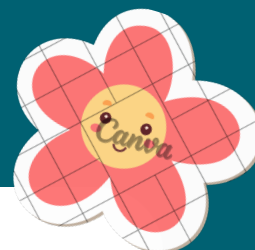
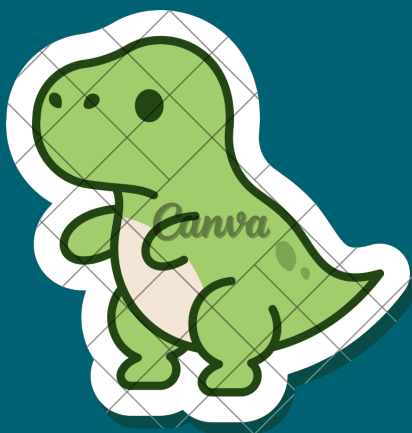


TAP INTO THE NICHE:

SPECIAL INTERESTS IN AUTISM



A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO
AUTISTIC STUDENTS' SPECIAL
INTERESTS



**MORE
INFORMATION**

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INTRODUCTION

Many autistic students will demonstrate intense focus in areas of special interest. In a classroom setting, these preferred topics, or “special interests,” may make it hard for the child to engage in activities about different, less-preferred topics.

However, these same special interests can also be utilized as an effective teaching tool that expands motivation and learning. In addition, engaging students’ strengths can promote higher self-esteem and help students be integrated into the classroom.

This packet is meant to support you as you figure out your own way to use special interests in your classroom. While tailored to elementary school educators, this guide may be helpful for parents, therapists, and more!

INTRODUCTION

In a research study with 18 teachers in grades kindergarten through 3rd grade, teachers reported that "taking an interest in students' interests" was the most important strategy for promoting a positive student-teacher relationship with an autistic student.

Teachers also report that utilizing students' strong interests is a useful tool for all students, not just with autistic students. One teacher said, "Thinking back to other children, [utilizing their special interests will] help... the children that do struggle socially a little bit more."

A NOTE ON “SPECIAL INTERESTS”

We are choosing to use the term "special interest" because it is a commonly used term, and many autistic people prefer the term "special interests." However, not everyone agrees on this terminology. Some find this phrase patronizing or feel that it suggests that their interest is less legitimate than the interests of non-autistic people.

Some other terms people use are: intense interests, passions, areas of expertise, focused and dedicated interests, passionate interests, autistic/neurodivergent passions, hobbies, or SPINS (special interests).

BRINGING SPECIAL INTERESTS INTO THE CLASSROOM:

STEP 1: IDENTIFY

STEP 2: EXPLORE

STEP 3: CONNECT

STEP 1

IDENTIFY

To bring a special interest into the classroom, you first need to identify your student's interests...

ASK



Sometimes, it can be this simple! During a moment with your student, ask about their interests. Keep in mind their interest(s) could be anything (e.g. a movie, a book, an object, an activity, etc.). If you feel uncertain, you can also ask other adults in their lives or even their peers!

OBSERVE



What things does your student like to look at/play with/touch/taste/listen to? If they struggle to focus in class, what is stealing their attention? When given an open-ended opportunity in class (e.g. show and tell, creative assignments, etc.), what topics do they choose? What do they do at recess or during free time? These observations can help you identify your student's interests.

WHAT ARE THE KIDS INTO THESE DAYS?

While there are some stereotypes about special interests, they can truly encompass any topic!

Here are some special interests that autistic adults have reported having in grade school...

Treadmills	The Wild West	Medical history
Dinosaurs	The Donner Party	License plates
Numbers	Fantasy literature	The Civil War
Baseball	Gabby's Dollhouse	Cooling fans
Russian	LEGO sets & books	Robin Hood
Singing	Vacuum cleaner brands	Car brands
Horses	The Wizard of Oz (1939)	Trash cans
Trucks	Home appliance manuals	The Titanic
Sheep	Air conditioner window units	Math facts

