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## Effect of Formational Learning Experiences on Student Attitudes

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# Effect of Formational Learning Experiences on Student Attitudes

## Abstract

This action research project explored the impact of formational learning experiences with refugees on student attitudes. One grade five class from an independent school in British Columbia interacted with, learned the stories from, and built relationships with refugees. All students in the class completed the same survey both prior to beginning the unit and after the unit was concluded about their attitudes toward both immigrants and refugees. Following the formational learning experiences with refugees, eight students participated in interviews where they responded to questions about how their own attitudes and understandings changed over the course of the unit. The results of the survey and interviews showed a change in attitude regarding refugees. The findings of the study suggest formational learning experiences positively impact students' attitudes towards refugees by increasing their understanding of the diverse stories of people in our world and thus motivating students to care for refugees.

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# Effect of Formational Learning Experiences on Student Attitudes

by

Pamela Zuidhof

B.A. Dordt College, 2005

Action Research Report  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education  
Dordt College  
Sioux Center, Iowa  
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Effect of Formational Learning Experiences on Student Attitudes

by

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### **Abstract**

This action research project explored the impact of formational learning experiences with refugees on student attitudes. One grade five class from an independent school in British Columbia interacted with, learned the stories from, and built relationships with refugees. All students in the class completed the same survey both prior to beginning the unit and after the unit was concluded about their attitudes toward both immigrants and refugees. Following the formational learning experiences with refugees, eight students participated in interviews where they responded to questions about how their own attitudes and understandings changed over the course of the unit. The results of the survey and interviews showed a change in attitude regarding refugees. The findings of the study suggest formational learning experiences positively impact students' attitudes towards refugees by increasing their understanding of the diverse stories of people in our world and thus motivating students to care for refugees.

*Keywords:* Intercultural sensitivity, attitudes, refugees, formational learning experiences, Teaching for Transformation



More than one in every five people living in Canada immigrated to this country (Statistics Canada, 2017). These immigrants were born in more than two hundred different countries and account for more than 7.5 million foreign-born people, out of Canada's total population of just over 35 million people (Statistics Canada, 2017).

Between 2011 and 2016, Canada welcomed over 1.2 million immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2017). In comparison, 5.7 million immigrants settled in Canada between 1980 and 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2017). Since 1980, close to 860,000 refugees have come to Canada and still live in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017). From 2011 to 2016, the majority of these refugees arrived from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Statistics Canada, 2017).

The United States of America (USA) has similar statistics with thirteen percent or one in eight people being foreign-born (Grieco, 2014). In 2012, the USA had 40.8 million foreign-born people out of its total population of 314 million people. (Grieco, 2014; Rodriguez & Lamm, 2016; US Census, 2013). By 2043, it is projected the United States of America will become a majority-minority nation and by 2060, 57% of the total population will be people of colour (Sarraj, Bene, Li, & Burley, 2015, p. 39).

It's time for change; a change in behavior (Sarraj et al, 2015, p. 40, 43). Our countries are experiencing a greater "shift from similarity to diversity" (Sarraj et al, 2015, p. 40) and it is crucial to know how to navigate this diversity (Rodriguez & Lamm, 2016). Bennett stated countries need to reflect the changed social landscape (Sarraj et al, 2015, p. 40) and we need to "help people become more receptive to the presence of different values and practices," (Sarraj et al, 2015, p. 43) as well as to varied experiences, and assist people to appreciate differences (Due, Riggs, & Augoustinos, 2016).

The diversity in our societies, workplaces, and communities is creating a need for cross-cultural relations and a greater competence in intercultural matters (M. Bennett, 2004). Canada is a diverse country, full of many immigrants, refugees, and first nations people (Nicolai, 2018). The diversity found in our country pushes us to figure out what it means to live together as people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs and to work towards the common good where different voices are heard (Nicolai, 2018). “Intercultural sensitivity does not happen by accident” (Osborne, 2016, p. 110). Building intercultural sensitivity depends on experiences to develop through different stages and adapt to cultural diversity (M. Bennett, 2004; Osborne, 2016). Our citizens lack knowledge and understanding about refugees, while also holding misconceptions and negative attitudes (Kovinthan, 2016). As a nation, we “could do a better job of preparing people for cross-cultural encounters” (M. Bennett, 2004, p. 62). To do this, intercultural education should be at the core of educating citizens (Osborne, 2016).

Intercultural education is the development of skills and perceptions to help one interact with people of different cultural groups (Osborne, 2016). It is “developmental by nature and, thus, dependent upon experience” (Osborne, 2016, p. 111; M. Bennett, 2004). When students get to know people from other cultures and communities, their existing stereotypes and preconceptions of others are challenged (De Leon, 2014). It is important for educators to help students “develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function within their nation-states and regions, as well as in global society” (Mellizo, 2018, p. 141).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to engage students in experiences which allowed them to get to know newcomers to Canada and to determine the impact learning one’s story firsthand and building relationships with refugees has on one’s attitude. The researcher compared student’s

reflections and attitudes both prior to and following the formational learning experiences, as students were encouraged to become more self-aware and self-reflective to the cultural diversity and immigration journeys around us. The researcher hoped to determine how formational learning experiences with refugees' impacted student attitudes and their desires to engage with people of cultural diversity, both now and in the future.

### **Research Questions**

To fulfill the purpose of this study, the researcher sought to answer the following questions:

1. How does a formational learning experience that involves students spending time with immigrants and/or refugees affect student's attitudes toward newcomers?
2. How does this formational learning experience impact intercultural sensitivity?

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will be used. The definitions are the author's own unless otherwise indicated.

Attitude: The way you think or feel about someone, typically reflected in one's behavior.

Culture: "Culture' refers to the behaviors, beliefs, values, traditions, institutions, and ways of living together of a group of people" (Endacott & Bowles, 2013, p. 44).

