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SPED 898

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Reflection Artifact SPED 843

**Social Skills Intervention: Avian-Assisted Intervention (AAI)**

**Introduction:**

Avian-Assisted Intervention (AAI) is a social skills intervention that leverages interactions with birds to support students’ social and emotional development, while facilitating positive interactions with peers, and fostering communication skills. I designed this program specifically for students with autism, emotional behavioral disorders (EBD), intellectual disabilities, anxiety, trauma, and PTSD. The idea was to harness the therapeutic benefits of animal-assisted therapy in an educational setting; “research suggests that animals can serve as powerful mediators in therapy, improving social engagement and reducing stress​” (Beguin, N., et al; 2024). What began as a creative intervention concept in my SPED 843 course gradually evolved through pilot trials and refinements. Over time, this concept grew into a larger initiative and ultimately became Tweethearts, an educational non-profit organization dedicated to avian-assisted interventions in special education. This journey from a class project to an educational non-profit underscores the strong belief I have in AAI’s potential to make a difference for students with special needs.

**Purpose of the Artifact:**

The primary objective of this artifact was to create a structured, research-based intervention that systematically teaches critical social and behavioral skills through guided interaction with conures (small parrots). At its core, AAI was founded on evidence that animal-assisted programs can enhance social communication and emotional well-being for children with developmental and emotional challenges. “Studies have shown that incorporating therapy animals into social skills training leads to improved communication skills and reduced social deficits among youth with autism​” (Becker, J., et al; 2017). Similarly, a “recent meta-analysis indicates that animal-assisted activities can significantly improve certain core symptoms of autism spectrum disorder, such as social communication and reducing irritability and hyperactivity​” (Xiao, N., et al; 2024). Armed with such research, I ensured the intervention was not just a novel idea but one grounded in established evidence.

In designing AAI, I integrated multiple components: systematic social skills instruction, problem-solving practice, behavioral modeling, and self-regulation techniques. Each AAI session was planned to include explicit teaching of a social skill (for example, how to greet peers or take turns), followed by a guided activity involving the bird that naturally elicited practice of that skill. I also wove in problem-solving scenarios and role-playing (e.g. what to do if the bird becomes overstimulated, mirroring a peer conflict situation) to build students’ cognitive coping strategies. Each session incorporated self-regulation exercises—students practiced deep breathing or identifying emotions before interacting with the bird, which helped them remain calm and focused. Students were taught to recognize that the birds reacted to the energy of the student during interactions, and high anxiety, stress, or fear tended to be mimicked by the bird, prompting students to work on self-regulation. The decision to include self-regulation and social problem-solving was intentional: “these skills are known to be critical for students with behavioral difficulties to succeed socially”​ (Smith, S., et al; 2017). While the conures serve as an engaging focal point to motivate students, the intervention’s content is firmly rooted in evidence-based practices for social-emotional learning and behavior management.

**Meeting Assignment Requirements:**

In fulfilling the SPED 843 assignment, I ensured that all requirements were met with a high degree of thoroughness. The assignment called for developing a social skills intervention plan complete with background research, a detailed description of the intervention, and alignment to course objectives. I addressed each of these: the artifact included a literature-backed rationale for AAI (citing studies on animal-assisted therapy benefits and social skills training), clear objectives and procedures for the intervention, and an evaluation plan to measure student outcomes. The course objectives centered on creating effective, inclusive interventions for students with special needs, and AAI directly met these objectives by demonstrating how an innovative approach could engage learners and teach critical skills. All expected components—such as theoretical framework, implementation steps, and potential modifications—were explicitly documented in the paper. The comprehensive nature of my submission resulted in a grade that was beyond acceptable, indicating that I not only met but exceeded the assignment expectations. Given this strong positive evaluation, it was evident that the artifact fulfilled the course requirements in full.

**Decision Not to Revise:**

I decided not to revise this artifact after the course, as it proved to be highly successful both on paper and in practice. Academically, the project earned excellent feedback and a top grade, signaling that the content, structure, and writing met the instructor’s criteria with no significant weaknesses noted. Professionally, I had the opportunity to implement the social skills intervention with students, and the real-world outcomes were very encouraging. The students responded with enthusiasm—previously reserved children with autism began initiating communication while handling the bird, and those with anxiety visibly relaxed during the sessions. This successful implementation reinforced that the intervention was well-designed and effective as-is. Because the artifact was already put into action with positive results, I felt confident that no further revisions were needed. The artifact had moved beyond a theoretical exercise to a validated program, underscoring its soundness. Any minor improvements (such as adding more data collection sheets or slight tweaks in scheduling) were incorporated during implementation, but the core design remained solid. I saw no need to modify the original written artifact, as it accurately and effectively captured a social skills intervention that works and has a direct impact on students with special needs.

