



Sped goes 'high tech' for students with autism

By Nina Calleja
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Teachers of children with Autism Syndrome Disorder (ASD) may have no need for blackboards, chalk and printed visual materials once they have access to the computer software VizZle.

"Our work will be easier. Thank God, they found us," said Salvacion Olivares, a special education (Sped) teacher at P. Gomez Elementary School, which has at least 400 students with disabilities, most of them with ASD.

By "they" she meant the Autism Society of the Philippines (ASP), Globe Telecom, and the Department of Education (DepEd), the three entities that signed a partnership deal last Friday to make the program accessible to two public school Sped centers in Metro Manila.

Pilot testing

Joining Gomez as a pilot testing site is P. Villanueva Elementary School. Each will receive the license to use VizZle in Sped classes through the ASP and a free one-year Internet connectivity through Globe.

ASP has acquired the license to the software through a grant from its creator, Monarch Teaching Technologies.

ASP members said the software's pilot testing was a turning point in the education of children with autism.

"To us, this is not a simple signing of a MOA (memorandum of agreement), this is not a simple application of IT. It's more than that," said ASP chair emeritus Erlinda Koe, tears welling up in her eyes.

Pictures, not words

According to ASP trustee Christina Estampador-Munarriz, one click of the mouse can help speed up learning for [students](#) with ASD. "Most of them think in pictures, so if you want to teach them, you have to deliver in pictures, and not in words."

Phonics lessons, for instance, could be confusing for [students](#) with ASD, she said. "If you say 'g' sounds like 'ga' and 'h' like 'ha,' how will you teach them the words 'laugh' and 'enough' where the 'f' sound is assumed by the letters 'g' and 'h' at the end?"

With VizZle, students can both learn the sounds and images of words taught to them through interactive games.

An engaging audio recording can read through the highlighted words while the touch screen feature allows the children to respond to the programs.

On a tablet computer, some mobile applications can be installed to the program to teach handwriting through a cursive handwriting game.

Fixations

Students with ASD had fixations, Munarriz said, adding that "a lot of teachers are smart enough to bank on these fixations and make lessons revolving around these fixations." But often, doing this in a class with at least 10 students was "very daunting" for teachers, she said.

Munarriz added that a mother of a child with ASD who had tried using VizZle was able to do in one afternoon what would otherwise have taken her a week. "That is liberating and empowering for teachers," she said.

According to DepEd, most of the 195,000 disabled children in special education classes, are handled by centers in some 231 public schools nationwide.

The ratio, according to the ASP, leaves no room for dedicated attention to the unique needs of students.

On March 20, teachers of the two pilot schools will undergo training on how to operate VizZle.

After the pilot test, Munarriz said, the ASP would forward its assessment to the software creators to contribute to the ongoing research on autism and information technology.

Ma. Yolanda Crisanto, head of Globe corporate communications, noted this was the first time that a visual learning software to educate children with ASD had been introduced in the country.

And the good part was that "the computer program can run on any personal computer as long as there is Internet connection," Crisanto said.

She said the partnership was merely "the beginning of a continuous effort" in helping to improve the education system at public Sped centers that normally had a 25:1 [student-teacher](#) ratio.