Diversity: The range of human differences, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, culture, religious or ethical values, national origin, physical ability or attributes, and personal stories.

Formational Learning Experience: Experiences designed to form the students' hearts and actions as well as their minds, equipping them to become people who live and breathe God's story

(Kornelis, 2018, p. 5). These experiences “invite the students to do real work that meets a real need for a real audience.” (Smith, 2016, p. 157).

Immigrant: A person who chooses to permanently settle in another country.

Intercultural Sensitivity: “An individual’s ability to ‘step beyond his/her own culture and function with other individuals from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds’” (Mellizo, 2017, p. 571).

Multiculturalism: Responding to cultural and religious diversity by acknowledging, considering, and celebrating differences. A multicultural mindset influences how people think, believe, feel, and act towards diverse people. (Rodriguez & Lamm, 2016).

Refugee: A person who has seen or experienced many horrors and flees to a foreign country to escape persecution or danger.

## **Literature Review**

### **Intercultural Sensitivity**

Immigration is an increasingly hot topic (Rodriquez & Lamm, 2016). Because our populations are increasing in cultural diversity, it is important for teachers to learn how to positively navigate and honor this diversity by improving students’ attitudes and helping prepare students to successfully navigate diverse work, school, and community environments (Rodriquez & Lamm, 2016). Knowledge, skills, and dispositions to both understand and communicate with many cultures is critical (Mellizo, 2018). We ought to foster a culturally-competent generation and workforce where diversity is valued, cultural awareness increases, and positive attitudes for other cultures are fostered. (Rodriquez & Lamm, 2016).

Dr. Milton J. Bennett, who has been in the intercultural field for over fifty years created the Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), highlighting the progression of stages people go through as they experience and navigate cultural differences (J. Bennett, 2011). The first three stages, denial, minimization, and acceptance, are centered on the idea and assumption that one's own worldview is superior and central (J. Bennett, 2011; M. Bennett, 2004; Mellizo, 2018; Osborne, 2016). When one moves into the last three stages of acceptance, adaptation, and integration, a shift in one's frame of reference occurs as one now views their own culture in the context of other cultures, increasing their own self-awareness, empathy, and humility (J. Bennett, 2011; Mellizo, 2018).

One's "default condition" is denial (M. Bennett, 2004, p. 63). In this stage, one sees their culture as the only real one, perceives their culture as unquestionably true, and often does not notice other cultures at all. (M. Bennett, 2004). "Denial is not refusal to 'confront the facts.' It is instead an inability to make the perceptual distinctions that allow cultural facts to be recognized" (M. Bennett, 2004, p. 64). Within the second stage, defense, one often has a stereotypical perspective where one sees their own culture as the only viable one and "the only good way to live," positively stereotyping their own culture and negatively stereotyping other cultures (M. Bennett, 2004, p. 65). "Nation building" and a "you're either with us or against us" attitude are evident in the defense stage (M. Bennett, 2004, p. 65). Recognizing commonality between people of other cultures leads one into the minimization stage (M. Bennett, 2004). Those in the minimization stage like the "melting pot" idea as they expect similarities (M. Bennett, 2004, p. 67). They also assume others want to be "like us" and they will come to appreciate our way of life once they see it (M. Bennett, 2004, p. 67). These first three stages have one using their own

reality as the focal point of what is real, recognizing “it is OUR reality, therefore it must be THE reality” (Osborne, 2016, p. 107).

As individuals move into the final three stages, they come to view their own culture through the context of other cultures and learn to think about the world in a different way (M. Bennett, 2004; Osborne, 2016). The acceptance stage is when one engages in a self-reflexive perspective and recognizes others as different than themselves, yet equally human (M. Bennett, 2004). One sees their own culture “as just one of a number of equally complex worldviews” (M. Bennett, 2004, p. 68). It is important to note that “acceptance does not mean agreement” and that one does not necessarily like or agree with other cultures’ values or way of life (M. Bennett, 2004, p. 69). The fifth stage is adaptation. During the adaptation stage, people extend their beliefs and behaviors, engage in empathy and go through a shift in perspective so that they are able to express their feelings and demonstrate behaviors in culturally appropriate ways (M. Bennett, 2004). They demonstrate curiosity, an eagerness to experience other cultures and perspectives, and attempt to learn how to appropriately act in various cultural contexts (M. Bennett, 2004). The final stage, integration, describes one’s shift in cultural identity, and is not necessarily better than adaptation (M. Bennett, 2004). In this stage, one is able to move in and out of different cultural worldviews (M. Bennett, 2004). Moving through these stages causes one to “experience cultural difference in an increasingly complex way” (Mellizo, 2018, p. 140).

At the heart of intercultural sensitivity is “adaptation to cultural difference” (M. Bennett, 2004, p. 62). “Without requiring students to explore the roots of their views, understand the roots of other views, and appreciate the nature and importance of different views about those issues perpetuates ignorance” (Osborne, 2016, p. 111). “Educators could do a better job of preparing people for cross-cultural encounters” by helping students seek and understand the

importance of cultural differences, and adapting one's own perspective (M. Bennett, 2004, p. 62).

### **Limited Understandings**

“The Disney version of “It’s a Small World” stands as an ironic reminder that our understanding of other cultures often lacks authentic detail” (Endacott & Bowles, 2013, pg. 43). Similar to the ride, our intercultural education programs historically emphasize a superficial awareness and celebration of differences, and cultural differences within the classroom are seen as a deficit rather than an asset to learning (Endo, 2015; Kovinthan, 2016). “Multicultural education, as we know it, is most often taught in an isolated fashion” (Childs, 2017, p. 33). Multicultural education should not be restricted to historical events or to present-day events, but rather, should encourage one to look beyond the classroom and to the future (Childs, 2017). Cultural knowledge has often been both the start and end of classroom activities aimed to foster intercultural competence (Osborne, 2016).

