

Working with students with autism has been one of the most rewarding experiences for me as a teacher. Over the years, I have had the chance to work with several autistic students, and I have grown and learned so much from each experience. I have been reminded repeatedly the importance of listening and that communication is so much more than speech. As humans, we strive to connect with one another, and these connections are essential before any learning will take place.

A number of years ago, I had the chance to work in a specialized classroom with a diversity of needs. Having only taught in a mainstream high school setting prior to that point, I was excited for a new challenge. When I entered the classroom on the first day, I realized that many of the students in my class were non-speaking and that I would likely have to modify some of my teaching ideas to meet their needs.

Among the students in the class, there is one that I will never forget. This student was non-speaking, with autism and Down Syndrome. On my second day of teaching, we were in the gym. I wanted them to play a game of basketball, and the student responded by getting mad at me, throwing all the basketballs on the floor and running out of the room. I quickly realized that perhaps they didn't understand my instructions, and that there had to be another way to communicate and to connect with this student.

The next day, I introduced a visual schedule, with pictures to explain each activity. I learned that this student loved the Friday afternoon dance in the gym. Perhaps when we had gone to the gym the day before, they didn't understand why we were playing basketball and not dancing. For music class, I created visuals for the songs that we would listen to, and the students could request different songs.

The following Friday, the student asked me for the visuals of the songs so that they could bring them to the school dance and request some songs, especially their favourite song at the time, "Gangnam Style". To this day, I still smile and think of this student whenever I hear that song on the radio.

At the end of the year, the student brought in a small bowl to give to me as a gift. I received a phone call later that morning from one of the workers at the group home where the student lived. They wanted to thank me for everything that I had done with this student. They told me that he was now happy to come to school every morning and was eating and sleeping much better too. This was one of the best phone calls that I have ever received as a teacher.

I have had many other memorable experiences over the years with the other students that I have worked with. While working with students with autism has its challenges, I have learned so much from each experience and believe that I have improved as a teacher.

Submitted by Colleen Burnett, Teacher