

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.

Hello and welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I'm Christine Reeve and I'm your host. We are still talking about one of my favorite topics, which is independence and independent work systems. Over the years, I've set up lots and lots, and lots of classrooms more than I think I can even count. In that time, that means that I have set up a lot of independent work systems. I was also extremely fortunate to have done more than a third of my time in my psychology internship at TEACCH at UNC-Chapel Hill many, many years ago. It was a great mix with my behavioral grad school background and a really great way to start out my career, and it also meant that I got to start learning about independent work and structured work systems as they are formally known the right way the first time. That means that I get a little high strung sometimes about making sure that they're being implemented with fidelity to get the most out of what they can offer.

Independent work systems are amazing tools if they are implemented correctly. If they aren't, then they're just a bunch of tasks, and they don't necessarily lead to independence. It drives me crazy when people call them busy work because every single element in the independent work system IS THERE FOR A REASON. In today's episode, I'm talking about the biggest and the most common mistakes that I see in independent work systems in classrooms, and how to avoid them. My hope is that this will help you to get them going in the right way in your classroom to avoid these mistakes in the first place and move your students on to independence as quickly as possible.

But before I get started, if you want to brush up on the parts and the how-to of independent work systems or if you're just getting started with them, I've got a free webinar that you can get started the right way in your classroom, plus it's got a bonus, if you watch it to the end, of materials to help you get it set up and monitor your students independence, and you'll find a link to my book with Dr. Kabot, all about the independent work systems there as well. You'll find the link to that in the show notes or at autismclassroomresources.com/episode115. Now, let's get started.

I find it really interesting in classes that I've set up over the years. I always think that the independent work systems will be the easiest thing for the classroom to keep going just as they are because they're the only element in the classroom that is already set up when I leave. We leave them all set up. The baskets, the folders are there, the finished baskets, the schedules, everything's already there and ready to go, yet I'll come back in a couple weeks and I'll probably find that the system's been changed somehow. The finished basket is gone or the schedule is incomplete. Somehow, the staff has unknowingly made one of these errors or the system has devolved in some way over time without them realizing it.

Now, the mistakes that I'm going to talk about today are made by new and made by highly experienced classroom staff, and they aren't anybody's fault. I've made them myself at times before I catch myself and I realize, "Oh, that's what was missing." They aren't a way of blaming anyone for something that's going wrong. Often, they're really a funny way of being an outsider who can see what's going on when an insider in the classroom can't see it because they're too close to it. Sometimes, it's just because we get too close to a situation and we make assumptions that aren't always quite as fitting to the situation as we think.

These are mistakes I've seen in multiple classrooms, probably the majority of them, over time, for some of them. They're something that are often worthwhile to look at your systems periodically, just like I will look at classrooms that I work with over time, and check to make sure that we didn't have what I call program slippage, which is a perfectly natural thing that happens in all programs of all kinds where programs just slip over time because once we get something going, we have to go focus on something else. When we do that, the thing that we left might slip a little bit, so we might lose some elements without realizing that it's happening.

My first story is about a teacher that I think was the queen of independence. She had the most amazing independent work systems. She had work tasks that she had gotten a grant for and created made in shoe boxes and she had maintenance come, and make shelves all around the perimeter of her classroom up near the ceiling and she had filled them with independent work tasks. She had labeled all of them. She had them organized. It was a high school class. All of her kids were just masters of independent work. She had bumped them up to different levels and everybody was doing their own different kind of system according to what they could do.

One day, after they've been going for quite a while, I walked in, and I'm watching this one student who used to be able to do his work system. He's sitting at his desk and he is pulling the work forward, and he's doing it halfway and he's taking apart. He's doing it halfway and he's taking it apart. He's doing it halfway. He's taking it apart. I'm like, "This is really odd," because this kid was the king of independent work. He could do whatever you gave him. I'm like, "This is really strange. I wonder if this is something he can't do, which would be odd but I'll go check," so I went over to the teacher. I'm like, "What's with this kid? What's the deal? He's not finishing his work." She's like, "Oh, he's been having a really hard time recently. I think something must be going on with him." I'm like, "This is really strange."