There is often a lack of awareness of the experiences refugees have gone through (Kovinthan, 2016). Kovinthan (2016) reflects on how the scarcity of awareness to her own experiences as a refugee unintentionally caused pain, embarrassment, and isolation through classroom activities that were meant to be inclusive. Discrimination, exclusion, and one's attitude can be direct results of lack of knowledge (Kovinthan, 2016).

Our current programs are not keeping up with the changing demography around us and require increasing attention and skill development in kindergarten to grade twelve settings (Mellizo, 2017; Rodriguez & Lamm, 2016). As Bennett stated, cultural knowledge is only the first step (Osborne, 2016). Our goal should be to move beyond the awareness stage (Childs,

2017). Designing courses that invite students to have cultural contact is beneficial and promotes movement to a broader and more diverse way of thinking (Osborne, 2016). Multicultural education, embedded into all aspects of curriculum, foster actions that encourage one to respect, appreciate, and embrace the cultural diversity present within our communities (Childs, 2017).

### **Attitudes and Empathy**

Multiculturalism needs to be taught and diversity valued (Rodriguez & Lamm, 2016). “What people think, believe, and feel, directly affects how they behave” (Rodriguez & Lamm, 2016, p. 108). As highlighted by researchers Vieira et al (2017) through their course development and study of cultural mediation in response to the large number of refugees entering Portugal, welcoming and appreciating differences is not easy. “Teaching students to have a multicultural mindset lead[s] to positive attitudes and behaviors toward immigrants” (Rodriguez & Lamm, 2016, p. 106). Listening actively, striving to understand, and respecting others for who they are, are three key ingredients to building empathy and bridges between cultures (Vieira et al, 2017).

“All humans have a common desire to be known, seen, and heard for who they are” (Nicolai, 2018). Unfortunately, refugees are often not heard or truly known as they are welcomed as a massive group rather than as an individual (Nicolai, 2018). Active listening to the refugee’s story, hopes, dreams, and sorrows helps deepen understanding, enabling one to make connections, and increase one’s ability to try to understand where others are coming from (Nicolai, 2018). When we put ourselves in others’ shoes, we are often slower to judge and more willing to engage in conversation instead of quickly responding that we do not agree with them or their perspective (Nicolai, 2018). When we truly strive to understand others, we recognize how complex humans are, which in turn causes us to stop and think and alter our preconceived,



and sometimes pedestal-like, images of others (Nicolai, 2018). Recognizing the complicated stories allows one to realize refugees are more like us than we first thought and helps us push aside irrational images and expectations of others, enabling us to respect others for who they are (Nicolai, 2018). When people feel respected, they feel heard and seen which in turn empowers them and enables them to feel more invested in their new home (Nicolai, 2018).

Students need to be given the opportunity to explore and ask questions about various cultures, as well as discover culturally-based similarities and differences (Endacott & Bowles, 2013). Educators ought to help enable students to develop the skill to see through others' eyes, not only today, but as a life-long process of being awake to the world (Mellizo, 2018). When students are socially aware, they recognize others' strengths and challenges, understand others' reactions, and have a deeper respect for the diversity around them (Katz & Porath, 2011). "It is important for the students to understand that, even though the values of others may seem strange or conflict with our own values, the people and their values are just as meaningful to the people who hold them and deserve the same respect we reserve for our own" (Endacott & Bowles, 2013).

### **Learning Experiences**

It is through self-examination and shared experiences that students better understand the lives of others (Endacott & Bowles, 2013; Hawkins & Kaplan, 2016; Kovinthan, 2016). When people can relate to each other through commonalities like food, clothing and shelter, a shared human experience results, as these are common needs regardless of culture, place, or location in the world (Endacott & Bowles, 2013). These similarities allow them to meet and interact on a more equal level and doing so allows both trust and friendship to develop across culturally dissimilar people (De Leon, 2014). When students see the connection to their own lives, a

deeper engagement and understanding results, forming the students' hearts, minds, and actions (Kornelis, 2018; Rodriguez & Lamm, 2016). Formational learning experiences give students an opportunity to develop hope and a positive vision for the future, while learning to appreciate diversity, regardless of the variety of cultural, linguistic, and learning profiles (Katz & Porath, 2011).

Intercultural interactions is one of the most important predictors of intercultural sensitivity (Mellizo, 2017). It is important these interactions build on students' prior experience and take place in a safe and welcoming environment (Kovinthan, 2016). Formational learning experiences and connected reflection, "provide an opportunity to 'de-center' by increasing students awareness of others and becoming stewards of their community, while 'thinking deeply and critically about their own assumptions'" (Hawkins & Kaplan, 2016, p. 160). These formational learning experiences as described within the Teaching for Transformation framework, help students develop empathy "through exposure, explanation, and experiences with individuals different from ourselves" (Hawkins & Kaplan, 2016, p. 160). Formational learning experiences enable the "development of intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes by providing experiential and reflection opportunities with and about diverse persons that are not easily replicable in the classroom settings alone" (De Leon, 2014, p. 17). Direct contact and "real world" experiences help to reduce prejudice and improve attitudes and meet needs in the community, while building an appreciation and understanding for alternate perspectives (Hawkins & Kaplan, 2016; Zeller, Griffith, Zhang, & Klenke, 2010). These real work experiences shape both the learner and God's world, and facilitate inward and outward renewal (DeBoer & Cook, 2018). Authentic experiences that engage students to be "active citizen-creators of the society in which they wish to live," not only connect students to the present, but

also to future opportunities (Berger, Rugen, & Woodfin, 2016; DeBoer & Cook, 2018; De Leon, 2014, p. 18; Smith, 2016).

