



**We ARE A COMMUNITY.**

Oakland International High School  
Oakland, California

# Learning by Heart

*Five American High Schools Where  
Social and Emotional Learning Are Core*

**CASE STUDIES OF PRACTICE**

WKCD 2014

# A Place to Make My Own

OAKLAND INTERNATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL, OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

by Kathleen Cushman, What Kids Can Do, Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice

The student-made banners above the walkway into Oakland International High School lend a ceremonial air of welcome to this school for new immigrants to the United States. Fluttering in a light breeze, their words and symbols evoke the lives, hopes, and beliefs of the youth who painted them: “We are immigrants.” “We dream of a United States without racism.” “We are a community.”

Since its 2007 founding, in both design and daily life Oakland International has forged that sense of community with its students, who come from 33 countries and speak at least that many languages. As part of the Internationals Network of Public Schools (conceived in New York City in 1985 and now numbering seventeen schools and academies in three states) the school brings very heterogeneous groups of learners into project-based academic, arts, and technology classrooms, integrating English language development in all content areas.



Fully a third of the 330 students here are refugees from war-torn countries, and 25 percent come with little or no formal education. The district allows them to choose Oakland International if they are under eighteen, have recently arrived in the U.S., and score below a certain level on the state’s English language development test. Once enrolled, they may stay on as long as they are working productively toward graduation; youth of very different ages as well as languages work side by side in each grade level. The exigencies of immigrant life make this student population especially transient, but this school keeps its doors open when they return.



All students here are learning English, yet Oakland International aims for much more in the academic challenges it sets. Teacher-created courses emphasize conceptual mastery, grounded in rich projects that go deeper into fewer areas of inquiry. Students must assemble and present portfolios of their work before a panel at each year’s end. The staff calls on every possible medium—computer technology, video, hand-worked art forms, music, sports—to help learners express their ideas fully despite the frustrations of working in a new language.



The social and emotional aspects fundamental to all learning have particular salience in such a context. Entering students join a mixed cohort of 100 ninth and tenth graders with wide variations in English proficiency;

for two years they stay with the same five teachers, forming bonds of trust and support. In collegial groups, teachers tailor the curriculum to their needs and collaborate in supporting students through the trials of transition. Students regularly access mental health services in many languages on school premises, provided by community partners. And their families come in freely to attend special classes in skills like English, technology, and health or nutrition.

Above all, this school nurtures in its adolescent learners the vital understanding that their family stories of struggle can inform a larger autobiographical narrative of resilience and possibility. This case study will pay particular attention to how students have integrated personal history into the experience of learning core subjects, growing their English language skills, and navigating new cultural challenges. Their words convey a developing sense of identity and emotional wellbeing that bodes well for their navigation of the territories ahead.

This is the last of five WKCD case studies produced by WKCD's research arm, the Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice, that documents the transformative power of social and emotional learning and its connections to deeper learning in a diverse collection of U.S. secondary schools. Each study—each portrait—explores particularities in that school's embrace of social-emotional learning. The series, *Learning by Heart*, was produced by WKCD for the NoVo Foundation and is aimed at the broadest audience possible: policy-makers, practitioners, parents, media, and, as always, students.

# Contents

Starting Over	5
From empathy, language emerges	5
Beginning to Belong	7
<i>Soccer As Unifier</i>	7
Building social and emotional bonds	8
Developing leadership	9
Learning language through (e)motion	9
Supporting athletes as students	10
<i>Finding the Way Through Art</i>	11
Knowing the world through art	12
Narrating immigration stories through art	13
<i>Technology As Agency</i>	14
Thinking with computers	14
Mastery in a digital context	15
Finding Yourself in the Curriculum	16
Belonging in the discussion	16
Putting emotions to work	17
Finding a place in history	18
From simulation to action	19
Looking to the future	20
Endnotes	21

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East Side Community School, New York, NY; Fenger High School, Chicago, IL; Quest Early College High School, Humble, TX; Springfield Renaissance School, Springfield, MA

See [howyouthlearn.org/SEL.html](http://howyouthlearn.org/SEL.html)

## I. Starting Over

If you are a new student at Oakland International High School, there comes a point—after the district has tested your English proficiency, after your intake interview, after your long journey by city bus to the low-slung school building in the Temescal neighborhood—when you will find yourself alone and afraid in the Tower of Babel.

Maybe, like Mical, you can catch at least some of what people are saying. After fleeing Eritrea through Sudan, she spent six months in a displaced persons camp in Texas, where she picked up some Spanish but little English. Now she lives in Oakland with an older sister, working at Burger King to help with her keep. Her father died four years ago; for six years she has not seen or spoken with her mother in Eritrea, though she keeps hoping to find her somehow. When she started ninth grade at Oakland International four years ago, the weight of all she carried kept her silent.

“Some people, they just get shy and they don’t want to talk to other people,” Mical said, remembering that anxious time. “I know how it feels . . . maybe they won’t like me.”

Other students express their fears more actively. In El Salvador Carlos learned to steel himself against gangs and when he started school in Oakland he kept his guard up. At first, “I get in a lot of trouble,” he recalled. “I don’t listen to the teachers, I do whatever I want. All my days I passed in the office.”



**Audio Slideshow**  
**Opening the Door**  
(2:56)



Thi Bui, a founding teacher here and herself an immigrant in childhood from Vietnam, well knows the isolation and confusion that new students experience. “There’s a lot of misunderstanding,” she said. “If someone else is speaking in another language and looking vaguely in their direction, students think they must be saying something bad about them.” That sometimes leads to fights, she noted, especially among boys in their early teens who are trying to establish their place in the school.

In this city known for its crime rate, finding one’s place outside of school matters equally. “Our students get jumped a lot,” said Lauren Markham, who manages family and community programs for the school. “Newcomers are often targets: robbed at gunpoint, beat up or threatened, their backpacks stolen.” As Mical noted softly, “Some people, they see you on the bus, they don’t look at us like people. They know us as immigrants, but they don’t know we work hard.”

