



***The Mind's Eye: Viewing Identity with an Empathetic Lens***

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This curriculum unit is recommended for:  
Second and Third Grade Literacy and Art Classrooms

**Keywords:** characters, compare, contrast, empathy, identity, inferencing, internal traits, external traits, palming, similarities, differences, intuition, schema, portrait

**Teaching Standards:** See [Appendix 1](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

**Synopsis:** This curriculum unit explores the recognition of shared attributes between students and the characters they read about in books. Reading selections will be shared during a read aloud by the teacher in class. Reading these aloud will allow some of the text to be a higher level than second grade, with teacher led discussions to explain unfamiliar vocabulary. Both shared and different physical and internal traits will be discovered through access to their “mind’s eye”. Using strategies such as palming, Venn diagrams, drawings, and photographs students will delve into similarities and differences of these characters, and compare them to their own lives, and their own identities. Through the books we read, we will discuss how to recognize personality traits and which characters they relate to most and least. Recognizing fairness and respecting differences is key to patterning and developing an empathetic nature. Inferencing is a skill that is not only useful in literacy, it will help them develop the necessary empathy to become balanced and productive global citizens. Awareness of the characters motivations, personalities, and physical items that describe the character will be discussed. A reflection into students’ own likes, dislikes, and similar objects that describe them will be included in the unit. Narrowing our focus to the “one thing” that describes them will then be incorporated into a culminating art project.

*I plan to teach this unit during the coming year to 19 students in my second grade class.*

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## Introduction

### Rationale

As a teacher and an artist, I am always amazed at the innate ability of elementary students to create. Even in second grade, they can verbalize a story and write, sometimes at length, about a story and the characters they read about. They may also add illustrations to elaborate on these characters. Exploring these connections and illustrations will be useful as they translate those skills to recognition of shared character traits and different ways to “see” a character they are reading about in a book. “Seeing” a character, through an internal lens, will be helpful to discovering the similarities the students share with them. Recognizing those similarities is a step on a path to empathy and true understanding.

Inferencing is a literacy skill that is higher level than just responding to a character’s physical traits or actions. Inferencing can help students “read between the lines”. Many answers to questions will often not be found “right there” in the text but must be woven together with the words they read and their background knowledge. How do we know Wanda is shy? Why do you think she sits in the back of the classroom? How do you know her classmates are teasing her when it says they “have some fun with her?” Inferencing and using background schema will be key to understanding characters and their actions.

My father passed away suddenly as I was working on this unit. My identity as his daughter will always be with me, but it has changed to memories of shared times together. In my own “mind’s eye” I can refer to these memories and gain comfort. At his funeral, an elderly man in the community approached me and said my father was “like an old Oak Tree, his roots run deep”. Connecting ourselves with nature, in particular trees, will be included in this unit. Ironically, my father had worked with trees his entire life. When my grandfather died, my father was in medical school. Instead of continuing his pursuit of a medical career, he took over his father’s desk and position in a lumber business and continued running that company for almost fifty years. What major events change direction of the lives of characters we read about in stories?

As a child walking with my father on our family farm, he would point out to me the various kinds of trees and explain how some needed to be nearer to a water source, some needed the shelter and protection of nearby trees, and others seemed to thrive in open spaces. He would also point out that humans refer to trees as having shared characteristics with them. We say “the limbs” of a tree, a tree “standing tall”, or a tree “reaching” or “spreading” arms to the sky. How can we also use nature to describe or respond to characters we read about? How are the rings of a tree similar to our own fingerprints? We will use our own fingerprints to explore some of these questions.

My father’s art, as well as my mother’s art, has always been a part of my life. He taught me to draw, and we would do portraits together. My father enjoyed drawing faces because he said you could learn so much about a person by drawing them, and although we all have two eyes, a nose, etc. everyone is unique. In the culminating art project, while teaching my students the grid method of creating portraits, I will share some information that my father taught me about portraiture, and also share portraits that he did of different people.

I had given my father a blank leather journal before my mother passed away. I had asked him to fill it with stories, but had not thought about it since the gift was given. As I was cleaning his bedroom after the funeral, I found the journal under some books by his bed. In the journal he had written stories, including how he and my mother met. It also contained mathematical calculations that he did and general events that suddenly become precious to me to see and read.

What is the one thing that is most precious to each child in my class? What object would define them? What object would they select to define characters they read about? This will be examined and each child will be photographed with their precious object that defines them. The photographs will be a starting point for our individual portraits, and the culminating activity of this unit.

### School/Student Demographics

Selwyn Elementary School is in the Southpark area of Charlotte, North Carolina. Selwyn is part of a large, urban district known as Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools. Selwyn serves students kindergarten through fifth grade. Our school is located on a wooded 212 acre campus adjacent to Alexander Graham Middle School and Myers Park High School. Selwyn has recently achieved an “A” rating based on test scores that showed significant growth. Our enrollment is not significantly transient, and has even increased with the number of students almost doubling over the last 10 years. The population at Selwyn Elementary has increased over the last few years with numbers that were close to 500 expanding to well over 800 students. Current enrollment for this school year is 818. Children in the Selwyn school zone can often continue their education on the same campus shared with the three previously mentioned schools from kindergarten through graduation in high school. Our school consists of 79.6% White, 9% African American, 6.9% Hispanic, 2.3% Asian, and 1.7 % Multi-racial. (Source: Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools- 2017) Our active PTA is extremely committed to providing support for our students and staff. (1)

### Unit Goals

This curriculum unit will focus on how to use our “mind’s eye” to visually “see” characters closely. In viewing them through the lens of their “mind’s eye” students will then discuss and relate to different external and internal traits to see if they share any of them with the characters we read about in our stories. A main goal with second graders will be to have them compare and contrast themselves with characters they read about in stories to find similarities and differences.

