

ASD in the USA

Ron Fortuna spent time in the US finding out **how American teachers cope with autism spectrum disorders** in the classroom.

“OK, Darren – your conversation is starting to head down the river of no return. Let’s just park your thoughts in the dock right here, and if we have time we’ll come back to that thought.”

Kathee Davis, a specialist teacher for autism from the Columbia Regional Program (CRP), knows the struggle Darren has with keeping to the topic. Darren is a 12 year old pupil with Asperger’s syndrome at Beaumont middle school, a mainstream school. Given the chance, he will steer all his conversations into a diatribe about politics or religion.

Study in the US

Ron’s travels to Portland and four other US cities were made possible by a **Walter Hines Page scholarship**. The NUT offers two Walter Hines Page/English Speaking Union (ESU) scholarships to enable members to travel to the USA to pursue an educational project. American ESU members provide food and accommodation and arrange the scholar’s itinerary.

The value of the scholarship is £1,565. There is a discretionary NUT award to pay for supply cover. Contact Angela Bush for details and an application form if you are interested in applying. Email a.bush@nut.org.uk, tel 020 7380 4704, or fax 020 7388 7860). The closing date for applications is 31 December 2009.

Kathee has placed visual reminders around the room to help steer his conversation in the right direction. These include listing the two banned topics of conversation, and drawing a map of a stream with a tributary that runs off the map. Fortunately, there is a marina before you fall off the edge, and here she places a post-it note of Darren’s topic for him to return to later – if there’s time.

As most teachers of students with high functioning autism know, social skills are a key area of weakness that holds them back. As an estimated 1 per cent of all pupils have an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), this is a difficulty that mainstream teachers are increasingly having to deal with.

Seeking new approaches to this problem brought me to Portland, Oregon, where I linked in to the Columbia programme and learned some of their techniques to engage pupils. CRP is a state-sponsored group of specialist teachers, speech pathologists and para-educators (assistants) who ensure best practice across the region.

Shadowing members of the team, I visited several schools. The first was the Metropolitan Learning Center. The MLC is a small kindergarten-to-twelfth grade school, the only one in the city that offers a fully alternative curriculum. Using techniques such as the Scottish storyline method, this is a dynamic and creative school that succeeds with students who might struggle in other settings. It uses small nurture groups to explore social skills, generalising the ideas in everyday classroom settings.

Next stop was Buckman elementary, where I witnessed a group of three children with ASD learning about analogies (often an area of difficulty for children with ASD). I then watched a mainstream kindergarten class learning about flexibility, using the fun techniques developed by Stephanie Madrigal and Michelle Garcia Winner. The ‘superflex’ technique helps develop flexibility in children with autism.

Students are inspired to try and behave like cartoon superhero Superflex, and avoid the foibles set out by his enemies, the Unthinkables. In this session, a story was being read to the class, but a staff member dressed as an Unthinkable was trying to distract the students’ attention.

This was an incredibly fun, visual and accessible way of teaching flexible thinking – not only for the children with ASD, but their classmates too. The students then fought off the Unwonderer (another Unthinkable who doesn’t want students to be curious about other people). By interviewing me the students had the chance to practise expressing an interest in another person, a valuable social tool.

Ron Fortuna works as a specialist teacher for autism in Northamptonshire.



Resources

The Scottish Storyline Method
www.storyline.org

The Incredible 5 Point Scale
www.5pointscale.com

Michelle Garcia Winner's materials
can be seen at
www.socialthinking.com

Michelle Garcia Winner will be
running training sessions on 23 and
24 November in Bournemouth. For
more information visit
www.autismawarenesscentre.org

For more information on autism,
see www.nas.org.uk

At Irvington elementary school, a social skills group was using a five point scale (a technique developed by Kari Dunn Buron and Mitzi Curtis in *The Incredible 5 Point Scale*) to visually clarify the severity of behaviours. Under each number was a description of potential consequences, and – more importantly – hints on how to rectify and de-escalate the situation. As one of the students explained: "If you don't do what you are supposed to do, you don't get to do what you want to do."

The session was jointly taught by a specialist from CRP and a speech therapist. Speech therapists are usually employed by local school districts and are part of the school team. They often have their own resource room, as in this inner-city school. In the room were several visual reminders to encourage positive social skills. A chart outlined what was needed for whole body listening: engaging your ears, brain, eyes, mouth and shoulders. Students with autism need these visual reminders to help explain the mysteries of social interaction.

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In another session, students explored a different Superflex Unthinkable: Rockbrain (who wants your brain to be as inflexible as a rock). The seven year old pupils explored their 'rock brain moments' and thought about how they could have been more

flexible. One boy noted how he had drawn bubbles when it was writing time. His flexible thinking told him: "I can tell myself that I can just do that later." Success!

Back at Beaumont middle school, Kathee is outlining how to use social smarts (as in Michelle Garcia Winner and Pamela Crooke's book *You are a Social Detective*). This method outlines why we have to think through our actions before we do them.

Darren abruptly interrupts, but is visually reminded with a quick line drawing and a thought bubble with Kathee saying: "Oh remember! That's a thought bubble you just took away from me!" Darren quickly apologises and gets back to the social behaviours that are expected of him.

Getting the social niceties correct can seem insurmountable for students on the autism spectrum. But clear visual guidelines and targeted methods can succeed. Social skills education is not given the prominence it needs in the UK. For people with an ASD, these skills can be a vital key to escape a life of isolation and failure. Remember: you can be the cleverest kid on the block, but if you lack social skills nobody wants to know you.

Unthinkables are characters that act as reminders to children to moderate their speech and behaviour.