### From empathy, language emerges

For these newcomers to fulfill their academic potential, transforming such painful frustration through language proficiency must be the work of every classroom in this school—and social and emotional elements undergird that process.<sup>1</sup> Most students here are not speaking English at home, so establishing an emotional comfort level at school takes on extra importance in acquiring their new language.<sup>2</sup> “It’s so hard sometimes,” said Esra, who comes from Yemen. “If I’m nervous, I can’t speak English and I just speak my own language. You just want to feel the words inside your body, and it’s so hard to pronounce them outside.”

The classroom environments and routines at Oakland International intentionally immerse students in warm support for their language development. Students typically work together at tables of four or five, carefully assigned so that a more fluent same-language peer can encourage and translate for a newcomer. Smart

phones and computers are readily at hand, providing instant translation as needed. Instructions on the walls pair simple and clear language with pictures. (One poster offered tips for helping others as they speak in English: “Stay positive! Speak clearly and slowly. Listen to what they say. Repeat the same idea using different words. Act out what you mean.”)

“Even the people who spoke Spanish didn’t understand what I was saying,” recalled Jeanni, who was one of the school’s youngest students when she arrived from Cuba at thirteen. “We really speak differently than people from Central America.” After the rigorous public schools of Cuba she was far ahead in subjects like math but a complete novice on the Internet. When she and Mical met that year, the bond they formed sustained both girls through their early efforts to learn English, with Mical’s rudimentary Spanish as the bridge.

Starting over with younger students can also cause frustration for older students, notes Sailaja Suresh, who shares the principal’s position with Carmelita Reyes. Even if they are about to turn eighteen, new Oakland International students start out as ninth graders, except for rare cases who arrive with considerable formal schooling and English skills.

“It’s gonna take them longer now to get started on their adult lives,” Ms. Suresh conceded. “But typically our students here are older, and there’s probably at least one other seventeen-year-old in their group.” Also, many older students feel privileged that they need not go unprepared into a daunting work environment. “They’re excited to have the chance to get their bearings,” said Ms. Suresh. “The government has decided that they are gonna get an education. And that’s a real honor for a lot of them.”

Expressions of empathy and appreciation among teachers and students show up everywhere in the school. A bulletin board in one classroom overflowed with sticky notes by students giving voice to their bonds (“I appreciate Abdul for be my brother” and “Thank you Wadhah for helping me in this class”). When a misunderstanding does erupt, the assumption is always that communication will resolve it. Translators assist at mediated conversations in the school offices; if something more serious seems amiss, a student can visit a counselor privately. The remarkable Vilma Ortiz, who staffs the school’s front desk, knows every student personally and provides motherly direction no matter what problem presents itself.

Each student also has one teacher who serves as an adviser, ready to help and troubleshoot as needed. Fadhleyah, a student from Yemen, transferred to Oakland International after a miserable three weeks at a large high school nearby. “When the teacher asked me anything in class, I just cry,” she remembered, but a reassuring hug from her adviser dried her tears and kept her going. “They will help you if you want the help.”

Along with a common language, students said, their trust and friendships developed over time. “Everybody always asks each other how to say the bad words in their language,” Thi Bui noted wryly, adding: “And also how to say ‘I love you.’” Those who once depended on the empathy of peers began to reach out to others in their turn.

“Once I saw one of my classmates on the bus get in a fight,” recalled a girl named Patience, from Liberia. “He really didn’t understand what was going on when this boy started fighting him.” As she watched in dismay, another classmate with better English stepped in to mediate. “When I saw him the next day, I said ‘Thank you for helping him’—it was unfair that that happened to him.”

Mical, now eighteen, volunteers at a nearby public library as part of her internship class. Her English has reached the same level as her Spanish, she says. She aspires to study nursing at a nearby college, then move to Minnesota, where she once visited a friend of her family. “It was fresh,” she said. “And I just want to have a new life.” Equipped to beat the odds—in Eritrea, girls often leave school to marry after ninth grade—once more Mical is setting out to start over.

## II. Beginning to Belong

### **SOCCER AS UNIFIER**

If asked to name one object that they recognized with relief and pleasure as soon as they started at their new school, most students at Oakland International would probably point to a soccer ball. As the world’s most popular sport—played in over 200 countries by anyone with access to a ball, a patch of land, and a few sticks for goalposts—soccer has cross-cultural appeal. At this school, it also provides an ideal way for students to forge social and emotional bonds even without a common language.

Early in the school’s history, a partnership with the nonprofit Soccer Without Borders sprang from the teaching of soccer in physical education class. Led by Ben Gucciardi, it grew like wildfire; roughly a third of all students here now take part, playing on various teams that compete in Oakland and its surrounds. However, the program goes far beyond athletic competition. It encompasses youth development and leadership as well as academic monitoring, intervention, and support. “My soccer program, they always support me, everywhere,” said Ravis, a student from Democratic Republic of the Congo. “My personal life, on the field, academically—they’re always there for me.”

First priority, Mr. Gucciardi emphasized, goes to establishing an open-door culture of inclusion and acceptance. “Regardless of language, culture, ethnic identity, gender, sexual orientation, skill level, whatever—in this space everybody can get out there and just be themselves, and get encouragement and positive reinforcement,” he said. “It’s okay to be competitive,” he added, cheerfully acknowledging the rivalries of older adolescent boys in particular.

Unlike the boys who take part in the program, for cultural reasons almost none of the girls at Oakland International have played soccer before. Leya, an older student from Eritrea who had recently enrolled at the school, stepped onto the field in boots one afternoon at the invitation of some other girls. Before long, she was happily lacing on some athletic shoes from the storage locker and encouraging a younger girl from her country to join the fun despite her father’s disapproval. (“It’s just exercises,” others coaxed, to no avail.)

Simply to enjoy “silly, goofy, physical fun” out on the playing field, noted Mr. Gucciardi, “is such a leap in terms of societal gender roles” for many young women. Katie Nagy, one of two female coaches for the program’s girls teams, agreed. “It takes some convincing,” she said. “We talk to their families and provide a different perspective on what the sport can do for their daughters in life.”