**Key Learnings from the Assignment:**

Designing and implementing this social skills intervention led to several key learnings for me as an educator. I learned about the power of engagement. Introducing an avian element into social skills training dramatically increased student engagement; many of my students who often struggled to participate in traditional social skills groups (or even basic-level academics) were eager to join sessions when a bird was present. This taught me how critical student motivation is — when students are interested and invested, their growth in skills accelerates. I observed meaningful improvements in social skills development: for example, one student with an emotional behavioral disorder who typically avoided peer interaction started to regularly greet and converse with classmates after practicing routines with the birds. AAI had a noticeable positive effect on students’ emotional well-being. Students appeared happier and more regulated during and after the sessions – interactions with the birds often helped lower their stress and provided a healthy outlet for their emotions. “This aligns with broader observations that animal-assisted interventions can reduce feelings of isolation and anxiety in vulnerable students”​ (Becker, J., et al; 2017). Seeing these changes firsthand was a powerful confirmation of the intervention’s value.

Another major takeaway was the problem-solving and flexibility required to implement an innovative program in a school setting. I encountered practical challenges, such as ensuring the bird’s presence was safe and hygienic and that it did not become a distraction. To address these, I developed clear protocols (e.g., handwashing before and after handling the bird, rules for gentle behavior towards the bird, and contingency plans if the bird became agitated). I learned to anticipate potential issues (such as a student being afraid of the bird) and proactively prepared solutions (such as allowing that student to observe from a comfortable distance until ready to participate). These experiences honed my ability to adapt in a fluid manner as both the situation and environment evolved. Problem-solving around scheduling and logistics was also applicable—integrating AAI sessions into the school day without disrupting academics, which I achieved by collaborating with classroom teachers and aligning sessions with social-emotional learning blocks. Through overcoming these challenges, I learned valuable lessons in planning, consultation, collaboration, and creative thinking. The assignment taught me not just theoretical knowledge, but also practical skills in troubleshooting and implementing a novel intervention in a real-world context.

**Contribution to Professional Development as a Special Educator:**

Working on this artifact was a significant catalyst for my professional growth as a special educator. It expanded my understanding of how to implement innovative, student-centered interventions. Conceiving and bringing AAI to life required me to synthesize knowledge from multiple domains—behavior analysis, social skills curricula, trauma-informed practices, and even animal care. This process improved my ability to integrate interdisciplinary strategies to support student needs. I became more confident in venturing beyond “traditional” interventions and tailoring approaches to my students’ unique interests and profiles. Prior to this project, I might not have considered using animals in a classroom setting; now I have the confidence to think outside the box and the skill set to ensure such interventions are done responsibly and effectively.

Creating the AAI program and the subsequent Tweethearts non-profit sharpened my leadership and collaboration skills. I learned how to advocate for my ideas and communicate the evidence base behind them to stakeholders such as school administrators, parents, and community partners. I was able to participate in school-based educational programs and resource fairs to share the experience and effectiveness and application of AAI. Gaining buy-in for a non-traditional intervention taught me about the importance of clear communication and demonstrated outcomes. Professionally, I grew in my capacity to design comprehensive programs — including developing curriculum materials, training staff and volunteers on how to continue the intervention and measuring student progress over time. These are competencies directly transferable to my future work in special education, whether I am designing a classroom behavior plan or leading a new school-wide initiative. This experience also influenced my perspective on future interventions: I now approach student needs with greater creativity and an openness to incorporating novel methods (grounded in research) to enhance engagement and learning. This artifact not only benefitted the students it served, but it also markedly advanced my skills, confidence, and vision as a special educator and behavior analyst.

**Conclusion:**

This artifact was both a fulfilling project and a pivotal learning experience in my graduate program. It allowed me to apply research to practice in a creative way, resulting in a tangible intervention that has real-world impact. The experience underscored the value of innovative interventions like AAI in special education – it demonstrated how leveraging the human-animal bond in a structured program can yield significant benefits in students’ social skills development and its positive impacts on their emotional health. This reflection on AAI affirms its significance not just as an academic artifact, but as a viable therapeutic educational approach. Moving forward, I carry with me the insights and confidence gained from this project. AAI will continue to influence my professional practice, and its success will remind me of the importance of staying student-centered and open-minded in developing supports. The journey of creating and implementing AAI strengthened my commitment to providing compassionate, effective interventions that help students thrive both socially and emotionally.