

The Autism Lens

Everything teachers need
to connect with students, build confidence,
and promote classroom learning

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Introduction

Let me tell you how I first became aware of the autism lens, long before I ever heard of autism. When I was in middle school, my younger brother Danny struggled in the mainstream classroom. He had difficulty understanding what was being asked of him, making eye contact, and speaking in full sentences unless it was about dinosaurs or video games, and he spent all his recesses hugging me. It took years for Danny to get an autism diagnosis and, like many children on waiting lists for assessments, he was an enigma to school staff. Well-intentioned teachers spoke louder in their attempts to elicit an answer, which sent his brain into a panic. Some would surround him with helpful peers, whose endless chatter, directions, and movements blurred together into sensory overload for him. Others interpreted his minimal eye contact and inability to say “I don’t understand” or “I need help” as willful defiance.

One day, while passing by his Grade 2 classroom, I heard the raised voice of Danny’s teacher. “Well? Answer me!”

I clung to the attendance sheet as I peeked inside, searching the room to see who was in trouble. Everyone was looking at Danny. His face was frozen, his cheeks red, his eyes boring into the floor. His entire body looked withered. The teacher repeated her demand for a response. *Doesn’t she understand?* I thought. *He can’t!*

There is nothing worse for students or teachers than feeling powerless. Today, as a teacher myself, I have sympathy for Danny’s teachers and support staff, who were baffled and trying anything—everything—they could, at a time when there weren’t many resources to help them understand what was going on in Danny’s brain. I didn’t have the words for it then, but Danny helped me glimpse the fact that what we often assume to be misbehavior is really an indication of something the student doesn’t understand or can’t do *yet*.

That was the moment it became my mission to help Danny meet success while learning. I wanted his entire class to see what he could do, not just what he couldn’t. He’d sit through almost any math problem if Mario and Luigi (his

favorite Nintendo characters) made an appearance. I taught him to swim underwater by pretending we were in a video game, diving for coins. Little did I know, at the time, how much I was learning about good teaching!

Though it wasn't a surprise to anyone but me, I became a teacher. For almost ten years, I have taught students with autism in a specialized withdrawal program, three days a week. The rest of the week, I'm an autism consultant—planning, visiting schools, collaborating with teachers and families, designing and delivering professional development, and developing tools and strategies to help my students across settings. I have grown exponentially as a teacher because of the rich interactions with colleagues. And some of my biggest breakthroughs have come from my students. All of my personal and professional experiences have contributed to my autism lens.

It hasn't been easy. I've encountered many difficult-to-connect-with students. In the challenging moments, it has been downright miserable. In my first year, I was shocked to realize there were kids I didn't look forward to working with. I worked hard not to show it and, each day on my drive to school, I recited the mantra: "The children who need love the most will always ask for it in the most unloving ways" (Barkley, 2000, p. 5). Over time, I shifted my attention to relationship-building and saw the positives increase and the negatives decrease. Once we got to the other side of the tough moments, and once I learned how to avoid most power struggles, I discovered how much I love teaching these kids! Figuring out what makes them tick and teaching them more adaptive skills has not only brought me tremendous joy, it's also improved my teaching.

The Teacher–Student Connection

The power of the teacher–student connection is at the heart of this book. As teachers, we *know* it's important to connect with students. We *know* having a good relationship makes everything else easier. We've read all the books and heard it in our teacher preparation courses. As real, on-the-ground teachers, we also know this isn't as easy as it sounds. How and where do we start?

Every so often in teaching, we experience a transformative shift in awareness, a short distance but a giant leap from head to heart. I'll never forget my student Alberto. He had recently learned he had autism and was struggling to accept his diagnosis. His struggle was aggravated by the fact that I had recently replaced the teacher he'd had for two years. Eyeing me up and down, Alberto turned to Sonia Tran, our incredible class Child and Youth Worker, to loudly ask, "Do YOU like her?" When other kids gave me hugs, he scoffed.