## Building social and emotional bonds

By bringing together peers who may not otherwise meet in academic classes, students made clear, the soccer program expands their social network. “If we see each other outside practice, we say hi to each other and ask about how the classes are going,” said Helen, who comes from Eritrea. Playing together also deepens their sense of emotional safety. “We’ve got to know each other here,” said Emory, from Mexico. “We don’t fight. We are like a team, a family, and we feel safe.”

Such cross-cultural friendships are the program’s most important outcome, Ben Gucciardi believes. For many students, he said, “the first time they build relationships outside of their language group is on the soccer field.” He told of an Arabic speaker in tenth grade:

*He’s really a very good soccer player whose English is still very basic. Mostly he spends time with other Arabic speakers, but through the team he’s now made friendships and relationships with people from a lot of other language groups. And it’s really authentic friendship, as opposed to just getting to know you. They are really invested in each other. They’re teammates, and that’s been a really powerful thing to see.*

Many players echoed Emory’s family metaphor in describing their attachment to the program. Omar, who comes from Colombia, regards Mr. Gucciardi as “my second father,” he said. “For him it doesn’t matter the skills that you have. He is always substituting the people and make everybody play equal amount of time. No matter if we win or lose, for him what matters is that we have fun.”

Ravis, who captained one of the boys teams, agreed emphatically. “That’s why whenever we play I give everything I have,” he said. “Even though we lost, I’m still smiling. Play as hard as you can, try anything as hard as you want to try, but don’t forget that we always play for fun. That’s the spirit that keeps me going and loving the team that I’m in.”

Their soccer coaches also serve as confidants and advisers, many students said. “If this man’s going to tell you what you did wrong,” said Ravis, “it’s like, ‘I’m mad at you. Don’t do this anymore. Try to change. I like people who tell me the truth: how I did good, how I did bad, how I need to improve.’” He trusts his coach with personal issues, such as the need to miss practice because of child care responsibilities at home. “He was like, ‘Ravis, do what you have to do, but we’re here as your family too.’ That was super, [to know that] there’s always people there waiting for me and trying to support my life and my goals far away.”

Many of her female players, Ms. Nagy observed, participate less for the program’s athletic or competitive aspects than for its family-like environment. “When I play soccer, it feels like a second home,” said Rebekah, a student from Malaysia. “They feel like my real family, and we respect each other.” Helen confides in her teammates or coaches when personal problems arise for her. “They’re really nice,” she said. “I can just talk to them about everything.”

In her first year of coaching at the school, Ms. Nagy has observed the effects of the trust her players develop in each other. “Here they can come together and be part of something,” she said, “with other girls they normally wouldn’t associate with because of their different backgrounds.” Despite their very different skill levels, “they find a common ground on the field with a soccer ball,” she added:

*Especially when you’re new to this country and to this learning environment, it’s hard to step outside your comfort zone and try something new. In class, you’re scared to fail. But if you learn how to do that on the soccer*



*field and then you have this support system around you, you realize that it's okay. Then it becomes okay to do that in the classroom: to learn, and to speak English, and to try all these things that are very new and very scary. Soccer creates an environment where it's safe for them to try, and hopefully it translates back.*

## **Developing leadership**

With the young men in the program, Mr. Gucciardi sees a variation on that theme. “The male ego gets bruised when they can’t speak English,” he has noticed:

*And when they feel like they're bad at something, they often react with: “I don't have to listen to you, I don't have to do this.” For those boys who are having a hard time in the other areas of their life, soccer is something that is familiar, that they're good at, that they love. They really feel invested in it, which is so important. It's something where they're excelling.*

Behavior change, he remarked, takes place gradually. “It starts with some positive reinforcement when they do the right thing,” he said:

*“Wow, you're doing such a good job being a leader here on the field! Could you also do that in the classroom? Your English is a lot stronger than some of the other students. The same way that you're leading here, you could do that in the classroom.”*

The relationships among teammates and coaches reverberate in other contexts as well. In one memorable incident, a bad fight over a girl broke out between two boys from different language groups, sparking a dramatic face-off between their Arabic-speaking and Spanish-speaking supporters. At soccer practice later, the players (many of them boys from the same two language groups) decided to take a stand to calm the waters. Forty-five minutes before school started the next day, some twenty male and female teammates stood together in its entryway and greeted their peers, holding signs in many languages: “We want peace in our school.”

At such moments, said Mr. Gucciardi, the Soccer Without Borders program “becomes much more than the sport itself.” By stepping up to facilitate healing in that crisis, students showed the leadership and values that it stands for. “We all like soccer,” the coach said. “But we’re using it as a platform, a means, a vehicle for building community.”

## **Learning language through (e)motion**

Creating that community has had its own remarkable effect, which goes directly to the central mission of the school: helping its language learners to communicate successfully in English. “One of our rules is to do your best to speak English on the field,” said Ben Gucciardi. “And I think that really helps. There are certain times when they are just forced to speak English in order to communicate with teammates from different language groups. There’s no other way.”

The research on acquiring and remembering language has long linked action with words: we remember phrases like “throw me the ball” better, for example, if we are actually tossing a ball than if we study it in a textbook.<sup>3</sup> More recently, cognitive scientists have theorized that thought, memory, and language derive from actual motor and sensory experience. According to this view, what we know and how we reason—whether

we are kicking a ball into a goal or curled up with a good book—depends on activity in the same neural systems used for perception, action, and emotion. Psychologists Arthur Glenberg and Michael Kaschak explain:

*The abstract symbols of language must be grounded, or mapped, to the world if they are to convey meaning. . . . That is, the meaning of a sentence is given by an understanding of (1) how the actions described by the sentence can be accomplished or (2) how the sentence changes the possibilities for action. . . . This description of language understanding is not metaphorical—that is, it is not simply a way to describe understanding. Instead, real bodily action is at the root of meaning conveyed by language.<sup>4</sup>*



**Audio Slideshow**  
**Soccer As Unifier**  
**(2:59)**



This understanding has important implications for how English language learners in high school enter academic discourse and come to conceptual understanding of abstract phenomena. As Glenberg and Kaschak put it, “Even as adults, we understand language about physical, social, and psychological causation in terms of the pushes and pulls of our bodily experience.”