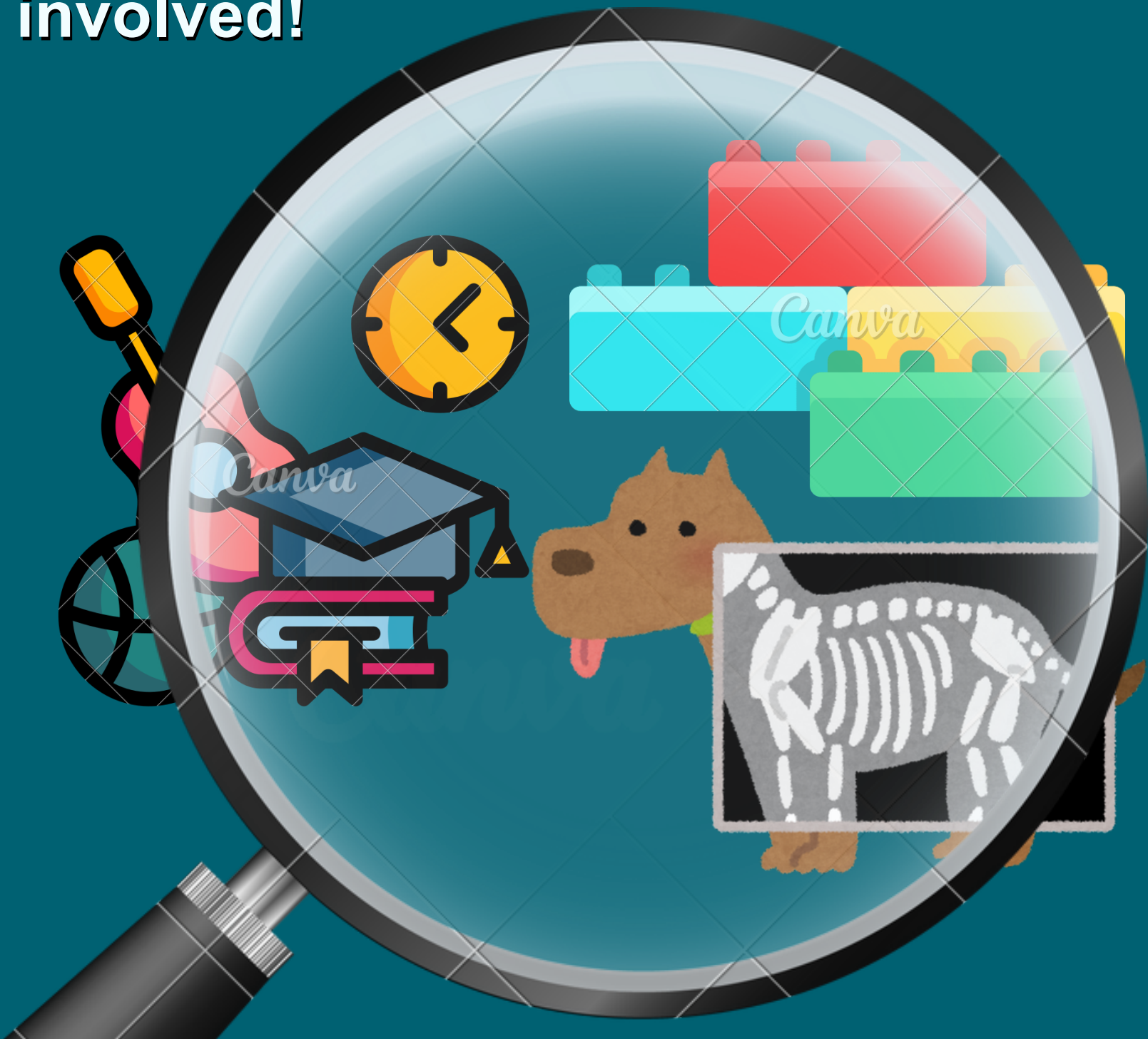
STEP 2

EXPLORE

Congratulations! You have identified one of your student's interests. Now, connect it to the classroom. To find possible connection points, look at the interest from different perspectives:

