

## Case Study

### Classroom Makeup and Behaviour

Alex is a ten year old boy in grade six. He is new to Purple Water Elementary this year and is in a grade 5-6 split class. His class of 25 students is made up of 13 boys and 12 girls, two of which have designations, and four whom are on Individualized Education Plans. In addition, there are several students in his class that struggle with behaviour management. Alex's teacher is female and in her mid forties. The majority of the teacher's time is taken up by students with designations, which provides the other students with minimal attention from their teacher. Alex seems to have very low motivation to start and complete his school work, and does not typically participate in classroom activities. Likewise, he appears unhappy and uninterested in almost all activities. Alex requires direct support and attention in order to produce materials to be assessed. When he is provided with this one-on-one experience, he is much more successful. Alex frequently complains of a headache and/or illness during class. Due to to this, he is often asking to be excused from activities and he occasionally wants to call home to leave school. He has expressed that he does not like school at all. The only thing he enjoys about school is gym class; however, he only participates some of the time. Every morning the class does 15 minutes of physical activity. It has come as a surprise that even though Alex enjoys being active, he does not participate in the morning daily physical activity. The desks in his classroom are laid out in rows, which makes it more difficult for students to collaborate with each other. So far, Alex has been observed in two different seating assignments. He has sat with two different boys in his class, but he has not engaged with either one of them.

## **Interpersonal Connections**

Since Alex is new to the school this year, he has very few interpersonal connections with his peers. However, Alex has a cousin in a different grade who he often spends his recess time with. Aside from this pre-existing relationship, Alex has struggled to make new friends. When he does make the effort to engage with his peers, he ends up being brushed off. Alex can have high energy when he chooses to do so, but for the majority of the time he is quite lethargic. At recess, Alex plays with his cousin or on his own. In addition, Alex rarely talks about any of his friends from his previously attended schools. He is very closed off and keeps to himself more often than not. Alex has attended two other schools since entering the school system in kindergarten. He expressed that he did not have trouble making friends in his previous school, but has been having difficulty this year. In the classroom, Alex shows little to no interest in his peers or his teacher. Even when given the opportunity to work in partners or groups, Alex is withdrawn and does not engage cooperatively with his peers.

## **Family Background**

Alex is the oldest of two children. At home, he and his eight year old sister do not particularly get along. They choose not to play together and Alex expressed that he often gets frustrated with her and would rather play video games by himself. In general, Alex rarely talks about his family. If you were to talk to Alex in school, you would not know that he has a sibling. The only family member Alex expresses interest in is his grandmother. He talks very highly of her and has expressed that she is someone outside of school who can help him with his school work because she lives nearby and is a retired teacher. Both Alex's mother and father have stable careers. His father works as a mechanic and his mother is head of administration at a university.

It has been brought to our attention that Alex's parents are in the process of separating. This in addition to changes in his school environment and interpersonal life may be contributing to his lack of motivation and concerning behaviour.

### **Concept**

#### **Big Idea: Experiencing art is a means to develop empathy for others, perspectives, and experiences**

Experiencing art was chosen as the concept because it appeals to a variety of different students. With art, there is no right or wrong answer, and it allows individuals to express themselves in a way that makes sense for them. Through creating, interpreting, and sharing art, individuals can learn about themselves as well as how they relate to others and the world. Art provides an outlet for individuals to share something about themselves in a creative way, from their own unique perspectives.

#### **Side 1: Mixed Emotions Game**

The mixed emotions game solidifies understanding of emotional vocabulary and associated responses. This game allows students to work together and learn from each others' responses. It also helps students learn from different perspectives, as emotions can be subjective. Students will be asked to act out an emotion, discuss when someone might feel this way, discuss what can be done to make someone feeling this way feel better, or identify the opposite emotion in order to move forward in the game.

This game allows Alex to interact with some of his classmates while learning about some of the emotions he may be feeling. Perhaps Alex struggles to deal with the changes in his life because he does not know the emotional vocabulary that is needed in order to do so. The Mixed

Emotions Game exposes students to different types of emotions, and solidifies their learning of each emotion by getting players to act it out, or answer questions about it. The more knowledgeable individuals are of emotions, the more equipped they are to deal with them.

