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## Socio-Politically Relevant Pedagogy for Immigrant and Refugee Youth

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors discuss how one public high school became a site for socio-politically relevant pedagogy for immigrant and refugee youth, building on the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy that has been discussed in educational scholarship (Howard, 2001, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a, 1995b). By exploring newcomer youth's understandings of their experiences, self-conceptions, and positioning in the global economy, the authors draw on a three-year qualitative case study utilizing ethnographic methods to highlight the key tenets of a socio-politically relevant pedagogy for youth who lead transnational lives. The key tenets proposed include: (1) the cultivation of critical consciousness around global inequalities and transnational migration; (2) the creation of formal and informal avenues for reciprocal learning between families/communities and schools; and (3) support and care for the material conditions of students' and families' lives.

Globally, some 245 million people have migrated from their country of birth to another, propelled by an unequal global political economy, violent conflict, and environmental crises (United Nations [UN], 2016). Whether in Europe, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, or North America, societies that receive migrants and refugees grapple with discourses of deserving-ness to distinguish those who receive assistance, and those who do not (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). Within the United States, narratives about desirable and undesirable immigrants have long pervaded political discourse and constitute some of the most pressing social justice issues of our times amidst contemporary discussions of building border walls, increased scrutiny for foreign visitors, and the denial of entry altogether to individuals from certain Muslim-majority nations.

Across the US, immigrants and refugees comprise 13% of the population (United States Census, 2011), with increasing numbers of recently arrived youth entering public schools. Public high schools in the US are increasingly compelled to focus on the distinct needs and realities of these “newcomer” youth particularly in the wake of the politicization of their presence in US schools and communities. Some school districts have specific programs in mainstream public schools to serve these populations, and some have established entire schools that focus on recently arrived youth, with additional time for English language learning, psychosocial support for students experiencing trauma through the migration and resettlement process (Birman et al., 2008), and services for families. This article presents data from a three-year qualitative case study of Oakland International High School (OIHS), which is part of a larger national network (the Internationals Network for Public Schools) that has established dozens of schools nationwide specifically to serve newcomer English language learners, with “newcomers” being defined

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by this school as immigrant and refugee youth who have arrived to the US within the previous four years.

In this article, we discuss how the public high school became a site for socio-politically relevant pedagogy (SPRP) for immigrant and refugee youth, building on the concepts of culturally responsive (Gay, 2000) and culturally relevant pedagogy that have been discussed in educational scholarship (Howard, 2001, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a, 1995b). By exploring newcomer youth's understandings of their experiences, self-conceptions, and positioning in the global economy, we highlight the key tenets of what we term a socio-politically relevant pedagogy for youth who lead lives marked by transnationalism through their own experiences as migrants, often to more than one country, before coming to the United States, and who remain connected to two or more societies in a variety of ways (Besteman, 2016; Kearney, 1995; Levitt, 2004).

Although many studies on immigration and education have importantly examined language acquisition and the academic success of immigrant newcomer youth or second generation immigrants (Alba & Holdaway, 2013; Louie, 2005; Suarez-Orozco, Pimentel, & Martin, 2009; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2010), fewer studies have examined the types of approaches that newcomer programs and schools employ to meet the needs of students and families (Bartlett & Garcia, 2011; Fine, Jaffe-Walter, Pedraza, Futch, & Stoudt, 2007) and their responses to such approaches. Important insights have been gained from educational research and literature about immigrant youth in mainstream schools where they forge identities counter to or alongside native-born youth (e.g., Olsen, 2008; Patel, 2013; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010). Research shows that newcomer youth specifically “face steeper odds” when compared to other immigrants or children of immigrants (Hopkins et al., 2013, p. 286); specifically, they are more likely to (1) live in poverty; (2) endure stress related to family separation and trauma resulting from migration; (3) face language barriers; and (4) drop out of high school (Louie, 2005; Suarez-Orozco, 2009, 2010). Despite high dropout rates for English language learners (ELLs), when newcomer students *do* persist in school, seminal studies have noted their higher academic attainment when compared to their native-born peers (Portes & Rumbault, 2001). By zooming in on newcomer youth in a school designed specifically for them, this study examines ways that one school has innovated to meet youth's needs both in and outside of the classroom.<sup>1</sup>