The young soccer players on the fields behind Oakland International provide a rich picture of English language proficiency progressing (quite literally) by leaps and bounds. Caught up in the physical and emotional flow of the game, they let go of their fears and call out to each other freely, reinforcing with every play their growing understanding of meaning in their new language.

“On the soccer field it was like I was in another world,” said Ravis. “Everything they would tell me, it would just get in my head—I was like, *ohh!*” Helen, from the girls team, agreed with him. “It’s more free outside,” she explained:

*You can’t say, like, “pass the ball” or something like that in their language [so] you have to use your English. You become more confident because they will still understand you—even if you don’t know how to say the word, you show them with your feet. . . . You try to say those words without feeling shy or anything, because you’re playing and the purpose is to score a goal. I think you develop that way. Because it’s something you like to do. It’s something you don’t have to force.*

Helen recalled watching a player strategize with her teammates at a game—first in Spanish, then switching to English. “She said she wasn’t really good at speaking English, but she was going to try ’cause it was important for us to win. . . . When they’re passionate about what they like, they still get up and do it because they know how soccer’s supposed to be played.”

“It’s so awesome,” said Isis, a student from Mexico. “People don’t know how to speak English, so we speak our own language sometimes, and sometimes we speak English, but we can still understand each other through soccer.”

## Supporting athletes as students

Coach Gucciardi has begun exploring ways to intentionally integrate academic vocabulary—such as “evidence” and “analysis”—into the language of soccer practice. In the meantime, he and his coaching colleagues act as steadfast champions of the habits students must build in order to succeed at their coursework. Students regularly do homework at the tables that fill the Soccer Without Borders office, with help readily available.

“He’s not only focused on making you a good soccer player,” said Abednego, who comes from Guatemala and aspires to be a lawyer. “He’s also focusing on making you a successful person for the future. He don’t care if you’re really good at soccer. He cares if you’re having a good education, you’re preparing yourself for a future.”

Omar described an occasion on which Mr. Gucciardi took a group of players to the home of a struggling teammate who had given up on school. “We went to talk to him, try and make him go back to finish high school, see how important it is to have a high school diploma in life,” he recalled. For another player, who was strong in both soccer and academics, the coach made sure he visited university programs and met the deadlines for college entrance exams. “Who does that for you?!” Omar exclaimed. “It’s amazing. And he treats equally everybody. [He says to us,] ‘Obviously you can apply too. You’re going to make it.’”

Soccer Without Borders considers such support part of its core mission. Though players may struggle with academics or have issues with classroom behavior, “they are also very invested in soccer,” said Mr. Gucciardi. “To help them stay focused, we can leverage their participation on the team with some academic outcomes.” At such an intervention, student, family, and teachers typically confer together to agree on a plan and fair consequences—such as losing the right to play in games or at practices—if transgressions occur.

In other cases, students who have dropped out maintain their connection with learning through soccer practice. One such student, now 21, left school in eleventh grade and “still comes all the time,” said Mr. Gucciardi. “He’s now finally decided he really wants to finish his GED, so he’s coming here to get help and support.” Their families trust the soccer coaches as well, asking assistance with everything from buying a used car to finding their way in a thicket of city agencies. Such interactions at once affirm and extend the culture of growth, opportunity, and empowerment the program seeks to create, the coach reflected. “We’re getting more intentional about that all the time.”

## FINDING THE WAY THROUGH ART

At every turn, art made by students pervades the campus of Oakland International. Their banners flutter over the entry walkway, declaring in bold red, white, and black the place of immigrants in the larger community. In the entrance passage hangs an array of illustrated student research and reflections on the visual patterns of textiles, currency, roofing, and other artifacts from their native countries. Most of the walls in the courtyard and corridors display huge murals painted by students. One illustrates with totemic figures and clasped brown hands the theme “Respect Each Other” spelled out in twelve languages; another, located near the school’s garden, portrays the ecosystem in brilliant hues and bold designs; a third juxtaposes silhouettes of athletes at play against a bright green background.

Around the upper perimeter of Brooke Toczyłowski’s art classroom hang poster-sized black-and-white photographic portraits in which students hold up their written declarations (“I am Afghani”; “I am ambitious”). Someone has overpainted a wall poster of a red “Do Not Enter” sign with the haunting black outline of a girl’s concerned face. On large round placards mounted up near the classroom clock, hand-drawn symbols illustrate the words “community,” “curiosity,” “compassion,” and “creativity.”

As Elliot Eisner suggested in his seminal book *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, the arts teach students to attend to relationships, develop their mental and emotional flexibility, and help them use imagination to shift

the direction and expression of their thinking.<sup>5</sup> Just so, the guiding principles of this school’s art program—articulated in this classroom as “I see, I think, I wonder”—reverberate throughout the social, emotional, and academic lives of its students.

The power of art seems to play even more of a role in the development of these English language learners. Just as soccer embodies language and meaning through their physical and emotional experiences, artistic expression enlarges their capacity to create meaning as they absorb a new language and its symbol systems. “I just draw and explain by doing something without speaking,” said Rebekah. “I can’t describe my drawing; it’s something described for me.”

“You paint something, if you don’t know how to say it,” added Helen. “Your painting can just explain what you’re thinking and feeling. And also you get to create things that you want to say without speaking.” Writing words to go with her images (as in an artist’s statement) “helps you to say what you’re thinking, and [what] you would say if you could speak it,” she said. Pausing to think, Helen concluded, “It’s like soccer. Sometimes we don’t have to say anything. . . . It has its own language. We don’t have to learn, we just create it.”

