“Just Give Him the Whale!”

20 Ways to Use Fascinations, Areas of Expertise, and Strengths to Support Students with Autism

by
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You advocate focusing on student interests, strengths, imagination, and passion areas in this book. Don’t you think it is just as important to focus on weaknesses and difficulties?

Student files are full of challenge areas because in the current American educational system, this type of information is used to identify learners for special education, in turn helping school districts to qualify these students for services and to receive money for personnel and supports. We understand the need to explore these areas in certain contexts, but we think there is far too much emphasis on student challenges and too little on clearly identifying student interests and passion areas, finding a learning connection, and educating respective individuals accordingly. It is easy to find information about “weaknesses” and “deficits,” but this information often provides little concrete guidance on how to support or teach a student; this focus, therefore, becomes a dead end.

Alternatively, delineating and outlining student interests, strengths, goals, and dreams, as well as successful teaching strategies, can help a teacher develop a relationship with the student and effectively plan for and educate him or her. To put it another way, we feel that talking and thinking about students in ways that are more positive, hopeful, and strengths based is not only more kind but also more helpful. On the one hand, when we learn that a child is noncompliant, stubborn, and slow, perseverates on baseball statistics, and is hyperactive, it is hard to imagine how to support him or her. On the other hand, if we learn instead that the student is a self-advocate and sticks up for
him- or herself, is careful or cautious, is an expert in calculating and remembering baseball statistics, and is very active and energetic, we have a more positive view of the learner and, we would argue, a better starting point for generating supports and designing instruction.

Doesn’t “teaching to passions” really mean “giving in” to the student? Should we really let students perseverate on their obsessions?

This is the question we get asked the most often. Our first response is always that it is important to consider how this language (e.g., perseverate, obsession) reflects a negative view of student interests. We suggest that instead of thinking about “giving in” to a student, think about honoring him or her. And instead of thinking about his or her behavior as “perseverating,” think about concentrating or being in a state of flow or superfocus.

Furthermore, we challenge our audiences and readers to think about what a useful tool student interests can be to teach social skills, communication skills, relaxation-related skills, and standards-based content and to move students into different areas of study and learning—and thereby potentially into new fascinations. We like to share the example of Ms. Chandler, a high school English teacher who taught us that not only could we value students’ areas of interest, we could capitalize on them. When Ms. Chandler learned she would have Raj, a student with autism, in her classroom, she asked many different people (including family members, peers, and previous teachers) for information about him, including his habits, strengths, challenges, and interests. She was told that Raj had only one interest—weather. She was also told that it was impossible to get him to read about, write about, or talk about anything but weather. Ms. Chandler took that as a challenge as she began the year with Raj.

Raj entered Ms. Chandler’s classroom on the first day of school and immediately asked her, “What will the weather be today?” Prepared for this question, Ms. Chandler handed Raj the newspaper and showed the young man where he could find the daily weather report in the newspaper each morning. She then told him he could come early to her class each day and write the weather report on the board—the only catch was that he had to use different descriptive words each day to share the information. Over time, she introduced Raj to other sections of the newspaper (including the baseball box scores, which Ms. Chandler read religiously). This led to several in-depth discussions about baseball (with Ms. Chandler occasionally throwing in stories about weather-related disasters at baseball games) that culminated in Raj helping Ms. Chandler design a
web site for the school baseball team. In order to be an informed web designer, Ms.
Chandler required him to read plenty of informational books about baseball, including I
Had a Hammer: The Hank Aaron Story (Aaron, 1991) and The Natural (Malamud, 1952).

After weeks of helping Raj learn the basics of web design, Ms. Chandler encour-
egaged him to attend meetings of the school’s technology club, which ended up being the
first extracurricular activity he ever joined (and it wasn’t even weather related). At the
end of the school year, Raj still loved discussing the weather and had even used his tech-
nology know-how to build his own web site, which featured stories, articles, and images
of North American natural disasters. However, he also had become interested in base-
ball and had adopted the Tampa Bay Devil Rays as his team. Furthermore, he had a
brand-new passion for technology and web design. Raj accomplished all of this because
Ms. Chandler acted on a philosophy to capitalize on student strengths and interests that
we can all learn from. Instead of seeing this student’s passion as a stumbling block, she
saw it as a stepping stone.

A similar stepping-stone-type story comes from the work of Carol Tashie, Susan
Shapiro-Barnard, and Zach Rossetti (2006). In Seeing the Charade, their stirring book on
friendship and inclusion, these educators described a young man named Samuel who
had an obsession with fans. He loved to set up fans to blow air across his face or to move
things around in space. As teachers sought ways to get Samuel involved in community
activities or in extracurricular life, they were hard pressed to find a club of fan lovers.
But while searching for hobbies that might be related to fans in some way, a physics
teacher referred them to a few students who were building ultralight model planes. This
group of youngsters was interested in having Samuel join them in their endeavor, as he
had some knowledge of and great interest in wind currents. Samuel, for his part, had the
opportunity to learn about aviation, engineering, and building models as a pastime.