This article first discusses the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy, and our critique and extension of this concept when applied to newcomer youth. We then outline our methods, which draw from a mix of qualitative and action research methodologies in a multi-year case study. We utilized grounded theory and a continuous iterative approach to data analysis; as a result, reviewing extant literature led us to an emerging conceptual framing through engagement with the school and students and through our discussions as a research team. From this iterative and ongoing process, we identified the concept of socio-politically relevant pedagogy as an extension of culturally relevant pedagogy for newcomer youth. We then utilize data to demonstrate how Oakland International High School advanced three tenets of SPRP that address the distinct needs of students and families who have recently arrived to the US. Given the increasing numbers of newcomer youth in public schools, it both is timely and necessary to address how schools can serve these communities by offering an education that supports students' academic skills and holistic needs. Through this study, we seek to contribute to the literature on newcomer youth and the ways to make schooling relevant to their transnational lives and unique realities.

### **Culturally relevant pedagogies for newcomer youth**

Culturally relevant pedagogy has emerged in educational scholarship as a way to identify and promote efforts to align curriculum and pedagogy with the experiences of students of color in the United States. Drawing from the field of anthropology and education, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995b) offers a seminal definition from her work with exemplary educators—hailing from different racial backgrounds—of African American children:

I have defined culturally relevant teaching as a pedagogy of opposition not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria

or propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. (p. 160)

Building on Ladson-Billings' important work exploring teacher practice, further studies of culturally relevant pedagogy have explored teacher education (Howard, 2001 & 2003), educators' reflective practice (Howard, 2003), and curricular revisions for relevant multicultural education (Banks, 1973), as well as integrating such approaches into various subjects such as science, math, and the humanities (e.g., Johnson, 2011; Tate, 1995). Cultural relevance in schooling also has been explored for various ethnic groups in the United States. For example, studies highlight various forms of relevance for youth, including the incorporation of ethnic studies curricula [e.g., Otero & Cammarota (2011) discuss Mexican American studies programs in Arizona], the integration of students' and families' funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), and the recognition of community cultural wealth by schools (Yosso, 2005).

Aligning cultural relevance to ethnic groups underrepresented in the curriculum has occurred both during the school day and in afterschool efforts to engage youth who live at the margins. Scholars have importantly identified that relationships are central in fostering a family-like space of belonging and support for native-born and immigrant youth (Lee & Hawkins, 2008). The notion of caring (Noddings, 1984; Valenzuela, 1999) and more specifically, critical care as conceptualized by Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006), is another area where scholars have discussed culturally relevant pedagogy, strong reciprocal bonds with students, and an approach that does not diminish academic aspirations, specifically for Latino/a students. Further development of the tenets of CRP has led to other conceptualizations such as through culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000), culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017), and hip hop pedagogies—which are both critical and transnational—that match the realities of urban youth (Alim, 2007; Alim, Ibrahim, & Pennycook, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008; Emdin, 2010; Love, 2016; Morgan, 2016). Other scholars have called for attention to youth resistance to oppressive structures in educational institutions and the possibilities for authentic and “unruly, transformative learning” in spaces beyond the school's walls (Patel, 2016, p. 400).

Our study contributes to the literature by centering the experiences of newcomer immigrant and refugee youth and exploring schoolwide strategies in addition to classroom curriculum and pedagogy. Through the data, we identify what we term socio-politically relevant pedagogy (SPRP). Socio-politically relevant pedagogy foregrounds Ladson-Billings' (1995b) third component of CRP—developing a critical consciousness—by not only giving youth the opportunity to form an oppositional consciousness, but also giving them tools to analyze social location, their own experiences, and the distinctions between school requirements and authentic learning vis-à-vis their future aspirations. Such strategic learning offers students a chance to understand inequalities on a global scale—both in their positioning in their home countries in addition to being recent migrants living in under-resourced communities in the US—and to historicize their realities in ways that suggest opportunities for solidarity with other immigrants and communities of color.