In order to still the eyes and mind, we will be using a technique called “palming”. Palming is a relaxation technique that has also been used by optometrists to calm the eyes. By covering one’s eyes with the palms of each hand and subsequently resting elbows on the table, it induces a stillness and calm that could be beneficial for the students to focus their thoughts without distracting stimuli that is often present around them. My father would often use this technique when he was writing a paper, or working on a portrait, and I remember him doing this. He said that it relaxed the eyes, and not only helped focus on the task at hand, but the text or drawing itself.

Viewing diverse characters in an honest, thoughtful way could provide pathways to understanding and accepting differences in others. Chrysanthemum (2) is a story that features a little mouse girl named Chrysanthemum who becomes increasingly sad about children making fun of her name. There are many negative responses in the story from some of the children in her class upon hearing her name as her teacher calls it out. One child says that it scarcely fits on her nametag, while another teases her that she is named after a flower. This child also adds that she, Victoria, was named after her grandmother, as if to suggest that made her name better because of that fact. After reading Chrysanthemum we will be creating art through a names project that will instill the importance of the identity of their name, and respect for others names. Questions to ask the children include: Why did Chrysanthemum “wilt” when her classmates talked negatively about her name? Why is it important to feel good about yourself/your name? Why is it important to respect names of other people?

In the book Same, Same but Different (3) an American boy named Elliot becomes pen pals with Kailash, a boy who lives in India. They find they have many likes and differences through the exchange of pictures and letters. Introducing a Venn Diagram to compare and contrast the characters in the novel will be helpful to discuss the characters from the different books and think of one key object that would describe them. By comparing and contrasting themselves directly with characters in mentor texts, they can directly see connections through their mind’s eye.

What could an American boy attending second grade at a large school in Charlotte possibly have in common with a Polish girl walking to school in a small town setting? As the teacher reads the story The Hundred Dresses (4) aloud, the students will make connections to themselves through questioning the events. The understanding of the classroom setting, the shyness of trying to make friends, and the playground experience of hearing someone say something unkind will be discovered. Students will then link these situations that are already part of their 7 and 8 year olds schema with the new views of others. The goal is that children will recognize this shared experience and through their “mind’s eye” see the relationships that revolve around particular characters, acknowledging them as unfair, no matter the age or race of the character.

For the final lessons in the unit, the teacher will read aloud the book Wonder (5). Reading and discussing this book will provide another opportunity to explore physical versus internal characteristics. The main character in the book is August. He has severe facial abnormalities including a misalignment of his ears and eyes, but is extremely intelligent, has a great sense of humor, and is a good friend to others. We will discuss each character that we have read about, and notice similarities amongst the characters as well as ourselves.

## Content Research

The idea of the “Mind’s Eye” has always fascinated me. The fact that we have the ability to “see” within us, excluding any external visible factors, is not a new idea, but one that can be built upon to strengthen other strategies in teaching. In my research, I came across an activity called palming. It was mentioned in the book Drawing with Children (6) but is based on an exercise devised by William Bates, author of Better Eyesight without Glasses (7). In this exercise, the child rubs their hands together, and then places the palms of their hands over each eye to cover. Resting their elbows on the table in front of them, they continue to close their eyes and keep their hands cupped over their eyes with the heel of their palm on each cheekbone, and their fingers are crossed over their foreheads. With this pose, they are focusing on the area behind each eye. Relaxing the entire body, while concentrating on that area, they breathe deeply and think of the area behind each eye. The relaxed feeling should continue as they open their eyelids slowly. Each class session will begin this way, while encouraging students to remember to “see” with their mind’s eye, looking for interior characteristics in characters in addition to physical characteristics. It is hopeful that this form of meditation at the beginning of each lesson will help them relax and focus.

A quote by Maya Angelou sums up what students may learn from this unit in just a few words. She says, “We are more alike, my friend, than we are unlike”(8). Through reading the different material for this unit, it was found that in order for children to discover their own identity it is helpful to view other’s identities. By relating to other characters, whether by finding similarities or differences, it can lead them to discuss and view themselves. Principles that guide us in the fair treatment of others and how to be respectful and empathetic can offer structure and a set of underlying “rules” for that viewing.

In her book Teaching Tolerance: Raising Open-Minded, Empathetic Children , Sara Bullard lists 8 universal principles that most human beings agree on. These principles are often found in stories, poetry, biblical proverbs, songs, and many other forms of literary communication.

Listed below are 4 of Bullard’s ideal principles are:

1. In some ways, we are just like everyone else on Earth. We all share the same feelings.
2. In some ways, we are different from everyone else on Earth. Each of us has a unique personality and appearance.
3. All people – no matter who they are, where they come from, what they believe, how they act, or what they look like – deserve respect and compassion.
4. We should treat other people the way we want others to treat us (9).

