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Critical transnational curriculum for immigrant and refugee students

Monisha Bajaj^a and Lesley Bartlett^b

^aUniversity of San Francisco, CA, USA; ^bUniversity of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, USA

ABSTRACT

This article explores the curricular approaches of three public high schools in the US that serve newly arrived immigrant and refugee youth, in order to define and illustrate a *critical transnational curriculum*. Drawing from qualitative research over the past 10 years at the different school sites, the authors posit four tenets of a critical transnational curriculum with examples of specific school practices: (1) using diversity as a learning opportunity; (2) engaging translanguaging; (3) promoting civic engagement as curriculum; and (4) cultivating multidirectional aspirations. A curriculum that responds to students' needs and realities as migrants, workers, and students offers not only cultural and socio-political relevance, but also recognizes the transnational lives and trajectories of immigrant and refugee youth.

KEYWORDS

Immigration and education; culturally relevant education; global migration; curriculum and pedagogy; global citizenship

Seng fled from Myanmar in 2007, narrowly escaping traffickers along a dangerous journey in which she was separated from her family for months. After working in the back of a restaurant in Malaysia as an undocumented immigrant, Seng and her family were granted asylum in the US in 2011, where she entered public schools in California, speaking no English, living in poverty, and carrying with her not only the trauma of political violence in Myanmar that forced her family to flee but also difficult memories from the migration process. Seng started at Oakland International High School, a school for newly arrived immigrant and refugee youth, soon after reaching the US. Four years later, and working almost every day after school in the back of a restaurant late into the night to help support her family, she graduated among the top of her class, securing a scholarship to attend a local four-year state college. Seng chose a major that would also allow her to work in Myanmar, given her goal to one day go back and live there.

Aasif left Afghanistan because, between the drug lords, the Taliban, and the drone strikes, he and his friends could not even play soccer without fear of violence. An 11th grader, he has learned English and is on track to graduate next year. Sitting with his best friend at Oakland International High School, a 19-year old who fled gang violence in El Salvador and travelled north to California alone, Aasif talks about how he loves eating *pupusas* at his friend's house when his aunt cooks. Aasif wants to go back and see his

grandmother again, and he dreams of becoming the president of Afghanistan some day after he finishes college and when things “settle down back home.”

Fleeing an abusive husband who later refused to help support the children, Carlos’s mom left Carlos and his younger brother with her mother, their grandmother, in the Dominican Republic when she moved to New York in 2000 to find work. For years, Carlos attended a public school in a rural area, where he got a maximum of three hours of low-quality schooling per day. When his mother remarried and got citizenship status, she was able to request papers for her sons. Carlos had done well at his predominantly Dominican high school in New York, learning enough academic English in three years to be able to pass the demanding state English exam required for graduation. He did not plan to go on to college, but he was considering the idea of using his English and the technological skills he had picked up in an intensive after-school program to return to the Dominican Republic and work in tech support.

Seng, Aasif, and Carlos are fortunate to have landed in one of the few, but expanding, schools that tailor their services and approach to newly arrived immigrant and refugee youth. These “international” or “newcomer” high schools cater to students who have arrived within the previous four years and are English language learners (ELLs). The majority of newly arrived students, however, attend schools that have little by way of curricula, pedagogy or support services that address this population’s unique realities; most US high school curricula are normed to white, middle-class, native English-speaking, college-bound, and non-working students with increasing standardization forced by high-stakes testing. Moreover, social studies curricula in the US focus on political socialization, presuming that all students are current and/or future citizens of the US. They provide information about legislative processes that (1) newcomer youth may not ever have access to given many students’ unauthorized status; and (b) may not be of relevance as many students may seek to return to home countries or continue on to other countries where members of their community’s diaspora are living. These choices are influenced by various circumstances and larger necessities of family structures.

Global mobility – by choice or mandated by economic or political circumstances – has reached unprecedented levels. Two hundred and forty-four million people, or 3.3% of the world’s population, live outside of their country of origin, with upwards of 65 million individuals classified as refugees, internally displaced persons or asylum seekers (United Nations Population Fund, 2016; United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2016). For immigrant youth and particularly unauthorized migrants, public schools are often the sole point of engagement with the host country.