Over several months, Alberto sized me up, gauging my reaction to different scenarios. During lessons, his contributions were variations of "So what?" or "That's stupid." As a beginning teacher, I barely had a handle on the curriculum, never mind trying to puzzle out how to calm a twelve-year-old, already the size of a football player, who seemed intent on not fitting into the group on any level. Alberto was the only student who ever gave me a swift kick to the shin. It was a tentative and testing kind of kick, but a surprise nonetheless. I wasn't as good at de-escalating or teaching proactively as I am now. It seemed Sonia and I were endlessly problem-solving as a team how to get the buy-in or to teach the self-regulation skills he needed.

One day over the lunch hour, I heard him join a conversation that piqued my interest. He wanted to try rock climbing. On my planning time, I Googled "rock climbing for kids" and found a place a short bus ride away. The next week, I announced our upcoming field trip to the class. I still get chills when I think

about it: the moment when theory settled deeply within my heart. The moment my relationship with Alberto—and his relationship to the entire class—began to change.

Quietly, Alberto looked up at me and said, “No one’s ever listened to me before.”

I lay awake that night thinking about the importance of listening to students and including their voice in our classrooms. How often do our students with autism get a say in what they do or how they do it? Whether at home, school, or behavioral skills programs, they are micromanaged in so many ways. Yes, of course, teachers *know* they should listen to students. Alberto taught me *why* we should.

How We View Autistic Students

If I asked you to finish the sentence *All autistic children are...*, what would you say? Think, for a moment, about the associations your brain makes when you think of learners with autism. Neurotypical brains—brains that develop the way the majority do—are used to making generalizations to help us predict and interpret future encounters, but that can also be a pitfall, robbing us of the chance to see children as they are.

When I ask you to consider things through an autism lens, I do not mean to imply that all autistic people have the same needs or perspective. There is incredible diversity across the spectrum—no two students I’ve worked with have had the same combination of strengths and developing areas. Some of the children described in this book are under-the-radar kids who stand out only if you watch closely, particularly at recess. After years of unsuccessfully trying to join in, they sometimes adapt by avoiding interactions entirely and escaping into a book. They worry most of the time about how others perceive them and struggle to participate in groups; they have difficulty communicating in a way that is received well by others or even understanding why others conform to the many unexplained rules of school and other settings. Other students with autism featured in this book need more obvious supports, requiring considerable prompting to complete work; they are much less able to interpret people’s reactions in any situation. They might invade the personal space of classmates or teachers, rigidly point out rule violations, or get up to investigate the reading area during a lesson, unaware of their impact on those around them. At recess, they may try repeatedly to join groups of kids who show nonverbal cues of lack of interest or they may submerge so fully into their imaginations that they obviously jump and leap through the middle of their peers’ basketball game. All my students struggle with recognizing their own powder keg of emotions and how to express these emotions in productive ways. Some have meltdowns in front of the class, while some bottle up what they are feeling and explode at home after a day of keeping themselves together. All day, they are working harder than most people recognize.

When I use the term *autism lens*, I am not suggesting there is only one way to respond to learners on the autism spectrum. If that were true, evidence-based practices would always work or always be enough. Every parent or educator knows that the same thing does not work for everybody because all children, with autism or without, are complex. While this book will share some generalizations from autism research, the learners in your class won’t all fit in neatly to the studies you’ve read, just as research into women or middle children doesn’t accurately encompass all that is me.

Nor am I implying that we view learners with autism as vastly different from other learners in our classrooms. Have you noticed how, when we are talking about a child with an exceptional ability, we often focus on their weaknesses? Every person has things they're good at and things they're not so good at. Children with autism can sometimes perform as well as—or outperform—so-called “neurotypical” students. They can share characteristics that overlap with students with other recognized needs, such as being gifted, having ADHD, having sensory-processing disorder, and having nonverbal learning disabilities.

Rather than imposing restrictions on how we view our learners with autism, the title of this book, *The Autism Lens*, is an invitation to see each learner holistically while recognizing that many challenges exist for autistic students in school settings and learning what kinds of strategies can be adapted to mitigate these challenges. Once I gleaned a brain-based understanding of why our expectations and classroom environments might need to shift so our students with autism can meet their potential, it was easier to shed unhelpful associations that limited my perspective.

