

How can I serve the social/emotional needs of students within a gifted self-contained class?

Wanda Backus-Kelly

Biography



In biographical terms, Wanda would describe herself first and foremost as a mother. “I only work full-time to support my husband’s hobbies,” she says. Deciding that if she had to be away from her children, she’d better find a way to enjoy it, Wanda jumped at the chance to teach Grand Erie’s first gifted self-contained class. “I was literally in the right place at the right time or I would never have even seen the posting! A sure case of fate?!” Wanda recalls. Vascillating daily between utter euphoria and sheer panic, Wanda nevertheless has neither regretted taking on the challenge nor wished for the greener pastures of another placement. Wanda hopes that at the time this research is published this new initiative is rolling smoothly into its second year, and that at least some of the findings from this research are helping to make for a better overall experience for the students involved, in her classroom and others.

Reluctant Pioneers: Into the Wilderness...

First day of school, September 2004. Ten wary-looking students, scrubbed and newly outfitted, gingerly took their seats in the circle of desks I had arranged in Grand Erie District School Board’s (GEDSB) first self-contained class for the gifted. I smiled and gushed about us “making history” in this new venture and how exciting such an undertaking was, especially since this was also a pilot project. The polite, and somewhat coached, responses around the room did not mirror my enthusiasm. How was I ever going to make this work?

As the days went on and the class, thankfully, began to meld and to become more comfortable, I learned more about these pioneering youth. While eating lunch with the students one day, I, working at my desk, and they, seated in their semi-circle, bantering back and forth little tidbits of their lives and personal stories, the subject of what brought them to this class was broached very innocently by one of the Grade Six boys when the subject of favourite sports came up.

“Next year, when I go back to (name of home school),” he started, between mouthfuls, “I’m gonna join soccer.”

“Whaddya mean, go back?” interjected another boy. “Don’t cha like this class?”

“Yeah, it’s good. But I miss my old school. My mom said I hadda try this for a year, and if I didn’t like it I could go back to (home school).”

A loud outburst of kindred identification followed.

“Yeah, that’s what my mom said...”,

“My dad made me come...I didn’t have a choice,”

“My mom just said to me ‘You’re going. No discussion.’”,

“My parents said if I didn’t like it after the first week, that I could go back to my old school. But then they wouldn’t let me. They said I didn’t give it enough of a chance...”

“My mom said I wasn’t (makes quotes signs with fingers) ‘working to my full potential’ in school and this would be better, but I miss my friends.”

(Personal Journal, recorded Nov. 6)

By this time I was standing near the circle of desks and must have had a very strange look on my face because all the taking stopped and the group stared back at me, food half-way to mouths, curiously looking at me looking at them as if to say “What...? Was it something we said?” I realized for the first time the incredible task I was asking of these students: leave your established peer groups at an age when peers are everything, in schools where you have been for years, being accustomed to receiving very good marks and in most cases not having to work for them, and come to what can only be seen to a child as a great unknown: more peers to interact with on the playground and in integrated subjects, long bus rides where there may have not been any in past years of education, a multi-storied building, rotation through several teachers and be ready to embrace the ‘more enabling environment’, where marks may begin to reflect the “more appropriate placement” and go down to Bs, or lower, meaning, for some children, that the student might actually have to start to work for a change. The hope is that this will all be overshadowed by the advantages a gifted learner seeks from this sort of placement and soon be eclipsed by the enjoyment of the challenge and the freedom that can bring to this kind of student’s learning.

But what if that isn’t enough? What if we give that students the academic ‘moon and stars’ and it still doesn’t make them happy about being in a gifted self-contained class? What then? Here in lies the question that has driven my action research this year.

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Knowing from the work GEDSB has done around the guiding principles of special education, that the role of the classroom teacher is paramount to the success of his or her students, I felt a sudden queasy mix of empowerment, panic and hope: “I can help! I have to help...there is no other help but me.” As the students slowly got to feel more comfortable with each other and me, I began to truly understand their misgivings about their new placement, I was the one who would become the ‘first line’ of response. I needed to be the one to seek out the agencies, resources, support systems, etc, as needed, to do whatever could be done to make the students more comfortable socially and emotionally within their new placements. The following describes the means I used to achieve these ends.

A home in a New Land: Meeting the natives...

Even before I’d met the children or started the year, I realized the need to begin my relationship with the staff at Elgin in the most positive light possible. I went, quite literally, hat in hand, to the rotation teachers, to politely introduce myself and explain that I had students coming into their French or Phys. Ed classes. Establishing a good rapport with my colleagues up front would stand in good stead for later consideration and allowances around our class’s field trips, bi-weekly walks to the library,

missed classes due to guest speakers running overtime, as well as a host of other special adjustments on the specials teachers' parts for my students due to the fact that sometimes our day would not follow the rest of the school's timetable.

