

## Chapter 4

# Supporting Albert

### CASE 2: TRANSITIONS

**Crosscutting Themes:** Parents/Caregivers/Family, Relationships/Trust, Communication, Collaboration.

**Leadership Competencies:** Communication, Collaboration, Values Inclusion, Professional Learning.

#### Samuel Bakar's Perspective

I am a grade four teacher at Cedarview Elementary School. My class this year is unique because most of the students identify as male. The boys in the class have a lot of energy and can quickly increase the energy of the whole class. Most days, it is a struggle to get through a whole lesson without being interrupted numerous times. I also have three students who are all on the autism spectrum and have a particularly difficult time settling down. Frankly, it has been a difficult year for me.

One of my students, Albert Cummings, presents some unique challenges. I taught him when he was in grade three as well and, although some of his behaviors were problematic then, they were not a frequent distraction. This year is a completely different story. Albert is particularly out of sorts in the mornings when he first steps into the classroom from playing outside. It tends to take him the first thirty minutes of class—*at least*—to even get his planner message finished. By this point, Albert's frustrations have elevated because his peers have already started on something else. Once he feels he is behind the rest of the class, Albert becomes so agitated that he can't do anything. All he can concentrate on is the fact that he won't be able to finish on time. He also gets agitated when I can't come to his desk to help him immediately.

His agitation spreads to the rest of the class. Albert also speaks very loudly as I teach and interrupts when others are speaking. He blurts out whatever is on his mind—sometimes he blurts out inappropriate words or makes rude comments about other students.

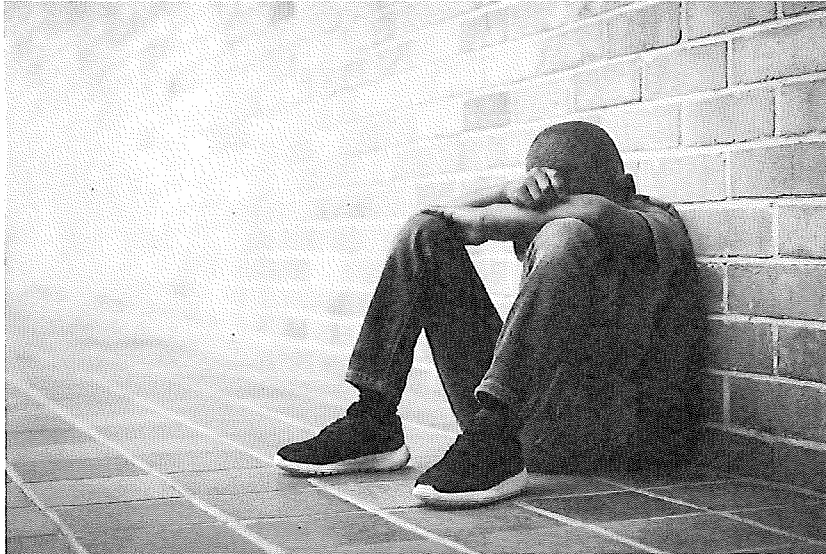
Last week I reached out to Albert's parents to learn more about how Albert behaves at home. I ended up speaking with Albert's mom, Leanne Cummings, for nearly an hour. She said that she has noticed that mornings are especially difficult for her son. He often has trouble waking up and getting ready for school. He often yells—and even swears—at her in the mornings and complains that he doesn't want to go to school. She is concerned because he has a hard time regulating his emotions and calming himself down. Leanne suspects that her son may have some sort of disorder. She has booked an appointment with Albert's family doctor but is worried that the doctor may want to put Albert on medication and she doesn't want to do that. As we ended the phone call, I told Leanne that I understand her concerns and am here to support Albert.