In reading through these principles, it is evident how children’s books often feature these guiding principles and offer simplistic ways of how to get along with others. When the unfamiliar is presented, the simple language above can give children guidance, and a way to see connections with people and things that are different. In our confusing world, how we view others, and subsequently, how we treat them, could be guided by these and practiced. Mere memorization of the above principles may not suffice, it is important that people can view different situations to hopefully let our tolerance be manifested in our actions.

My research involves four children's books. Two are able to be read in one sitting with the students on the carpet while the other two are chapter books which will require reading a few chapters each day. The two shorter books are: Chrysanthemum, by Kevin Henkes, and Same, Same but Different by Jenny Sue Kostricki-Shaw. Starting the unit with these shorter books will allow for immediate discussions prompted by the texts to occur, and these discussions will be referred to as we build on them through the two longer chapter books. The two longer chapter books are: The Hundred Dresses by Eleanor Estes, and Wonder by R.J. Palacio.

Another part of my research involved the work of Chuck Close, and his large paintings. In the book Chuck Close Up Close the artist reveals that he often felt isolated and different as a child. When he was growing up in the 1940's students who had trouble reading, writing, or paying attention were categorized as unintelligent (10). Today we might recognize some of these struggles as dyslexia or other numerous learning disabilities. In his isolation, Close drew and developed skills as an artist. Similarities emerge between Chuck Close and the character Wanda in The Hundred Dresses. By practicing the skills of finding shared characteristics with characters in our stories, students will see a glimpse of themselves.

The book Same, Same but Different was written by Jenny Sue Kosticki-Shaw after traveling through Nepal and India. She learned the popular phrase by hearing natives use it. They spoke of someone being "same, same but different" when comparing cultures. As the lead characters in the book exchange letters and pictures, they recognize the similarities they share, even though their lives and cultures are extremely different. Using this book, in conjunction with a Venn Diagram activity, will help to concretely separate the "same" and the "different", but also let the children reflect of how many more similarities they find when looking closely.

## **Instructional Implementation**

### Teaching Strategies

Metacognitive strategies will be introduced when we use the palming method and “mind’s eye” introduction. Use of graphic organizers and cooperative learning will be used while working on the Venn Diagram of similarities and differences in the book Same, Same but Different . Hands-on participation and tactile experience will be used with the creation of the class tree created with fingerprints. Consistent re-looping of previously learned material and think-alouds will be used while building on the student’s base knowledge and reinforcing it daily as students listen to the chapter books during read alouds. Direct teaching of vocabulary through listening, reading, and writing will be used and relating reading to student’s experiences while having them talk about the connections they make to the characters introduced will also be a strategy. Throughout this unit visuals in selected books will be used to enhance teacher instruction in the content area.

### **Classroom Lessons/Activities**

Before introducing the unit, the teacher will assess current knowledge about character traits using a pretest. This pretest will be a sheet of notebook paper that is folded twice. Go through the folds of hotdog and hamburger to form four separate sections. In the middle of the page, draw a box that encloses a bit of each of the four sections. At the top left side, the student will write their name. At the top right side, the student will write the name of a character from a book that they are reading. The two sections below will be space to list internal and external characteristics, with the box in the middle reserved for shared characteristics that they find. If they do not know the meaning of the words “internal” and “external”, you can use the terms “inside” and “outside” to help them understand the concept.

Save the notebook paper for the posttest. The posttest will be on the back of the notebook paper, using the same four separate sections. The student will list the internal and external characteristics of themselves using more detail than previously listed in their pretest. The students will list internal and external characteristics of one of the characters we have read about in the unit, and use the shared box in the middle to show the shared characteristics that they discovered.

#### Activity #1 Investigating My Name: Roll and Tell

After reading the book Chrysanthemum, the students will create dice out of printed cardstock that lists six questions for them to ask an adult or parent at home. This “homework” will be an investigative way for the class to “roll the dice” and learn more about the origins of their names. Answers should be recorded on a separate sheet each student brings to share with members of the class. (See Figures 1, 2, and 3)

## Activity #2 Creating a Classroom Tree

Students will create a classroom tree with each of their names on an individual leaf. After the names are written on each leaf, the students will apply fingerprints using a green, yellow, and red stamp pad. Using their own fingerprints, students will create individual leaves on a class tree. In comparison to the related material on trees, which characters are nearer others? Which characters thrive on their own and are more independent? Which ones “bloom” and which ones “wilt”? As an extension activity, each student may choose a character trait that represents them to add to their leaves. (See Figures 4 and 5)

## Activity #3 Using a grid to show patterns with our names

After showing students the 1 inch grid paper, the teacher will model how to write a name continuously on the grid paper. Each individual letter should be the same color for the pattern to show. (See Figures 6, 7, 8 and 9)

## Activity #4 Hula Hoop Venn Diagram

The book Same, Same but Different will be discussed using a Venn Diagram. Two large hula hoops will be overlapped to form a Venn Diagram on the floor. The class will gather around the hula hoops and we will fill out index cards listing descriptions of Elliot and Kailash. Two students could step inside. These two children could represent Elliot and Kailash. The class could hand them the characteristics on notecards that are unique to the character assigned to each circle, and the shared items could go in the intersection space, or lens. The children inside the circles could then read out the characteristics, and place them around them in each circle. They could also read the shared characteristics with the class, and debate whether any others could be included.