In our call for a socio-political turn to culturally responsive, culturally relevant, and culturally sustaining pedagogies, we foreground complex understandings of resistance in order to sharpen analyses of asymmetrical power relations for marginalized immigrant and refugee youth. As Judith Butler (2015) notes:

In resistance, vulnerability is not precisely converted into agency—it remains the condition of resistance, a condition of the life from which it emerges, the condition that, rendered as precarity, has to be opposed, and is opposed. This is something other than weakness or victimization, since, for the precarious, resistance requires exposing the abandoned or unsupported dimensions of life, but also mobilizing that vulnerability as a deliberate and active form of political resistance. (p. 184)

By offering tools for structural analyses of vulnerability and precarity, SPRP offers newcomer youth global frames for analyzing resistance, power, agency, and collective action in a postcolonial and global perspective. For youth who lead transnational lives that are extremely influenced by the global economy, SPRP helps us understand and offer youths' perspectives on schooling as one site of their integration into a

new nation-state where, perhaps similar to their home countries, their existence continues to lie at the margins.

By extending Ladson-Billings' framework to recently arrived immigrant and refugee youth and rearticulating it for this distinct population, we highlight three tenets of a socio-politically relevant pedagogy.

- First, within SPRP, teachers and school staff encourage a cultivation of critical consciousness around interconnections among local and global issues, human rights, and the unequal circumstances under which migration occurs. This happens both within and outside the classroom.
- Second, SPRP includes the creation of formal and informal avenues for reciprocal learning between families/communities and schools. The recognition of the knowledge, resilience, and cultural wealth of their communities (Yosso, 2005) informs how schools operate and reflect students' realities.
- Third, within SPRP, attention is paid to the material conditions of students' and families' lives through the coordination of services and resources that support the learning process and exhibit care for students' whole selves and their families (see also Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006 and Bajaj, 2009).

Each tenet of a socio-politically relevant pedagogy is illustrated and discussed through representative examples of how one school for newcomer youth attends to these dimensions in ways that address the realities of students, families, and communities.

To be clear, we affirm the utility of culturally relevant pedagogy as a framework and offer critique and extension of CRP in order to tailor approaches that are best suited for newcomer immigrant and refugee youth in the US. In naming "socio-politically relevant pedagogy," we seek to more accurately capture how educational approaches address the transnational and precarious nature of students' lives particularly vis-à-vis, for example, their authorization status or US foreign policy that has engaged in massive drone warfare with concomitant attempts at the wholesale banning of migrants from certain countries from entering the US.

We emphasize two additional characteristics that distinguish SPRP from CRP in the context of serving newcomer youth. First, in SPRP, primacy is not given to "culture" per se as many scholars have discussed. For the population at this newcomer high school, their culture had not been stripped away by mainstream schooling as is the case for many populations that scholars of CRP discuss. Some examples of this are African American, Latino/a and other communities of color seeking to reclaim histories of resistance and resilience through ethnic studies and other forms of culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies. The newcomer youth discussed in this article by and large spoke their native languages and were new participants in US schools; CRP scholars often focus on students who have been in US schools since childhood and who have consistently had their cultures and languages devalued in such institutions.

Second, although SPRP, like CRP, prioritizes academic success, SPRP for newcomer students extends beyond conventional and temporal indicators of academic achievement, especially given the tremendous academic hurdles that newcomer youth face in terms of learning English rapidly and often, having to take high-stakes exams in order to graduate from high school. Socio-politically relevant pedagogy seeks to understand newcomer youth as transnational agents (Levitt, 2004), not as helpless victims saved by the US, a narrative that social service agencies in the US sometimes employ that erases hardships that migrants continue to face in their new country (McKinnon, 2009). As such, SPRP situates youth in a longer arc of their trajectory, not forcing them to sever their ties to their communities or homelands for assimilation or to obtain narrow definitions of academic attainment. By viewing students as whole persons with diverse individual and collective identities, and not just attending to the academic mandates of the school day, teachers and school staff structured the years students spent in high school as a temporal and productive component of much longer life trajectories that were multidirectional and based on students' goals, whether in their host or home countries.