### **Knowing the world through art**

Students created the entryway flags in a unit designed “to reimagine and reframe the conversation about immigration in the United States,” said Ms. Toczylowski. They began by studying the work of the Oakland printmaker Favianna Rodriguez, whose parents were Peruvian immigrants:

*Favianna talks about how some people compare immigrants to cockroaches invading your kitchen. But she likes to imagine immigrants as butterflies, who are able to freely move and need to migrate in order to survive, just like many immigrants. We went through all sorts of class discussions about that, and small group discussions. Working in groups, they then chose sentences that defined what they had in common as immigrants: “We are dreamers,” or “We work hard,” or “We want a good education.” Then they created their own symbols for those ideas, or chose symbols that already exist. Xing’s group’s flag says “We want all people to have freedom,” and he chose the Statue of Liberty as a representative symbol of that.*

The arts program here has forged close ties with Harvard University’s Project Zero, whose researchers explore the processes of coming to know the world through art and thinking like an artist. With a local grant from the Abundance Foundation, teachers have joined with colleagues from nearby schools to learn how “studio thinking” in arts classrooms might extend as well to other domains of learning. Rooted in the concept of thinking dispositions,<sup>6</sup> the approach centers on specific habits of mind and classroom structures in the teaching of visual arts.

One class was exploring the word “experiment,” which many students associated with their science classes. To see what it could mean in visual terms, they were looking into the ways that artists “play.” After their teacher modeled the process, they tried drawing on a magazine with oil pastels, then ripping it in half to see the resulting images. Next they worked in their individual art journals, experimenting with collage, tempera, pastels, or different types of pen or pencil. Some students played with the Surrealistic technique of “exquisite corpse,” a collaborative image assembled from unrelated parts. “I see . . . it is made of lines and shapes,” one student wrote, examining the result. “I think . . . it is an abstract draw. I wonder . . .”

These learners are practicing “studio thinking,” but one could use much the same language in describing intellectual growth in other curriculum areas and in their daily lives. A look at the “studio habits of mind” described by Project Zero<sup>7</sup> makes that apparent:

- *Developing craft* easily translates to acquiring the tools and techniques of other domains
- *Observation* in the arts correlates to listening and attending elsewhere
- *Envisioning* compares to generating hypotheses
- *Reflecting, expressing, exploring, and engaging and persisting* all have clear relevance to any field of inquiry
- *Understanding the world of art* correlates to understanding the larger context of any domain in which students work.

In teaching the arts, the “studio thinking” approach calls for certain structures—demonstration-lectures, protocols of students at work, and critique—that also apply readily to learning in other domains. Just as Ms. Toczylowski modeled an artistic technique in her class that day, teachers in other classrooms can model the ways that historians analyze documents or scientists design an investigation. Just as their art teaching colleagues do, they can set up differentiated classroom work for students that allows observation and intervention as needed. Even the traditional critique of artwork in process offers a way for non-arts classrooms to reflect and develop understanding as a community.

## Narrating immigration stories through art

Another major art project that called on immigration stories came about in 2010, when Thi Bui, who at the time taught ninth and tenth grade art, proposed to her class that they write and illustrate their immigration stories in graphic-novel form. With a few simple conventions like panels and speech balloons, she said, students who had only rudimentary English “surprised, informed, inspired, and moved me to tears.”



### Immigration stories by students

**My Odyssey, by Maria**  
(PDF, 1.3 MB)



**A Big New Life, by Bao**  
(PDF, 3.2 MB)



*We Are Oakland International*, the self-published book that resulted, sells on Amazon and brims with a power and pathos that belies its comic-book format. Maria’s story, “My Odyssey,” portrays her arduous journey with her brother from El Salvador to rejoin their mother, who had left after two earthquakes had devastated their country. On the way, as she told a public radio interviewer, “A lot of bad things happened to me. But in the end it was happy, because I met my mother after nine years.”

The first two stories in the book, by a student named Bao, tell of his former life in Vietnam and his family’s transition to California. His comic art is highly developed in both, but the story he first portrayed as a shy new tenth grader revealed little of his emotional experience. The next year, before the book went to press, Bao returned to Ms. Bui with a revised version that fairly leaps off the page with the tensions of growing up across two cultures. “Here is a young man who is becoming a storyteller,” his teacher wrote in her introduction. “He is learning by figuring out what his story really is.”

## TECHNOLOGY AS AGENCY

In her seventh year at the school and with experience across several curricular domains, Thi Bui now teaches technology to eleventh graders, which has only increased her students' capacity to express themselves through the arts. Last year, her class created a movie screenplay from Cory Doctorow's dystopian novel *Little Brother*, which features a diverse group of activist Bay Area teenagers. Since most of her students struggle mightily with reading, that work created a fascinating literacy experience, Ms. Bui said:

*Translating this novel's text into a screenplay format really gets them to read closely. You change everything that's past tense into the present tense, which means you have to be very aware of who's speaking every time there's dialogue. It makes you look for the action, so it actually helps you understand the text as well.*

Movie making, she saw, presented a powerful learning tool. "There's always the issue at the end: your movie is better if you understood the text," she mused. "But if they can visualize the text through the movie—act it out, watch it, talk about it—then it might be more useful as part of the process of reading." So the following year, in a documentary project, she explored the uses of a storyboard activity. This time, students pieced together their footage without screenplays in a process that emphasized research skills. It was a developmental jump, she said, from the earlier graphic novel project in which they told their own stories. "In the eleventh grade, it's telling somebody else's story through your lens. It's going outside yourself."

One group began with a "literature review" of the immigration comics produced by peers in the previous year. "They identified what was still missing in the stories, what they wanted to know more about," Ms. Bui explained. "Then they created more research questions and turned them into interview questions." One team of students might interview another, often across language groups; or students might also interview a parent. A student who hails from the featured country acts as guide for the process of connecting, interviewing, and translating, but "everybody is working outside their own experience in the documentary," Ms. Bui said. "It feels nice—they're learning, and they appreciate each other."

### Thinking with computers

Like soccer and visual art, the use of digital technology across domains at Oakland International seems to infuse an ever-growing sense of agency into the learning process of these English language learners. It gives them yet another "thinking language" as they take on complex challenges across the curriculum. It provides alternate ways of expressing what they know and can do. Not least, it acts as an ever-present private "guide on the side," translating and pronouncing terms that otherwise might easily remain opaque.

