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Ellen Heyting & Rachael Thrash

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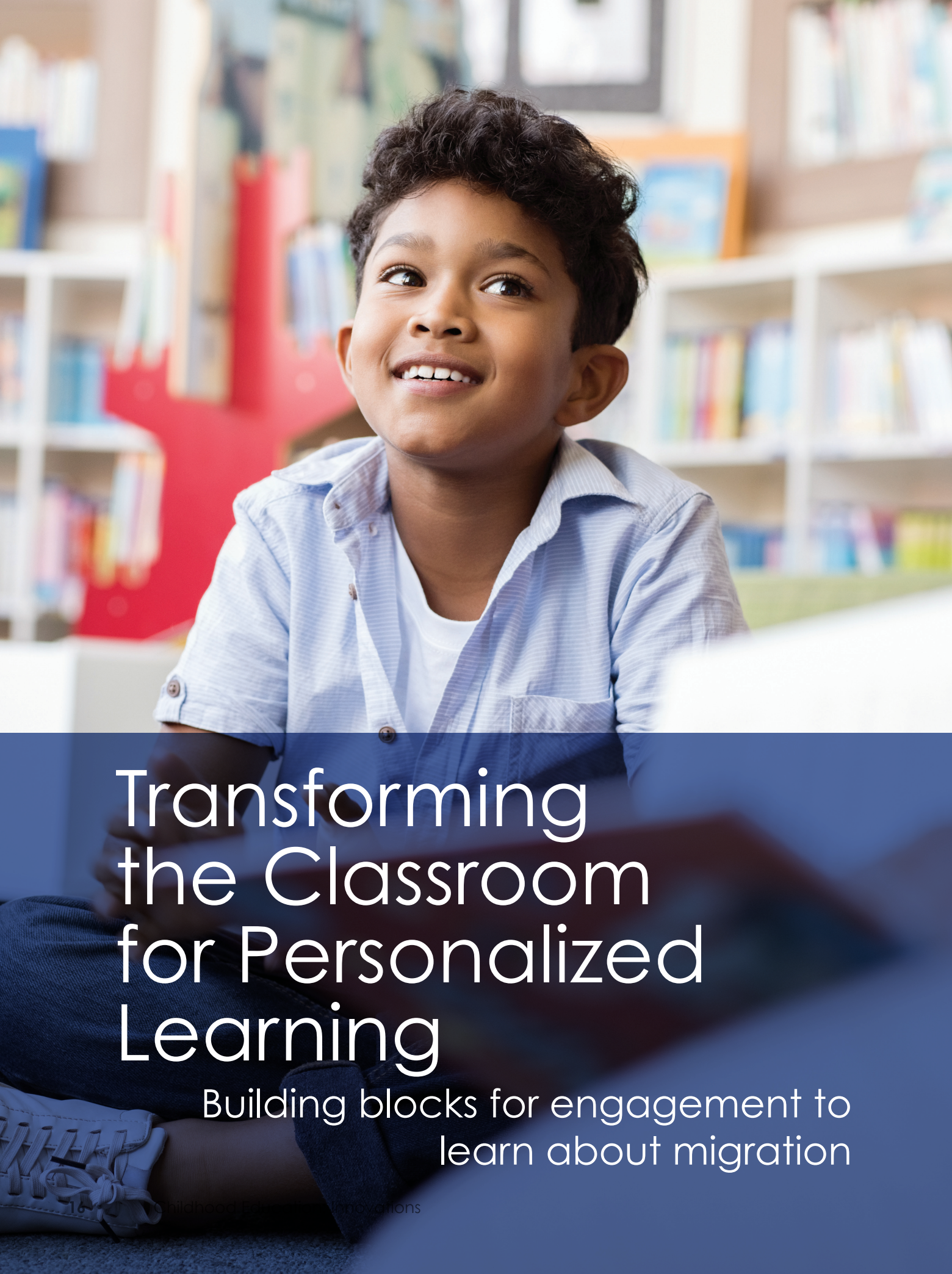
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Transforming the Classroom for Personalized Learning

Building blocks for engagement to
learn about migration



Ellen Heyting and Rachael Thrash
The International School of Helsinki

Learning approaches that support students' awareness of real-world issues and provide opportunities for taking action will lead to true transformation of education.

In a unit about the immigrant experience, a 9th-grade student at the International School of Helsinki captured the feeling of real engagement in learning when she reflected:

This unit honestly helped me get in tune with my own immigrant status. I often try to ignore it or hide it away because I think of it as something to be ashamed of. I never really understood why, but once I moved and got a new citizenship I did not feel like I belonged to Poland anymore. I'm not even sure I wanted to belong to Poland. I think there is too much negative stereotypes surrounding refugees and migrants when sometimes it's not even their fault.

