

Students with autism often complain that they are reprimanded for talking about or otherwise sharing their interest area (Barron & Barron, 1992; Jackson, 2002; B. Moran, personal communication, November 9, 2005; Tammet, 2007). Imagine the possibilities for changing student attitudes and perspectives if students were invited not only to share their fascinations but also to serve as classroom experts and teachers in those areas.

For instance, a middle school teacher used an active learning technique called Match Game (Udvari-Solner & Kluth, in press) to showcase the talents of Marn, a young woman with autism who loved trains. During a unit on transportation and technology, Marn created one set of cards that contained concepts, words, and phrases related to trains. On the other set of cards, she wrote the corresponding definitions. One card, for instance, had the phrase, *run-through* written on it. The definition of *run-through* (“a train that generally is not scheduled to pick up or reduce railcars en route”) was written on another card. Students had to find matches for terms and phrases that were, in most cases, completely new to them. Students had fun learning the new lingo and were impressed with Marn’s expertise in this area. According to the teacher, the game was the first time students in her classroom had to go to Marn to get help and information. This experience changed students’ perceptions of their classmate and gave Marn the courage to share more of her specialized knowledge with others. In addition, all students became interested in the activity and were anxious to take a turn designing their own set of cards for the group.

Another way teachers can give all students in their classrooms opportunities to serve as experts is by instituting activities or exercises that require students to share what they know, can do, and enjoy. One such approach that we and our colleagues have used is a classified advertisement activity. In this activity, all learners are asked to write an ad offering their services or expertise in a certain area (e.g., scrapbooking, organizing, math tutoring, telling jokes). Each student must also write a “help wanted” ad seeking assistance for any area in which he or she wants to gain skills or abilities (see Figure 1 for a sample advertisement and classified advertisement). Students might ask for or offer help in anything from designing origami to practicing math facts to learning to play tether-

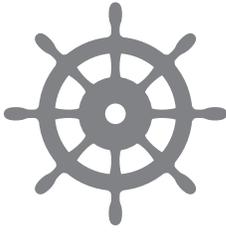
Name: *Reed S.*

Help Wanted Ad	Classified Ad
I am looking for help with: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Finding after-school clubs• Learning to speak Spanish better• Learning slang	Please see me for help with: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Organizing your locker• Organizing your desk• Making reminder lists• Learning about North American reptiles• Making books about snakes

Figure 1. Sample student classified ad.

ball. Teachers instituting such a structure may be surprised by the diversity of student passions and the degree of interest learners have in educating and learning from one another. A seventh-grade teacher who used the classified ads model was astounded to learn that 9 of her 26 students signed up to learn lawnmower maintenance from a student with autism!

Finally, increasing student expertise might simply be a matter of finding moments for your students to shine and be recognized by peers. We fondly recall working with Matt, a middle school student who loved maps. Matt loved to draw, read, and interpret maps. When we visited him in his home, we saw some of his creations and were amazed at their detail and creativity. We were surprised, then, when we visited Matt's school and his teachers did not know much about his incredible abilities in mapmaking. We suggested that he be allowed to use his expertise in the classroom, and his teachers were only too happy to comply. They decided to display Matt's maps in the classroom and around the school and, when possible, to have Matt teach his peers map skills. During the first week of school alone, Matt taught both latitude and longitude and the concept of map scale to his peers.



ADDITIONAL IDEAS FOR BUILDING CLASSROOM EXPERTISE VIA INTERESTS OR PASSIONS

* ✨ Ask all learners about their strengths, loves, and fascinations. Some teachers do this with a whole-class discussion, whereas others do it by asking students to make a product to post in the classroom (e.g., a “Things I Can Do” or “My Interests” poster). Once those interests are posted or made public, remind students to use one another as resources.

* ✨ Provide ample opportunities for students to share their passions in the context of the curriculum or create team-building exercises that build on learners’ areas of expertise. Whether you teach first grade or twelfth grade, regular community-building activities will strengthen student relationships and make it easier for learners to get and give support. Before you ask students to talk about Crazy Horse, suggest that they share their own personal heroes. As learners dive into an adventure story, ask them what elements would be part of their own adventure tale (e.g., ask “What objects would you bring? Which companions? Where would you go?”) As students share this information over time, you will learn what students know and what they love and will be able to coach learners on how to depend upon one another.

* ✨ Structure specific opportunities to “advertise” the individual talents and fascinations of your students. Many teachers have a “student of the week” in the kindergarten year, but few carry this tradition into the upper grades. Having some way to highlight the accomplishments and uniqueness of each student during the year often makes it clear to teachers that all individuals have areas of expertise and interests that are special and out of the ordinary.

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