The school is approaching a one-to-one ratio of computers to students and continually acquires more, with donations from the community nonprofit Oakland Technology West (OTX). Students come and go continually at banks of computers in the central area through which everyone arrives; many classrooms have a "half lab" of ten to fifteen computers for rotating use; three laptop carts make the rounds. After taking a free training class by OTX, students and their families can take home refurbished computers and other equipment.

"It helps us a lot, learning things on a computer," said Patience. Every student and family has free access to language study using Rosetta Stone software. For help with translation and pronunciation, students may consult classroom computers or keep smartphones close at hand. They use computers to read books, to do

research in different languages, to check their email, and to share and revise their written documents. They use inexpensive video cameras that the school has bought, downloading moviemaking software that they can also access from home. On the school website they can access dozens of “survival English” resources, ranging from phonics chants to vocabulary videos and easy-to-learn popular songs.

Co-principal Sailajah Suresh, who previously taught the eleventh-grade technology class, largely focused on developing students’ technical proficiency. When Ms. Bui took it over, she thought hard about what new lens she might introduce to students. In the first year, she said, “We talked a lot about the Internet”:

*The world before the Internet, what we use the Internet for now, what might it be in the future, what issues we need to think about. And this year it’s a lot more focused on the students as learners. What kind of learner am I? How can technology help me learn, grow, work? And then—as they become more of a community—how do we use computers and technology to collaborate? How can you be 21st-century learners in that way? How do we use the Internet to share our work?*

One wall in her classroom displays a long timeline that students created to represent the life history of the Internet. “We always start with a blank slate,” Ms. Bui said, explaining that the timeline went up during one day’s lesson on evaluating the reliability of sources:

*One first step is confirming your information. I had them look up when a piece of technology was invented or developed, but they couldn’t put it up [on the timeline] until they got two other people to confirm a different source for the same information. It was a baby step toward being critical readers and [developing] information literacy.*

## **Mastery in a digital context**

In another class not long after the fall term began, Ms. Bui’s students were revising essays in which they described what they would like to learn and do in the class that year. To persuade their classmates of the value of their proposals, they had also used computer software to produce short animations, selecting a background and small avatars, then incorporating sound and movement and humor as the characters made their case.

“Mastery assignments can always be improved,” read a note on the whiteboard. “You can rewrite parts of your essay or finish it for a better grade.” Half the grade in this class comes from mastery of tasks like the essay or the animation, the rest on class participation, homework, and growth in English.

“I’m very, very excited because this is the first time that my students have given me so many ideas in this class,” said Ms. Bui. “Not all of them want to make movies. Some are interested in taking apart a computer and understanding how it works. Some are interested in learning programming so that they can get a job.” For each interest, she plans to bring in an expert they can learn from, and with each visitor they will use the same process. First “I want kids to get a window into how this person thinks,” she said. Then with the expert’s help, they will “take apart an object, build an object, and share that object—it could be a movie, a computer, a software program.”

“Just know that it’s a long year,” she told her class that day. “We’re going to try to do all of the things you’ve asked to do.” They would start with a moviemaking project, she continued, joining others in a long literary and artistic tradition by creating their own “love letter to a place.” Yasser, a student from Yemen who had

worked on three movies the previous year, would serve as expert and set the context for his peers. In a corner of the room he was rehearsing what he would say:

*Last year I learned that it's not easy to do a movie, so first you have to think, you have to observe around you. I would suggest they think about the thing that maybe people would like to learn about that place. Maybe they would love to see some pictures, and [I will show as an example] how an image of the Golden Gate represents San Francisco. I will teach them some steps they need . . . how to choose their song or music, the steps they need to save after the work.*

“In all classes, when students think of a good idea, the teachers always support you,” Yasser said in a tone of confidence and pride as he prepared to teach his peers what he had learned. “My voice counts. Teachers try to understand what students want, then do it.”

### III. Finding Yourself in the Curriculum

Identifying what matters most to adolescent learners takes on even more importance when teaching new language learners. Their search for identity and their yearning for friendship provide an especially strong avenue to foster the academic skills that will matter so much to their futures, many Oakland International teachers observed.

As a base for all their learning, Jen Kelly-DeWitt makes sure that her ninth- and tenth-grade English Language Arts students buy in to her expectation “that everyone is sharing their ideas with each other, and that those ideas are valuable.” Starting the year by talking about things that already matter in their lives, she said, consolidates their understanding of that discussion norm. As examples of topics, she offered “Should you be able to have your cell phone in school?” or “Compare the merits and demerits of Oakland to those of the place you came from.”

*Through that, I think kids start to feel, “I have a place here. People are listening to me . . . I’m sharing my experience and my ideas.” Then we move from there to more text-based work, where again you have to share your ideas but it’s more about a story. . . . We don’t go right into reading a book. We start with something more approachable—something autobiographical or cultural.*

Ms. Kelly-DeWitt’s unit on ethics makes a good example of that process. Huge charts festoon her classroom walls, on which her students have written examples from the moral codes of their Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian belief systems. (Among them: “Hating other people is a big loss to yourself.” “Be peaceful.” “A women cover her hair.” “Don’t descrimination.”) Only after engaging on that personal level do they move on to discuss the moral codes of literary figures like Odysseus, the teacher said. “By being gradual, most students feel like they have at least a toehold in the work.”

#### **Belonging in the discussion**

With language skills varying so greatly in these heterogeneous classrooms, teachers here do struggle to make sure that every student engages with the target concepts. “We do have a lot of kids who *can*, to varying degrees,” Ms. Kelly-DeWitt said, “and then we have kids who you could perceive as ‘*cannot*,’ to varying degrees . . . in this moment.” Separating them in different levels to work on the same concepts, she recalled, often ended with students “sort-of copying material they didn’t necessarily understand from students who did understand.”