We know there is value in pushing students outside a protective academic bubble to participate in real-world learning and service. Yet teachers often struggle to design units that move beyond traditional academic outcomes. While teaching at the International School of Helsinki, we sought to build cognitive skills while challenging students to take action in their lives and communities. Through this process, we developed a unit template aimed at transforming the classroom into a laboratory for personalized learning that applies to a global context.

We began by creating a unit question that connected our students' understanding of their world to a significant universal theme. From this question, we carefully crafted learning experiences to support and disrupt their initial understanding. We completed the unit with a "performance of understanding," an opportunity for students to creatively synthesize learning materials with their own experiences and opinions.

The unit exceeded our initial academic goals. The students had not just gained new skills and knowledge, they had also internalized the learning, critically analyzing their ideas and forming indelible impressions of their role in the world. Most excitingly, this phenomenon included our entire range of learners, not just those students who typically perform in the classroom. Consider the reaction from three

students whose academic success generally differs significantly:

Throughout this unit, I was given the opportunity to reflect on my own life and I realized that I too am guilty of turning my back on situations in which people needed help. When I realized this, I decided that I was going to change, that I can't just think of refugees as a faraway issue, a statistic of people suffering, or simply another complex world issue.



Those who flee, leaving behind their old life for survival, I can't begin to imagine what they go through as an outsider perspective. They are faced with the cold reality of the world and with an incredible amount of strength they have to do that, I will never be able to comprehend it but it's survival. I recount to the story of how one card was sent to a refugee whose entire mindset changed from that. Small acts of kindness that go further than you can imagine. I really appreciate that we are given opportunities to do service as action and be able to have such a great impact. Our play was able to raise awareness on the issue and has allowed for an opportunity for everyone to come together and understand.

When we first started looking into the question "Why do we turn away?," I could only find one way to understand it: why our first instinct is often to turn away from those unlike us and choose not to help. However, I soon understood that there are a multitude of ways for this question to be inferred.

Reflecting on our journey to create an impactful unit design, we considered our other units that "hit home" and successfully broadened students' world views. The common elements among these units led to a consistent strategy for unit design—the Building Blocks for Engagement.

A Call to Engage Students

On the first day of school, we gathered our new group of 9th-graders together to talk about learning and personal responsibility, and presented them with a disturbing video prompt documenting slave labor rampant in the chocolate industry. We then presented them with two bowls of chocolate. One was filled with cheap chocolate, likely tainted by unfair labor practices. The other contained Fair Trade chocolate, more expensive but ethical. We told students that we would leave the room at the end of the period and they could help themselves to either bowl. We offered one stipulation—the cheap chocolate was free, but they had to pay 50 cents for a piece of the Fair Trade variety. IOUs could be used as payment.

We have conducted this experiment to launch many classes. Every other time, the vast majority of students, influenced by the faces of the desperate young chocolate slaves, abstained from taking the cheap chocolate or bought the Fair Trade version.

In this case, however, the students were snickering as they left the classroom. When we entered, we saw an upended, empty bowl of cheap chocolate, a full Fair Trade bowl, and a small piece of ripped notebook paper on which one student had written, "Sorry." The note spoke for the quiet bystanders, who were cowed and embarrassed by their peers' behavior. Goodbye to our first day enthusiasm!

Overcoming our initial shock, we considered the experience to be a "call to arms." This group desperately needed our guidance. We needed to reach beyond academics to rebalance the inequity of voices, addressing the students' sense of entitlement and giving them a sense of engagement and responsibility. But how?

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR ENGAGEMENT

Engaging Question Connecting Student Experience to a Universal Theme

What are the big picture concepts in the unit of study that students can apply to their own lives?

Materials to Deepen Understanding

What learning experiences, people, places, and resources can you use to spark interest and drive the unit forward?

Community Connected Experiences

Where can you take students to witness the real-world application of this theme? Who could you invite to speak with them? Are there possibilities for service?

Mid-Unit Assessment for Learning

How can students engage with the learning materials to demonstrate new understandings about the learning materials? How will this assessment help them develop tools/knowledge necessary for the Performance of Understanding?

Synthesized Performance of Understanding

How can students showcase their learning in a creative and meaningful way? Is there any way to connect this performance to the community?

Purposeful Reflection

What questions can you ask students to uncover how their thinking will have changed after taking part in this unit?

