

# TIPS FOR TEACHERS

## Increasing independent learning at Unity College

BY VICKY LAMB

I would like to share some special 'teacching' happening in the junior phase at Unity College that is making a difference to the special needs learners.

Unity recognised a need in the entry level (junior) phase to start preparing learners early on for the workplace and being independent once they leave school.

We have implemented the 'Teacch' system to equip our special needs learners with skills for a more independent future. Teacch stands for the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children. It is a programme designed to help learners develop independent learning via a sort of production line that requires learners to start and complete a task independently from beginning to end – something many special needs students cannot do.

### A visual learning environment

A Teacch environment is a visual one. Often, children with autism spectrum disorder and/or other communication challenges fare best by looking at and thus absorbing things such as a visual timetable, which enables a child to keep track of their schedule. Together with this, there will be visual reward charts and rules – these allow the child to be able to check back and refer to the rules or their timetable. (For example, learners often ask me if something such as speech therapy will happen on that day. I tell them to check their schedule, and they are then able to determine the answer for themselves. This minimises constant questions and also gives the students a sense of ownership.)

### Increasing learner control

If you decide to use the Teacch system, then it is important to have the classroom set up in an appropriate manner. Each child needs to have their own individual

workstation. This enables them to focus better while they are working. The stations also encourage directionality (vital in the process of learning to read) – the child must work either from left to right or from top to bottom. Just as crucial is the sense of accomplishment our children feel when they have completed all of their tasks, knowing that they are able to work independently. As a result, they ask for less and less help each day.

The Teacch programme (also known as the skills of learning class) is used every day at 11:00 during a class that lasts 45 minutes to an hour. Four learners are the focus of the intervention. Each learner is presented with two or three tasks to complete, starting with basic activities such as putting matching objects into containers.

Tasks become more complex and learners move from using concrete to abstract skills as they gain mastery, such as employing prepositions in sentences. Daily living skills are also incorporated into the class; for example, sorting washing and filling envelopes.

### Promising progress

Teacch has been used since the start of the first term this year, and has already positively affected our focus group of four juniors on behaviour and social levels. They have some control over their decisions, and are able to see the consequences of their actions. All four students are making rapid progress.

By the time they leave Unity at around the age of 20, we are certain that with the help of Teacch and our staff's commitment, our learners will be able to be quite independent. ❁

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