An informed autism lens will help you to envision each student with autism as they are and as they can be. Soften your focus a little on those developing areas. Instead, focus more sharply on what they are able to do and what they can bring to the table. Strengths can bolster what students need to learn. With practice, it gets easier to filter your classroom through an autism lens. It's almost impossible to do when students—and teachers—are in the middle of a really tough time. But even an impasse can be an invitation and an opportunity. Try to see it their way. Trade lenses, for a moment. That way, you may learn what you need to teach—and reach—them.

Why I Wrote This Book

As an autism consultant, I have listened and learned from hundreds of educators. We've talked about the anxiety we all experience when left alone to figure out how to support students with autism. As I have delivered and researched effective teacher professional development, time and again educators have said they are tired of teaching through trial and error. They don't want more research or government documents, although these can certainly be worthwhile.

This book is the outcome of years of conversations with teachers, support staff, teacher candidates, and parents, and of what they've repeatedly told me they want to understand better. Educators want to move beyond diagnostic criteria to recognize what autism really means for students' learning and development. They want to hear what works for other teachers and find teacher-tested strategies and resources they can easily apply in their own classrooms.

Through my many collaborations with school staff, we've swapped stories about our students and the moments when our own perspectives have been expanded. We have worked together to develop creative, individualized interventions for specific students, as well as whole-class approaches to differentiate instruction and build relationships. I've stepped into classrooms and been wowed by teachers paying careful attention to group dynamics to see who is being left out and finding creative ways to build that child up. I've admired teachers whose organizational skills far surpass my own, who have established innovative systems to help our “tornado” students keep their desks clean and file loose sheets away. I've collected hundreds of tips, tricks, and best practices from my colleagues. This book aims to share these insights with you, teacher to teacher, to remove some of the guesswork. It doesn't require a complete overhaul of what you're already

doing well. The most exciting part is that many of these suggestions will benefit the learning, attention, social abilities, and self-regulation of your entire class!

Why Read This Book?

We have tremendous impact on our students' quality of life. Their well-being and peace of mind is profoundly connected to our own. I hope this book contributes to your peace of mind, providing you with practical solutions to reduce any anxiety about how to meet the needs of students with autism, and moves you from apprehension to an appreciation of the strengths of these students. The magic of being a teacher is that we grow and transform through our interactions with our students. I hope you experience this. More than anything, I hope this book will help you give yourself permission to nurture, support, and engage students in creative ways that work for you and your classroom. You'll catch glimpses of my students, whose voices and stories are interwoven through this book. Together, we will unpack the kinds of challenges that might manifest in your classroom and why. We'll review how to anticipate these challenges and develop strategies for nipping them in the bud.

Take a deep breath and stop worrying. It's okay not to know what to do. You just need to know where to begin. And we begin by connecting. This book will help you to see that connection starts when we bend to see from our students' points of view and gain their trust. Once we learn how our students with autism might think and perceive the world, we can better understand the changes to make to have powerful impact. Then we can nudge these students into the space where learning can happen. You've got this! In case no one's ever told you, you can confidently meet all children where they are and support them along their own unique trajectory. Just take it one connection at a time.

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The Teacher/Student Disconnect

Works fundamental to my practice and my philosophy include the books and the Collaborative and Proactive Solutions approach to behavior developed by Dr. Ross Greene (livesinthebalance.org); *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome* by Dr. Tony Attwood (2007); the notion of the "hidden curriculum" as described by Dr. Brenda Smith Myles and colleagues (2004); and the Social Thinking® Methodology created by Michelle Garcia Winner (www.socialthinking.com). Starting on page 123 you will find recommended resources for exploring related topics, and suggestions for classroom read-alouds to reinforce perspective-taking, inclusion, social-emotional awareness, and autism understanding with students.

Teaching is tough. I'm sure if you work in a school, you'll agree: until I became a teacher, I had no idea how much educators invest in our classrooms and students. Growing up, it didn't register how hard it must be to teach a diverse group of learners and to help each student along their own pathway to success. My autistic brother Danny switched to an independent school by Grade 3 and no one else in my school appeared to have any disabilities or learning differences. I didn't see them, but that doesn't mean they weren't there.