## Activity #5 Culminating Portrait Activity

The Hundred Dresses involves the mistreatment a shy student who was teased by members of her class. Discuss the isolation of the student in the story and what would happen if someone in our class was being treated that way. Which child in the story do the students identify as similar to themselves? Would empathy from her classmates have helped Wanda in her struggle to fit in and be accepted by her peers?

The students will be shown video clips of Chuck Close working on his paintings, I will introduce his method of breaking down the whole into individual parts. In several of his paintings, Close would forego the brush and use his fingertips to paint the portrait. Referring to his use of fingerprints, he said, "I like to use the body as a tool for painting. In a funny way you usually have to feel through a brush, through a pencil. But there's this object between the body and the surface of the canvas." Throughout the reading of Wonder I will continue the questioning of which characters they feel they are most like, and which ones they are not like. Even the cover of the book sparks the children's imagination because there is not a specific rendering of what the main character looks like. The main character, named August Pullman, has facial deformities since birth, but his friends know he is smart, funny, and a kind person. The students at school who are not August's friends, and who actually seek out ways to isolate him, will lead second graders to discussions of fairness. What would you say to a friend who was behaving this way? If you say nothing, do you add to the problem? We will ask and answer questions such as: How is Elliot similar to Kailash? How is Wanda like August? Are their similarities that we can find with all of the characters? How would you draw August? How would you draw other characters? How would you draw yourself? Using the artist Chuck Close's portraits, we will create our own grids that show different "pieces" of ourselves. (See Figure 10)

This book that will take several class read aloud sessions to finish. While we are learning about August's identity, each member of the class will create a portrait based on a grid shown in the art of Chuck Close. Black and white photographs of each student will be enlarged, cut, and attached to a blank canvas, or large watercolor paper. A grid will be formed using a straight edge to break each section into 1 inch boxes. Students may use paint or colored pencils to form designs in each grid. A reminder should be given that the viewer should be able to see the black and white image underneath.

A post-test will also be administered to check for understanding of character traits.