As the teachers in these examples illustrate, it can be very helpful to think about
student interests as launching pads, springboards, or bridges (Williams, 1996). You can
start with a student’s passion and consider all of the extensions that might be made into
new content areas, interests, skills, and competencies and even into new fascinations.
As Ms. Chandler did with Raj, you can build a chainlink of new learning, starting with the
student’s area of interest as the origin.

**What if it seems impossible for me to link the student’s interest area to content, instruction, or supports?**

**Q**

Nothing is impossible! Einstein said, “Imagination is more important than
knowledge,” and we agree. Thinking creatively and out of the box can always
bring forward innovative solutions. We have known students who have fasci-
nations as obscure and unusual as ball turrets, Rutherford B. Hayes, missile silos, and Branson, Missouri. There are as many student interest areas as there are students, and this goes for both individuals who have and do not have autism.

If you truly feel you are at a standstill for incorporating the interest area into the curriculum, start with an Internet search on the topic or consider having the respective student conduct such a search. This method can lead you to websites, resources, organizations, and, of course, other people with ideas for creating links to learning in the classroom.

If a web search doesn’t yield enough and you still cannot see connections to curriculum, instruction, supports, or classroom environment, you might stick with options that allow the learner to pursue the area of interest on his or her own. Research projects, extra credit opportunities, independent studies, mentorships, and internships are all options. Teachers might also consider going outside the classroom to inspire learners. Students’ interests might be explored via field trips, community groups, or even local and national conferences. Tashie, Shapiro-Barnard, and Rossetti (2006) shared a story of a man with a passion for collecting air sirens. Because this is a rather unique interest, the man had to look outside his community for connections and therefore went all the way to Moscow to attend the International Air Siren Convention(!), illustrating that there truly is something for everyone. No matter what a student loves, there are probably others elsewhere (somewhere) who love it, too, and where there is a will to teach, connect to, support, extend, or build a bridge from a student’s passion, there is certainly a way.

**Q** I know it is important to be positive and to honor the things students love, but what if they get really carried away with their fascination? Is it ever okay to try and move the child away from his favorites?

**A** Although it may be useful to negotiate how and when students engage in their fascinations, students will most likely do their best work and find the most success when we seek ways to integrate them into the day. Students often need favorite materials, activities, behaviors, and interest areas to relax, focus, or make connections with others. Even if we cannot see how it works or happens, students with autism are often using their interests to serve some purpose, even if it is to escape difficulty, regain composure, find a moment of solitude, or enjoy beauty.
Donna Williams (1996), in fact, believes that accepting and building on fascinations and fixations can be good not only for people with autism but also for those without it:

It may be more advantageous to meet and share with these ‘autistic’ people on territory that does make sense to them than to take away the only things that do hold significance for them in favour of compliance. Some [individuals] really need to ask themselves whether they might not be able to have a little more tolerance of eccentricity than they already have, not just regarding the ‘autistic’ people in their care, but in themselves as well. (p. 229)

Having shared this sentiment, however, it is important to note that some individuals with autism may occasionally express a desire to spend less time with or even to get rid of a passion. In these instances, the teacher should support the student in doing so. Yet, it is important to emphasize that this process should be done in respectful ways and always in collaboration with the student.

More tricky is the situation in which the teacher makes a decision that the interest area must be limited or “extinguished.” We believe if the student is not interested in moving away from their fascination area, the teacher should proceed with caution and carefully evaluate this decision. Eugene Marcus (2002), a writer, teacher, and advocate who has autism, indicated that fascinations and interests often serve important purposes in his life and that although they sometimes get in the way or cause him struggle, he feels that he must be the one “managing” his fixations; furthermore, some of the challenges of his so-called compulsions also hold lessons:

My own view is that my life is enriched and made livable by the habits that enslave me. My feeling is that my enslavement is a voluntary one in that nobody else forces me to be compulsive, or even gives me permission to be compulsive.

