



Areas of Specialty: AOS

Recognize that every person in the school has an area of specialty—something he or she knows and cares about deeply. Establish AOS with students and share them throughout the school.

* WHY

Everyone has a specialty. Ricardo loves black holes. Suzanna knows a ton about dinosaurs. We have never met a child who doesn't have at least one interest. Although striving readers may not be crazy for reading when we first meet them, they are rife with interests—sports, skateboards, video games, animals, and so forth. We want all kids to recognize that they are specialists in something, so we establish a way for them, as well as adults in the school community, to share their specialties far and wide.

* WHEN

We begin to establish Areas of Specialty, or AOS, at the beginning of the year. That way, no child goes long without knowing that he or she has a specialty and can make a unique contribution. Everyone in the school, children and adults alike, participate in the AOS project.

* HOW

Every single person in the school is a specialist in something, be it cooking, painting, rock climbing . . . whatever! We begin by sharing what a specialist is. A specialist is someone who

- knows a lot about something,
- cares a lot about something,
- wants to learn more about it, and
- wants to teach someone else about it.

Then, to model, the teacher shares three things that he or she specializes in, based on that criteria. For Steph, these might include

- teaching literacy
- hiking in the mountains
- women in politics

Next, the teacher shares what she knows about these topics, why she cares about them, and what more she would like to learn about them.

Finally, she asks that kids jot at least three things they specialize in. Donald Graves believed that if you ask kids for at least three things, you will most certainly get at least one. Whereas when you ask for only one, too many kids come up with none. This is particularly true of strivers.

Once kids have jotted their specialties, we have them turn, talk, share, and choose one they most want to learn more about. We interact with kids to support them to come up with their specialties. Some do so before we even confer with them; others need more support. Strivers, in particular, may not believe they know enough about anything to be a specialist. So we confer with them and assure them that they do have a specialty, one that is every bit as important as anyone else's in the class.

During the next month, kids research and learn more about their chosen specialty. They write informational books complete with graphic features that contain at least three things they know about their specialty, three things they care about related to their specialty, and three things they learned through research. These books are housed on an AOS classroom library shelf, or in an AOS basket or niche in the room.

Additionally, we display a chart with all kids' names, photos, and their specialties so that each child is recognized and valued for his or her own specialty. Similar charts are placed in the front hallway or posted on the school website, so everyone knows who to consult to get information on a particular specialty. This public acknowledgment is particularly efficacious for striving readers.

The AOS project can go many directions. Kids and teachers can offer afterschool classes on their AOS. The teacher can arrange a time during the day for kids to teach their AOS and learn from others. The school can host an AOS day where kids and teachers both share their AOS and learn from one another. Or, more informally, kids can chat with one another and other adults in the school if they need advice from a specialist on a particular topic. As the year progresses, kids and teachers continue to share their AOS and learn from each other.