



BY LAUREN STAFFORD

## Technology transforms the autism classroom

Lauren Stafford has worked as an Intervention Specialist in the field of autism in public and private school settings in Virginia and Ohio. Ms. Stafford worked as an Intervention Specialist for Monarch School for 10 years, where she also served as an Academic Supervisor for four years, and acted as Entry Year Coordinator, LPDC Chairperson, Data Coordinator, and collaborator with Children's Hospital Boston. Ms. Stafford is currently the Director of Instructional Design for Monarch Teaching Technologies.



### Finding What Works

Autism is a spectrum disorder with a beautiful range of abilities and disabilities making each child unique. Finding ways to unlock the potential of each student can be difficult and truly rewarding. Research has proven that individuals with ASD typically use visual processing as their dominant information processing mode, and because of that strength they usually possess a heightened interest in visual materials. One would be hard pressed to find an autism classroom that doesn't use visual schedules, token boards or other visual behavioral supports in therapy. They are used in almost every intervention

paradigm, making them philosophy neutral. How visuals are used in the autism classroom needs to go beyond the basics though for the child with ASD to succeed.

### Visual Immersion — Beyond the Basics

The Visual Language Program at the Monarch Center for Autism at Bellefaire JCB, in Shaker Heights, OH goes far beyond the basics. The program is the core of the teaching model at Monarch, permeating every aspect of a student's day. Visuals are everywhere for organization, such as schedules, timers and token boards; instruction, including visually rich stories for social learning or visually supported learning games; and expression, such as topic boards and augmentative and al-

ternative communication (AAC) devices.

Monarch developed the successful evidence-based Visual Language Programming in partnership with Howard Shane, PhD. Dr. Shane, director of the Center for Communication Enhancement at CHB, led a team of clinicians from CHB and Harvard Medical School and worked with the Monarch staff and students to develop and research the model (as documented in his book *Visual Language in Autism* [Plural Press, 2008]). The research involved proving that ubiquitous use of visual materials and supports throughout a student's day leads to greater success.

### Presentation Also A Key Factor

Part of Shane's work proved what educators and parents working with this population for any length of time knew anecdotally to be true: that young individuals with ASD are more attracted to, and choose to spend more time with, electronic media than with any other forms of play combined. It makes sense then to take advantage of this affinity in education. Doing so has been proven effective. One study showed that students with ASD were attentive to a computer-generated lesson 97 percent of the time and learned 74 percent of the targeted

nouns, compared to 62 percent attentiveness to a teacher-directed lesson where they learned just 41 percent of the material. "We now know ubiquitous use of individualized, meaningful visual supports for organization, expression and instruction is very effective with this population," Shane said. "Presenting those supports interactively on a computer or electronic whiteboard makes them even more effective."



But How?

The question became how do you create and maintain an environment that can sustain the customized visuals needed for all parts of a child's day? And how do you provide visuals that can be presented interactively on computers or whiteboards to maximize their impact? As they implemented visual immersion for each student in every classroom at Monarch, creating all the individualized visual-based materials needed became one of their biggest challenges—it can be a full time job for an army of media specialists.

Monarch's answer is a program called VizZle® developed specifically to meet just those challenges. The Web-based visual learning software developed by the Monarch school staff through an affiliate organization, Monarch Teaching Technologies Inc., has launched the school into efficient 21st century learning. After four years of development and testing, both at Monarch and in public school classrooms, VizZle is now available to any teacher, therapist or parent with access to the Web.

VizZle has opened doors for students with ASD. The program is at its core an authoring tool. Teachers can browse more than 15,000 pieces of media to create any content or curriculum using series of templates that mimic what they do every day in the classroom. They then share lessons through the library, so nobody has to reinvent the wheel every time a lesson is needed. Thousands of adapted and peer reviewed lessons and tools are searchable by subject, age level and keyword.

Lessons can be linked to IEP goals and objectives to print reports and make data driven decisions. The program also allows everyone on the student's teaching team, including parents, to share materials to enhance generalization. It is touch friendly and has changed the dynamics of group learning by using interactive write boards to engage students and present material in a multi-sensory format. It can also be used to introduce skills in a 1:1 setting and allows setting up playlists that can be organized for independent work at a computer station in the classroom.

Technology is a powerful tool, allowing the transformation of the autism classroom, and student's lives, one click at a time!

*Lauren Stafford is an Intervention Specialist and Director of Instructional Design at MTT Inc.*

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