### **MIXED EMOTIONS (Up to 4 players)**

#### **Instructions**

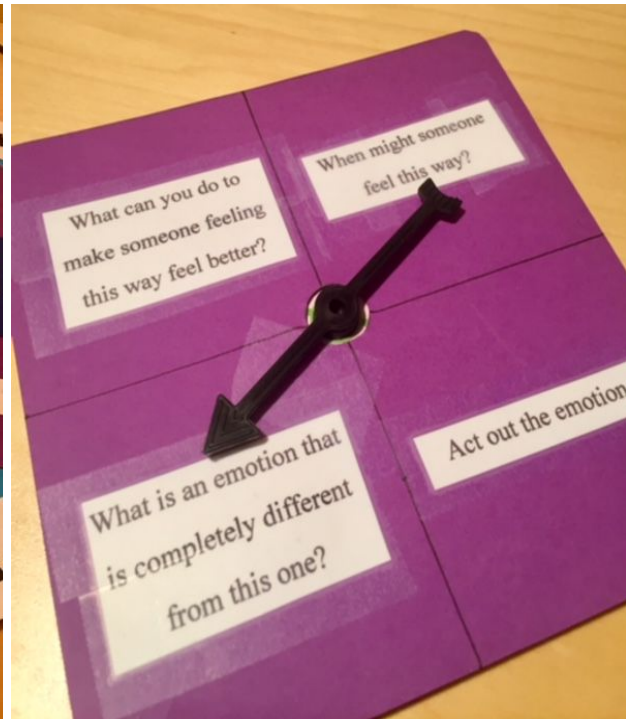
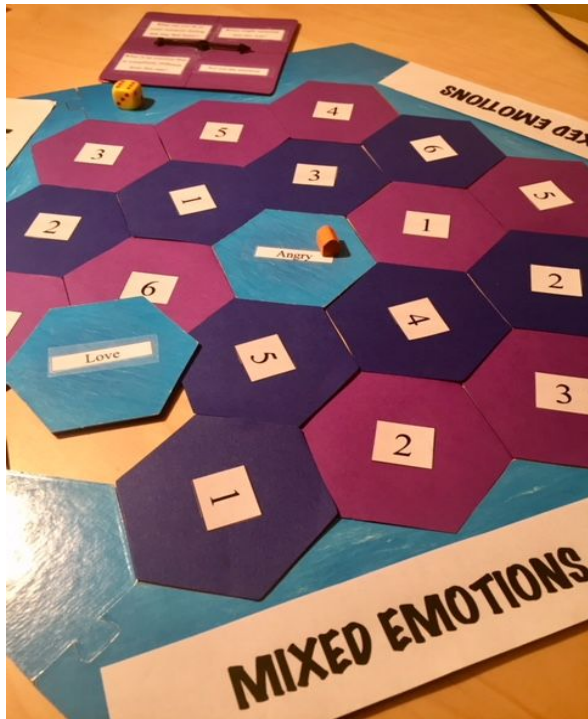
#### **Determine Player Order and Game Piece Colours**

1. Take turns rolling the die. The player who rolls the highest number goes first, then the order goes clockwise. The player who goes last gets to pick their colour first, then the order goes counterclockwise.

#### **How to Play**

2. Roll the die. Flip over a board piece with the corresponding number on top (there are multiple of each number, choose one).
3. Read the emotion word.
4. Spin the spinner and follow the instructions indicated on the part you land on. The four options on the spinner are:
  - a. Act out the emotion
  - b. When might someone feel this way?
  - c. What can you do to make someone feeling this way feel better?
  - d. What is an emotion that is completely different from this one?
5. If the group agrees that you provided an acceptable answer, place one of your game pieces on that board piece. When all of the pieces are claimed, the game is over. If you

roll a number and there are no available pieces left with that number on it, you miss your turn.



## Side 2: Write and Act Out a Play

Students will be asked to work together in groups of 4 or 5 to write a play based on a main character and an emotion that the main character feels. The main character is determined by rolling the die once and looking up the corresponding character in the table below. Similarly, the emotion felt by the main character is chosen by rolling the die again and finding the corresponding emotion listed in the table. Once these two elements are chosen for each group, students will work together to develop the story behind why the main character feels this way and what happens afterwards.

<b>Rolled #</b>	<b>Character</b>	<b>Emotion</b>
1	An Angry Alien	Happy
2	A Beautiful Princess	Frustrated
3	A Scary Dinosaur	Hurt
4	A Cowboy	Jealous
5	An Evil Witch	Worried
6	A Zombie	Embarrassed

This activity fosters collaboration and creativity among each group. In addition, students will have to use their problem solving skills to ensure that everyone is equally involved in the process and is assigned a task that he or she enjoys. When groups are finished writing their play,

they will perform it for their classmates. As an alternative for students who fear public speaking, groups can put on a puppet show of their play instead of acting it out.