That said, SPRP attends to student academic achievement in diverse ways rather than focusing solely on the outcomes of high stakes test that are notably biased against English language learners. Scholars have found that the more students are engaged in the curricular material, the more likely they are to persist in school (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2009); school persistence is key to the success of newcomer

youth given that just 65% of ELLs graduate high school in four years in California (Duffy, Poland, Blum, & Sublett, 2015). Further, “research ... has long suggested that teachers who understand the everyday lived contexts of students’ lives, and who view their students primarily in terms of what they bring (their assets) instead of what they lack (their deficits), are better able to promote school success for minority and immigrant youth” (Bartlett & Garcia, 2011, p. 147). SPRP’s focus on students’ lived experiences, families, communities, and material realities all encourage students’ engagement in curriculum and learning. Thus, this study offers insights into how one school successfully integrated students’ lived experiences into the life of the school, facilitated ELLs’ persistence through high school (graduation rates were much higher than national averages for immigrant youth), and offered students a holistic educational experience tailored to their realities.

## Methods

The data presented in this article come from a three-year qualitative case study (2014–2017) utilizing ethnographic methods of a newcomer public high school located in Oakland, California. Methods included: participant observation of regular school life (once a week) in classrooms, the lunch room, and courtyard as well as at special events, such as school festivals, field trips, and graduation (with extensive field notes recorded by each member of the research team); semi-structured individual interviews with district officials whose role was to serve the newcomer families and school staff/teachers; focus groups with students; and document analysis. Much of the data collection from the students’ perspectives took the form of observations and conversations that took place with the students, on field trips, and during the weekly human rights club that was created and facilitated by the research team. An inductive data analysis and interpretation strategy rooted in grounded theory was utilized (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As a team, we regularly reviewed the interviews, field notes/observations, and documents in order to identify themes emerging from the data; we engaged different measures of validity, such as member-checking and triangulation of the data.

As a form of reciprocity, building rapport, and as a component of “action ethnography” (Erickson, 2006),<sup>2</sup> the research team—comprised of Monisha Bajaj (a professor), and Amy Argenal and Melissa Canlas (both doctoral candidates at the time)—ran a weekly human rights club for interested students who were given the option of participating in the research as well (we detail this component of the study more extensively elsewhere, see Bajaj, Canlas, & Argenal, 2017). As individuals, we had a variety of backgrounds that influenced our interactions in the club and throughout the research, including being of South Asian (Bajaj), Nicaraguan (Argenal), and Filipina (Canlas) heritages. Two of us spoke fluent Spanish, one of the lingua franca of the school. All the members of our research team were of immigrant origin (either parents or grandparents who migrated to the US), and with some family members who were refugees (Bajaj) or victims of political violence and torture (Canlas); as a result, we engaged human rights as dynamic and focused on efforts to bridge the often-wide gaps between international guarantees and actual realities in different communities, not as abstract legal norms to proselytize or blindly adhere to (Bajaj et al., 2017).

The club met weekly over two years, and the students who participated consistently were predominantly juniors and seniors (ages 16–20). There were a number of students, from all grades, who attended club meetings periodically, and there were usually about eight students per club meeting. Regular participants included students originally from Burma, Bhutan, the Philippines, Guatemala, El Salvador, Eritrea, and Nepal. The club allowed the researchers to build rapport with the students and also to offer opportunities for field trips and other activities in which students could participate. Participants in the research study included approximately 25 students and graduates, and 15 teachers, school staff, and district officials.

The site for the study was a small urban public high school in a mid-size urban center (Oakland, California) that enrolled newly arrived immigrant and refugee youth in grades 9–12, and from ages 14–21. In Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), some 2,000 newcomer students entered the district during the 2015–2016 schoolyear—many of them unaccompanied minors being placed with family members or other sponsors while their immigration cases were pending (OUSD, 2017). At Oakland International

High School (OIHS), among the nearly 400 students, 68% of the students were from Latin America (primarily Central America and Mexico); 17% from East, South, and Southeast Asia; 12% from the Middle East; and 3% from sub-Saharan Africa. Adolescent boys/young men predominated the student population (61%), with 39% of the students being adolescent girls/young women. Ninety-five percent of students qualified for free or reduced price lunch.

Oakland International High School was established by the school district in 2007 to serve newly arrived immigrant and refugee youth, as part of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, headquartered and first established in New York City. OIHS received district funding and also fundraised for additional monies directed towards special services for immigrant and refugee youth (counseling services, additional staff to outreach to parents and communities, etc.). Most all of the teachers and administrators at OIHS spoke Spanish though fewer spoke the less-dominant languages at the school.