My wish is to one day be free of my compulsions, but not any day soon. By being an inconvenient and loud slave to compulsion, I have learned things I never would have through silent cooperation. I have tested the limits of my real and unreal friends (even those people who wanted to be my friends, but only when I was play-acting a role—not being myself). My compulsive behavior has allowed me to set my own agenda in situations where the most I could have hoped for was “eats and treats.” My compulsive behav-
ior is a long-playing defense against well meaning people who cannot guess what I really am thinking of or wishing for. (p. 8)

Marcus goes on to share that the way to help those with compulsions may be to stop implementing procedures and programs that are oppressive and to support the individual in finding a variety ways to be in control of his or her own life:

Compulsiveness can be a useful weapon, but like all weapons it can be misused. I look forward to burying my weapons someday and traveling unarmed through the world. Maybe then people will see the man behind the armor more easily. Some day, we will all disarm. I will drop my compulsiveness when my staff decide to drop their desire to keep me under control. (p. 8)

Liane Holliday Willey (2001), a woman with Asperger syndrome, suggests having frank and serious conversations about the “good and bad parts of obsessing” (p. 125) instead of trying to change people and get them to quit their passions. She shared how she has helped her daughter, who also has Asperger syndrome, learn to live in concert with her interests:

Slowly, patiently, with tiny steps, we are trying to help her find the good and the bad parts of obsessing. “It is good to play with your monkey collection when you feel badly about something that happened at school,” we tell her. “Of course you can buy that book about monkeys because you worked hard to control your temper this whole week,” we will say. “No, you cannot sort your monkeys right now, not until your homework is finished,” we remind her. In time, she will do these things for herself. In time she will know on her own how to share her life with her obsessions. (p. 125)

This caring approach can, of course, also be used with students who are nonverbal. Do not limit time with passions without letting an individual know when, where, and under which circumstances he or she can gain access to preferred experiences or materials again. Always educate students about why breaks from certain experiences are necessary; this means talking to students who may not be able to respond. Be gentle and sincere in all of these instances, and let students know that you realize how much their passions mean to them.

In other words, if you must limit, do it with grace, kindness, and creativity. Barbara Moran, a colleague and friend of ours who has vivid recollections of her childhood fascinations squelched in ways that were not graceful, kind, or creative, asked us to remind teachers to never “yank away a child’s cathedral” (her passion), as this approach is not
only cruel but also ineffective (B. Moran, personal communication, November 9, 2007). She remembers that her interest was never valued and sometimes punished. According to Moran, this is ironic because “I would have done any darn thing they wanted if they just would have given me pictures of cathedrals to gaze at throughout the day.”

**How does this idea of using passions as springboards or stepping stones apply to families? How can parents do this at home?**

It probably will not surprise our readers to learn that many of these ideas came from families. Mothers and fathers who know and love their children often figure out how to do this work of “exploiting” passions before the teacher does. This happens most likely because parents have the opportunity to support their children across many environments and because they have a deep sense of how important and even sacred some of these “enthusiasms” are to their children.

Many of the ideas we share throughout this book translate easily to home and community environments. The examples we give for using interests in the standards-based curriculum, for instance, can also be used in Sunday school, and the ideas shared for preparing the inclusive classroom can be implemented in the student’s bedroom or in the family home. One mother we know used these ideas to both bolster her son’s leisure time activities and to bring the family closer together. This testimonial comes from an e-mail she sent to us after learning about the give-him-the-whale concept:

I’ve got a son ‘stuck’ on front loading washers and dryers. I’m embarrassed to say how much time is spent trying to distract him from the basement when laundry’s going. I’ve been contemplating putting a lock on the basement door, but he’s now taller and certainly smarter than I, so what’s the point?

She went on to share that after attending our seminar on honoring fascinations, she came home and searched for a magazine her son had been dragging around the house, thinking it had an advertisement for front loading machines but she was mistaken:

Turns out it was a five page article on re-decorating your laundry room. I started reading him the article and as I’m sure you’re not surprised to hear, he was thrilled. When I’m old and grey sitting in my rocker, I will remember this moment as one of my favorites! Then we pulled out all the pages, so we could save them, and started talking about the sizes and colors of baskets, machines, and laundry accessories—who knew? We even decided that when
Grandpa returns from Florida next month we will have him help us redecorate the laundry room. That upped the excitement quotient! Then I pulled my husband aside and although he was skeptical, I talked him into finding the owner’s manuals and the DVD for the machine. My son was so thrilled; you would have thought it was Christmas. No, let me correct that, he has never been as excited about a Christmas or birthday gift. So, I’m planning to stop by Home Depot and Best Buy and get as many ads, brochures, and manuals as we can find, and use a front loading washer and dryer to teach every concept I can come up with!

Clearly, families have the ability not only to apply these concepts at home but also to teach educators how to engage in this work. It is our hope that the ideas in this book will inspire new home-school collaboration and give opportunities for teams to design, in addition to powerful curriculum and instruction, supports for school and home and opportunities for students to grow, learn, and find happiness within and beyond school walls.