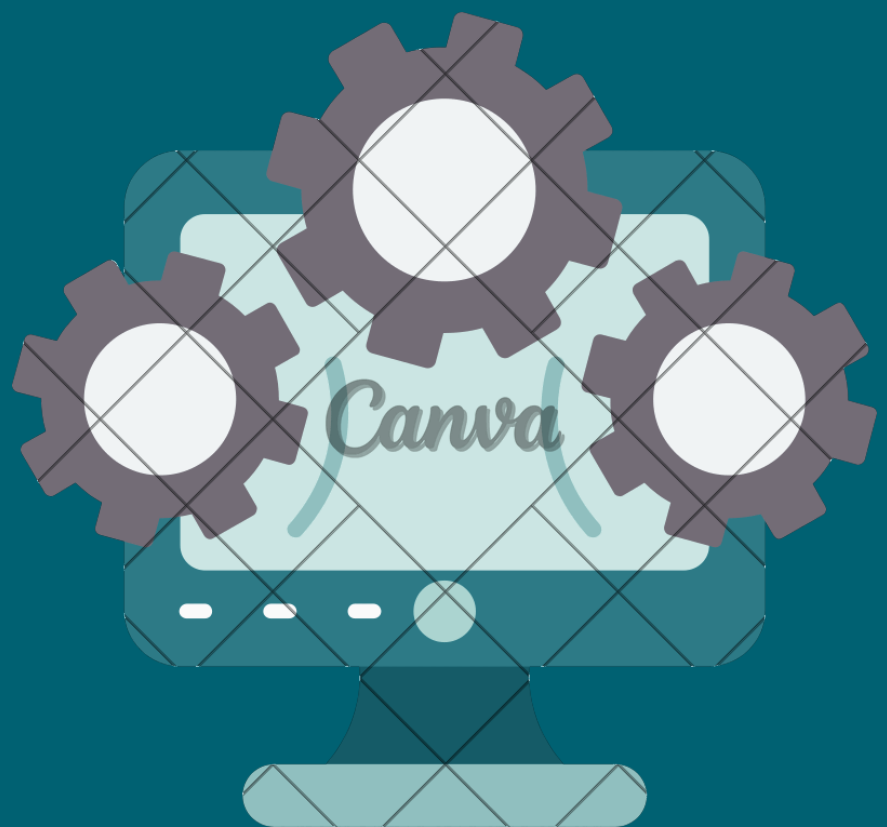
ZOOM IN

What small details or component parts are involved in your student's interest? These parts could be colors, game mechanics, characters, animals, etc. Think of these components as parts that come together to create a larger machine; depending on your student's interest, literal machine parts may be involved!



ZOOM OUT

What broader topics, feelings, or themes might your student's interest involve? What genres or characters do they like to watch/read about/play? If their interest is an object, what functions does that object perform? Finding a way for those abstract concepts to connect to your curriculum can feel difficult and vague, but it is valuable if done well.



STEP 3

CONNECT

**Next, examine your teaching
with a flexible eye!**

TOPICS

What subjects are your students learning? If the special interest is a real thing (e.g. dinosaurs, toys, vehicles, appliances, etc.), try using it as a lens to explore scientific, mathematical, or historical ideas or study skills. If their interest is more abstract (e.g. a story, character, concept, etc.), try using readings involving it.



ASSIGNMENTS

How are your students learning? In math and science, word problems can be especially useful. Take advantage of creative assignments (e.g. presentations, roleplays, crafts, dioramas, story writing, drawing, etc.)



CLASSROOM

What is the physical space of your classroom?

Could you put up any decorations or posters related to the special interest? Putting up children's art is also a good option.



POLICIES

What policies exist in your class? If you have stickers that you share with your students, try acquiring some stickers involving the special interest.



EXAMPLES

One teacher incorporated her student's interest into the classroom's culture, reporting, "I had one student who had an area of expertise, and over time, he would volunteer all this information when it was brought up in class. So he was fondly nicknamed 'the expert of' his topic. And I think that gave him... an identity of positivity."

Another teacher used Thomas the Tank Engine as a rewards system, saying "We gave him color sheets of Thomas as a reward. One time, we gave him a big chart paper, and we said, 'draw Thomas' - just little things like that... He must have had forty [Thomas objects]. It was beautiful. He just loved it."



PRACTICE CONNECTING

Now, it is time to play!

Try to find if any of the possible connection points in the special interest might fit with one of the elements of your teaching. Try folding a piece of paper in half and jotting notes on the special interest's components on one side and notes on your teaching's components on the other side. As with any creative process, experimentation and patience are key!

Once you have found your connection and fleshed it out into a full-fledged assignment, policy, or activity, you are ready to implement! Read on to see practical examples...