As data were collected, the research team had an ongoing and collaborative initial process of data analysis through regular meetings and comments in a shared computer drive. Upon completion of data collection, transcriptions, field notes, and other data were collectively coded and analyzed, resulting in the generation of representative themes. We present in this article those themes and representative examples that frame our conceptualization of a socio-politically relevant pedagogy as enacted by this particular school, with implications for broader schooling practices for newcomer immigrant and refugee youth and other marginalized youth.

### **Three tenets of socio-politically relevant pedagogy**

#### ***Tenet 1: Curriculum and pedagogy towards critical consciousness and global citizenship***

Teachers played an important role in advancing socio-politically relevant pedagogy at Oakland International High School. The classroom was a site where the school's primary goals of academic attainment and English language learning occurred. As such, rather than having only one period of English language instruction per day, the school had English language goals integrated into the teaching of every subject throughout the school day. And as a school that accepts students all year round, there were often vastly different language levels and abilities within a single classroom. Classrooms had language and content area goals posted on the walls, and were comprised of tables for group work with multiple languages being utilized and translated in small groups at all times for comprehension.

Many curricular examples of how the teachers sought to cultivate students' critical consciousness and awareness of global citizenship were identified in the data that emerged from this study. Two representative examples will be discussed in this section: the interdisciplinary assignment planned by ninth and tenth grade teachers, and action-components of the US history and government classes around immigrants' rights.

In the summer of 2015, two teachers of the ninth and tenth grade classes (which were grouped together heterogeneously), developed an inter-disciplinary unit across science and history related to issues of water use and scarcity. Rather than focusing solely on the statewide issues of drought and water use in California, the teachers together decided to develop a unit that would have students research water collection, use, and management in their home countries, and develop a presentation in their home language directed at someone in their families; as the teachers instructed, "imagine you are presenting this information to your grandmother." The students brought in photos of the people their presentations were tailored to (photos of cousins, parents, grandparents were assembled into a collage near the front corner of the classroom), developed these presentations in their native languages, and then, as a last step, translated their work into English in language groups and with the teachers' help, and delivered these presentations to the class. In their presentations, students discussed how they collected water in their home countries, analyzed inequalities in terms of access to water in rural and urban areas, and examined differences between water use in their home countries and the US.

In a classroom with dozens of nationalities, and diverse ethnicities and languages even among those groups, achieving "culturally" relevant pedagogy to match each culture may be difficult. While attention to raising critical consciousness around students' position in both their host and their home societies,

as well as issues of resource scarcity or inequality, align with Ladson-Billings' definition of CRP, SPRP builds upon this framework to call for the need for fostering political engagement across national borders as necessary to respond to the transnational lives of students. By highlighting the role of knowledge production to serve their own and their families' needs (e.g., teachers' instructions to "develop the presentation for your grandmother"), teachers were able to engage the class in discussions of the local ways that environmental issues are discussed from vastly diverse places around the globe. Also, by having students first address the work in their own language and then translate their work to English, the project built fluency and skills in students' home language and English, stressing importance on both languages, while also focusing on English language instruction.

A second example of OIHS teachers' cultivating critical consciousness in their pedagogy was through encouraging students to consider their own migration. For example, in a presentation to classmates and teachers, Luis, a senior at the time, shared his experience crossing the border on his own at age 11 to get away from a violent gang that was trying to recruit him in Honduras:

The train to get to the border is called "La Bestia" [the beast] because if you fall off, you'll get killed. You travel on top, not inside. I remember one person fell off because a branch hit him in the face at night when it's hard to see. ... I crossed through the river at night into Laredo and the *coyote* told us to take off everything but our underwear [Luis shows a slide with a picture of the Rio Grande river]. When I was in the detention center in Texas after crossing the border, it was like a punishment. They make you throw away everything except the clothes you're wearing. We called it the "cooler" because it was hella, hella cold and they don't give you no blankets. There were like 40 people in one room and only one bathroom. I was there for more than a week before getting transferred and I didn't even know how much time it was because they never turn off the lights, not even at night. (observation, February 2017)

The migration experiences of newcomer students like Luis who came to the US as an unaccompanied minor could differ dramatically from students who came as political asylees (with legal status in the US); students did not automatically understand the political circumstances or realities of their peers, sometimes resulting in tense conversations. Questions arose such as a Burmese student asking a Central American student, "Why would you come here when it's so dangerous and you don't know if you can stay?" Given students' diverse trajectories, one student from Guatemala asked each new student he met to show him where their home country was on the map and if they came by plane or by foot—a distinction that seemed to register some critical analysis once the answers were given. These conversations among students, while often challenging, also led to more understanding and solidarity between students.

