



ART ON PURPOSE

"Art is a place for children to learn to trust their ideas, themselves, and to explore what is possible."

—Maryann F. Kohl

OVERVIEW

Students learn about and explore what is meaningful to them through art.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- At the beginning of the year, to get to know your students, and let them get to know each other
- At the end of the year, to check in on goals and development
- Anytime during the year, to inspire meaning-making and connections
- To create classroom community

TIME REQUIRED

- One class session

LEVEL

- PreK/Lower Elementary

MATERIALS

- Writing/drawing materials
- Sample [Purpose People Template](#)

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Explore what *purpose* means
- Think about what things matter most to them
- Imagine what they might like to do in the future

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Humanity
- Purpose
- Meaning

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-awareness
- Social awareness
- Responsible decision-making

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open awareness

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to reflect on your own purpose.
- How are your personal values or the things most important to you reflected in your life goals and purpose?
- For more exploration about your own purpose, check out this course, "[Purpose Across the Lifespan](#)"
- Consider creating your own Purpose Person, as an example to your students, and to share a little about yourself.

INSTRUCTIONS

THE PRACTICE

Step 1: What is Purpose

- **Tell students:**
 - *Today we are going to explore "purpose." What do you think purpose means?*
 - *Purpose means wanting to do things in life – that we enjoy and that mean something to us – but also that might help the world.*

- *We all have different things that live in our hearts – things we care about and think are important. We are going to do some art today to explore what lives in our hearts.*

Step 2: Brainstorm

- **Tell students:**
 - *First, can we brainstorm together some things that are important to us or for a happy world?*
- Provide some examples: "I think it is really important to [help other people]". *What are some other ideas?*
 - *Examples: Help our planet, take care of those who need us, be fair, share, keep people safe, make sure everyone has food to eat, make sure everyone has somewhere to live, recycle, help animals.*

Step 3: Purpose People - Reflection

- **Tell students:**
 - *On the first person outline on your page, I would like you to draw yourself. You can fill in the details of your face and hair. Maybe you can draw your favourite outfit on your body.*
 - *Then – in the little heart shapes around that person, can you draw some of the most important things to you? They could be some of the things we talked about. It could also be things like, family, friends, pets, special items at home?*

Step 4: Purpose People - Imagine

- **Tell students:**
 - *Now on the second person outline, we are going to draw ourselves again – as a grown up!*
 - *What do you think you will look like? Will your hair be longer? A different colour? What clothes do you think you'll like to wear when you are a grown up?*
 - *Then, can you draw yourself doing something that you would love to do for the world that makes it a better place? Use your imagination – you can do anything! It can be a big or a little idea.*

DISCUSSION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- **Tell students:**
 - *How was that activity? Was it easy or hard to think of things that were important to you?*
 - *What about imagining what you would like to do for the world to make it better? Was it easy or hard to come up with an idea? It's ok if it was hard – you have lots of time to think about that. And even grown-ups change their minds a lot!*
 - *Does anything you drew in the little hearts match what you drew yourself doing later in life?*
 - *What do you want to learn more about in school – that could help you to do what you want later?*

EXTENSIONS

- This can be used as a community building activity – where you can post your students' drawings on the wall and they can share their ideas with each other.
- You can also repeat this activity – at the beginning and end of the year – to see how students' interests change, and how their thoughts around purpose evolve over time.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Were there any barriers for students to participate? If you were to try this again, what might you modify or try differently next time?
- Did you learn anything new about any of your students?
- How might you connect some of what they shared in their drawings with your teachings in the coming weeks? Are there any interests that could be woven into lessons?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In her [study](#) of 14 diverse elementary school students from a charter school in California, purpose expert Dr. Heather Malin found that children used art to explore their interests, express themselves, and make meaning of the world around them – important precursors to developing a sense of purpose.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Scientists [define](#) purpose as a commitment to accomplish something that is meaningful to you personally, and that makes a difference in the world. Having a strong sense of purpose in life has been linked to greater [well-being](#), [resilience](#), and even [longevity](#). Students with purpose find more [motivation and fulfillment](#) in their schoolwork and tend to be more [successful in school](#) as well.

The foundations for developing a life of purpose begin in early childhood. [Art](#) has been shown to be a very effective way for children to explore meaning-making and their own identities, helping them to “connect their inner lives with their social and cultural surroundings.

SOURCE

Jenna Whitehead, PhD, [Simon Fraser University](#)