Building the Unit Question: Creating Personalized, Interdisciplinary Learning

With these aspirations in mind, we planned a collaborative English and Humanities unit on migration. Given significant imbalances of academic skills and entitlement in this particular group of students, we did not want to introduce such traditional unit questions as, “What are the factors that caused the current refugee crisis?” Instead, we wanted to hold a mirror up so the group could reflect on their own behavior while considering a larger universal theme that would integrate learning from both disciplines. After an intense brainstorming session, we selected the question, “Why do we turn away?” We asked students to provide an answer to the question based on their own experiences.

The unit forced them to consider a range of perspectives and begin to develop their own informed opinions.

Challenging Understanding of the Question and Assessing Learning

Interdisciplinary lessons in English and Humanities classes pushed students beyond a standard historical or geographical account of the migration crisis as they considered why we go out of our way to help and support some people, while turning away from and ignoring the plight of others.

In English lessons, we shared Mohsin Hamid’s contemporary novel *Exit West*, a text that transports the reader into the struggle of immigrants driven away from their homes and searching for new stability. Students used a literary circle model to analyze the text, exploring their own interpretations of the novel.

In Humanities lessons, through a study of human psychology, ethics, and global migration, the students considered the larger themes that applied to their experiences, the migrants in the novel, and world issues. Students also created podcasts about the refugee crisis, interviewing a range of experts, immigrants, and stakeholders to broaden their perspectives on the issue.

Interdisciplinary projects are associated with gains in students’ ability to:

- **Acknowledge and appreciate ethical concerns about their and society’s actions**

Discussions of ethical considerations ask students to question their fundamental beliefs around what is good or bad, right or wrong, and if justice means the provision of equity or equality. While many subjects operating in silos avoid such questions, interdisciplinary approaches naturally struggle with these philosophical questions.

- **Think critically**

Interdisciplinary learning promotes the development of certain cognitive skills, such as understanding multiple viewpoints on a given topic, honing the understanding needed to solve complex issues, integrating conflicting insights from different subjects, and appreciating that when an issue has roots in multiple disciplines, each discipline may call for different, and even contradictory, responses and solutions.

- **Recognize bias**

Interdisciplinary units allow students to understand their preconceived ideas by drawing from a range of subject matter and different perspectives. Using a range of disciplines, students can arrive at deeper, more nuanced understandings and check their initial biases.

- **Tolerate ambiguity**

Interdisciplinary instruction can build up resistance to the need for absolutes and help students feel comfortable in the grey area of complexity, helping them appreciate that problems often do not have clear right and wrong answers.

Materials for Teaching About Refugees From the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency

The UNHCR Teachers' Toolkit offers free-of-charge and adaptable UNHCR teaching materials on refugees, asylum, migration, and statelessness, and a section dedicated to professional development and guidance for primary and secondary school teachers on including refugee children in classes. The teaching materials (available for ages 6-9, 9-12, 12-15, and 15-18) include lesson plans, activity guides, videos, and other materials.

www.unhcr.org/en-us/teaching-about-refugees.html

Rather than providing students with an answer to the migration crisis and the reasons people turn away, the unit forced them to consider a range of perspectives and begin to develop their own informed opinions.

Community Connection: Opportunities to Bring in the Real World

To make the learning real, we needed to provide authentic connections to the refugee community. Therefore, we arranged opportunities for students to support the migrant population in Helsinki, such as providing child care so new migrants could attend legal interviews, participating in English lessons, and volunteering at mixers for young asylum seekers to break down barriers between communities. While we required each student to attend only one of the six organized meetings, many voluntarily participated in the majority of meetings.

The students discovered they had more in common with the refugees than they had assumed. One student commented, "I used the Cafe Night as both a real-life learning experience and an opportunity to meet new people. I realized that getting to know people who are outside of my 'circle' and community isn't a bad thing. I, myself, have moved many times in my life and I came to understand that many people migrate in their lives even if it isn't by choice."

Such service learning has many benefits for young people, the teaching staff, the wider educational institution, and community partner members. Evidence points to the following outcomes:

Learning Outcomes

- Gains in traditional academic achievement, more opportunities to practice problem analysis and critical thinking, and appreciation for the complexity of understanding
- More motivation to learn and greater retention of skills and knowledge
- Increased ability to apply their learning to real-world situations

Personal Outcomes

- Stronger, more positive student-teacher relationships
- Growth in diverse domains, including personal identity, moral development, spiritual growth, and personal efficacy
- Gains in interpersonal development, including communication skills, collaboration skills, and leadership skills

Social Outcomes

- Reduction of stereotypes, breakdown of barriers, and facilitation of inter-racial and inter-cultural understanding
- Increased long-term commitment to service and desire to participate in more service opportunities in the future.