“Efforts to develop intercultural sensitivity must be deliberate and carefully planned by the teacher” (Osborn, 2016, p. 109). Purposefully experiencing cultures and worldviews different than their own enables students to begin working and processing through the six stages of Bennett’s *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)* (M. Bennett, 2004). “Experiences are necessary to foster that growth” through the DMIS stages as contact with others with cultural differences generates pressure to reflect on and change one’s own worldview (Osborne, 2016, p. 107; M. Bennett, 2004). Experiences with people of other cultures enable one to develop intercultural sensitivity (M. Bennett, 2004). Bennett hoped that developing a framework that highlighted the set of stages many people pass through as their intercultural worldview changes would help educators develop curricula and experiences that facilitate growth in student’s intercultural sensitivity (Mellizo, 2018).

“Interacting with people from cultural backgrounds increases students’ intercultural competence through a process of perspective transformation, relationship building, and development of skills” (De Leon, 2014, p. 21). Development of relationships increases empathy, motivation, interest, and care for the other person (De Leon, 2014). It also creates a reciprocal effect where feelings of belonging develop within the refugees, as their interests, identity, and experiences are valued (Due et al, 2016; Kovinthan, 2016). Becoming active participants and co-creators of their education in these formational learning experiences, enhances one’s learning, deepening the learning that results (De Leon, 2014).

Formational learning opportunities coupled with high levels of critical self-reflection, have been reported to deepen one’s knowledge and understanding of diversity, as well as build

positive attitudes towards diversity while being personally enriched and benefiting the community (Endo, 2015; Hawkins & Kaplan, 2016; Zeller et al, 2010). These relevant, out-of-class experiences enable students to sensitively and empathically navigate culturally diverse settings both personally and as they prepare for and enter into the workforce (Endo, 2015).

### **Summary**

Building bridges across cultures through formational learning experiences helps students to recognize and “remember that everyone is different in their own way” (Endacott & Bowles, 2013). Being able to connect and engage with others in an authentic way helps students look past themselves, appreciate the diversity around them, and increase their self-awareness to their own attitudes and misconceptions. “As children become more aware of each other’s experiences and develop connections, it will help them normalize these experiences and counter stereotypical notions of refugees; they will come to understand that refugees are ordinary people in extraordinary situations” (Kovinthan, 2016, p. 149). It is important for K-12 educators to help students see past themselves and develop empathy, respect, and positive attitudes for the larger community (De Leon, 2014).

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

The research participants were 26 grade five students from one of the four grade five classes at a Christian Pre-12 school in British Columbia. There were 14 boys and 12 girls in this grade five class, with a mean age of ten. Of the 26 students, one student was born in Ethiopia (3.8%), one student was born in Egypt (3.8%), one student was born in the Philippines (3.8%), one student was born in South Korea (3.8%), one student was born in China (3.8%), three

students were born in the United States (11.5%), and 18 students were born in Canada (69.2%). It is also important to note that two students were adopted. Four percent of students had one parent immigrate to Canada, 42% had two parents immigrate to Canada, and the remaining 54% have parents who were both born in Canada.

The majority of the research was conducted with all 26 students. Eight students were randomly selected to be interviewed at the conclusion of the unit. Of the eight students selected, 25% of the students were not born to Canada.

## **Materials**

Prior to beginning the Social Studies unit on Newcomers, each student was given nine questions to independently respond to via text or video using the Seesaw app (see Appendix A). These questions were piloted with students from one of the other grade five classes at the school to ensure clarity of understanding within the questions. All 26 students again responded to the same nine prompts at the conclusion of the two-month unit, again using the Seesaw app. In addition, eight students were individually interviewed by the researcher. These eight students were given the same set of questions and the questions were made available to the students prior to their interview (see Appendix B). These questions were piloted with two other students from the same homeroom class to ensure clarity of understanding within the questions. The interviews were voice-recorded and later transcribed to identify themes. To ensure an ethical study, an informed consent agreement was signed by a parent of each of the eight participants (see Appendix C).

**Design**

This research was conducted through a qualitative, phenomenological study. A phenomenological research design allows the conscious experiences of a person to be captured via first person point of view (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). The participant's memories and shared experiences were mainly attained using interviews. This phenomenological study allowed for a first-hand account of the student's stories to be recalled and captured in way that allowed their main highlights, memories, and experiences to be shared. The use of a survey alone would have limited what and how much a student could share about their experiences. Interviews allowed the researcher to ask participants to build on experiences they told about to assist in fully understanding and accurately capturing the participant's experiences, feelings, and attitudes. The researcher captured the narrative and stories from these formational learning experiences, as told by the participants, and noted common themes to help summarize the experiences described. One of the limitations of this study is that the researcher was also a participant getting to know refugees alongside the students, so the researcher may have experienced personal attitude changes as well.

**Procedures**

To conduct this study, one grade five class was identified. Prior to beginning the unit, all students independently responded to the survey questions as outlined in Appendix A. From here, the students began a discovery of their own family's immigration story by surveying their parents. These stories were then shared with the class. The class also took time to identify the immigration history of Canada. Together the class unpacked their deep hope for the unit: "I can connect with newcomers to Canada and help them feel noteworthy in their new home," and brainstormed ways in which they could welcome newcomers. An opportunity to partner with a

local agency in their mission to welcome and support refugee families by hosting a tea for the mothers, playing with the young children, and serving around the apartment complex approximately once a month arose. The students also had the opportunity to interview and host a refugee who came to Canada with his parents, and learn about, capture, and reflect on his story. The class hosted this refugee a second time, increasing their relationship with him. During his second visit, the students had the opportunity to experience and learn how to make Iranian food from him. Following each of these experiences, the students informally reflected on their interactions and learning. These formational learning experiences were planned within the Teaching for Transformation framework with the goal of meeting real needs while doing real work for a real audience. At the conclusion of the unit, all 26 students again responded to the survey questions recorded in Appendix A. Eight students were randomly selected to be interviewed by the researcher using Appendix B. The survey results prior to and following the unit were coded and identified according to their themes and the researcher looked for evidence around how student's attitudes may have changed after participating in these formational learning experiences with refugees.

