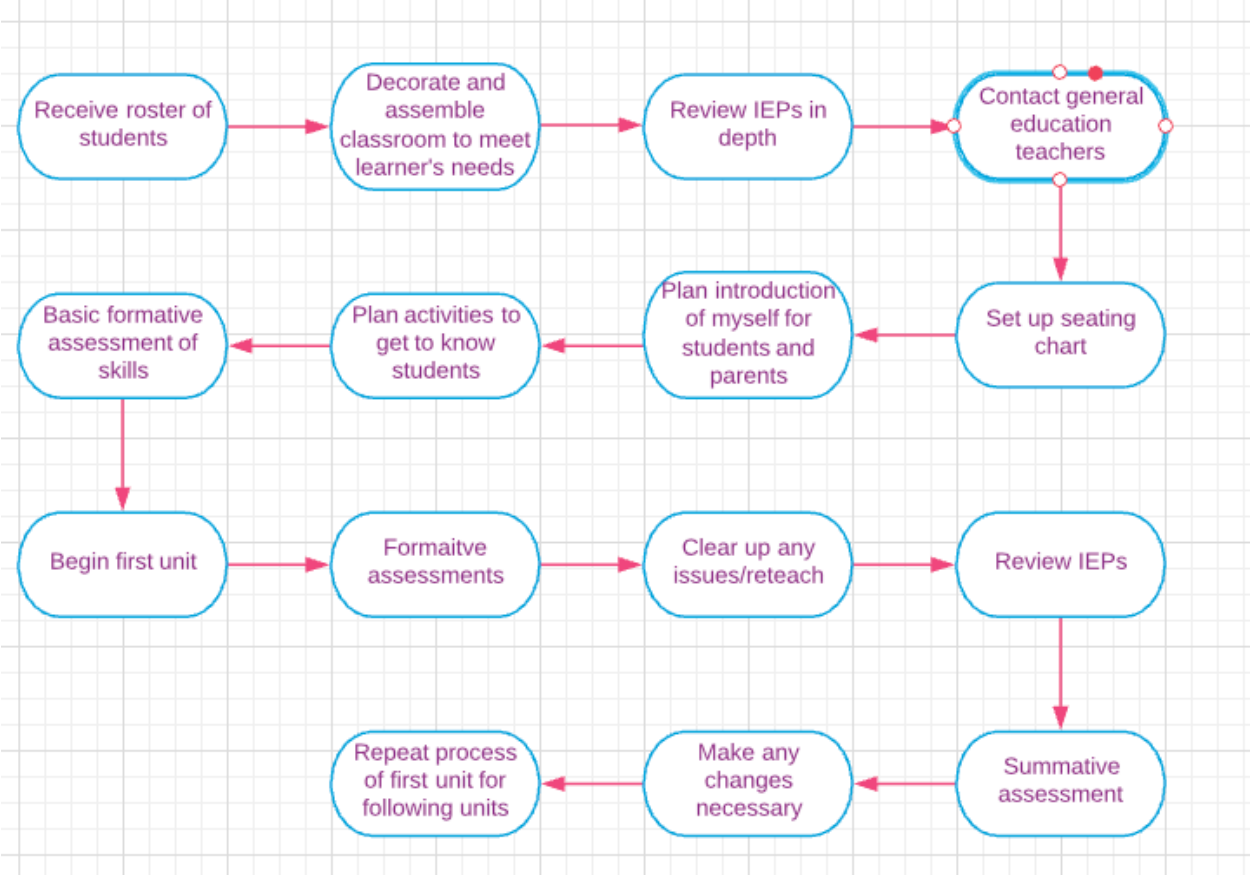
organizing the physical space. These six main categories have branches off of them that go into more detail. All of these things work together to create the best environment for non-verbal students with autism, and other students as well. I learned about these things through my research and my own experiences in the classroom. When all of these things are implemented together then the student is able to have the best learning experience as possible. I will be implementing these things into my classroom right away at the beginning of the year so that we are able to start things off on the right foot.



Artifact B: Special Education Classes Mind Map

This is a mind map of how I start and run my special education classes throughout the year. As you can see, some of the things on this map are a one-time thing and some things get repeated over and over throughout the year. By following this map, I am able to have an organized and

smooth procedure to help increase the success in my classroom. By looking at this mind map it is evident that everything in the classroom goes hand in hand. Following this procedure helps to keep things organized and helps the students to get the most out of their education. I will begin following this mind map right away at the beginning of the year so that there is no confusion and so that everything is organized. During different parts of this mind map I will be able to implement the strategies that I researched. This helps bring everything together.



Artifact C: Classroom Environment Video

Here is the link to my classroom environment video. In this video I talked about some physical aspects of my classroom as well as how my classroom is ran and organized. Having certain routines in place helps create routine in both my life and in the student's lives. This is important in making sure everything runs smoothly. I have my classroom set up to benefit special education students, but general education students would also be successful in this type of classroom environment. The way I have my classroom set up is closely linked to the two mind maps I created. All of these things kind of flow together. I believe the way that I have my room set up right now, along with adding in my three strategies, will help these students to be as successful as possible. I plan to put my sensory area in a corner of my classroom that is easily accessible to the students but where there can also be a sense of peace.