To address that, she and her grade-level team have devised a discussion protocol that gives all students meaningful thinking roles in small heterogeneous groups, regardless of language proficiency:

- **Reporters** facilitate table discussion and keep it going when it falters, pressing on with another question or more examples.
- **Trackers** chart students' participation, noting as people contribute ideas, take notes, and push the conversation further.
- **Translators** interpret the group discussion in non-English speakers' home language, then ask for their comments and share them with the group.
- Everyone else has the role of **speaker**, and they may report back main ideas to the larger group.



**Discussion Roles and Tracker Sheet (PDF, 1.2 MB)**



The method takes planning. Ms. Kelly-DeWitt assigns students to a consistent group that ideally has at least three languages represented. (Spanish and Arabic prevail in her classroom; usually two interpreters suffice, as many students speak yet a third language. If necessary, students can look in a dictionary or get a digital translation from a device. Though that makes the discussion less rich, she said, “it makes them feel the expectation that they’re participating.”

Using the protocol has markedly increased the sense of belonging among her newcomer students, Ms. Kelly-DeWitt said. They no longer feel excluded from a discussion not really about them, “because it is very clearly about them. It’s changed that dynamic.”

Teachers in other domains, such as history and art, are already finding it useful in their classes as well. Most students also said that working in small groups of students from other language groups pushed them to work hard on speaking English. “That’s the way I learned,” said Omar simply.

### Putting emotions to work

As students develop in their language skills and move on to eleventh and twelfth grades, teachers also provide scaffolding for the new challenges they face. For example, Thi Bui breaks down the task of essay writing into more manageable parts. She might start with a visual representation of an essay, then introduce topics that might appeal to different students. Before they begin to write, students try out thoughts with each other in brainstorming and pair-share activities, and after finishing a draft, they exchange feedback.

Writing one paragraph typically takes a day, and “each day they feel completion and some success,” Ms. Bui said. By the end of a week, “they see that writing an essay”—which they must do to pass California’s high school exit exam—“is not that impossible.”

Ambitious content also lies well within the reach of English language learners, teachers here agree—but it too needs careful scaffolding. Working with three colleagues at San Francisco International High School, for example, Jen Kelly-DeWitt adapted Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet” for her ninth and tenth graders. She knew that they would relate to its themes of adolescent love, conflict, loyalty, and deceit, and as cultural capital the play also had high value. With its numerous movie versions and opportunities for students to speak, listen, read, write, and perform, it seemed a good text with which students could work toward multiple Common Core ELA standards.

Yet in this extremely heterogeneous class, her summative assessments for the unit differed. Even students with minimal English, for example, could join a small group of peers in performing an adapted scene. Many students also wrote a four-paragraph essay (one prompt: “How do characters’ words and action worsen or resolve the conflict between the two families?”). However, newcomers only compared and contrasted two characters in writing, then wrote accompanying text for a complete storyboard of the play.

In adapting the play’s text, Ms. Kelly-DeWitt said, she always looked for “what can stay mostly the same.” She aimed to keep Shakespeare’s most famous lines intact and to maintain his complex metaphors, while modifying grammar and vocabulary to help students understand. (“I had to weigh the value of each word they would not know,” she said.) To mingle students of different language levels, she simplified and shortened some roles and left others longer and more difficult. Throughout the text, she inserted graphics and storyboards that gave emotional and visual cues to its meaning.

In Act 1, Scene 5, for instance, Romeo says that Juliet “is like a dove next to crows.” Students could gather a sense of the scene from a Shakespeare edition presenting the play through comic art. They could consult a vocabulary bank of familiar words (like *ugly*, *beautiful*, *loud*, *annoying*, *peaceful*, *black*, *white*, and *pure*) to explain how Romeo viewed Juliet compared to “all the other people at the party.” Or they might perform a randomly selected line from the scene, coupling it with an expressive action. Bit by bit, this teacher said, they were making the text their own—and finding themselves, at times, in the curriculum.

## Finding a place in history

In history classes as well, teachers draw in social and emotional elements to support students’ academic understanding, and vice versa. “Whether it’s a concept or a skill, we scale it down to whatever their street view is,” said Veronica Montejano-Garcia, who teaches world history to ninth and tenth graders. “Then we ratchet up the demand.” Prior to a unit on the Mexican-American War, she asked her class to debate the issue of students fighting each other. Once they drew their own lines about justifiable conflicts, they found more reason to engage in studying historical conflicts, she observed:

*They can see that aggression plays out in similar ways in different contexts. They begin evaluating it, defining it, describing it not just in their own lives but also in history. [They ask] “What do I know about this?” and “Do I think it’s a problem?” and “Do I have ideas about solutions?”*



### Audio Slideshow Journey Toward a Dream (3:31)



In another unit, students analyzed what their World History textbook said about their home countries. “Many of them found nothing,” she said. “So we supported them to write about how they felt about that, and what the textbook writers needed to know. They’re already questioning the history book, which is great.” As a culminating project for the year, students will gather and share oral histories from relatives or family friends. “I want them to be active in this class,” Ms. Montejano-Garcia said. “Taking in stories, talking about stories, documenting their own stories or their families’ stories.”

Eleventh graders in Raquel Franker’s U.S. history course begin class by responding in their journals to prompts like “Describe a time you had to change in order to fit in.” Discussions also start with familiar concepts; after showing the “After the Mayflower” episode from the PBS documentary series

We Shall Remain, the teacher asked, “If you find something that nobody is using, is it okay to take it? Is it okay to take land?”

As students learn that the U.S. has always been a nation of immigrants, they gain perspective on their personal obstacles, Ms. Franker said:

*Everything they’re doing is history. It’s not necessarily to answer the question: “Where do I fit in this situation?”—more to ask the question and realize that there’s more than one answer to that.*

Unlike their peers in most U.S. schools, very few Oakland International students have studied the country's history before. To help them develop a meaningful sense of events that span four centuries, Ms. Franker builds the year around the question “What is an American?” She narrows her focus to four eras (the nation’s beginning, the Civil War, the Great Depression and New Deal, and the Civil Rights movement), then coaches her students in taking perspectives as historians do.