What curricular approaches have newcomer international high schools developed to address the constrained agency of newcomer youth, many of whom have fled violence and carry significant trauma from home countries only to arrive and live in poverty at the margins of urban US centres? How can we conceptualize transnationalism and a holistic understanding of youths’ lives as learners, migrants, workers, and social agents to offer recommendations for curriculum approaches that address the needs and realities of newcomer immigrant and refugee youth? In this piece, drawing on fieldwork in international and newcomer high schools, we conceptualize a *critical transnational curriculum* that discusses four components of culturally and socio-politically relevant pedagogy for immigrant and refugee youth (Bajaj, Argenal, & Canlas, [under review](#); Bartlett & Garcia, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b). The data, analyses, and conceptual insights we present in

this essay have emerged from our separate research engagements over the past 10 years in three different newcomer school contexts in New York and California, namely, Gregorio Luperón High School (Bartlett & Garcia, 2011), Brooklyn International High School (Mendenhall, Bartlett, & Ghaffar Kucher, 2017), and Oakland International High School (Bajaj, Canlas, & Argenal, 2017; Canlas, Argenal, & Bajaj, 2015).

Two of these three schools (Brooklyn and Oakland International High Schools) are part of the national Internationals Network for Public Schools that coordinates approximately two dozen public (non-charter) newcomer high schools across the US. Many other high schools outside of the network, like Gregorio Luperón High School, have emerged since the 1980s, or programs within high schools, that serve newcomer immigrant and refugee ELLs. In the US, education is primarily financed and run at the state-level, though the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, passed under then-President George W. Bush, introduced many standards-based reforms nation-wide, including high-stakes testing tied to funding and, in some cases, teacher evaluations. In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act turned some of that federal oversight over to states, but many of the accountability mandates linked to increased testing and budgetary cuts for non-examination based subjects continue. In the current policy climate, each of the schools, whether in or outside the Internationals Network, operates differently based on the agreements they have with their districts. These schools sometimes can raise additional funds through the Network or a partnering community-based organization for additional staff or support services. However, generally they are subject to the policies and mandates of their district. For the schools in which we have carried out research over the past decade, high-stakes exams – with some waivers and exceptions – continue to influence how teaching and learning are structured for newcomer youth. Within this larger policy context, putting our research in conversation across time and location allows us to consider how newcomer schools – through their curriculum and pedagogy – have innovated to meet the needs of immigrant and refugee youth.

Existing approaches to curriculum development frequently tout the notion of global citizenship as a way of recognizing human webs of interdependency and responsibility, beyond the local; it promotes the idea of world citizenship. However, while we support the ideas behind this effort in terms of dismantling borders, we agree with Koyama (2016) that the notion of global citizenship “suffers from the dangers inherent in the term citizenship and misconceptions of the term global,” as it privileges Western normative notions about the relationship between the individual and the state (p. 1). The framework of global citizenship often fails to take into account forced migration and the limited choices the youth and families in our research have in their decisions to seek safety and survival across borders.

Instead, schools that are responsive to the needs of newcomer immigrant and refugee youth must rethink the fundamental assumption of national schooling systems – the expectation that schools should socialize students as citizens (e.g. Levinson, 2005, 2011; Stevick & Levinson, 2007). Culturally relevant and responsive schooling approaches in the US have largely focused on bridging school with the realities of families and communities, fostering academic success and cultivating a critical consciousness about unequal opportunities (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b; Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel, & Martin, 2009). Further, such culturally and socio-politically responsive approaches (Gay, 2000) to schooling for immigrants and refugees must recognize that students’ identities and their sense of belonging may extend beyond or across national boundaries (Bajaj et al., [under review](#)).

Here, we identify and illustrate four key tenets in the *critical transnational curriculum* that is responsive to the needs of newcomer immigrant and refugee youth that we have seen at work in the international schools where we have done research. These include (1) *using diversity as a learning opportunity*; (2) *engaging translanguaging*; (3) *promoting civic engagement as curriculum*; and (4) *cultivating multidirectional aspirations*. The four principles of critical transnational curriculum that we discuss below offer insights for other educational contexts that are responding to the needs of diverse student bodies.