## **Results**

The entire grade five class responded to the nine questions in Appendix A via the Seesaw app both prior to and after the unit. This data was compared to see how the students' understandings and desires to interact with refugees changed from the start of the unit to the end of the unit. When their unit began, 38% of the students could define who an immigrant was, while 45% of the students could explain who a refugee was. At the conclusion of the unit, 100% of the students could define who both an immigrant and a refugee were and explain the difference between the two terms. When asked at the start of the unit if they wanted to meet a

refugee, one student (5%) shared she is a refugee, 14% of the students stated they have already met a refugee, 23% of the students were unsure about meeting a refugee, 27% of the students said no, and 32% of the students shared yes, they would like to meet a refugee, as shown in Table 1. When responding to these same questions at the end of the unit, all students recognized they had met a refugee (question #5).

When asked at the conclusion of the unit if they would like to meet a refugee (question #6), as shown in Table 1, 14% of the students stated they already had, one student (5%) was unsure, and 81% of the students answered yes. Many students shared they would like to meet another refugee because they “want to hear their refugee story,” “I love hearing people’s stories,” and “yes, so I could put myself in their shoes.”

Table 1  
*Do you want to meet a refugee?*

Student Responses	Beginning of Unit	End of Unit
I am a refugee.	5%	
I have met a refugee.	14%	14%
I am unsure if I want to meet a refugee.	23%	5%
No, I do not want to meet a refugee.	27%	0%
Yes, I want to meet a refugee.	32%	81%

When asked if they liked it when people move to Canada from different countries (question 7), the majority of the students answered yes, both prior to beginning the unit and after concluding the unit. The students’ reasons why they liked having new people move to Canada changed throughout the unit. Before starting the unit, common responses from the students about why they liked having people move to Canada was because “we have a good and safe



country” and “it’s a nice place here.” Following the unit, common reasons for why the students liked having people move to Canada was to “help them escape,” “they need a better life,” “it would be cool to learn about more cultures and traditions and their immigration stories,” and “yes, because I can make new friends.” As one student summarized when explaining how they feel about different cultures at the end of the unit (question 9), “I think it’s a good thing for people to be different and have different cultures [in Canada].”

For the purpose of anonymity, the eight students who were randomly selected and interviewed by the researcher using the questions outlined in Appendix B were identified in this study using names that begin with the letters A through H: Anna, Brett, Calvin, Dawn, Ethan, Faith, Gloria, and Hudson. The name of the refugee that visited their class has also been changed for the purpose of anonymity. The refugee will be referred to as Navid for this study. After the interviews with the eight students were conducted and transcribed, they were then coded. The themes that arose during coding included feelings and attitudes, learning stories and building relationships, the value of real work, and encouragement for others.

### **Feelings and Attitudes**

All of the students expressed how their feelings and attitudes changed due to the formational learning experiences that took place with their class. Both Gloria and Brett respectfully shared, “I didn’t know what a refugee was” (Gloria’s interview, 3-8-19), and “I didn’t even know what refugees really were and then I got to meet a lot of new refugees. I didn’t even know that they were human” (Brett’s interview, 3-7-19). Hudson knew what a refugee was, but as he stated, “I never thought that I would meet a refugee” (interview, 3-12-19).

The students described how their class visited New Hope, “a place where they help refugees have a home and help them settle in Canada,” and how they served cookies and tea, played with the children, listened to refugee stories, and cleaned around their apartment complex (Faith’s interview, 3-7-19). Anna described how she was “nervous, excited, and shy” prior to her first visit to New Hope (interview, 3-7-19). “I was nervous because they won’t understand me maybe, and excited because we got to meet [them]. I had never met a refugee before, but I had met immigrants” (interview, 3-7-19). Anna then went on to explain how she was “happy and joyful” after her visit because “we helped them feel comfortable and I think they actually enjoyed our company” (interview, 3-7-19).

The students also communicated how Navid, a refugee claimant from Iran who came to Canada as a tourist and cannot return home for safety reasons, visited their class twice. “The first time he shared more about his story and then the second time he shared his food with us” (Dawn’s interview, 3-7-19). “We got to ask him questions about himself” (Calvin’s interview, 3-7-19). All of the students expressed how Navid’s visits were a highlight for them.

As the students reflected on meeting these refugees, they portrayed how their own attitudes changed. “They are really nice. They are easy to get to know... I thought they would be really scared of everything and not know any English” (Brett’s interview, 3-7-19). “I use to think it would be scary [to meet a refugee] and they would be so nervous, they would run away. Now, I’m not nervous [to meet a refugee] because I met Navid” (Faith’s interview, 3-7-19). Faith went on to say, “I was scared that they were going to do something to me because maybe something was done to them. Now I’m not scared and I feel more comfortable talking to them” (interview, 3-7-19). Most of the students told how they were initially scared and nervous about

meeting refugees. All students expressed how their comfort level and understanding around refugees grew. As Ethan expressed:

I thought that refugees are just people, but now that I know more about them, they are special just like us. People treat them lower, like less than us, and I think that refugees should feel comfortable and really safe in our country. (interview, 3-7-19)

### **Learning Stories and Building Relationships**

“We got to learn a refugee story from a refugee!” (Brett’s interview, 3-7-19). Brett went on to say, “It’s good if you actually learn the story from the person that it happened to, [rather] than just reading a story” (interview, 3-7-19).