### **From simulation to action**

That week, for example, her students were using the social networking site EdModo to role-play characters from the Colonial era. “They’re either a Wampanoag or an English colonist,” the teacher explained:

*And they create a historical background for that person. We want the students to understand what a primary source is, so they create their own bank of primary sources: actual images and maps. They create timelines. Then, from the perspective of their character, they communicate back and forth to each other [on EdModo] from their different perspectives. Hopefully, by the end of the project, they’ll have an idea of what it’s like to be in somebody else’s shoes when interpreting history, and how to do it.*

In another assignment, students write two “letters home” from the perspective of their character: one before colonization and one after the colonists' arrival. Students begin to realize, Ms. Franker said, “that over time relationships change, depending on the historical circumstances around them.”

After studying the role of youth in the 1960s Civil Rights movement, in May 2013 her class organized a whole-school teach-in about immigration reform issues that has itself gone down in history at Oakland International. First, Ms. Franker recalled, two students spoke to the whole school: “We need to fight for this, this is important to us, this is what we’re learning in history and it’s connected to our lives.” Next, eleventh graders wearing armbands led ninth, tenth, and twelfth graders on a learning tour of teaching stations they had set up in the school cafeteria. Their teacher described the stirring scene:

*One station was for an email writing campaign to Congress. We had instrument-making and poster-making tables. We had a letter-writing table that did handwritten letters, and we had voice recordings—and these were all about immigration and immigrant rights, just at the time when people were talking a lot about this. The cafeteria was abuzz with everybody getting excited, and then we started marching down the street.*

Playing instruments and holding handmade posters, the group marched more than two miles before arriving at the downtown Oakland office of their U.S. Representative in Congress, Barbara Lee. “She herself was in session,” Ms. Franker said, “but students presented the letters to an aide who came down and talked to them and thanked them. It was the biggest rush we’ve ever had at this school.”

## Looking to the future

That day of empowerment—like the Shakespeare scenes, like the soccer program, like the bold murals and the student-made films and publication—testifies to the power that social and emotional factors exert in the academic development of English language learners. By placing those elements at the heart of its mission, Oakland International High School is creating a new place for young immigrants to make their own, as scholars and as people.



**Audio Slideshow**  
**Changing a Life**  
(2:59)



When students here describe their pasts and their futures, one hears them creating narratives with an intergenerational frame that is larger than themselves. They are coming to see setbacks not as the end of the story but as obstacles from which they and their families are bouncing back. Such “sense-making” narratives contribute mightily to resilience, psychologists have found.<sup>8</sup> And as these adolescents integrate the perspectives of others into their immigration stories, their own understanding of their emerging identity increases and their voices grow more confident.<sup>9</sup>

In his native Guatemala, Abednego said, he saw a lot of racism. “They used to call me ‘monkey’ because I’m Mayan; they said I didn’t belong to their civilization.” But at Oakland International “they taught me that it’s different,” he said. “We have to live together, we have to bring unity between everyone.” After earning his law degree, he wants to return to his country and help Mayan people fight for their rights. “If I could, I would do something good for this country, too . . . maybe come back to Oakland and work in this school to help other kids like people helped me.”

“In the future I want to be a software engineer,” said Ravis, who found his sense of belonging on the soccer fields here. “That’s why I’m training in computer class to understand what computer is the best, so when I go to college I’ll be ready.” Patience, who hopes to become a midwife, is trying to arrange her senior internship in that field. Jeanni wants to go to “the best four-year college that would have me” and to have a career in accounting. Carlos, who acted out his fears in his first year at the school, now plans to go into business or perhaps become a chef.

On the wall of Jennifer Kelly-DeWitt’s classroom, her advisory students have posted their aspirations in large letters on bright paper. Beneath Aye’s name it says: “I will go to college. I will be a doctor. I will help my people. I will take care my family.” Zahraa wrote: “I will be a mom. I will be an engineer. I will read 100 books.” Small mistakes may show up here and there, but the conviction of their words carries a momentum that seems unstoppable.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Research in the science of learning increasingly recognizes the close interdependence of physical and intellectual well-being and the close interplay of the emotional and cognitive. See, for example, Mary Helen Immordino-Yang and Damasio, A.R., We feel, therefore we learn: The relevance of affective and social neuroscience to education. *Mind, Brain and Education*. 1(1), 3-10 (2007); and Felicia A. Huppert, Positive emotions and cognition: Developmental, neuroscience and health perspectives (2005) in J. P. Forgas (Ed.), *Hearts and minds: Affective influences on social cognition and behavior* (Frontiers of Social Psychology Series) Psychology Press: New York.

<sup>2</sup> A five-year study of the challenges facing immigrant students in the U.S. appears in Suárez-Orozco, C., Suárez-Orozco, M. M., & Todorova, I. (2008), *Learning a new land: Immigrant students in American society*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

<sup>3</sup> For a review of this research, see Nilsson, L-G. (2000), Remembering actions and words, in E. Tulving & F.I.M. Craik (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of memory* (pp. 137–148). New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Glenberg, A.M., & Kaschak, M.P. (2002). Grounding language in action. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 9, 558–565.

<sup>5</sup> Eisner, E., *The arts and the creation of mind*. (2002). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Perkins, D.N. Jay, E., & Tishman, S. (1993). Beyond abilities: A dispositional theory of thinking. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 39(1), 1–21.

<sup>7</sup> Hetland, L., Winner, E., Veenema, S., & Sheridan, K.M. (2007). *Studio thinking: The real benefits of visual arts education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

<sup>8</sup> See Fivush, R., Duke, M., & Bohanek, J. G. (2010), “Do you know...”: The power of family history in adolescent identity and well-being. *Journal of Family Life*, February 23, 2010; and Habermas, T., & Bluck, S. (2000), Getting a life: The emergence of the life story in adolescence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126, 748-769.

<sup>9</sup> Fivush, R., Habermas, T., Waters, T. E. A., & Zaman, W. (October 01, 2011). The making of autobiographical memory: Intersections of culture, narratives and identity. *International Journal of Psychology*, 46, 5, 321-345.

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