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SPEAKERS

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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, my friend. I am Dr. Christine Reeve, and I'm your host, and you're listening to Episode 198 of Autism Classroom Resources podcast.

So I want to start today by talking a little bit about students that we all may have met at some point in our career, I've met them in general ed, and special ed. I've met them in kindergarten in high school. But these are students who don't sit down and engage with material on their own.

Often they're students who often demonstrate a lot of challenging behaviors because of that. They're not completing tasks on their own. They might be that student who's sitting in the general ed science class looking back at a staff member who is supporting him every time he does an answer. So he may not have that independence. For that student, I typically use an independent work system. And that's part of what I'm going to talk about today.

Another kind of student that I have is someone who comes into class, and they don't have the ability to engage with any of our materials productively, constructively, and certainly not on their own. So you put down a simple file folder in front of them, and they either stare at it or throw it across the room.

Those are students who are coming to us without those learning readiness skills of being able to engage with materials and work somewhat independently. You heard me talk about the magic of

engage with materials, and work somewhat independently. You heard me talk about the magic of engagement in Episode 129. And you can find that at autismclassroomresources.com/episode129. All of my episodes you can find in that way.

Engagement is key to keep challenging behaviors low, as well as for learning. Students who aren't engaged are unlikely to be learning. But for some of our students, they're coming in with some very basic learning readiness skills.

In episode 188 recently, I talked about those learning to learn skills, being able to work on just a simple task without instruction or constant redirection is one of those skills.

Now, you all know if you've listened to the podcast for a while how much I love independent work systems or structured work systems. I've talked about them in a series from Episode 113 to 116. A while back, there's tons of resources on my blog, and I'll point you in those directions. You can also just do a search for independent work systems. And you'll find a ton on my website as well as products in my store.

But what do we do about students who come in, and don't have the ability to engage with materials independently? We use independent work to teach independence.

So for that student in that General Ed science class was constantly looking for validation of his answers, a work system is perfect for him. Because we give him specific information, he knows what's expected of him to do, we make sure the task in it is something that's already mastered, and we work on fading our assistance out and letting the system carry the burden of telling him what to do, and giving him that kind of check in that he needs. And then we can start switching it up and fading the system into things like to do lists and things like that.

But what about that student who comes in and doesn't have any of those skills? How do you start independent work systems for that student? And this is a question I get very frequently when I do training. And so I thought it would be a really good one to talk about in today's episode. So I will be talking about those guys, and how we can use independent work systems, even though they don't have any tasks yet that are independent. So let's get started.

Now, let me talk briefly about what an independent work system actually is. I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this. We sometimes call them task box systems are sometimes referred to the task is task boxes. Those may make up the tasks for the independent work system. But a structured work system or an independent work system is a specific way of organizing materials to help students learn to complete a series of tasks on their own without assistance from others.

There are very specific characteristics about these systems and I'm going to hit on just a couple of

There are very specific characteristics about these systems and I'm going to hit on just a couple of them today. But there is a tutorial on my website that you can go to, and there are previous episodes that cover this. So I'll make sure those links are in the show notes.

But for some of our students, we're really starting at just being able to do one task independently rather than a series. We're working our way up, because we start with the student is, and we move with them to build skills.

But when we set up our work system, whether the student comes to us with no independence, or should be independent, there are specific characteristics that make up a work system.

One is that typically, all tasks are mastered, because I can't expect a student to do a series of tasks independently if he's not independent with the tasks. A lot of times we get our independent work systems confused. And we think that we're teaching the skills that are in the system, the tasks. We're not, we're teaching the system so that we can use the system for other situations like on a job site, or with their homework, where they know how to work the system to know what's expected.

And in order for that to be the case, we have to start somewhere. So we start by teaching some tasks, and we'll talk about that. But overall, a system has a clear beginning and end. So I know where I start. And I know when I'm finished, when my work is in front of me in a traditional system, that's where I start on the left, and I work to the right. And when all the baskets are gone, then I know that I'm finished. And I my schedule tells me what the next thing is I'm supposed to do.

It's really, really important that the student knows from the visual nature of the system itself, what to do next, and what to do when they're done. Because that's what we're trying to foster is this idea that I could send you to an area and have you work on your own just as I would if I was in a job site. Or if I was in a general ed class, and the teacher was giving an assignment for students to work with at their desk.