For this activity, Alex will work with the same classmates for several classes. Since his group mates will be relying on him to do his part, it is likely that he will focus and complete this task, rather than choosing not to participate. Also, instead of his classmates ignoring him like they usually do, they will be put in a situation where they have to get to know him and work cooperatively with him. Perhaps this opportunity for them to get to know each other will help Alex form connections that he desperately needs. His classmates may in turn find things they have in common with Alex through interacting with him in this activity. The opportunity to work through problems with individuals he has been placed with may mirror working through issues in his personal life. If he can overcome potential obstacles that he encounters in this group, it may give him the confidence to work through personal struggles at home with his parents.

### **Side 3: Button Blanket**

**Button blanket making activity; gaining insight into Indigenous People's perspectives and developing empathy.**

Some of the most significant areas of the curriculum are those that require students to learn about First Nation's history and culture. In order for students to truly appreciate these elements of the curriculum, they need to have a strong ability to empathise with others and have a deep understanding of the necessity to view issues from a multitude of perspectives. This activity should take place following a social studies unit on First Nation's historical events, so the students understand the importance of preserving and relearning cultural traditions. Alex is undergoing a lot of changes at this time, given his current situation of uprooting, he may be able

to connect in some way to First Nation's people's feelings of unbelonging. It is important to tell students stories of how First Nations people are actively reclaiming their heritage and traditions so they feel hopeful that recovery can happen; and for Alex, and any other student going through a particularly difficult time, they too can heal.

To begin the button blanket making activity, the students will be provided with a list of traditional animal symbols along with their associated meanings. The students will be asked to select an animal symbol based on their connection to its meaning. The students will be given ample time to complete the project at school, using the provided materials. The blankets can be made out of a variety of different materials, but for this particular activity, students will make the blankets out of a standard size piece of black felt. Their symbols will be cut from red felt using stencils and attached to the black felt with glue. Students may also use red felt to create borders on their blankets. Lastly, the students will then glue buttons in a decorative fashion around the blanket until they are satisfied with the appearance of their work.



After the students have all completed their blankets they will share their work with their peers. They will first share in small groups and then be given the option to share with the whole



class. One of the most significant elements of their sharing will be to explain how they felt connected with their chosen animal symbol. This activity provides students with the chance to learn about themselves through making connections to animals. When students share their blankets with their classmates and hear the reasoning behind why they chose their animals, they can make connections with each other and perhaps form friendships with people they may not have formed relationships with otherwise.

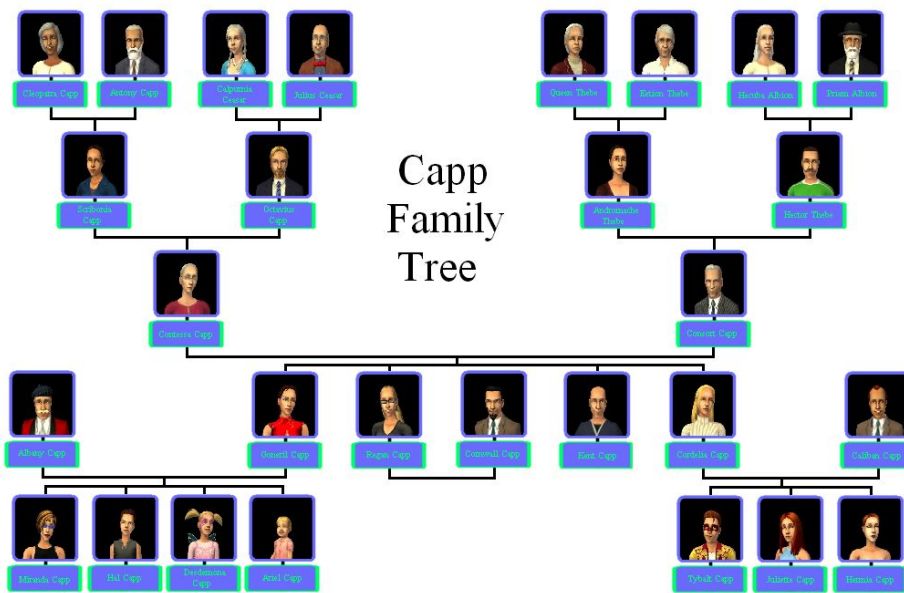
#### **Side 4: Create a Family Tree**

Creating a family tree can help students learn more about their families and find out information they may not have previously known. In this activity, students will be asked to create a family tree using pictures they have drawn themselves, or photographs from home. Under each picture or photograph, students will have to write the name of the family member. They will create an accurate family tree including a minimum of three generations in addition to their own. Students will also be asked to write about the origin of their families, or something that they did not know about their families before. Each student will be asked to briefly share their family tree with the class.