I go back and I look for a little while. I'm thinking, "Oh, I think I see the problem." I go over to her and I say, "You know, he doesn't have a finished place. Does he have a place where his work's supposed to go when he's done?" "Oh, he doesn't need that anymore," so my antenna goes up. I'm like, "Can I try something?" because I always want to try something because I could be completely off base. She's like, "Sure." I said, "Can you find me a wander basket?" She gets me a wander basket, which is what we were using for a finished basket and I take it over, and I put it down to the right of his station, and sure enough, he finishes the whole task, puts it in the finish basket, and picks up the next task.

I looked at it and I was like, "Yeah, see, he does still need his finished basket. He needs to know, maybe it does in a basket, maybe he can take it someplace else but he still needs a place to put it when he's done. He keeps redoing the task because he's not sure what to do with it

when he's finished. We haven't taught him that yet. We haven't taught him an alternative. We just took away his basket." She's like, "Okay, okay. He needed it." I was like, "Yeah, he still needs it."

Another kid comes in, another king of independent work. He's working at his desk and he has a list of things he has to do. He looks at it and he says, "I already did my Edmark," which is the thing in the middle of the list. She's like, "Yeah, you're right. You did." He's like, "Well, I'm going to do it again." She's like, "No, you don't have to." "Well, what do I do with it?" "Just put it on my desk." He puts his Edmark workbook on the desk. He sits down to do his work and he finishes the first thing on it, and he looks at her, he comes up to her, and he says, "Okay, I'm done with it." He just looked at her. She's like, "Put it on my desk." She turned to me, she said, "I know, my desk became the finished basket. I get it. He needs it too." She knew that we had transitioned them too fast. The finished basket is important. They need to know what comes next. It's a really important thing.

The second thing is that tasks don't always have a clear beginning or end. Sometimes, our students get stuck when they don't know when something is done. If a task isn't clear when it's done, then how do they know when to put it away? If it's a worksheet that they're doing and they answered all the problems, that's really clear. "I'm finished. I put it away." But if it's a chapter book and I haven't made it clear to him how far to read in the chapter book, "How do I know when to stop? How do I know how much to read? How do I know when to put it away?" A lot of times, you'll see students not end because they haven't put it away in that way, so that becomes a problem.

Another one is one that I have in a slide presentation. If you take the webinar, you'll actually see this. It's a big slide in big red letters. It says, "Only mastered work can go in independent work." One of the biggest mistakes I see is that we put non-mastered tasks in independent work. I want you to think about this. The only thing that we can use independent work to teach is independence. That's what we are teaching. We are not teaching matching or sorting or any of the things that we're doing in the work. We are teaching the act of doing it independently.

If you haven't mastered something already, how will you do it independently? If I don't know how to roller skate, chances are good, I'm not going to be able to do it without some help. If I don't know how to do gallbladder surgery, don't send me in on my own and ask me to do it because I'm not going to be able to do it without some help. I certainly won't be able to do it independently. In order for them to do it independently, everything that goes in their work system that they are supposed to do as the work has to be things that they can do on their own, has to be work that they've already mastered. They are practicing it for maintenance, so they're maintaining the skill, they're generalizing it to new materials, and they're getting value out of it. It's not busy work but it has to be something that they've mastered because otherwise, they can't do it independently. The goal of the system is to do a series of tasks without somebody reminding you and prompting you to get through it. The only way to do that is if the tasks themselves are mastered.

Another thing is that we don't want to allow our students to take their work apart. This is one that really comes from when we work with young kids especially. We're used to teaching kids to play

with things, then take them apart and put them away. They build with blocks, then they take them apart and put them away. That's great for play. While we might use structured work systems to teach children with autism how to play, which is probably a whole other episode of this someday, we don't want their structured work to be taken apart. It's not play. It's work. I want you to imagine a general ed teacher saying to students, "I want you to do all of the math problems on your math worksheet, then erase them all and turn them in." That wouldn't make a lot of sense. Many of them aren't going to bother to do them because, "Well, I do them if you're going to erase all the answers." That's not how we usually work.