I also want to make sure that it tells them what to do when they are finished. So that they don't try to undo what they've done. And so that they know where to go or what to do, and probably what is reinforcing them and motivating them to work independently. Typically, this is some kind of reinforcer when we start out.

I also want to make sure that the expectations of the tasks themselves are clear. I want to make sure that they have a clear beginning and a clear end. I know what I need to do, the amount of materials I need match the amount that you expect, or that fill it. So I don't put a puzzle in that's missing a piece, because my kids will get stuck.

I want to make sure that they know exactly what to do with those tasks. So I go into this in a lot more

I want to make sure that they know exactly what to do with those tasks. So I go into this in a lot more detail in Episode 113. And I've got links for tutorials there as well, I'll make sure all of that in the show notes. But keep in mind that not all task box systems are equal. If it doesn't have those characteristics, and some others that I've talked about before, that were designed by Project TEACH, then it isn't going to work to promote independence. We want our students to learn to use the system because it's an organizational system, essentially.

But what do we do about those students who don't have independent work skills yet, who don't have tasks we can put in their systems that they can do on their own. They're learning to work on a task independently. That is a learning readiness skill, like I noted in the intro, but how do we teach that skill?

Well, we can use some of the same elements from a structured work system, but we're going to modify them or simplify them, for students who aren't quite there yet at being able to use the whole system. So here are some modifications that we can make to get started.

First, let's start with the tasks. You can start with very simple tasks. We often call these put in tasks. They can also be takeout tasks. So you could be putting things in or you'd be taking things out. It could be something as simple as an oatmeal canister that has velcro on the outside, it's got three blocks Velcro to the outside, and they have to take the block off the velcro and put it in the open top.

Put in tasks are pretty easy to make. They're very simple to use. And when we're starting out, it's really helpful if we create them with as few moving parts as possible. So you can find a whole set of tutorials of different kinds of basic tasks, some of which are put in tasks, on a playlist in my YouTube channel. If you'll just go to autismclassroomresources.com/taskbinTuesday, all one word. That has a ton of different video tutorials of how I've made different kinds of tasks, look for put in in the title and you'll see what I mean.

The next thing we can do so we can we can simplify the task itself. Make it very simple. Just take the things out or put the things in. We can make sure that we're containing all of it in one container. So we might have a shoeboxtask where I want him to take the blocks out of a container and put them into a hole in the top of the box. I'm going to kind of hole and put that margarine container or that plastic container that holds the blocks on top of the box. So that when he pulls the box forward, everything he needs is already laid out from left to right. So the ones that he needs to put in are on the left, the thing he's putting them in are on the right, and he pulls it forward and can do the whole task, it stays together, and it goes in the finished basket when he's done.

Now, we're going to have to prompt them through these first tasks. And we might teach these tasks at other times other than just during an independent work system. But this is one of the things that I would start an independent work system with them for.

The next thing you probably want to do is greatly reduced the number of items in the tasks that they have to complete. So instead of giving him 12 blocks, I'm giving him three. Or maybe I'm giving him one, because I want to work on him being as independent as possible, as fast as possible. But I want to really make sure that I'm limiting how much I'm asking him to do, because that increases the likelihood that he will complete the task more independently.

Next, a lot of times when we started an independent work system, we start with traditionally with three baskets, I think it's just a numbers thing, we just tend to do that. But for these guys, I would probably start with one basket, one shoe box task, one task they have to complete before they get the reinforcer.

So it's going to be one task with two blocks. And when he's done, he gets a container that has an m&m inside or when he's done, he gets to go and play with an iPad for a minute or two. And so he's doing only one task instead of a series of tasks, because that's where we're starting, we'll build up to the series of tests later.

So what that means is, when you're scheduling your class, a lot of times we'll have independent work as a center. And when we do that, it might be like 15 minutes long, 15-20, maybe 10 Depends on the class. But if I only had him do this one thing, he's going to be done like that.

So that means that I might take that independent work time as an opportunity for him to practice the system multiple times, don't think that just because an independent work system, you only completed once, and then you're done. So it takes him a minute to complete the task. And then he has 14 minutes of reinforcement. Instead, it takes him a minute to finish that task, he gets a minute or two of the iPad, and then we reset his system while he's playing with the iPad and bring him back to do another thing. And typically would use a different set of materials, it might be the same skill, so I might have another put in task. And then we'll do that one. And he'll get his reinforcer and your rules reset.