**Figure 1**

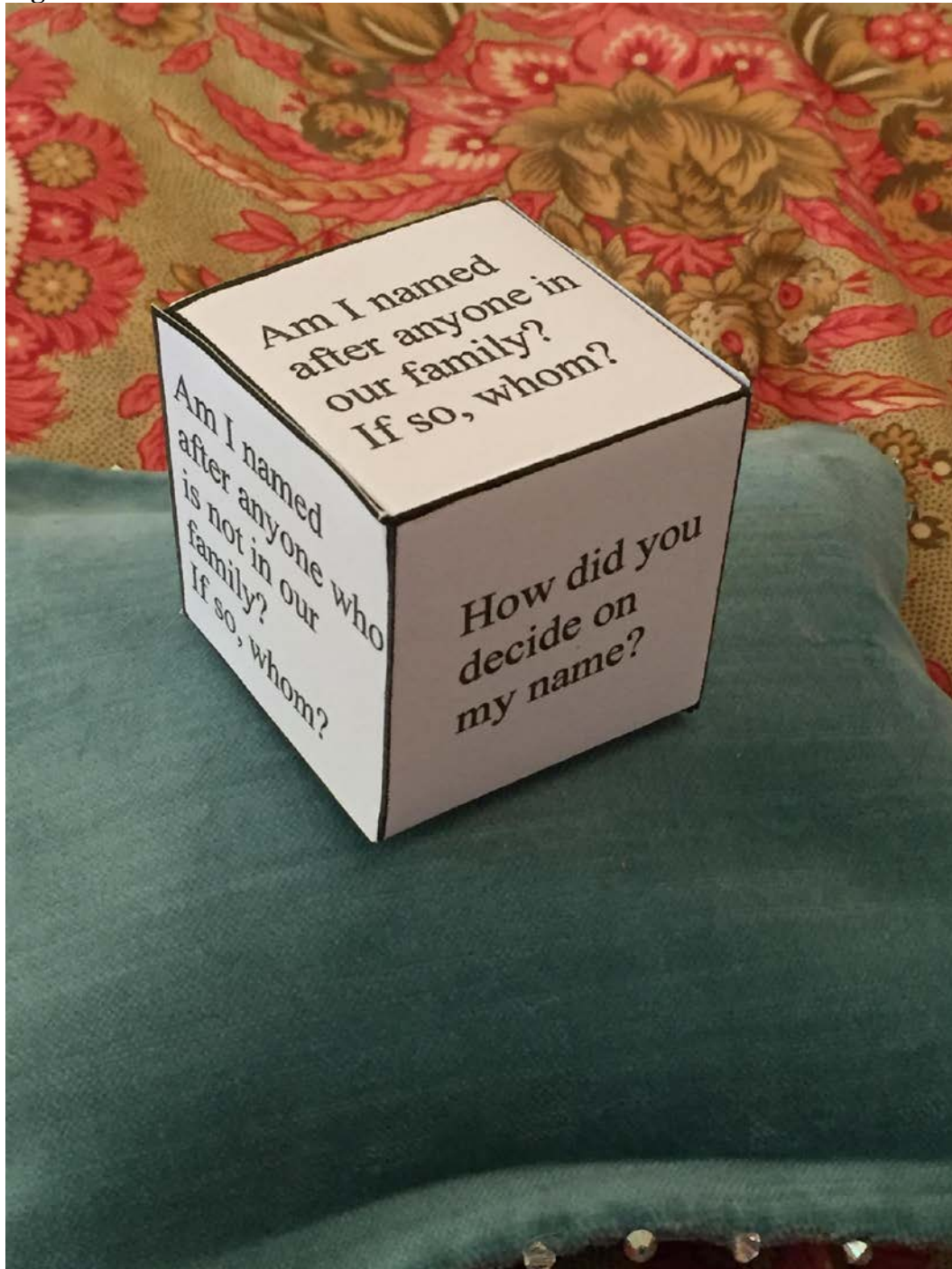


Figure 2

Am I named after anyone in our family?  
If so, whom?

Am I named after anyone who is not in our family?  
If so, whom?

How did you decide on my name?

Where did you get your idea for my name?

Did you consider any other names for me?

Was it hard deciding on a name for me?  
Why or why not?

The figure shows a net for a cube. It consists of six rectangular panels arranged in a cross shape. The top panel is connected to the middle-left, middle-center, and middle-right panels. The middle-center panel is connected to the middle-left and middle-right panels. The middle-left panel is connected to the middle-center panel. The middle-right panel is connected to the middle-center panel. The middle-center panel is connected to the bottom-center panel. The bottom-center panel is connected to the middle-center panel. Each panel contains a question related to naming.

Figure 3

## Roll and Tell

Using the information on the dice, interview your parents about your name. Roll and tell about each question as you land on it.

My name: \_\_\_\_\_ Parent: \_\_\_\_\_

1. How did you decide on my name?
2. Where did you get your idea for my name?
3. Am I named after anyone in our family? If so, whom?
4. Am I named after anyone who is not in our family? If so, whom?
5. Was it hard deciding on a name for me? Why or why not?
6. Did you consider any other names for me?

