

Oh-My-Goodness Moments

EDCompass newsletter

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Teaching children with autism spectrum disorders

By Heather Ellwood

Dr. Stephen Shore, a special needs teacher who has Asperger's syndrome, once said at a conference, "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." This quotation rings especially true for teachers of students with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) – responding to the individual needs of these students can be daunting. But while these teachers mention the challenges they face when teaching students with ASDs, they are more eager to talk about the rewards they reap from these relationships.

Children with autism, explains the [Autism Society of Canada](#), "develop differently from others in the areas of motor, language, cognitive and social skills. Each person with an ASD is unique and will have different abilities." Included under the umbrella term *autism* are Asperger's syndrome, autistic disorder and pervasive developmental disorder – not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS).

For Cynthia Everett and Catherine Kelly, teaching children who have ASDs goes beyond terminology, diagnosis and descriptor and into the realm of the practical. Like other teachers who have responsibility for students with autism, they work with children who have difficulty with social interactions and communication, demonstrate repetitive behaviors and develop unusual attachments to objects or routines. Both Kelly and Everett have inspiring stories as varied and interesting as the students they teach.



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Catherine Kelly

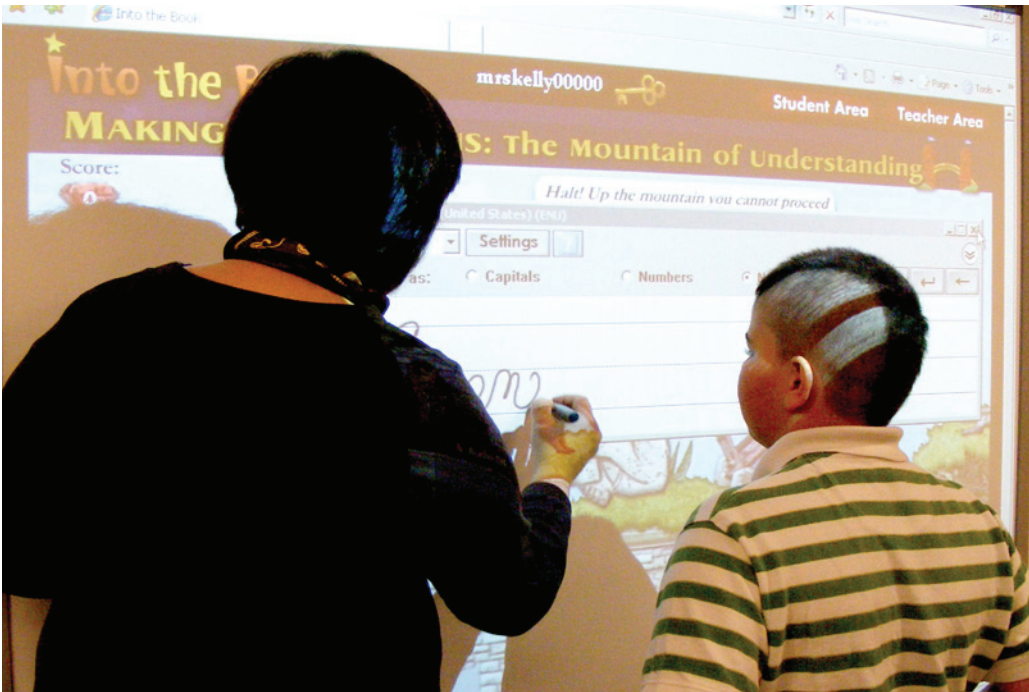
Sixth-Grade Teacher
Leighton Elementary School
Oswego, New York

An expert opinion

Kathleen McClaskey, president of New Hampshire-based [EdTech Associates](#), has decades of experience designing customized technology solutions that help schools and other organizations develop learning environments in which all students can succeed. These solutions, she explains, "have to look at learners and not at labels such as autism. When a child has been labeled with a disability then you have certain expectations and ideas about the child. I want to remove the veil of disability. We need to find ways to connect learning with all students."

McClaskey believes one way teachers can better reach learners with ASDs is through the implementation of classroom technology. For the past three years, she has been involved in a project at the Spaulding Youth Center in Tilton, New Hampshire. Educators there have found SMART Board™ interactive whiteboards have a profound effect on the learning outcomes of children with ASDs. Most noteworthy of the project's findings, McClaskey says, is the improvement in the students' communication and social interaction skills.