The advantage of doing it this way, too, is that as far as classroom management is concerned, you have the ability to then go check on your other guys that are in the centers see that they're on task and come back, because this guy is working through it pretty quickly.

When you start you will be doing hand over hand to complete the task and to use the system. And so you want to make sure that you're fading yourself out effectively, that you're using your prompt fading and all those kinds of things. But you're going to have the opportunity for this student to practice this skill multiple times within one activity one center in your day.

And finally, I would start the system, typically when we set up an independent work system, we have a schedule that students follow. Now I am a big advocate for that schedule. I see a lot of work systems on the internet, on Pinterest and Instagram, who are not using the schedule, there have a

three bin cart for instance.

The problem of not having this schedule, is that it's going to make it much harder to transfer the strategies from this task to other activities in the classroom. Because not everything comes in a three bin container, or three bin rolling cart. So going from top to bottom may not always be the order in which I want you to do something. I want you to look at your to do list, which is what the schedule is at this point.

However, for the students who do not have that independence skill, I probably wouldn't include the schedule, because my system is going to be very, very simple. So what I might do is give him a task box that has that put in task and a shoe box that contains his reinforcer. So he knows when this is done, I do the next basket over and that's something he likes to do. When he moves up to two it's two tasks boxes and a box of reinforcers. I would then when he starts to be able to do two tasks together, I would start implementing the schedule and matching the schedule piece to the basket and doing it.

The reason for the schedule is that eventually I want the student to be able to go somewhere else in the classroom, find the materials for his job, do his work, and then go put it away and check his schedule for the next thing he needs to go get. That's what allows us to grow the system and use it in so many different ways to help our students with independence.

Now, in addition to working on this without the schedule very simply, is I would probably also work on these put in tasks and simple tasks that the student is working on learning probably in direct instruction, because we're learning to do something from beginning to end is a learning readiness skill. And often, it probably should be an IEP goal for some students to be able to do that, because it's going to greatly increase their independence in general, because there's something you can give them to do that keeps them with you, and learning.

So the tasks may seem deceptively simple. But the ability to complete something on your own is a skill that's going to set you up to learn in the future. So I might do this during the direct instruction time, as well as during your independent time.

For these students, I would choose the easiest tasks for their work system, understanding that they still might need some help to complete the task in the work system. And we're working on independence with the task as well as the system itself, when we're there. I might just pull the tasks into my direct instruction, and teach the tasks there. Ultimately, we do want them to do it on their own. But first, we're going to use those prompts and fade them out.

Now I would say, make a task as easy as you can. So it gets your student independence first, because that is of course, the point of all of this.

So that should give you some ideas of where we start with a student who comes to us who does not have these skills at all. You can use an independent work system for other students who maybe have the ability to do the tasks themselves, but don't work independently, they've come to be very dependent on the people around them to help them, work systems are a great way of helping them to do that.

Now you can grab all sorts of simple tasks ideas from my YouTube channel, just by going to autismclassroomresources.com/taskbinTuesday, it's a series of videos I did on Facebook several years ago. You can also find them on the blog by going to autismclassroomresources.com/iwinspiration, standing for independent work inspiration. Many of those videos are included on my blog, as well as material lists and tutorials, written tutorials for how to do them.

So hopefully that gives you some ideas that you can get started with. And I'm more than happy to answer any questions you have. Come over to Spotify. And you can share your questions in response to this episode. And I will either respond to you if I can. And if not, I will include them in a future episode.

Now I will be back next week. And I'm going to shift gears just a bit and talk about some hard truths and realities of building parent teacher or teacher parent relationships. Whether you are a parent working with teachers or a teacher working with parents, I really think this will be a valuable lesson and reminder for all of us. So I hope to see you back then. Thank you so much for listening.

If you got something out of today's podcast, I would love for you to go to Apple podcasts and leave a review. It really helps other people find me and that allows me to reach a larger group of the teaching world with these types of strategies for our students. So I hope to see you again next week. And until then, talk to you later.

Thanks so much for listening to today's episode of the Autism Classroom Resources podcast. For even more support, you can access free materials, webinars and Video Tips inside my free resource library. Sign up at autismclassroomresources.com/free. That's F-R-E-E or click the link in the show notes to join the free library today. I'll catch you again next week.