Figure 4

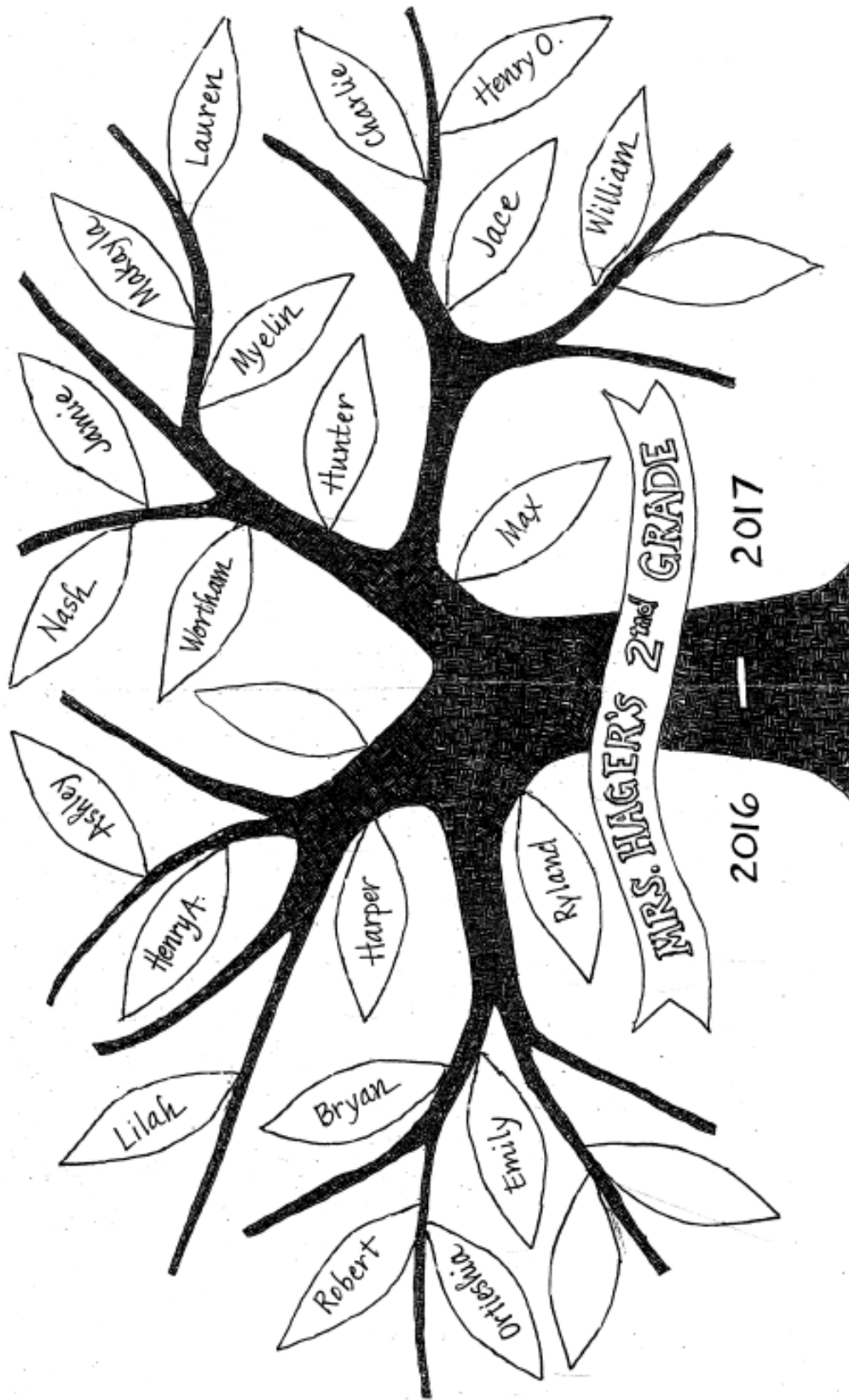


Figure 5

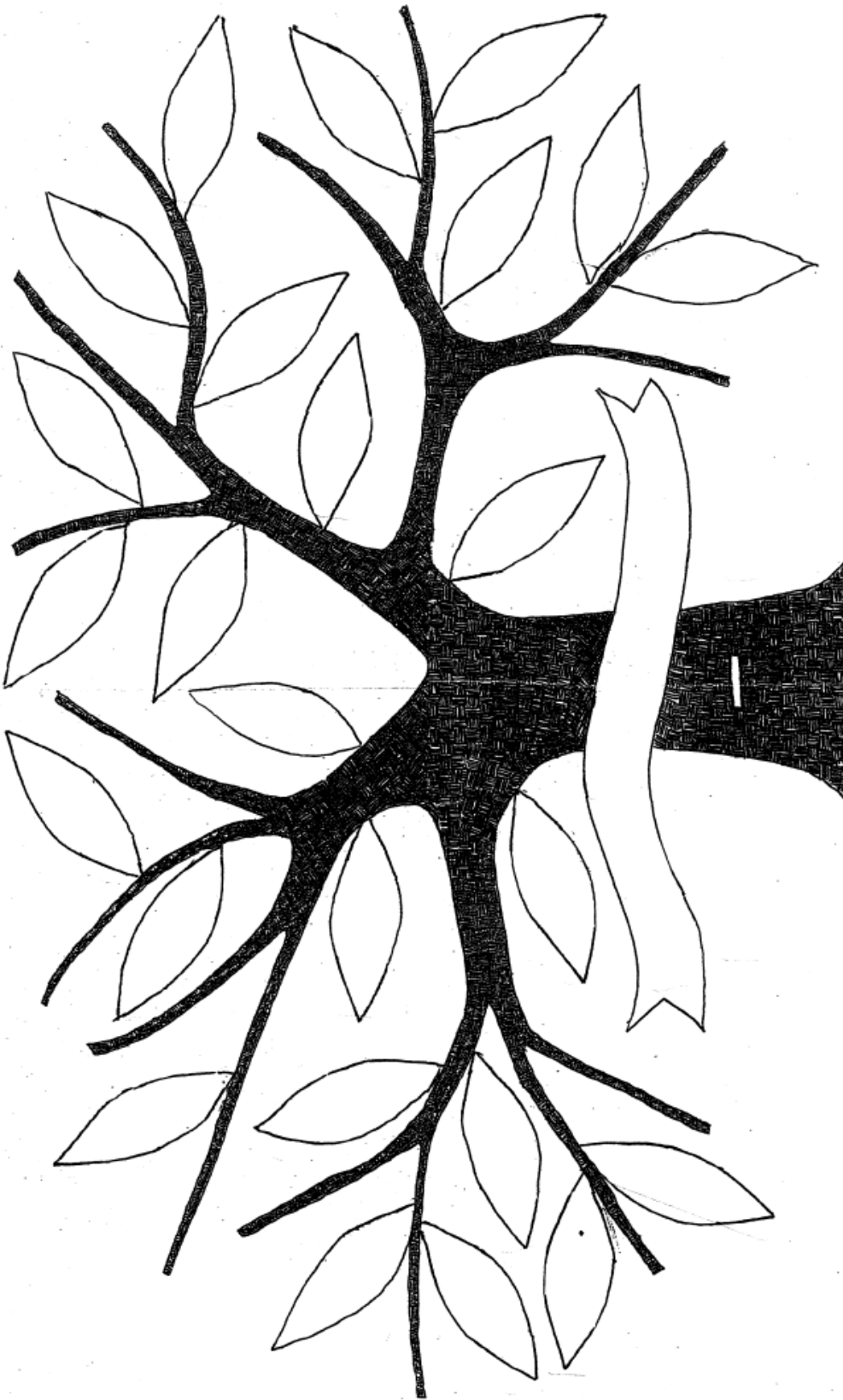