EXAMPLE 1: SUPER MARIO BROS

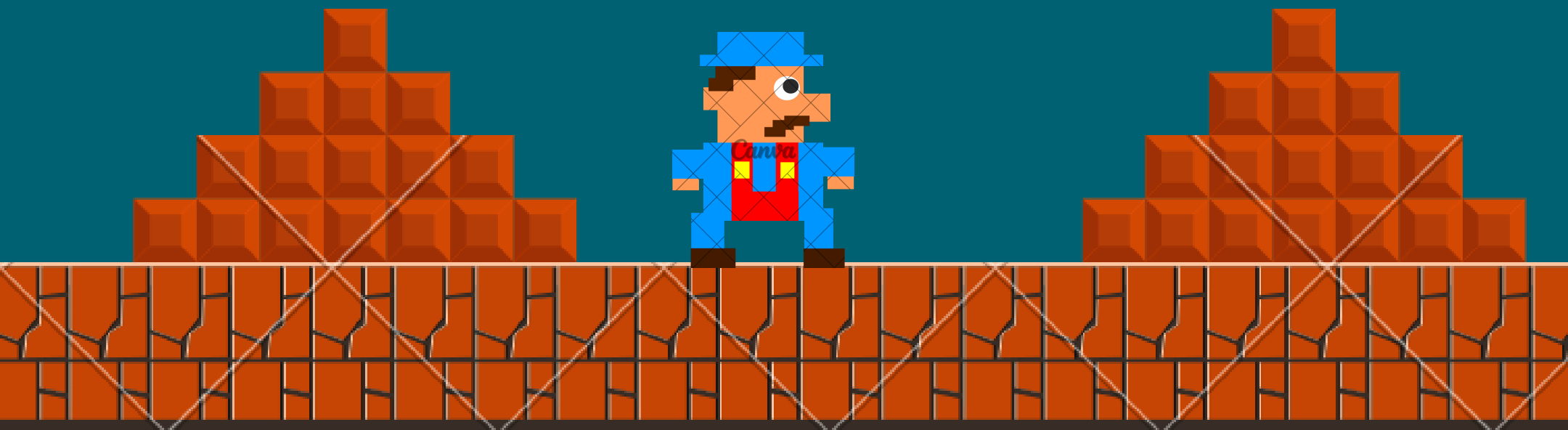
Ms. Stone's new class includes an 8-year-old autistic student, Elijah. Here are some steps Ms. Stone might take...

IDENTIFY Ms. Stone sets up a meeting with Elijah's parents, where she learns that Elijah loves the Super Mario Bros. videogames.

EXPLORE After getting more details from Elijah's parents and Wikipedia, Ms. Stone learns that Super Mario players go on a quest through the magical Mushroom Kingdom to rescue a princess, during which they collect coins and powerups. She writes "coins," "powerups," "heroism," and "adventures" in her notebook.

CONNECT Ms. Stone examines her classroom and policies.

