

ENGAGING STUDENTS WITH THE ROBOT WAS EASY

meet

ERIC SPENCER

Eric Spencer is an educator of over 25 years serving as a School Counselor, Dean of Students, and Principal at the high school level. Eric is the current Director of Education at Saint Catherine Academy.

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takeaways

- the robot supports all the school's curricula areas
- students make more frequent eye contact
- students established a relationship with the robot

ABOUT ST. CATHERINE ACADEMY

St. Catherine Academy is a non-profit, private special education school in Fairfield, CT, educating students diagnosed with autism, intellectual disabilities, and developmental disabilities. The academy began using MOVIA's Robot-Assisted Instruction (RAI) system with their students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in November of 2020 and witnessed noticeable gains with these students in only 4 months.

THE CHALLENGE

St. Catherine Academy is currently working consistently with four of their students, ages ranging from 10 to 18, each diagnosed with ASD. Common behaviors include repeating what others say, stimming behaviors, difficulty engaging in conversation, loss of focus, limited or no verbal receptive and expressive language, and boundary issues. These students come from varied socio-economic backgrounds, sexes, and ethnicities.

HOW MOVIA HELPED

St. Catherine Academy began giving these four students sessions with Robot-Assisted Instruction, with each session lasting for approximately 15 minutes. The lessons are structured with the following components: a greeting, warm-up, 5 to 7 activities, and a goodbye. Eric Spencer, the academy's Director of Education, says, "We have found MOVIA's RAI system to be very user friendly from start to finish. The general format of the sessions, structured with a greeting, warm-up activity, various activities of your choosing, followed by a farewell, made it easy for us to engage students with the MOVIA RAI system soon after the robot arrived." Activities vary by each student, depending on ability and interest. The educators structure in a game like Snowflakes and Bubbles before academic activities to draw the student to the tablet. Academic activities include money values, alphabet, and simple math. One of the students enjoys the spelling games that ask the student to pull correct letters into the circles to spell given words. Role-plays are used as well with each student, most often How to Greet and Non-Verbal Communication.

The overarching goal for each student is greater independence in his or her environment. Having basic skills in the areas of academics, activities of daily living, vocational, and social interaction are at the core of St. Catherine Academy's curriculum. The robot helps to support all of these curricula areas with the various activities available through the robot. In the course of working with the RAI, students have established a relationship with the robot as evidenced by their smiles, their own greetings to the robot, and consistent eye contact. "In general, we have found that all our students with ASD are naturally drawn to the robot," says Mr. Spencer. "They fully engage with the lessons and are beginning to generalize behaviors such as how to make eye contact, greet people, and ask for help. The results we have seen so far are very promising!" One particular student only spoke in whispers prior to his interactions with the robot; now he speaks with an appropriate volume. Staff have noticed increased vocalizations, more frequent eye contact, and increased duration of attending to activities both with the robot and in the classroom.

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