Through their interactions with refugees, all of the students told how they learned the stories of the people they met. “Everyone has different back stories why they came here. It was interesting to know why they came here and how they felt” (Gloria’s interview, 3-8-19). Many students echoed Dawn’s thoughts, “You should build a relationship with them first before you ask them what their story is” (interview, 3-7-19). Calvin thought language would be a barrier but recognized how, “Just because they don’t speak English, doesn’t mean that you can’t spend time with them” (interview, 3-7-19). Many students shared similar ideas to Ethan:

Some advice is if you’re meeting a refugee you want to ask them questions. Don’t jump right into what’s your story? Where are you from? You should ask them some basic questions like: What’s your name? What’s your favourite colour? What’s your favourite sport? What do you like to do? Don’t just jump right into the questions: Where did you come from? How does it feel to be a refugee? (interview, 3-7-19)

The students really expressed the importance of helping refugees feel less nervous and getting to know them first before getting too personal.

I really liked [meeting Navid]. He was really brave to tell us his story. He told us all the details about not ever seeing his family again... I felt really sad because he didn't really have a choice to go back and see his family again. (Brett's interview, 3-7-19)

Even though many of the students expressed feelings of sadness when hearing the refugee stories, they also shared feelings of curiosity and told how it was interesting to learn their stories. As Anna summarized, "Learning their stories helped me a lot" (interview, 3-7-19).

"I think it was really good to see him [Navid] a second time because the first one was just really getting to know his story and the second one we could make new friendships with him" (Brett's interview, 3-7-19). Ethan shared how he would like to meet with the refugees, "Three or four times, because you got to actually know them" (interview, 3-7-19) and when Hudson reflected on how often he would meet with Navid, he articulated, "If I had the chance... forever" (interview, 3-12-19).

### **Value of Real Work**

One hundred percent of the eight students randomly selected to be interviewed explained how the most valuable part of their unit was meeting and interacting with refugees in person.

[The most helpful part of the unit was] meeting him [Navid] and learning more about their things... because in books you can't really ask the person how did this happen, but when you meet a person you can ask that to them and they'll probably tell you. (Gloria's interview, 3-8-19)

Meeting refugees and not just searching up on the computer and being like, oh, this is what refugees do. Normally searching on the computer they only give information that they think refugees are and sometimes they're not true and sometimes they don't give like the whole story and a refugee actually explains what happens to them and they're just like real. (Dawn's interview, 3-7-19)

All of the students expressed how their learning deepened due to the fact they met and interacted with real refugees, rather than just hearing about someone who exists. They shared how when there is no face and name the story does not mean as much, but actually meeting the real person is very impactful. "Meeting them in person is better than just going on-line and learning their stories because I want to actually see who they are and know what their stories [are] like" (Anna's interview, 3-7-19).

Calvin expressed how his class' formational learning experiences and face-to-face interactions impacted him:

I wouldn't really learn much about refugees if I just hear people talking about them... Refugees are from a dangerous place and they want to come to a safe place. [Hearing others talk about them] doesn't tell me their story or why they want to come to a safe place. (Calvin's interview, 3-7-19)

Due to their interactions with refugees, all of the students expressed changes within themselves, "Before I met them, I didn't really care, because I thought they were just people, but now that I know a lot of refugees. I actually care [about] helping them because they've been through a hard time" (Dawn's interview, 3-7-19). Brett also communicated how his own attitude changed due to doing real work for a real audience that meets a real need with his class, "I used to like not

really care before about what refugees were, but now I actually care about them” (Brett’s interview, 3-7-19).

### **Encouragement for Others**

When asked what advice they have for others who have never met a refugee before, all of the students referred to how you should meet a refugee and gave advice for how to do that. Faith not only encouraged you to meet refugees, but to “welcome them” and to “make friends with them” (interview, 3-8-19). Hudson expressed, “I think they should meet a refugee and they shouldn’t be nervous when they meet them” (interview, 3-12-19) and Gloria mentioned, “You should treat them with kindness because they are the same people like you, but just [with] different backgrounds” (interview, 3-8-19). Calvin encouraged you learn to use their name and not just call them a refugee, as “refugees are people too” (interview, 3-7-19). Ethan expressed how, “People should treat refugees the same as you treat yourselves and make them feel special. It’s something we really need to work on [in our world]” (interview, 3-7-19).

As Anna shared she reflected on how her own attitudes and feelings changed due to her interactions with Navid and the people at New Hope, and expressed:

That they should be excited and not scared of them because I was actually really scared of them before because I thought they were mean people because they run away from war. Now I learned that they are actually like us, and they should be treated fair.  
(Anna’s interview, 3-7-19)

Brett also recognized the changes within himself, as he gave advice for others, “They should meet one [refugee] because it changes your perspective on them. I just didn’t pay attention to

refugees [before]. I didn't really care. Now, I actually really do care about them" (interview, 3-7-19).

## Discussion

### Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to answer the questions: How does a formational learning experience that involves students spending time with immigrants and/or refugees affect student's attitudes toward newcomers? How does this formational learning experience impact intercultural sensitivity? In order to answer these questions, the researcher facilitated formational learning experiences where one class of grade five students had multiple opportunities to meet with, interact with, and learn the stories of refugees. The students had ownership in the process as they brainstormed their ideas and hopes for the unit, as displayed in Figure 1. The students' ideas helped guide the formational learning experiences with refugees that occurred with their class.