"What we've seen is engagement increases significantly when the SMART Board interactive whiteboard is used. The students' attention is focused the whole time the board is on. The students are totally engaged. The transformation is so significant that people cannot believe the behaviors they are seeing in these children," she says.



McClaskey has watched nonverbal and uncommunicative children begin to verbalize, interact and make eye contact with other students. She explains, “The interactive whiteboard is not just an educational tool – it really has created and improved classroom behaviors, behaviors you would expect to see in regular classrooms. These students are very engaged for a very long period of time, and the teachers at Spaulding believe the board trains their attention.”

Unbelievable turnaround

Like the teachers at Spaulding, Kelly, who teaches sixth grade at Leighton Elementary School in Oswego, New York, has seen such changes firsthand. At Leighton, children with learning disabilities, including those with ASDs, are integrated into regular stream classes. At the beginning of the 2008–2009 school year, Eric, a student with autism, was placed in Kelly’s literacy and social studies classes. His arrival coincided with the installation of a new SMART Board. As the mother of a 20-year-old son with an ASD, Kelly was personally and professionally intrigued by the immediate impact she saw the interactive whiteboard had on Eric’s engagement and learning.

“When Eric first came into my class, he was quite typical. His head was down, he wouldn’t make eye contact, and he didn’t really want to be involved. Having the SMART Board interactive whiteboard in my class made such a difference. The turnaround in this child was unbelievable. He was engaged and involved.”

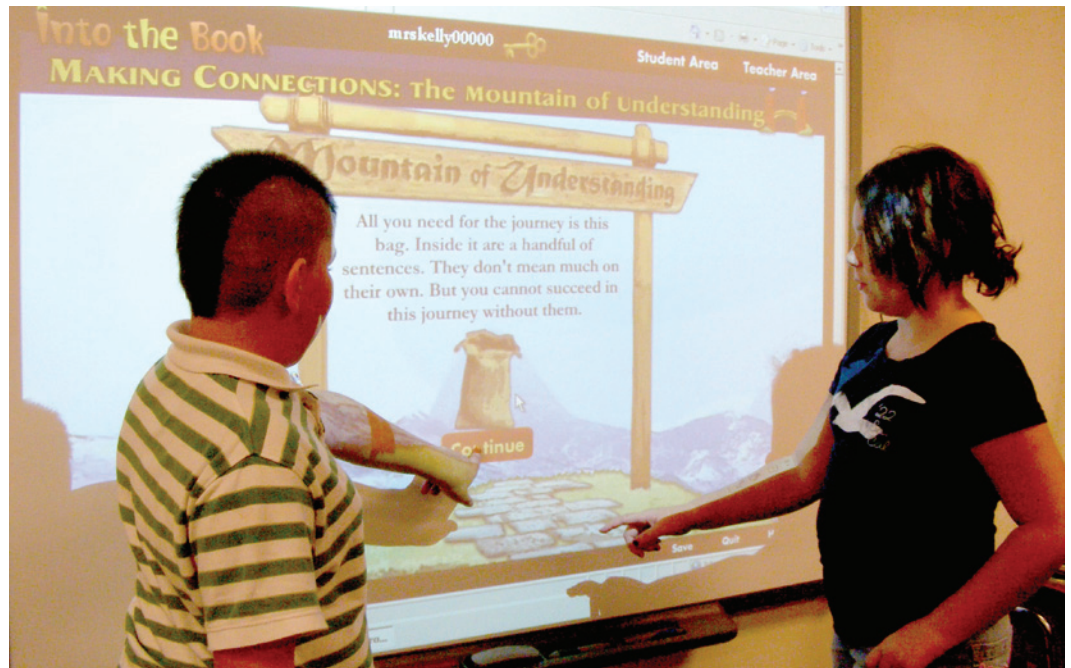
Eric was initially reluctant to participate in activities, explains Kelly, and so to overcome that, she loaded digital images of all her students into SMART Notebook software and used the random generator to determine the order they would follow to complete activities at the SMART Board. “Before using the SMART Board and the random generator, Eric often refused to come to the front. But by using this feature, just like any other student he came up to the board and did the activity,” Kelly explains. “I really believe that using the SMART Board made learning fun and meaningful. Socially, he was doing what all those other kids were doing – for kids with autism, that’s huge. I think the SMART Board levels the classroom playing field.”