Figure 7





Figure 8

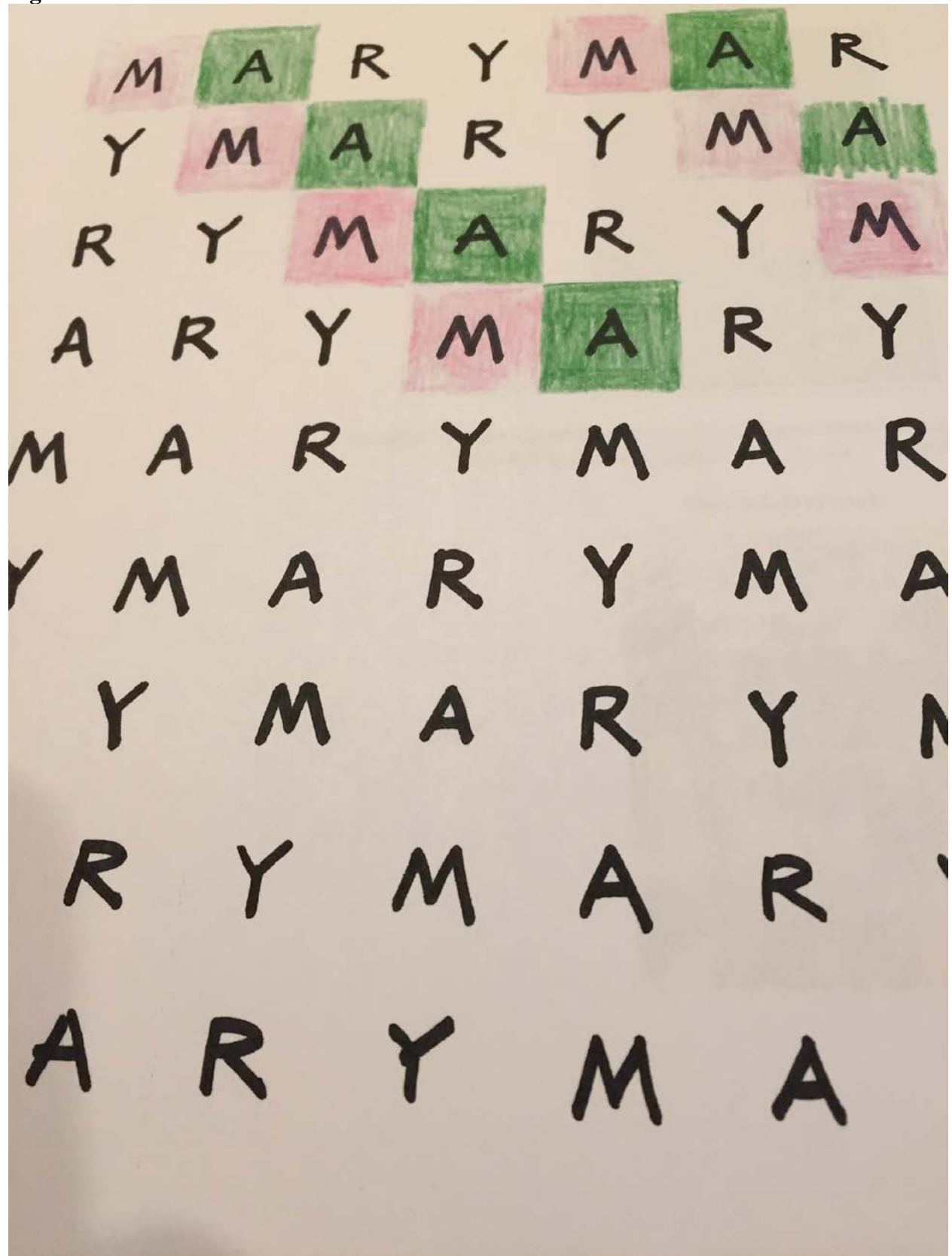
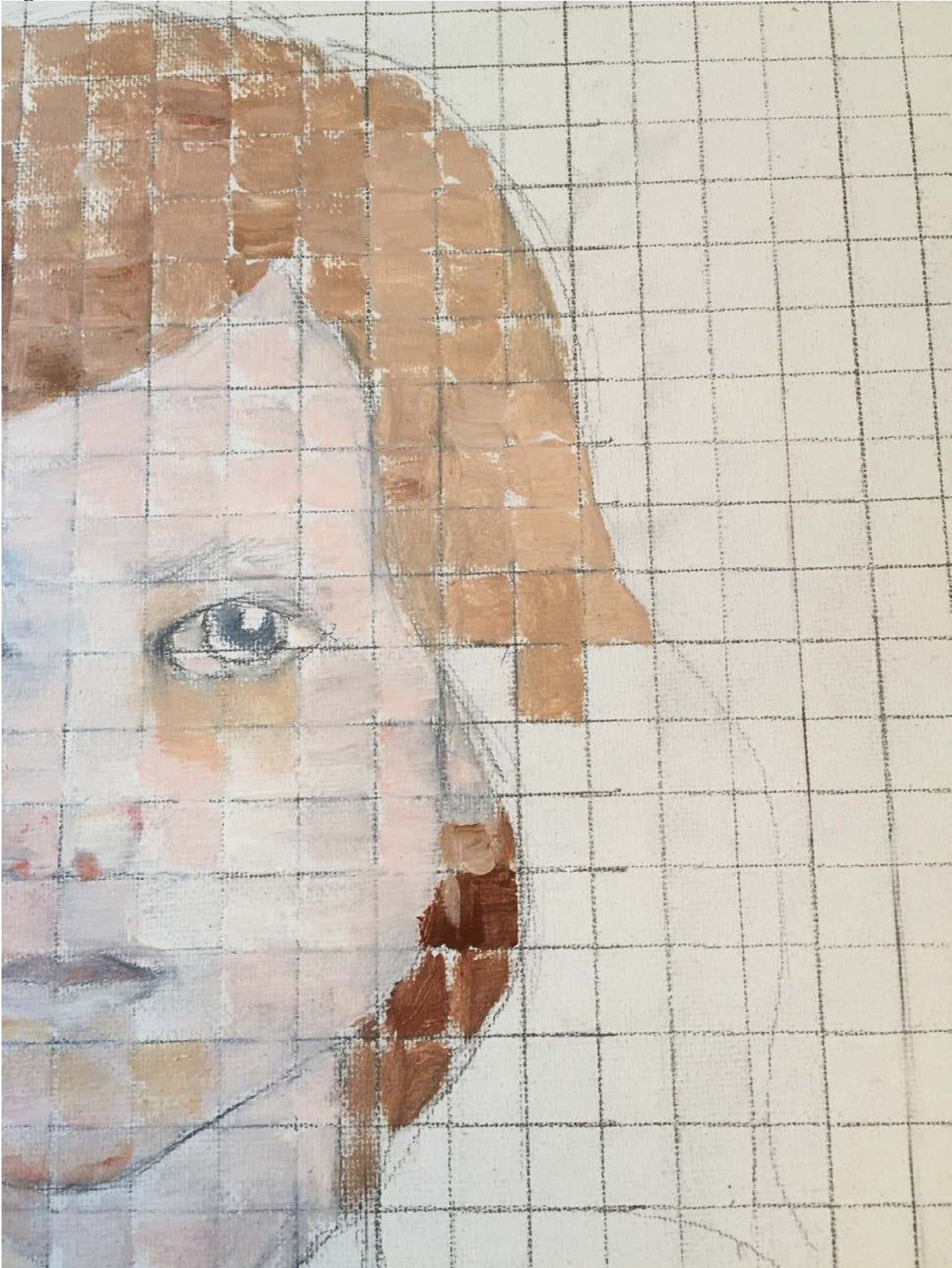