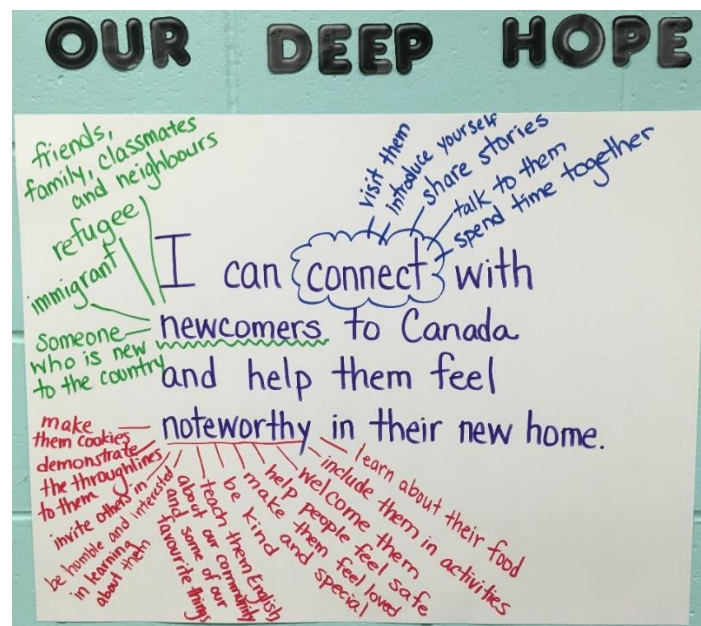


Figure 1: Unit Deep Hope Learning Target

Research studies show that the development of intercultural sensitivity is dependent on experience (De Leon, 2014; M. Bennett, 2004; Hawkins & Kaplan, 2016; Osborne, 2016). Research studies noted the changing demographics of cultures occurring within both Canada and the United States and highlighted the importance of teachers preparing students for cross-cultural interactions by developing knowledge, skills, and dispositions to both understand and communicate across cultures (M. Bennett, 2004; Mellizo, 2018; Vieira et al, 2017). The purpose of this study was to help students look beyond their own culture and experiences and participate in formational learning experiences with refugees to see if these learning experiences would develop a shift of attitude within the students towards the diversity of other people, their cultures, and their stories.

### **Summary of Findings**

The research studies depicted how a development of relationships would increase empathy, interest, and care for the other person (De Leon, 2014; Hawkins & Kaplan, 2016). The increase in care and positive shift in attitudes was clearly felt and articulated by all of the grade five students interviewed. Some students expressed how they did not care about refugees before, and how they really do care about refugees now. At the beginning of the unit, 23% of the students were unsure about meeting a refugee and 27% of the students did not want to meet a refugee. At the conclusion of the unit only one student (5%) was unsure about meeting a refugee again (see table 1). Most students shared how they were initially scared to meet a refugee, but how now after interacting with refugees a number of times, they want to keep meeting them and building a relationship with them. As one student expressed in her reflection journal, “He [Navid] is now close to our hearts.”



The research studies also suggested how reciprocal feelings of belonging would occur within the refugees as their interests, identity, and experiences were valued (Due et al, 2016; Kovinthan, 2016). Upon leaving the grade five classroom after his second visit, Navid, a refugee from Iran, told the students how he had felt isolated, but how he now has hope due to his interactions with the students. As one grade five student reflected in his journal, “I think we also made Navid feel noteworthy. I saw a smile on his face when he left the classroom.” Another student wrote, “We brought Navid joy.”

All of the students interviewed clearly expressed how having face-to-face interactions with refugees was the best way to learn about them. As one student explained during her interview, the most helpful part of the unit was, “meeting Navid and actually meeting a refugee and not just talking and thinking about how they would be” (Faith’s interview, 3-7-19). The students expressed how interacting with refugees was a much richer experience for them than learning about refugees online or from books. The students also shared how these formational learning experiences allowed them to build a relationship with refugees and to learn their story in a way that not only increased their understanding of what refugees have been through, but also brought hope to refugees. The students become mindful of how to build relationships and shared how they were careful to respect the refugee’s culture and traditions as well.

It was evident a lot of the students moved from not knowing who refugees or immigrants were or having a limited view of them, to acceptance, the fourth of six stages in the *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)*, as they not only recognized the similarities between themselves and refugees, but also the differences. As one student stated in her reflection at the end of the unit, “I used to think of refugees as not real people with no education, but I was wrong.” This student went on to say, “I listened to Navid with respect

because we can learn a lot from him.” Another student shared, “Refugees are people, not projects.” Some students also moved into the fifth DMIS stage, adaptation, as they were mindful of being culturally appropriate in their interactions, and demonstrated empathy to the refugees they met. When reflecting on her future deep hope with refugees at the end of the unit, one student expressed, “My deep hope is that we will show the refugees the love and kindness of God.”

At the beginning of the unit, 55% of the students could not explain who a refugee was, and those who could expressed how they were scared of refugees. “I used to think that refugees are kind of like scary people because they came from scary experiences” (Calvin’s interview, 3-7-19). After meeting with refugees through formational learning experiences, the student’s attitudes shifted. “I would encourage you to meet them and get to know them and... make friends with them” (Faith’s interview, 3-8-19). “They have to be treated like all of us because they’re people like us and they should be treated equally” (Anna’s interview, 3-7-19). The students shared how their attitudes changed from fear and nervousness, to caring for and wanting to welcome and build relationships with refugees, both now and in the future. “I used to like not really care before about what refugees were, but now I actually care about them” (Brett’s interview, 3-7-19).

## **Recommendations**

Based on the memories and experiences shared and highlighted by the grade five students, it is recommended multiple, in person visits, occur between students and refugees. The researcher recommends each visit has a different focus and that there is time between the visits to allow both the student and refugee to reflect on and process their learnings. For example, teachers may wish to focus on the refugee’s story during the first visit, and then during the

second visit focus more on their food, culture, or country. Separation of the sharing of the story and food allows for a deeper understanding of the person's story to be emphasized and felt, rather than having the focus and excitement of the interaction shift to the food.