Many mornings Eric arrived at school with a list of websites he had asked his mom to write down so he could share. He would stand at the front of the room, open the sites on the SMART Board interactive whiteboard and explain to his classmates what he liked about them. “As I watched him making that huge transition, initiating this experience of going up to the front of the class and sharing these passions of his, I would think, ‘this, right now, is an oh-my-goodness moment,’” Kelly says.

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Cynthia Everett

Special Education Teacher
Butts Road Intermediate School
Chesapeake, Virginia



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Everett has experienced similar moments at Butts Road Intermediate School in Chesapeake, Virginia. Working exclusively with third-grade children with ASDs, she has her students completing activities and explaining their actions at the SMART Board interactive whiteboard every day. She explains, “My students are not intimidated by the SMART Board. All students, I find, have no trepidation running up to the SMART Board. Let’s face it – anytime you are in front of your peers there is pressure, but with the SMART Board they find it fun and interactive.”

Everett observes that her students with autism welcome the opportunity to perform for and with their peers at the SMART Board interactive whiteboard. She says, “I believe doing this has enormous benefits for their social skills and their self-esteem. If we can get our students to feel confident enough, regardless of their learning abilities, to stand in front of their peers, that’s significant. And it happens again and again with the SMART Board.”

Something magical happens

McClaskey believes the SMART Board interactive whiteboard is such a successful tool for students with ASDs because it supports a diverse range of learners, no matter their preferred learning style. “That whole idea of multiple means of representation is about providing tools for all learners to demonstrate their learning,” explains McClaskey. “Until interactive whiteboards were introduced, the students at Spaulding Youth Center did not have the tool that allowed them to represent their learning.”

According to Kelly, the SMART Board interactive whiteboard is the right technology product for children who need additional sensory stimulation because it is touch sensitive. She adds that her students “get to move from their seats and be active, which keeps them engaged.” Kelly also feels the SMART Board interactive whiteboard adds structure to learning because, for every action or touch, there is a predictable response. That, she says, is especially important for students with autism who need structure and predictability to remain focused and engaged.

For Everett, it’s the visual aspects of the SMART Board that she’s seen engage students the most. She explains, “Something magical happens between children with autism and the SMART Board. I find that my students with autism are so visual. With the SMART Board, I can take any lesson and break it down into visual icons and steps, and they understand it. When I break a concept down into images, something brilliant happens. I just watch them go.”



Making huge progress

At both Butts Road Intermediate and Leighton Elementary, the SMART Board interactive whiteboard is a source for learning games and activities that reach learners with ASDs. Everett uses an online game based on *Thomas the Tank Engine*, the popular British children’s show, to help her students identify, interpret and understand how human facial expressions communicate emotions – something she finds students with ASDs often struggle with. The children use the SMART Board interactive whiteboard to identify various emotions by clicking on the character who is showing the correct facial expression. Her students can’t get enough of it.

“Part of social skills is the ability to communicate. To do that you have to be able to express feelings, and you have to be able to interpret feelings. My autistic students love the Thomas game because it provides interaction, but, most importantly, they begin to infer. For example, one of my students applied the images of the train engine’s emotions to a conversation he had three days prior, and he was able to determine what emotions were present during the conversation.”

In Kelly’s classroom, interactive learning games presented on the SMART Board also had a striking effect on her student with autism. She recalls Eric’s reaction to a content review game called *Fling the Teacher*, which allows students to build a picture of their teacher online and then answer a series of questions. “The first time we played this game and the students got all the answers correct, this cartoon image of me went flying across the whiteboard. Eric burst out laughing. I actually heard a voice come out of him in laughter, which very rarely happens. And for me, well, that was a sign that we were making huge progress.”

Kelly’s son, who is now in college, didn’t have a SMART Board interactive whiteboard in his elementary school classroom, but she’s sure that, had it been there, he too would have used it to share the unique ways he learned. “The more we can give tools to children with autism, the better we can all be,” she says. That’s a statement McClaskey would agree with. Through her work with the Spaulding Youth Center, she recognizes the success that results from enabling students with autism to share visual and nonlinguistic representations of their learning. McClaskey says, “I believe the SMART Board is absolutely the tool for the ASD classroom.” And giving students with ASDs the tools to help them share their learning will, in the words of Catherine Kelly, lead to even more oh-my-goodness moments in schools around the world. **EC**

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