I also spoke to the school principal, Kim Young, about Albert and my frustrations. I am feeling tired and, frankly, not all that sympathetic toward my student. He is always in my personal space, yelling, and trying to get more attention from me. He gets very close and expresses himself very loudly. The more I try to talk to him and try to calm him down, the more intense his reaction is. He gets to a point where he is so stressed and anxious that he can't even hear what I am saying to him and he just continues to yell over top of me. It's really frustrating. I shared with Kim that I usually send Albert into the hall for a "break time" if he's really disrupting the class. I could sense that Kim isn't particularly happy with my strategy; she said that he may decide to run off if he's unsupervised in the hall. I figure that there are plenty of teachers and other staff walking in the halls so he should be just fine out there. Kim told me to send Albert to her office if he is acting out, but she didn't offer any other support than that. I know Kim is busy and all, but she can't provide more help to me than *that*?

I am now feeling quite concerned because I feel like I'm *always* sending Albert out into the hall to calm down. This means that Albert is missing a lot of class time.

He also seems to find the transitions to and from the breaks quite difficult. The breaks, in some ways, cause Albert to become more frustrated because when he returns to the classroom, he feels like he is behind the other students in his work.

I recently had a meeting with Kim and the special education resource teacher, Marta, and discussed ways that we could improve Albert's daily routines. Marta suggested that we try soft entries with Albert in the hope that it will improve his mornings and set a positive tone for his day. She explained



**Figure 4.1 Student Sitting Alone.** *Source:* <https://www.istockphoto.com>. Credit: Rido Franz.

that soft entries usually involve a paraprofessional taking a student to another room, like a special education resource room, and doing a few calming activities with them before entering the busy classroom with the other students. The paraprofessional will teach the student some strategies to help them better manage their own behavior. The student is given the opportunity to have a calm, relaxed morning routine, away from the busyness of the classroom. Once the student is feeling relaxed and in control, they are able to reenter the classroom. I think this is a great idea and might be really helpful for Albert. And it might help my own mental health.

### **Kim Young's Perspective**

It was early in the fall when Samuel Bakar, the grade four teacher, came to me with his concerns about Albert Cummings. He shared with me that he was at a breaking point and is feeling exhausted by Albert's problematic behavior, especially in the mornings. I knew that a plan needed to be put in place to help Albert, particularly with his transitions and regulating his emotions.

I told Samuel that I understood the way he was feeling. I also told him that I am here to support him and that we will come up with a solution together. I emphasized that he isn't alone in this process. There is nothing worse than feeling like you are on your own island when dealing with situations like this

one. I sensed, however, that Samuel didn't really appreciate my words. I think he wanted me to do more to help him, but I don't know what he is expecting of me at this early stage.

Samuel explained to me that he often sends Albert on breaks when his temper escalates. While this strategy gives *Samuel* a break from Albert, it concerns me that Albert is in the hall so much and is missing important instruction time. My hope was that we could help him control his emotions better so that he could have a better opportunity to learn.

Last week I spent a morning in Samuel's classroom to observe Albert. I could see how the transition into the classroom was particularly stressful for him. I have been meaning to ask a paraprofessional to do soft entries with Albert to help him ease into the classroom in the mornings. Marta, the special education resource teacher, made this suggestion and I think it's a good one.

I have also tried to build a relationship with Albert. One day I asked him about why he doesn't like to come into the classroom in the mornings. "Because I don't like Mr. Bakar. He just sends me out of the classroom," Albert told me, looking down at the ground and not making eye contact with me. "I don't like leaving all the time. It makes me sad." I told Albert that I will do my best to come up with another solution. I agreed, in my head, that the breaks were most likely not that helpful. I had told Samuel to send Albert to my office if he is acting up, but he hasn't sent Albert to me yet. I need to have another conversation with Samuel about Albert. We need to help Albert be the best he can be. The problem is that Samuel is frustrated by Albert's behavior and doesn't seem very willing to help him. I need to figure out how to effectively support Samuel as he supports Albert. But how?

### Questions To Consider:

1. Do you think that the principal, Kim Young, handled the situation with Samuel Bakar, the teacher, well? How else can she support him as he supports Albert?
2. Transitions are a particularly challenging aspect of the day for students with special education needs. What other solutions could help address Albert's problematic behavior and difficulty with transitions?
3. How would you ensure that Albert would be able to remain in the classroom for the majority of the day, without being a major distraction for the rest of the class?
4. As a principal, what steps would you take to communicate with Albert's parents?