Critical Transnational Curriculum

In this section, we review key curricular principles and practices that illustrate a critical transnational curriculum for newly arrived immigrant and refugee youth. Each of the four tenets bridges the realities of students with the mandates of the educational institutions they have entered. By seeing diversity as a learning opportunity, encouraging translanguaging, utilizing civic engagement as curriculum, and cultivating multidirectional aspirations, educators, and school leaders are addressing the many educational challenges that global mobility poses for youth migrants.

Diversity as a Learning Opportunity

Schools that serve immigrant and refugee youth often frame diversity as a learning opportunity. Aware that tracking furthers social exclusion (Oakes, 1985), many schools intentionally mix students. Many newcomer schools, particularly those that form part of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, embrace the principle of heterogeneity and collaboration. Rather than track students based on academic ability, linguistic ability, race, ethnicity, grade level, age, gender, or membership in an ELL subgroup, students are heterogeneously mixed in their content classes.

Schools such as Brooklyn International High School and Oakland International High School supported heterogeneous and collaborative learning environments; classes were small, and each group worked with the same team of teachers for the first two years, during 9th and 10th grades. For example, students worked on group projects and completed different aspects of a task according to either their skill level, linguistic level or personal preference, allowing all to experience success and contribute to the project. When necessary, they engaged peer translators or even used Google Translate to communicate. Students in 9th and 10th grade stayed together, allowing for some inter-generational support and extra time to learn the pedagogical model in a small team environment. Roshan, a student who had lived in Lebanon and Turkey, stated that the international high school provided a good context for refugee students:

“Teachers know that students just got to New York. Teachers know that they don’t speak that much English. Teachers know that they don’t have a lot of participations. So, to get them used to it, they have to [practice]. So, the thing about 10th and 9th grade is to get ready for 11th grade. That’s what the teachers try their best [to do].”

While students were grateful for their overall educational experience, particularly in terms of supportive pedagogy, it was not without its challenges. Several students remarked that they found the pedagogy, and the emphasis on inquiry-based learning,

critical thinking and creativity, to be challenging because it was so different from their previous learning situations. Students noted that their previous schools had emphasized memorization above understanding. For example, Aboubakar attended private school from 1st to 8th grade in Guinea. There, he said:

“You have to like, memorize the lessons, without knowing like what you’re studying... And here, you have to like – they show you what you are studying and everything. You don’t have to memorize, you just have to, like, know what you are studying.”

Pedagogies are deeply cultural; they encapsulate (often implicit) ideologies about how young people learn and how an “educated person” should act and think (e.g. Schweisfurth, 2013). Students often found this pedagogical shift challenging.

Thanks to heterogeneity, students can learn from each other. Often, schools with large numbers of immigrants and refugees use the students’ life stories as part of their curriculum. For example, at Gregorio Luperón High School in New York (not part of the Internationals Network, but a school tailored to newcomer Latino/a youth experiences), students were often asked to draw upon their personal experiences to write essays. In one class, students were asked to write about and then contrast their school experiences back home. Soon, it became apparent that they had had access to very different types and quality of educational experiences, depending on factors like location and income in their home countries. At Oakland International, students in the 11th grade made videos of their migration stories as part of their coursework.

Thus, avoiding tracking and homogeneous groups, schools serving international students often opt for heterogeneous grouping wherein they can use the diversity of students as an educational resource.

Translanguaging

Translanguaging, a term that originated in Wales, signals the effort to move across and beyond language boundaries (Garcia & Wei, 2014). It indicates a stance of respect for and cultivation of all of the linguistic and cultural repertoires that a student brings (Garcia & Kleyn, 2016). Schools that are responsive to the linguistic needs of immigrant and refugee students often engage in translanguaging. Schools may do this in different ways. Gregorio Luperón High School in New York is a fully bilingual high school. In their first two years, students (who are all native speakers of Spanish) learn English even as they continue to develop their Spanish academic fluency not only in a language class but also in content classes taught primarily in Spanish. They receive lots of opportunities to translate texts and learn content-specific vocabulary in English. This strategy is made possible by the availability of required state high-stakes tests in Spanish (and four other languages). In their last two years of high school, students transition to classes that are taught primarily in English, but with frequent translanguaging. For example, students might read a text in English, summarize it in Spanish, and then write responses in either language; they might make a presentation in Spanish while their peers write English definitions for key terms (Bartlett & Garcia, 2011).