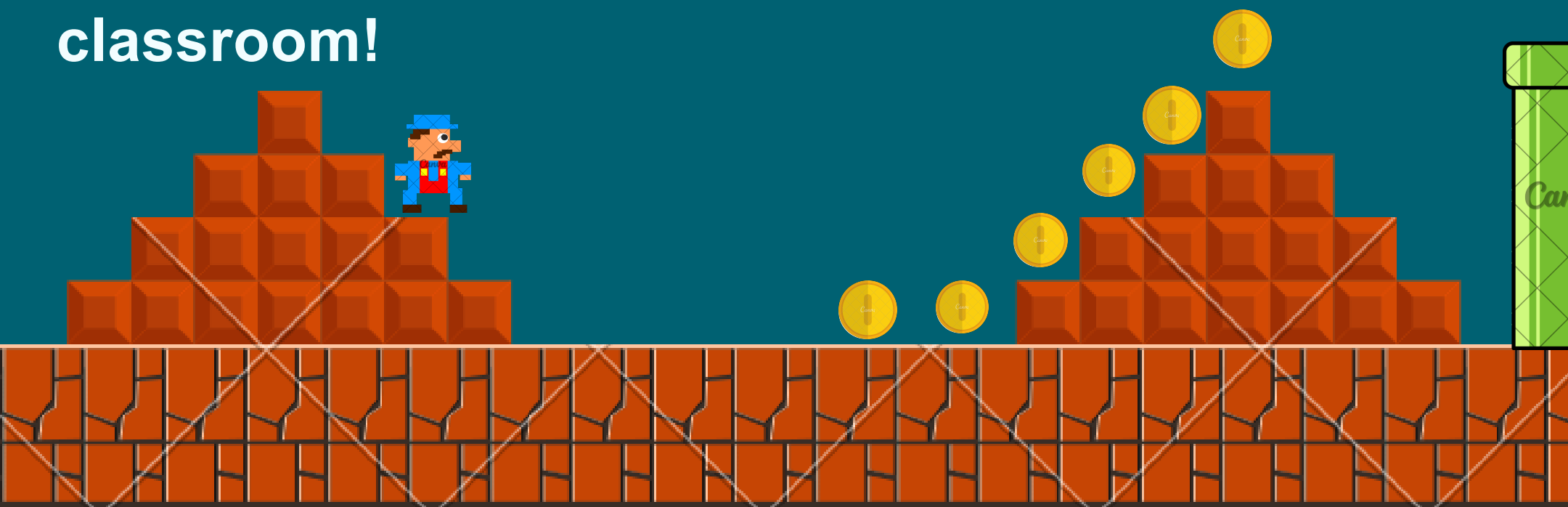
- a. She has been meaning to replace one of her reading books, and an internet search reveals that there are several kids' books themed around the Mario brothers.
- b. Ms. Stone shares stickers with her students. On her next trip to the store, she sees that they carry some stickers that look like gold coins!



EXAMPLE 1: OUTCOME

Ms. Stone adds her favorite of the Mario books to her curriculum. She also buys some of the gold coin stickers. At first, she plans to use the coin stickers only for Elijah, but then she decides to make them universal to foster a sense of unity in the classroom. Also, it's easier for her to just buy one type of sticker!

Ms. Stone also thinks about assigning a creative writing project to engage Elijah's love of heroic adventures, but decides to shelve the idea (for now) as her curriculum is too full already. She does, however, resolve to look for opportunities to make Elijah feel like a powered-up hero in the classroom!



EXAMPLE 2: DISNEY PRINCESSES

Mr. Garcia's new class includes a 6-year-old autistic student, Amara. Here are some steps Mr. Garcia might take...

IDENTIFY Mr. Garcia notices that Amara uses recess to play as various Disney princesses. A quick chat with her dad in the pickup line confirms that Amara loves watching all of the Disney princess movies (though she hates Cinderella).

EXPLORE Mr. Garcia remembers that Disney movies often feature fairytale creatures and center around larger-than-life characters' actions which drive the plot. Mr. Garcia writes "heroes & villains," "agency," and "fairytales" in his notebook.

CONNECT Mr. Garcia examines his lesson plans.

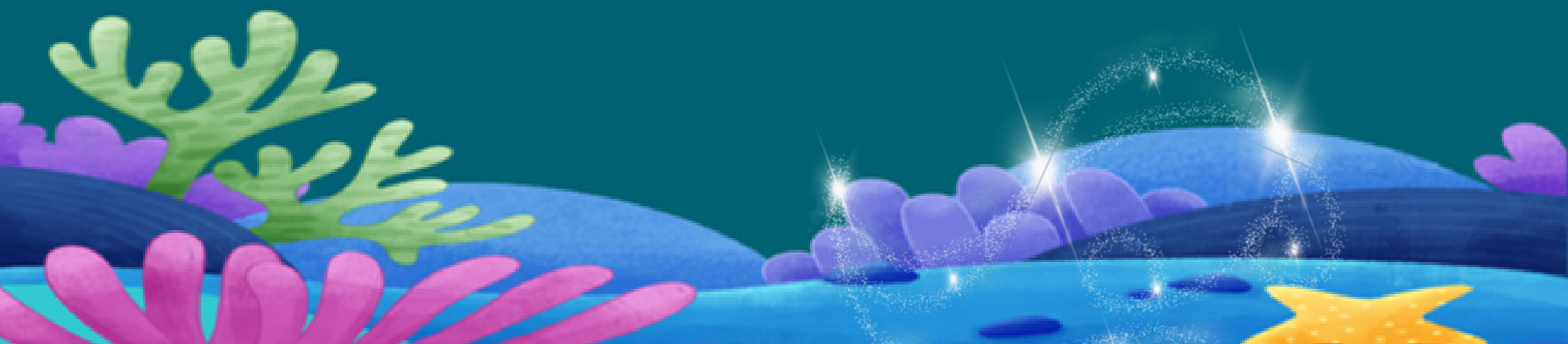
- Mr. Garcia teaches his students about animals. Remembering the Little Mermaid, he decides to craft an assignment linking mermaids to his marine life unit.
- Mr. Garcia realizes that Amara is struggling with word problems in math. He plans to modify his word problems to include Disney characters!