Similarly, I don't want someone on a job site to install, for instance, software on a computer, then uninstall it when he's done. I don't want someone working in a restaurant to fill up all the salt shakers, then empty them all when they're done. I don't want people to undo their work. That's what I'm trying to teach the students here. They put their work together, they do their work, and they leave it complete because that's what we're trying to teach them, it's work. Second, it's demoralizing to do your work and have to take it apart. Third, I also want to check it a lot of times and make sure they're doing it right because many of you probably do work with some students who are really good at putting everything on the velcro, on a file folder, but not so good at making sure that they got the pieces in the right place. They need to check them. We really want to make sure that we are encouraging everybody to not have the students take their work apart. We also want to make sure that we're not taking their work apart in front of them. I try to make sure I do that off to the side where they can't see me when it's time to do that.

For the final one, I want to tell you another story. I walk into a classroom, another one that's had independent work for a long time with another kid who's an ace. Long as he had, he was working for something that he liked. He was an ace. He could do anything you threw his way. I walk in and he is literally standing on his head on a chair at his workstation. I didn't even know you could do that. I'm like, "What is going on with him?" I went up to the aid that I knew and who was working with him. I'm like, "What's the deal?" She's like, "He will not do this this year. It doesn't matter what I put in his system. He will not do his work." I'm like, "What is the deal?" Again, I'm standing there, looking at the system and I see a schedule, I see a finished basket, I see the pieces, and I look at it and I said, "Where's his what's next?" She says, "Well, the new teacher didn't put it in." I'm like, "Okay, but he always worked for computers. Is he still motivated by the computer?" She's like, "Oh yeah, he's still really motivated in front of the computer but we try not to give it to him very often." I'm like, "Okay, but he still really needs a motivator."

Again, let me just try because again, maybe it's not going to work. I don't see these kids every day. I don't know if it's going to work. I'm never going to recommend something unless I've tried it. I'm never going to say, "Let's do this, even though you've decided not to unless I know it's going to work." So I said, "Can you get me a computer visual and we'll put it at the bottom, and see," because he was missing the what's next visual because the thought was he should be able to work for work's sake, which is a lovely thought. But in looking at him, I'm thinking it's not really working if he's never finishing the system.

She went and got a computer visual, I put it at the bottom, the kid turned around, sat down, did his whole system in five minutes flat, and went to the computer, which is pretty much what he'd

done when I'd seen him before because he knew the faster he got his work done, the more time he got on the computer until the time for that center was over. He knew if he got his work done fast, he got more time. He was a smart kid. He needed that what's next, most of our kids do and if you think about it, most of us do too.

Always remember—and I think this is really the thing that I want to hit home with today—every piece of a structured work system has a purpose. Every piece is there for a reason. They're not just hoops that we put there for people to jump through. We might make accommodations to them, we might change them up a little bit over time but we want to make sure they answer those four questions that I talked about in Episode 113 because they're important. They're the four questions that begin it and they're important questions that drive the system itself.

I hope that this gives you some ideas of things to look for as your independent work systems progress in your classroom. The great thing about work systems and about even these mistakes is that they're all very correctable. They're not big things. Just put the stuff back in place and you're good to go. You might have to do a little reteaching but the program slippage is usually generally minimal if you catch it quickly. It's why it's sometimes useful to have somebody from the outside come in and look at your classroom as stressful as they know it is to have someone else come in and do that.

I hope you're seeing your students build their independence in your classroom. Remember that independent work systems are always changing as your students' skills change, so as they gain skills, you can bump up the difficulty, a little, of the skill as long as you're answering those four questions. I hope you'll be back next week when I'm going to finish up talking about independent work systems by answering some frequently asked questions about them. I hope you have an amazing week. If you like the podcast, don't forget to leave a review on your favorite app and grab your free webinar with the bonuses at autismclassroomresources.com/episode115.