The landscape of schools has changed in the years since then. There are so many more needs in our classrooms to understand, accommodate, and support that it can be overwhelming. It's not just supporting students with identified exceptionalities that concerns teachers. The invisible load many students carry into the classroom has a very tangible impact on their mental health, well-being, and ability to learn. I work with colleagues whose hearts are bigger than their wallets, who stock their classrooms with snacks for the students going without, and who pitch in to buy a new snowsuit and winter boots for the kid who has none. Our profession is filled with educators who notice and care, and we take it all home with us. Faces scroll through our brains at night as, instead of counting sheep, we fret about whether we're doing enough to foster inclusion, to differentiate to support the range of learners, to get to the root of challenging behaviors, to motivate a heel-dragger, to slow down a roadrunner, or to facilitate independence. We constantly ask ourselves, *Is there anyone who is falling through the cracks?*

The Demands of School

When students with autism are young, school is usually highly structured. They benefit from explicit instruction combining verbal, step-by-step instruction with visual exemplars; scaffolding of tasks; student repetition of those instructions;

and lots and lots of practice of skills. Compared to when they are in later grades, children in primary classrooms more frequently produce individual work and encounter a greater emphasis on rote learning of the basics, even in highly hands-on and centres-based classrooms. This allows autistic students to use their strong logical and rule-bound thinking and to feel successful. They often have show and tell, where they can dazzle teachers and peers with their enormous knowledge of their favorite topics. When educators use strengths and a positive relationship to motivate and encourage, students love coming to school.

As these students move up into middle school, they are at greater risk of falling through the cracks. They are expected to have a level of mastery over some thinking skills that are thought to be core difficulties of autism: perspective-taking (see Chapter 2), generalizing and context blindness (see Chapter 3), executive function and seeing what's important (see Chapter 5), and sensory and emotional regulation (see Chapter 6). The curriculum tends to require them to infer, predict, decipher causal relationships, connect, interpret meaning, think critically, and see from others' points of view (Garcia Winner, 2013). I once opened the Grade 6 language curriculum and highlighted any expectation that would be contingent on these particular skills. The pages were soon a sea of neon pink! To complicate matters, assessment activities become even more social with each passing grade. Students participate in presentations, group projects, inquiry-based learning, and classroom discussions. Teachers take a step back, expecting their students to take greater ownership over their learning. Instruction becomes less explicit and is often delivered verbally in multiple steps, and students are assumed to possess certain prerequisite skills that have been absorbed intuitively over their years in school. They are faced with open-ended questions, choices, and tasks that can be approached more than one way and still must somehow be correct. They must transition not just between subjects, but between rooms and teachers, bringing the right materials with them to each class. And the classroom rules—those hidden rules—are always changing! If we fail to connect or notice what's going on for students with autism, it can have long-term implications.

Let's put on our autism lens for a moment. To get a better sense of what school can feel like for students with autism, we'll examine two hypothetical children who are composites of many students I've supported. Gino is in Grade 3, carries a Pokémon plush doll with him everywhere, and always knows the weather report. Annie is in Grade 7, loves K-pop and anime, and is teaching herself to speak Korean (she is not Korean). As you read, think about what strengths and developing areas you can identify.

Pseudonyms are used for all students mentioned throughout this book.

	Gino's Day	Annie's Day
8:30 a.m.	Gino is still in his mother's car. It's a cloudy day, and he is afraid of rain. His family once went camping and they were caught in a thunderstorm; he screamed all night. Now, no amount of bribery or force can get him to brave a storm, and cloudy days are almost as bad. As usual, a struggle ensues to get him out the door and into the car, and then out of the car and into the school. He is late entering the building, his whole body taut with tension.	The school bell rings. Annie has been waiting for the bell. She doesn't feel comfortable joining the groups of her peers in the yard before school, so she waits against the wall where her class lines up, listening to K-pop with her headphones on. She is always first in line. As her peers bump and cluster into line, she doesn't look around. She doesn't say hi to anyone; what if they don't say hi back?