Family trees can be created using cardstock or bristol board as the background, and then using a black marker to make the connections between family members. Please see the picture below for an example. Students can also have the option of creating a tree using paints and have a more realistic looking tree, where they can glue their pictures on the tree branches.

Although Alex is struggling with a new family structure, he may benefit from learning more about his family. It could give him the opportunity to spend more time with his

grandmother, who he speaks very highly of. Focusing on his family through this activity may help him come to terms with his parents' separation. He may also make stronger connections with his family members through gathering information, thus strengthening his sense of family. While watching and listening to his classmates present their family trees, he may find that his peers have similar family backgrounds or structures. This is another way for Alex to make connections with his classmates.



**Discussion Questions or Possible Presentation Topics:**

What did you learn about your family?

Did anything surprise you?

Is there anyone you haven't met before? If yes, what do you wish you knew about them?

### **Side 5: *Wonder* Inspired Art**

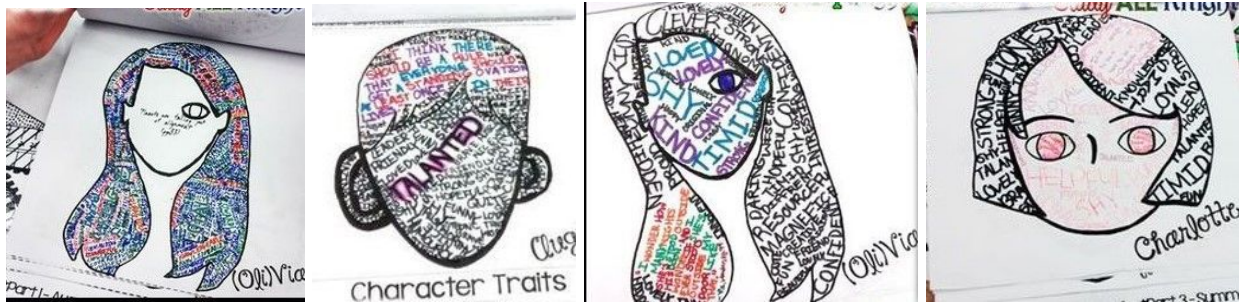
**Art activity related to developing empathy and perspective following the completion of the novel *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio.**

Given that Alex is quite withdrawn from both academic and social engagement, we would like to offer Alex some activities that will allow for some autonomy, which might open up his creative side. The goal is that these activities provide opportunities to create artistic pieces of evidence of his learning while in gentle collaboration with his peers. If Alex becomes engaged during the lessons, he may enjoy a degree of diversion from his likely feelings of concern over his parents separation and his continued detachment from his peers, so that he might be better able to focus on his studies.

Other areas of the curriculum have allowed us to explore empathy, perspective and kindness through reading the book *Wonder*. This particular art activity builds off of that reading and the other associated activities. Most of the activities related to the lesson plan are related to the english language arts curriculum components so it was important to include activities that would allow for some visual creativity thereby incorporating the grade six art curriculum. This activity allows students to visually represent themselves in a drawing parallel to the cover of the *Wonder* novel. It will encourage students to think about their own individual qualities, with a special focus on the ways in which they are kind, thoughtful, empathetic, and vulnerable. The portion of the activity where they draw an image of a time when they felt different or vulnerable in some way allows them to share those experiences with their peers and it is the hope that during this sharing, the students will be able to relate, in some way, to the perspectives of their

peers and thereby further develop their ability to empathize with others. This activity also provides students with an opportunity to compare the similarities and differences amongst one another after their projects are completed. Discussions about accepting and celebrating people's differences will be led by the teacher throughout the course of the unit as well as the activity.

The activity would be initiated once the class has completed reading the novel and participated in other learning activities relating to the novel. The class would be given a large (18 x 24) piece of paper. On one side of the paper, the students would be instructed to create a visual work incorporating words describing their own characteristics that relate to kindness, empathy, understanding and good nature, as well as traits that they feel may make them vulnerable (see images of examples).



On the reverse side of the page, the students will be asked to create a drawing depicting an image representative of a time that they felt vulnerable because they felt different from everyone else. Once the class has completed their drawings, they would share their drawings in small groups, so that they may hear about others' feelings of vulnerability and hopefully gain some perspective on that person's feelings during their highlighted experience. The students would also think about and discuss ways in which they can act appropriately when observing someone else's differences and vulnerabilities. The students would share in groups of three or

four so that those who do not feel comfortable sharing in front of the class would not need to do so in order to gain the benefit of perspective. Students may be given the opportunity to rotate through small groups, giving them the chance to share and learn from even more students. Students will also be given the opportunity to share their experiences with the class as a whole if they are comfortable doing so. In learning about his peers, Alex may be able to connect with students who are having similar experiences and this might provide an opportunity for him to begin forming friendships.