The first of these such investments paid off when I needed to respond to a concern from the only Grade 5 student in the class. "Bill" complained that he didn't like going to Physical Education class with one of the other Grade 5 classes in the school because he felt isolated. He wondered if he could take gym with the Grade 6 students in our class, and thankfully, the teacher of the Grade 6 class was agreeable to adding another body to his already large class, and to assessing Bill using the Grade 5 curriculum.

Another initial problem at the first of the school year had to do with problems on the playground: being the new kid, and a smart kid to boot is probably the last place any child wants to find themselves. For the first few weeks, the students from this class hung together very closely on the yard, playing with sports equipment brought from home, at their own games. Some attempts on their parts were made to invite other students to join in with their games, but met with little success, in part I think, due to the Elgin population's initial uncertainty with these students. As one young lady from a Grade Six class so succinctly put it when engaging one of this classes's students in conversation during an encounter at recess, "Are you guys mental, er somethin'?" As I heard it related to me at a later date, "Bob", who chose to respond for the group, simply stared back and said in an exasperated tone "No." The group turned and walked away, leaving the giggling Grade 6 girls to make of it what they chose. (Personal Journal)

The other major concern early on in the year had to do with recess. The classroom is one area that can be controlled in terms of the ways in which students within a school react to one another. The teacher sets the tone, instills respect, monitors behaviour and prevents interactions from getting out of hand. What to do about conflicts on the playground is a quintessential problem for any group of students. I certainly couldn't follow the group around at recesses to jump in and defend them, nor would I nor should I. To help alleviate this problem, I sought the help of the principal to access community agencies to implement a playground program that would teach student leaders from across the school population how to play cooperative games that they could then teach other students on the playground. With these sorts of activities in place, my students might be more likely to find a group to join in, as this would be something new to everyone that everyone would be curious about trying. Initial investigations went nowhere, but such help is still being sought to start up in September of 2005.

Therefore, to answer the students needs around recess anxiety over the school year, I adopted a more relaxed policy regarding recess: students were encouraged to go out every recess, but could opt to stay in and engage themselves in completing work or a silent activity of their choice, providing I was taking the time to stay in my room anyway to prepare for the next period. Everyone was expected to go out when I had yard duty.

This worked well and over the year more and more of the group began looking forward to recess as a time to play with buddies they were making from other classrooms. At the end of the year, only two members of the group were preferring not to go out a recess. I accommodated them where and

when possible and they worked quietly in the room, respecting my need for a quiet work time by getting to their chosen activity or task quickly and quietly. When I had duty, or couldn't supervise in the room, these two students did go out for recess, choosing to hang around with a group of girls from their French class, and with whom they had taken part in the school musical.

Pilgrim's Progress:

'Albert' was a very extreme case for whom we had to take extreme steps. In mid-January, Albert's parents asked to meet with me to discuss his anxiety around French class and Phys. Ed. class. They reported that they were becoming very concerned about Albert's self-esteem. They had attended a Grade 9 information night with Albert at the high school he was planning to attend in the fall, and that they had seen some of Albert's friends from his home school that evening. They were alarmed that Andrew even didn't feel confident enough to go over to his old group of friends to say hello. In their opinion, Albert's self-confidence had been so badly eroded by that time that other areas of his life were being badly affected. They attributed this to his severe discomfort at having to deal with his peer population at Elgin in French and Phys. Ed. class.

Albert reported feeling an immense sense of intimidation when entering these classes. Although no overt negative instances were experienced by Albert, he did describe an uneasy sense of ill-will from some of the larger, more potentially physically intimidating peers. (Personal Journal Quote, Jan 05)

In Phys. Ed., he did experience having his clothes put into the toilet during one class. He chose to change in the washrooms from the very beginning, and left his clothes in the washroom, instead of bringing them out into the gym or leaving them in the change room. It is not believed that this was a deliberate act against Albert, but rather a bit of "mischief of opportunity" perpetrated by other users of the washroom. The incident did, however, contribute to Albert's growing sense of unease: he loved coming to our class, but would rather have the class anywhere other than Elgin.

So concerned were Albert's parents for his self-esteem, and so hugely was his anxiety impacting on his health, that serious measures needed to be taken. After consulting with the principal and the teachers involved, Albert was excused from attendance to French and Phys. Ed/Health. During those periods he remained in our classroom, and worked on assignments from those classes. The problem remained as to how Albert would be assessed and who would write the report card for those two subjects.

The principal and I met with the two teachers concerned to discuss the situation. Neither teacher was comfortable "teaching from afar" so to speak, so Albert was not assessed in either French or phys. Ed for the last two terms of the school year. He did however, go on to complete the curriculum for French with the help of (GEDSB) French as a Second Language (FSL) consultant and a high school-aged tutor, sought out by the consultant, and paid an hourly fee by Albert's parents. Albert was able to complete the curriculum in order to prepare himself successfully for Gr. 9 French.