True to the research, our students universally reported that their experience with the asylum

More Than Migrants

Projects that examine various aspects of migrant life in depth

Grade Level: 9-12

From Teacher Tolerance

www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/more-than-migrants

seekers deepened their engagement with the unit. One student captured it best when she explained:

We were there because the teachers told us to be, because our parents said it would be a good idea, because we hoped to grow from it, or because we would have more hours for the service action. There were so many different reasons for going. As we were there, we all felt very awkward because we knew nothing about these people and they knew nothing about us and yet we were being asked to play games and talk as if we had known each other for ages. It was an experience that definitely changed my way of thinking but not for ways that I would have thought. Going there, we all obviously knew what their labels were [refugees] and a bit of what they had gone through. When we were there, looking at them, talking to them, listening to them, there was a part of my mind that kept going back to everything I knew about what they had gone through, but there was suddenly this other voice in my head that was making me realize that even though we were always told stories about these people, always implying that there should be pity in how we treat them, these people in front of me were anything but [in need of pity]. They were funny, shy, sweet, chatty, and overall like anyone else. We are always so quick to judge people based on their history when instead we should be looking at their present and future. How they have grown and changed from their experiences and how they are living their lives now. The cafe nights changed my views entirely, making me, in my point of view, more considerate and caring and understanding, which is something that I have always aspired to be.

Synthesizing Performance of Understanding

We wanted to build a challenging summative experience to capture students' growing understanding through their own creation. We finished the unit with a theatrical "performance of understanding" for a blended audience of the school community and young asylum seekers. The students showcased their learning from the study of the text, the wider humanities unit, and their lived experiences as they interacted with and got to know young refugees. The goal was to break through apathy and bridge understanding while cultivating their creative voices as storytellers and performers.

For the performance of understanding, the grade 9 class gathered on the cafeteria stage in a mix of tableaux representing the bustling life in a city. Two student actors in the role of refugees attempted to enter the scene, only to find the other players turning their backs and preventing their entry. At the close of the scene, the refugees implored of the audience, "Why do they turn away? Why do we all turn away?"

Arts literacy can be an effective vehicle for bringing young people from different communities together to explore complex and challenging themes. The performance served as a perfect opportunity to bridge cultural divides. To end the performance, they asked the mixed audience of family and asylum seekers to stop "turning away" by getting to know each other. To achieve this goal, they invited guests to a Cafe Night with music, board games, and baking in a relaxed, welcoming setting.



AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

When an actor in the play says, "Lights off," close your eyes until they say, "Lights on."

PERFORMANCE INSPIRATION

Our play is an interpretation of the novel *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid and our study of the global migration crisis. The novel follows Saeed and Nadia, a young couple from an unnamed city beginning to undergo a civil war. As the events of the war develop and the militants gain more control of the city, Saeed and Nadia decide to flee. Using magical doors rumored to open to a different location in the world, they migrate from place to place, facing challenges with the Western world and each other.

TIMETABLE OF THE NIGHT:

5:00-5:30: Community gathers, reads the program for information about the performance, enjoys coffee and a treat, gets to know each other.

5:30-6:00: "Why Do We Turn Away?: The Immigrant's Experience," a performance of understanding created and presented by the 9th-graders.

6:00-7:00: Board games, baking, discussion about the performance, sharing migration stories.

PLAY OUTLINE:

Opening Scene: Why do we turn away?

Scenes 2 and 3: When our home turns away from us.

Scenes 4 and 5: When we turn away from our home.

Scenes 6 and 7: When we turn inward in our journey to find a new home.

Scenes 8 and 9: When our new home turns away from us.

Closing Scene: Opportunities to turn toward each other.

Program of the performance of understanding about the immigrant experience presented by a grade 9 class

Reflection: The Artist's Statement

To reinforce the range of learning students encountered in this unit, we asked each student to produce an artist's statement. Students wrote responses to the prompt, "How did your participation in this unit help you develop a personal understanding of the unit question and how was your performance a reflection of this understanding?" As they documented the moments that brought them to new awareness, they took pride in their journey and helped make their learning transparent.

Throughout this unit, our students faced some challenging realities, and were asked to explore their own potential to make change. They were asked to find ways to connect with a new population, bridging divides and finding commonality in our shared experiences. "Why Do We Turn Away?" combined service learning, arts literacy, humanities, English, and reflection using an interdisciplinary approach. We hope that this unit can serve as a model for service learning that prompts students to challenge their assumptions and expand their empathy.