In contrast, schools in the Internationals Network, such as Brooklyn and Oakland International High Schools, receive students from all parts of the world. Classes are all taught in English. However, English learning is not segregated to one classroom; rather,

all teachers teach both content and English simultaneously. Further, teachers often draw on students' native languages as part of their teaching practice. For example, at Brooklyn International High School, one teacher provided students opportunities to participate in projects in which the students translated from their native language into English. Another teacher had students translate key concepts into their home language. She said: "If they don't want to explain DNA in English to me, they can explain it in French or Spanish to one of their peers who understands their language and then that peer will explain what they said." A senior official at the Internationals Network for Public Schools explained that in developing new performance assessments:

"One of the things that we added into their graduation portfolios, which isn't required but we are having them do, is a native language project. It could take lots of different forms. It could be an original piece in their native language, it could be something that has a bilingual component to it, it could be a spoken word piece, etc."

In this way, educators demonstrated the value of the students' language resources, and encouraged them to draw across languages in their conceptual development.

Though translanguaging occurs naturally in the presence of multilingual students, teachers may benefit from learning how to cultivate and best leverage it. Recommendations include: students reading thematically in both or multiple languages from books and websites; teachers developing a listening library that contains summaries or translations of class texts in students' languages; teachers developing key vocabulary and syntax in home and classroom languages side-by-side; students doing regular turn-and-talk with partners who speak the same home language; teachers encouraging students to translate in ways that enhance students metalinguistic awareness, which is shown to improve their reading comprehension (Celic, 2009; Jiménez et al., 2015). Other sources on professional development provide not only strategies for developing translanguaging pedagogies and curricula, but also explicitly emphasize how to teach for access, equity, and social justice (Garcia, Johnson, & Seltzer, 2016).

Translanguaging is not without its challenges. It may lead some to adopt an "overly cognitive and individualistic" notion of translanguaging competence (Canagarajah, 2011, p. 2). Further, it is important to ask how teachers should address errors or interference; how to prepare students to evaluate rhetorical considerations; and whether translanguaging might pose a threat to particularly minoritized languages, such as Native American languages (Canagarajah, 2011).

Civic Engagement as Curriculum

Schools that promote a critical transnational curriculum give students direct experiences with civic engagement. Students learn how to participate knowledgeably and actively by connecting their learning to social and environmental issues affecting their communities, which may be local or transnational. They acquire skills for participatory democracy by engaging directly in experiential learning. Yet living on the margins of the United States as often-unauthorized migrants or recently resettled refugees may pose a challenge for active participation. Nonetheless, a feature of critical transnational curriculum is the connection of teaching and learning processes to real-life examples of activism and civic engagement.

Gregorio Luperón High School (“Luperón”) offers an example of using civic engagement as curriculum. For 12 years, the school was located in an old warehouse. There was no laboratory or gym space; the overheated classrooms had tiny windows that did not open; the school was so overcrowded that students ate lunch in shifts in the tiny cafeteria, beginning at 10:30 am. The school ran frequent fire drills, just to make sure that they could get all of the students out in time in case of an emergency. In the 2000s, the teaching staff began organizing students and their families to pressure the mayor, schools’ chancellor, and other political figures for a new school. They wrote letters and planned, practiced for, and then held press conferences on the street right outside the school. They learned about the city’s political processes, analysed them, and strategized how to intervene. Students learned, experientially, how to engage in the political process. Finally, after a long struggle, they achieved their goal; in 2008, a new, \$41 million school was constructed.