**Q** At my school, we use student fascinations as rewards for good behavior and not as tools for teaching and supporting. Changing this practice would be a struggle for us. How do you get your colleagues to change their way of thinking?

**A** If students are able to engage in their major fascination or interest area only as a reward for good behavior, the bar often can be too high and, for many, unreachable. If the student does not achieve or loses his or her reward, the entire day can be ruined, causing anger, sadness, or depression. Therefore, the reward that was originally created to reinforce the student ceases to do so, creating a punishment (and many times behavior that escalates further). For this reason, we commend you for your interest in challenging an entrenched and often damaging practice in special education.

We know that bringing a new idea to colleagues and getting buy-in is not always easy. Initially, not everyone may be thrilled to try something new, but if you can position these fascination-based strategies as fun to develop or as out of the box, fresh, or even radical, colleagues who like to be on the cutting edge or those who value ingenuity may be more inclined to experiment with them.

You also can try asking your colleagues to think about their own lives and experiences. Remind them that the simplest reason to use student fascinations as tools for
teaching and supporting is that all people, regardless of age, work best when they have activities, responsibilities, and expectations during their day that involve an area about which they feel passionate! Many people without disabilities (especially those who have ever had a bad job experience) can relate to the need for motivation and inspiration in the course of the day.

Finally, you can try appealing to your team by sharing information about best practice in education. In the popular book *Best Practice: Today’s Standards for Teaching and Learning in America’s Schools, Third Edition*, Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2005) concluded that the curriculum for any student should allow for ongoing choice and input in the areas of assignments, activities, and projects. Therefore, empowering students in their own learning enterprise through interest areas, fascinations, and passions is supported by research and is a practice recommended by leaders in science, social studies, math, language arts, and other subject areas.

If I give my student time with his or her passion and fascination during the school day, how do I get him or her away from it when it is time to make the transition to other things?

Many students who have a favorite interest area that is explored in school may have a difficult time leaving their time spent in this “wow” experience. By providing students some choices about how they use their time for particular periods of the day and allowing some flexibility in when and where they will incorporate their favorites, teachers may keep students more calm and relaxed and find that struggles are kept to a minimum. If a student requires visual supports or teaching strategies to transition away from his or her special activities, materials, or topics, tools can be built into the day for this purpose. Effective tools or strategies include but are not limited to using a schedule (words or pictures or both), a timer, brief reminders about the duration of the time with favorites (written, pictorial, or verbal), and specifications about how and when the individual will be able to revisit his or her fascination.

Also consider secondary interests that are reinforcing to the student, allowing time for those as well. After the student’s most preferred activity of the day, you might offer some time related to a secondary interest to ensure a smoother transition and acceptance of the next activity. Also, as we discuss throughout the book, embedding the topic throughout different subject and activity areas may ease transitions. For example, if Tania is passionate about *The Wizard of Oz*, she will adore spending time reading the book and maybe even the screenplay or creating a poster of the good and evil characters and healthy/nonhealthy relationships that are depicted in both the book and movie.
In mathematics, she could use character names for the numeric story problem; for science, many areas could be related to concepts in the book such as chemicals (potions), inventions (hot air balloons), and nature (storms). As students become more comfortable in the classroom and feel safe enough to take risks, they may require fewer references and connections to their area of passion. The more frequently we use their interests as ways to connect to new content, the easier it will be to introduce novelty into their educational experiences.

**What if my student’s interest changes? Will the fascination likely be lifelong?**

As with any of us with a particular deep interest, it may remain or it may change and evolve. No matter what the particular passion a student has currently, the strategies and examples in this book will help you to accept, embrace, promote, and further develop the relationship it has to school activities and the curriculum. Opening the doors to the fascination and supporting the student in exploring new interests as they evolve is what effective teaching is all about. For example, we have just learned that the student who inspired us to write this book, Pedro, has chosen a new interest area. He has evolved from being passionate about whales to being passionate about windmills (perhaps the sequel to this book should be titled *Just Give Him the Generator!*). A wise and knowing teacher will put forward the philosophy “Change is good” by introducing new opportunities, ways, and means for Pedro to explore windmills in the curriculum. Windmills, generators, and engines may be embedded into Pedro’s curriculum as whales were before, and, once again, other learners in his classroom community can be encouraged to provide supports as they did with Pedro’s first interest. If whales evolve into a secondary passion for Pedro, they may also continue in the curriculum as well, depending on his needs and desires. Once this approach is utilized for a student, it gets easier when doing it again for the same student or others in the classroom. Keeping your eyes, your ears, and your mind open will undoubtedly result in new ideas for all learners and make it more likely that you will be that unforgettable teacher who not only teaches and supports but inspires!
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