### **Side 6: All About Me Bags**

**All about me bags; an exploration of self and opportunity for insight into others, promoting further development of empathic ability and understanding of the value of alternate perspective.**

It is important for all children to be given the opportunity to express themselves, to share who they are, in an environment that supports uniqueness rather than casting judgment. Students in grade six might be feeling a lot of peer pressure to 'fit in.' That is why we have chosen to have the students participate in an activity that encourages them to share their unique selves, their interests, likes and dislikes, hopes and dreams and any other information they would like to share. As mentioned previously, Alex is fairly new to the school and it is crucial to his well being that he feels like he belongs. Considering that his parents are going through the process of separation, Alex may be feeling neglected or even somewhat responsible for his parents getting a divorce. The goal of this activity for Alex, and others with similar concerns regarding sense of self or confidence, is to allow for a safe space for students to get to know one another better. This

activity also encourages a growing ability for empathy and for being able to see a situation from someone else's perspective.

To begin the activity, all of the students will be given a paper bag and given a couple of days to complete the project; some in class time as well as the opportunity to work on it at home. The students will be asked to find images or words that describe them in some way. They will be instructed to place these items either on the outside of the bag with glue or simply placed inside of the bag. The items that the students choose to display on the outside of the bag should be items that represent characteristics that they readily show to others. Some examples could be family members, pets, hobbies, favorite quotes or favorite foods. The items that are placed inside of the bag are items that represent meaningful characteristics that help to make them who they are, but are usually kept hidden or secret or are only shown to people with whom they are close to. Some examples might be a dream or a goal they are reluctant to share, past negative experiences, things they do not like about themselves or are afraid will be misinterpreted.



The process of both choosing the items, as well as choosing whether to put them on the outside or inside of the bag encourages them to think about who they are, why they show the things they do and why they hide the things they do. Once the outsides of the students bags are shared, students may see things on the outsides of others bags that they themselves have chosen to put on the inside. Maybe then they will question whether or not they really need to hide this particular quality if someone else is not afraid to share a similar quality. It helps people to know that they are not alone in the things that make them feel uncomfortable or like an outsider. During the process of sharing and discussing the outside of each bag provides another opportunity for students to learn about their peers strengths and vulnerabilities, thereby allowing opportunity for understanding empathy and perspective.

### **Theorists**

The activities listed above utilize theories put forth by Vygotsky and Piaget. Vygotsky “states cognitive development stems from social interactions from guided learning within the zone of proximal development as children and their partners co-construct knowledge” (McLeod, 2014, para.7). Each of the activities have been designed so that they include some level of social interaction so that the students may gain knowledge through the ideas, statements, and actions of their peers. Piaget describes children of this age as nearing the end of the concrete operational stage, marked by an emergence of logical or operational thought (Crain, 2016). Further, children at this age will soon be moving into the formal operational stage where they will develop the ability to think about abstract concepts (Crain, 2016). The focus concepts, empathy and perspective, throughout this series of activities can be considered to be abstract; abstract is defined by Google Dictionary as “existing in thought or as an idea but not having a physical or

concrete existence ‘abstract concepts such as love or beauty.’” Therefore, as pertaining to Piaget’s stages of development, the students in this age group are capable of integrating abstract thinking, such as empathy and perspective, into learning expeditions.

The idea that Alex may not feel safe in his new school, and his failure to make connections with his peers and his teacher can be explained by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943). According to Maslow, individuals “are motivated to achieve certain needs and that some needs take precedence over others” (McLeod, 2017, para. 2). If Alex does not feel safe at his new school or at home, he will not be able to meet his need for love and belonging because his safety needs have not yet been met. His lack of motivation to start and complete his school work can be explained by the fact that perhaps his need for safety and love and belonging are not met. His esteem needs, which includes a sense of accomplishment will not be something that Alex strives for until his more fundamental needs are fulfilled.

### **Conclusion**

The six activities described above are all ways in which Alex can begin making connections with his peers, as well as ways for him to begin exploring his emotions regarding his changing family structure, new school, and lack of interpersonal relationships. The more Alex immerses himself in classroom activities, the more he and his classmates will get to know each other, leading to inclusion. Since art has many different streams and it is a collaborative subject, Alex may find a new interest and a reason to stay motivated in the classroom.



## References

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