A second example helps to demonstrate the range of such engagement and the cultivation of a collective immigrant identity and sense of solidarity among learners. In a government class in 2012, one Luperón teacher piloted a bilingual curriculum developed through a partnership between the City College of New York and the Spanish-language newspaper *El Diario* called “Social Justice & Latinos in NYC: 1913-2013.” The curriculum used *El Diario* articles from the last century, along with other resources, to teach students about the history of Latino/as in the city. The curriculum built on students’ language resources and a widely circulating newspaper, often read by parents and relatives, to encourage students to develop a social justice perspective, develop their historical and civic knowledge, and think critically about how political engagement and political representation for Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Mexicans, and other groups had changed over time in New York.

The three schools we highlight in this article promoted a social justice orientation that helped students not only develop a critical consciousness about social inequalities in the US and beyond, but also respond to inequalities through political action. At Oakland International High School, a history teacher started a school tradition of 11th grade students organizing a May Day march as part of their study of the US civil rights movement, taking their demands for immigration reform to City Hall. The refugee students (with asylum) held signs alongside their classmates who were unaccompanied minors and other unauthorized migrants to signal collective solidarity particularly in the wake of increased deportations.

The experiential learning that fostered varied forms of civic engagement allowed students to consider contemporary stratification and inequality in local settings; ideally, a critical transnational curriculum would also include global settings reflecting the transnationalism of students’ lives, though these examples were harder to identify in our data. Creating a deliberate space that fostered such forms of critical education socialized students into active participation in their communities, which was particularly important for students and families whose civic participation led to political repression and forced them to flee (this was true for many of the youth from Myanmar in Bajaj et al.’s research in California).

As the existing literature suggests, civic engagement curricula must be carefully designed. Such curricula when linked with community action and participation may generate an unequal relationship between the community and educational institutions if parents and communities are not consulted or involved. While authentic civic engagement as curriculum is challenging to develop especially in schools with tremendous

diversity of national background and citizenship status and can often be secondary to the mandates of state exams, that the three schools we discuss were trying to foster pan-immigrant solidarity and active forms of civic participation among students in preparation for their future was laudable.

Multidirectional Aspirations

There is a widespread assumption in educational scholarship that acculturation, assimilation, and political socialization are key tasks for public schools. It is worth questioning how successful schools have been at “integrating” immigrant students who live in poverty. Further, it is important to note that schools making this assumption are excluding transnational students who may have multiple current national identifications and different plans for the future. As Hamann and Zuniga (2011) articulate, “the regular practice of schools can be a source of routine rupture for transnationally mobile children” (p. 141). Here, we argue that schools working with immigrant and refugee students need to rethink those assumptions, and should instead be preparing students for transnational possibilities.

All of the students in the opening vignettes – Seng, Aasif, and Carlos – had hopes and dreams that transcended an entire career in the United States. Immigrant students may return to home countries for stretches and come back to the US for a variety of reasons related to family structures, economic opportunity, family’s fears of negative peer influence in the US, authorization status, etc. (see, e.g. Bartlett & Garcia, 2011). Thus, a critical transnational curriculum, contrary to current US social studies and citizenship education approaches, requires preparing youth for multiple post-secondary options that include work and post-secondary studies in different countries. Few schools have excelled in this area.

The schools featured here foster multidirectional aspirations in several ways. First, the mere fact of cultivating native languages is one key factor in preparing youth for multiple possible futures. By maintaining and even, as in the case of Luperón, further developing their mother tongue, students sustain the possibility of securing professional work back home. Second, teachers in these schools intentionally expanded the curriculum well beyond a focus on the US. Even in classes on government or US history, teachers incorporated parallels from students’ home countries. For example, in a Luperón social studies class, after discussing the civil rights movement in the US, students were asked to critically discuss the treatment of people of Haitian descent in their hometowns in the Dominican Republic, which led to comparing the contrasting experiences of those at the border to those in resort areas and those in bigger cities. Teachers were careful not to assume that a students’ lack of knowledge of US history meant the students did not know history. Instead, they encouraged students to draw upon and compare what they had learned in their previous educational experiences, and they incorporated specific students’ life stories when discussing contemporary events. Further, teachers de-centred US-centred perspectives and sources by contrasting accounts of events, for example, by contrasting an Al Jazeera and a New York Times report of an international conflict. Third, counsellors at these schools were aware of diverse possibilities for the future, and worked with youth to help them elaborate possible plans. For example, students were encouraged to investigate post-secondary opportunities and costs in various locations, including back home.