B, our youngest member of the class was equally as much of a challenge to offer social-emotional care. B was our only Grade 5 student, and had been reluctant to attend. The summer before our program started, B's homelife changed due to a marriage break-up. B was to spend one week with his mother at her house, and the next with his father at his. B had not chosen on his own to attend

either: he was one of the many who reported being “encouraged” by his parents to attend this class. (Personal Journal)

Thus B can be best described as having come reluctantly to our class. He had the proper criteria for the class: three nines on the CCAT, the test we use in GEDSB to determine giftedness, and his report cards were almost all straight A's. He did not, however, readily respond to the more-enabling environment offered in our gifted class, nor did he always demonstrate initiative around taking on extended depth or breadth of study. As the year wore on, he became increasingly more difficult to motivate, and would often come to class unprepared, lacking the correct materials or simply disinterested.

To combat B's feelings of isolation around being the only Grade 5 student, we shifted his time-table, as already mentioned, to allow him to take phys. ed. with his Grade 6 classmates. Later in the year, towards the end of May, B outright refused to attend for two days, and all his father could get out of him was that “It's too stressful there”, although Beau was unable to clearly articulate what specifically was stressful.

B's parents met with me and with Mrs. Rasokas periodically before this and in response to this to ascertain where B was having the most difficulty and where we could accommodate his needs more fully. B identified the need to go out for all recesses, although there were very few where he was held in to complete work and then only when a tight time-line loomed. He noted some homework to be given in too many “large chunks”, and requested that any homework should only be in smaller pieces. Although I didn't feel as though B ever had much homework, I acquiesced to these requests. He also had requests of his parents, specifically that he should be allowed to play Paintball, a popular combat strategy game that his Mom in particular was not keen on seeing him have any involvement in whatsoever.

It appeared to me that B. was actually trying to gain more control of his life in the little ways he could, and not that he was truly unhappy in the class. I gave up sweating the small stuff: B's unconventional pencil grip, his constant use of an invented style of printing and disdain of cursive. Whatever B was dealing with on the outside was something beyond my scope in the regular classroom. He did adequate jobs as they were asked of him, and they were easily at grade level. Math came very easily to B, as well. Because of these reasons, I stepped back enough to let him work his own way through the end of the year. At the end of the year, he had plans to return to his home school. (Personal Journal, February 18th, 2005)

Supporting the Gifted Learner around Curriculum Compacting Advanced Courses:

One of the Grade 8 students responded very well to the challenge of compacting her French study in order to access Grade 9 French at our local high school beginning in the second term of the school year (about early February). Compacting involves encapsulating the curriculum of a particular subject into as focused an approach as possible and finishing the course more quickly than a regular school year would require, and is often a component of a student's gifted program. As it was the first situation of it's kind to our knowledge in the Norfolk family of schools, this was uncharted territory.

J's mom was the one to put forward the question initially, and my principal sought the permission of our superintendent after consulting with the Principal Leader of Special Education, the principal of our local high school and Elgin's French teacher. After the input of all parties concerned was heard, and after we were given the go ahead by our superintendent, my principal and I then sought the help of our family of school's FSL consultant, who liaised with the high school's French department head to arrange registration in high school and a timetable for the student.

J had to receive support to make up lessons missed during her two hours away from our class and needed extra time with me to help her prioritize assignments. As the high school French class she attended rotated through a week of an early class and then a week of a later class, J needed to monitor her attendance in phys. ed and health class and meet with that teacher regarding missed work.

All through the bitter winter and into the wet spring, J walked back and forth from Elgin to the high school. I regularly conferenced at the end of the day, usually every day, with J to help her organize and prioritize school work and her busy life of activities outside of school.

Conclusions: The pioneers emerge from the wilderness...

As I write this at the end of June 2005, our pilot project status is now finished and this class has become a "real" class within the spectrum of special education services in GEDSB. A second such class is opening in September 2005 in the Brantford family of schools.

One of our eleven "pioneers" summed up her year very aptly in a slide-show she put together on her own time to tell us "What I like About This Class". For S this year has made quite a difference.

Of the eleven students my class list at the end of the year, two are graduating, six have chosen to return to me in the fall and three have chosen to return to their home schools. The three who have chosen to return to their home schools have cited "missing friends" as the number one reason behind their decisions.

New candidates for this class have visited our class and are currently considering this as an option for the fall. During these visits, I have had the opportunity to use some findings from this research in my dialogue with the parents. Ultimately it is the overall well-being of the student that must be upper most in our minds as we seek to serve the needs of the gifted learner, both academically and socially/emotionally.

I look forward to the next school year and hope to put more of this research to use.