As part of the eleventh grade US history class, students learned about the civil rights struggle. Ms. Denise remembered how a few years ago, she started having the class reflect on protest and civil disobedience as connected to the issues that faced their lives as immigrants and refugees. Her history class that year decided to plan and lead the school in a May Day march around the neighborhood. This tradition has extended to the whole school making posters and participating in an annual May Day celebration and march. For the 2015 march, students made colorful signs in art class that read "No more Deportations," "Immigrants' rights are human rights," and "My DREAMs are not illegal." (See Figures 1 and 2). (Many posters made reference to the DREAM Act, legislation at federal and state levels that regularizes the status of some undocumented migrants. The term "DREAMers" was coined by undocumented youth through their organizing efforts in the United States).

Whether documented or undocumented, students all marched together around the neighborhood to demonstrate their support for a more just immigration policy and connected to a pan-immigrant, global citizen identity fostered through the curricular approach of the school to connect to students' lives.

Oakland International had several forms of assessment beyond the required statewide exams including comprehensive portfolio projects all seniors had to complete, and the encouragement of student work that responded to the needs of the community; for example, in November 2016, seniors developed and delivered presentations to younger students in their native languages about the 2016 election and implications for unauthorized migrants or students from majority-Muslim countries that were affected by the new administration's policies. This collective component of acquiring and demonstrating mastery of content knowledge infused the ways that teachers approached curriculum and pedagogy.

The cultivating of a critical consciousness around local and global issues was central to the SPRP approach engaged by OIHS teachers and administrators. In addition to the learning that occurred in the

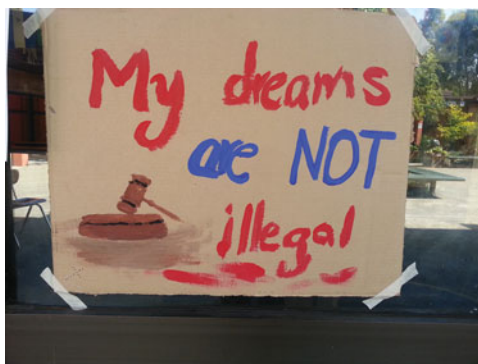




**Figure 1.** OIHS May Day March Preparations. Photo by Melissa Canlas, 2015.

classroom, the school's environment also reflected the ethos of the school and the types of curricular approaches teachers utilized. For example, there were murals of international themes, images of global leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Rigoberta Menchu, and Aung Sun Suu Kyi around the school's grounds, and flags of dozens of countries hanging in the cafeteria. SPRP approaches were well situated within, and supported by, the ethos of the school as a whole. For youth who had already lived or endured perilous migration through two or three countries and faced many situations related to structural and global inequalities, the chance to engage with larger frameworks to help them situate their realities in a broader context was of particular use and relevance. These curricular examples offer only a representative sample of the many ways that OIHS teachers directed their curriculum and pedagogy oriented to elevating students' consciousness as global citizens.

SPRP's focus on critical consciousness also included the need to humanize students and contextualize the development of strong academic and English language skills with the responsibilities and realities of students' transnational lives. Many students had transnational identities and connections that included academic and professional goals beyond just the learning of English and the passing of state exams. The range of goals varied from attending four-year universities, to community college, to obtaining a full time job upon completion of high school, to continuing to support family back home. The school did not just focus on English language acquisition but created a caring academic environment that could meet the diverse needs of the students. For example, one Guatemalan student was part of a book drive for libraries in her home country and a Burmese student talked about choosing a major for college that would allow her to go back and work there in the future. Such transnational identities necessitated



**Figure 2.** OIHS May Day Poster. Photo by Melissa Canlas, 2015.

curricula, pedagogy, counseling, and other school approaches to understand students' complex and multidirectional aspirations (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017). SPRP did not force an assimilationist agenda on students through their coursework and allowed them to meet their requirements and learn English while supporting their transnational civic engagement as members of diasporic global communities.