It is clear that more could be done on this front. It is essential to develop students' language resources and global ties in order to facilitate their transnational imaginaries. Students' realities and futures (by choice or by circumstance) are not always limited to life in the United States. When possible, teachers should approach subjects in a way that allows students to bring their own interests and experiences. While some subjects – e.g. US history – may be mandatory, they can (and should) be taught in ways that decentre white middle class masculine narratives and diversify the topics and actors under consideration. This area of multidirectional aspirations needs further development in order for deepening the critical transnational curricular approach we have outlined in this article.

Discussion and Conclusion

In elaborating a critical transnational approach, we build upon scholarship that advocates for relevant and sustaining pedagogy that allows students' realities to be reflected in the curriculum. We highlight four dimensions of how specific newcomer schools engage in culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy tailored to students' interests and needs. This approach is valuable not only because it addresses a growing population in the US, but also because it can interrupt the dogma of a homogeneous national identity. One indicator of curricular relevance is persistence in school. The Internationals Network for Public Schools boasts an 82% high school graduation rate (within six years) amongst its 22 schools (including Brooklyn International and Oakland International discussed in this article), compared with much lower rates both for peers (56% in six years) and amongst ELLs who, for example, have a 60% high school completion rate in California and 46% in New York (Deeper Learning Network, n.d.; Scott, 2012).

Outdated curricula that centre the experiences of middle-class people of European descent in the US force a large number of students into the margins. For example, on the days he is not at Oakland International High School, Juan, an unaccompanied teenager from Guatemala, works as a day labourer to pay rent and buy food. Worker, unauthorized migrant, breadwinner, *and* student (with interrupted formal education): these realities are complex and require transnational understandings of students' past experiences, present realities, and future trajectories. A curriculum that fails to recognize the realities and needs of migrant students and families is a lost opportunity. Conversely, responsive and tailored approaches, such as the critical transnational curriculum we have illustrated in this article, can offer newcomer students important preparation for life, post-secondary transitions, and the development of a critical understanding of social inequalities and civic participation.

Obviously, the ability to tailor curriculum and make schooling relevant is often constrained by policy reforms such as high-stakes exams, English-only legislation in some states, and limited funding for curricular innovation. Despite these odds, many newcomer high schools are securing external funding and leveraging community partnerships in order to critically engage with students as transnational global agents. Examining models of innovative praxis for newly arrived immigrant and refugee youth can suggest important directions to scholars, students, and practitioners who seek to deepen and expand culturally responsive approaches for this increasing population in schools across the world. A critical transnational curriculum can offer students important resources and tools for gaining knowledge and engaging in social analysis and action.

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Notes on contributors

Monisha Bajaj is an associate professor of international and multicultural education at the University of San Francisco, where she directs the MA program in Human Rights Education. She is the editor and author of six books, including *Schooling for Social Change: The Rise and Impact of Human Rights Education in India* (winner of the 2012 Jackie Kirk Outstanding Book Award of the Comparative and International Education Society), as well as numerous articles. She has also developed curriculum – particularly related to peace education, human rights, anti-bullying efforts and sustainability – for non-profit organizations and inter-governmental organizations, such as UNICEF and UNESCO. She is the recipient of the Ella Baker/Septima Clark Human Rights Award (2015) from Division B of the American Educational Research Association (AERA).

Lesley Bartlett is a professor of educational policy studies at University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research and teaching interests include anthropology of education, comparative and international education, literacy studies, and migration studies. Two recent books include *Rethinking Case Study Research: A Comparative Approach* (2016, with Frances Vavrus), *Refugees, Immigrants, and Education in the Global South* (2011, with Ameena Ghaffar Kucher), and *Additive Schooling in Subtractive Times: Bilingual Education and Dominican Immigrant Youth in the Heights* (2011, with Ofelia Garcia).

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