There is value in an ongoing relationship. Essential elements to this relationship include respect, trust, and an openness to learn and experience new ideas. The reflections from both the students and refugees depict how there are mutual benefits to this relationship, from a deepening awareness and understanding for someone else's story, a positive shift in attitude, and a development of hope. As the research studies highlighted, shared experiences and interacting with others from different cultures through commonalities allow understanding, trust, and friendship to develop (Endacott & Bowles, 2013; De Leon, 2014; Hawkins & Kaplin, 2016; Kovinthan, 2016). Building relationships by learning about their interests, experiences, and identity increases the respect and empathy students have for refugees, while also fostering belonging within refugees (Due et al, 2016; Hawkins & Kaplan, 2016; Kovinthan, 2016; Nicolai, 2018).

Finally, it is recommended the students have ownership in the planning and decision making that goes into planning and hosting visits with refugees. When the students have voice and choice an increase in their engagement and passion for these formational learning experiences increases, and they themselves begin to recognize the needs around them and how their actions matter. Sharing and building on their ideas is one way to empower students.

Incorporating formational learning experiences into classes is strongly recommended. Face-to-face interactions and the building of relationships outside of classrooms, facilitate lifelong memories and attitudes that will help shape the actions and attitudes of students, both now and in the future. Experiences with people of other cultures fosters growth within students,

allowing them to reflect on and change their own perceptions, and therefore grow in their motivation, interest, and care for others, while moving through the DMIS stages as they develop intercultural sensitivity (M. Bennett, 2004; De Leon, 2014; Osborne, 2016).

### **Limitations**

A limitation within this study is the researcher was also the teacher of the class that participated in the formational learning experiences with refugees. Although this was not the researcher's first or even second interaction with refugees, every refugee has a different journey and shares a different story, so her experience walking alongside the students may have caused a personal bias within this study. It is recommended the researcher is not the teacher of the students, but rather a neutral educator to ensure no personal bias is incorporated through the study.

Another limitation is this study was conducted with one class of 26 students and only eight of those students were interviewed by the researcher. While most students were present for all of the visits with refugees, some students were absent due to illness or family vacation, so their decreased exposure during the formational learning experiences with refugees may have affected the results of the study. For future studies, it is recommended this study is conducted with more classes, so a larger sampling of students could be interviewed. It is recommended a study is conducted with students that have participated in a variety of formational learning experiences across multiple classes, schools, or even a larger geographical location, so a larger sample of students could be interviewed and the impact of multiple experiences shared, instead of just the findings from one class and the formational learning experiences within one unit.

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**Appendix A**

Learning Target:

- 🎯 I can share my understanding of the following words and ideas to the best of my ability.

Using Seesaw, please voice record your answers to the following questions. Some of these words may be new to you; that is okay! Please take your best guess answering each question. We will again answer these questions at the end of the unit and compare our responses to help track our learning.

1. What is an immigrant?
2. What is a refugee?
3. Have you ever met an immigrant?
4. Do you want to meet an immigrant? Why or why not?
5. Have you ever met a refugee?
6. Do you want to meet a refugee? Why or why not?
7. Do you like it when people move to Canada from different countries? Why or why not?
8. What should the most dominate (biggest) culture in Canada be? Why?
9. Explain how you feel about different cultures.

## Appendix B

### Learning Target:

- ③ I can reflect on how my understanding and attitudes have changed after meeting refugees and learning their stories.

### Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about meeting the refugee's at New Hope.
2. Tell me about meeting Navid and learning his story.
3. Tell me about learning how to make and trying traditional Irian food with Navid.
4. How has your understanding of refugees changed after meeting them and learning their stories?
  - a. Prompt: I used to think... but now I think...
5. What was your attitude about refugees before you met them? How do you feel about refugees now?
6. What advice do you have for others who have never met a refugee before?
7. Did we meet our deep hope for the unit: I can connect with newcomers to Canada and help them feel noteworthy in their new home? If so, please explain how we met our deep hope.
8. Please give examples how we met and displayed your teacher's deep hope for the year throughout this unit: My deep hope is that we will respect, encourage, and delight in the diversity around us.
9. What was the most valuable part of this unit to help you learn about refugees?

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form

Dear Parents,

For the past three years I have been pursuing my Masters in Education through Dordt College. I am currently in the final stage of my graduate work and am conducting an action research project around formational learning experiences. It is through these formational learning experiences that we as a school desire to engage students in real work that meets a real need for a real audience. The interview your child is being asked to participate in is part of a phenomenological study focused on examining the experiences of grade five students and how interacting with refugees may have impacted their attitude.

Your child's participation in the study will consist of an interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. Your child will be asked a series of questions about our time with the various refugees we have met throughout our Newcomers unit and how they have been impacted by learning the refugee's story and interacting with them. At any time, your child may notify the researcher that they would like to stop the interview and their participation in the study.

Your child's confidentiality will be strictly held. The interview will be voice recorded on a password protected device and then transcribed. Your child's name and identifying information will not be associated with any part of the written report. All materials collected will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

It is completely up to you and your child whether or not they participate in the study. All 5Z students will participate in reflection activities involved in this study, but I need parent consent to interview eight randomly selected students from our homeroom. I appreciate your consideration for participation in this study, not only for my continuing education, but for the deepening and understanding of best learning practices within the greater education community.

If you have any questions, please e-mail me or call me, Pamela Zuidhof, at 604-581-7073. If you have additional questions, you may e-mail my thesis advisor, Dr. Patricia Kornelis, at pat.kornelis@dordt.edu.

Thank you,

Pamela Zuidhof (researcher)

\*\*\*\*\*

By signing below, I acknowledge I have read and understand the above information. I consent to my child's participation in this interview and am aware that the experiences shared may be anonymously used in the researcher's written report.

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Printed name of child

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Signature of child

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Date

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Printed name of parent/guardian

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Signature of parent/guardian

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Date