Figure 9





Figure 10



## **Appendix 1**

**Teaching Standards:** (Appendix 1 hyperlink will be added later) and will include four Common Core standards for the unit. Three of the standards will focus on Literature and these include: Standard (RL.2.3) that focuses on describing how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges, Standard (RL.2.6) which focuses on acknowledging differences in the points of views of characters, and Standard (RL.2.7) which focuses on using information gained from the illustrations and words in a print of digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot. An Art Standard will also be included. Standard 2.4, listed under communication and expression through original works of art, will also be addressed as we create our portraits.

## Notes

- 1Selwyn School Improvement Plan (Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools, 2017)
- 2Kevin Henkes, *Chrysanthemum* (New York: Greenwillow Books, 1991)
- 3Jenny Sue Kostecki-Shaw, *Same, Same but Different* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011)
- 4Eleanor Estes, *The Hundred Dresses* (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt, Inc., 1944)
- 5R.J. Palacio, *Wonder* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012)
- 6Mona Brookes, *Drawing with Children* (Los Angeles, CA: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc, 1986)
- 7William Bates, *The Bates Method for Better Eyesight Without Glasses* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1940)
- 8Maya Angelou, *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (New York: Random House, 1994)
- 9Sara Bullard, *Teaching Tolerance: Raising Open Minded, Empathetic Children* (New York: Doubleday, 1986)
- 10Chuck Close, Joan Sommers, Amanda Freymann, and Ascha Drake, *Chuck Close: face book* (New York: Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2012)

## Unit Resources

- Angelou, Maya, *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. New York: Random House, 1994, Print.
- Bates, William, *The Bates Method for Better Eyesight Without Glasses*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1940, Print.
- Borba, Michelle. *Unselfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World*. New York: Touchstone, 2016, Print.
- Brookes, Mona. *Drawing with Children*. Los Angeles, Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc. 1986, Print.
- Bullard, Sara. *Teaching Tolerance: Raising Open Minded, Empathetic Children*. New York: Doubleday, 1996, Print.
- Close, Chuck, Joan Sommers, Amanda Freymann, and Ascha Drake. *Chuck Close: face book*. New York: Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2012, Print.
- Edwards, Betty, *Drawing on the Artist Within*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1986, Print.
- Estes, Eleanor. *The Hundred Dresses*. Orlando, Florida: Harcourt, Inc., 1944, Print.
- Henkes, Kevin. *Chrysanthemum*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1991, Print.
- Greenberg, Jan and Sandra Jordan. *Chuck Close Up Close*. New York: DK Publishing, 1998, Print.
- Killen, Melanie and Adam Rutland. *Children and Social Exclusion: Morality, Prejudice, and Group Identity*. Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, Print.
- Kostecki-Shaw, Jenny Sue. *Same, Same but Different*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011, Print.
- Palacio, R.J. *Wonder*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011, Print.

### *Video Clips featuring Chuck Close*

Chuck Close on following the grid – Youtube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-p5MOvhZ1>

CBS This Morning – Artist Chuck Close writes notes to his younger self

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=milXH-433vs>