EXAMPLE 2: OUTCOME

Mr. Garcia adds an assignment asking students to craft their own mermaid tails, taking some inspiration from real fish but encouraging creativity and fantasy. Noticing that Amara is having some trouble socially, he makes it a group project and assigns Amara a partner who also likes Disney movies. He begins experimenting with personification in lessons, talking about the water cycle as a story and granting some agency and personality to its “characters” (i.e. the water, the sun, the mountains, etc.). Mr. Garcia also knows to look for other opportunities to use fairytale storytelling in his classroom!



FAQS

What if student's special interest is not appropriate for school?

Try to find appropriate elements of the interest to use. For example, if your student loves an adult horror movie or historical torture methods, you may still be able to use the concepts of “scary stories” or “machines of history.”

What if my student is only interested in video games?

That's okay—use it! Many children are interested in video games, and many video games offer lots to explore. Video games often have rewards or points systems you can use as well as thematically rich storylines (see Ms. Stone in Example 1).

Exposing your students to new ideas and topics is always good, but it is not your job to change or “reform” your students' interests.

Is this strategy only for autistic students?

Absolutely not! Incorporating your students' interests into the classroom boost all students' relationships and engagement. Please feel encouraged to try this out with any students!

We highlight autistic students for a few reasons:

- a. Autistic children are at particular risk of social isolation and academic disengagement, which this strategy can alleviate.
- b. Special interests often play a particularly important role in autistic people's identities and social lives. They can act as both a safe retreat and a bridge to connect with others. The intensity of “special interests” supercharges this strategy, but it still works for anyone!

FAQS

Is it appropriate to change the whole class's assignment to center around one student's interest?

It may feel unfair to center one student's interests in your classroom. There are many ways to address this issue.

- a. As we noted earlier, this strategy works for children of any neurotype. Feel free to spread the love and look for ways to highlight everyone's interests.
- b. Create assignments that encourage each student to incorporate their own interests. Ask them to do a presentation as their favorite protagonist, or do a show-and-tell! As we noted in the Connect section, creative assignments (e.g. presentations, roleplays, crafts, dioramas, story writing, drawing, etc.) are goldmines.
- c. Even if you get an idea for an activity from one student's interest, your other students might love it too! Looking back at example 2, many students besides Amara would likely enjoy crafting mermaid tails. Indeed, that shared excitement makes connecting all the easier for your student!
- d. Rather than modify everyone's experience, you may prefer to only change your approach for your autistic student. A downside of this is that there may be fewer social benefits for your autistic student. A special-interest-themed activity gives the student the chance to socialize on their home turf.

FAQS

How am I supposed to find time to do this?

Teaching is hard, and you know what works best for both your students and your teaching. Teachers and school staff often feel overwhelmed by the need to differentiate every lesson. That said, autistic children's student-teacher relationships with teachers often involve more conflict and less closeness than those of their peers, a strain on both the student and you!

The strategies presented here were designed to lessen this burden by better integrating autistic children into the classroom. We believe that incorporating these strategies will ultimately save you time and energy.

These strategies can be as high- or low-commitment as you need. When you feel inspired, you can design new assignments from scratch. Other times, you might find that it works best to do simple things like putting up a poster in the classroom with their favorite animal.

**MORE
QUESTIONS?**

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EXTRA READINGS

Specific interests as a social boundary and bridge: A qualitative interview study with autistic individuals

General Education Teachers' Perceptions of Autism, Inclusive Practices, and Relationship Building Strategies

Glossary - Reframing Autism

Using the special interests of autistic children to facilitate meaningful engagement and learning

REFERENCES AVAILABLE ON REQUEST!

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**MORE
INFORMATION**

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