## **Tenet 2: School, family, and community engagement strategies**

To better connect with our diverse newcomer student communities, each year for the past five years, Oakland International High School offers "Community Walk" Professional Development for teachers and staff. Designed by parents, students and community leaders, school teachers and staff visit student communities where they are shown important landmarks and cultural centers; meet with community leaders, advocates and/or support people; and meet with families (in either homes or community centers) to discuss families' questions, concerns and hopes for their students and the school. These professional development sessions educate teachers about students' backgrounds, challenges, community and cultural assets, and the educational concerns of the school's diverse newcomer students and families. They also serve to immerse teachers in the home environments of their students, and give students and family members the opportunity to serve as leaders, inverting roles such that our teachers become the students, and our students and families become the teachers. [Excerpt from school e-mail from Ms. Monica about the Community Walks, October 2015]

A key component of SPRP as demonstrated at OIHS was their school-community engagement strategies. Resonant with the call of scholars of culturally relevant pedagogy to "honor and respect the students' home culture" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 138), OIHS also asked teachers to *understand* students' home realities in their neighborhoods as well as experiences prior to migration. Making the school welcoming to communities and creating reciprocity was the goal of various school practices, including the annual community walks. Community walks were introduced to the school after the OIHS principal participated in a Community Walk organized by the district when it underwent re-zoning. She found the walks extremely informative and asked a staff member to include students and families in planning them. We excerpt our field notes and interview data below to describe what a community walk entailed at OIHS.

### **Community walk**

At 9:30 a.m. on a school professional development day, we join several school staff, teachers, and interns in Classroom 6 to begin the day-long community walk. The students have us first read a two-page excerpt from Rigoberta Menchu's book about the civil war in Guatemala. Four students (three young women and one young man) from Guatemala are facilitating the entire Guatemala community walk. After reading and discussing the excerpt from the book, the students introduce some basic facts about Guatemala and showed three short video clips they had chosen. The first is about teen pregnancy and early marriage of girls in Guatemala, showing a 12-year-old who was involved with a 35-year-old man who impregnated and then left her. In the film, a nurse was interviewed talking about the danger of maternal mortality when so many young girls give birth (sometimes their hips are not yet wide enough to give birth safely) and the lack of any sex education in schools. After the video ended, one of the student facilitators Amalia notes, "This is what happened to my sister." She also notes how two of her older sisters never went to school or learned Spanish—they only speak their indigenous language Mam—and that both had children as teenagers. The second video shows recent protests to unseat the president, and a third video showed some of the tourist attractions in Guatemala (the Mayan ruins, Lago Atitlan, etc.) that the students put on mute and talked over highlighting when they migrated, some information on their families, and in the case of two of the four students, what indigenous groups they were from (we learn there are 23 indigenous languages spoken in Guatemala). In other classrooms, staff and teachers were preparing to go on other walks that also had been planned by students to learn more about the Karen ethnic community from Burma, the unaccompanied minors from Central America (including a visit to court to observe a hearing), the Yemeni community, the Eritrean Community, the Chinese community, the Afghan community, the Vietnamese community, and the Nepali-Bhutanese community.

At about 10:30 a.m., we head out in various cars to a different part of town to visit a parking lot, known as the *parada*, where many Guatemalan day laborers wait for work. Ms. Monica who coordinates

the community walks says this was Juan's idea when they were planning the walk; he asked, can we visit the parada and have people learn about it? Juan often goes to the parada to get work on days off from school, and as he tells us once at the parking lot underneath the train tracks at a busy intersection, also on days when his family is short on money for rent or food, even if a school day. He mentions how often the people who come to hire day laborers want them to do work that no one else will do, sometimes operating heavy machinery that he's never been trained to use. One of the school staff asks if he's ever scared, and Juan says, "Yes, but we need the money so what can we do?"

Since this day is a day off for students (it was a professional development day for teachers), we see a couple of Guatemalan male students from OIHS at another parada near the one we stop at, and the student leaders of the walk yell out to them to say hi. We don't see many laborers out today at this corner; Juan says the police have been cracking down a lot at this particular intersection. Ms. Monica remembers the first day Juan came to OIHS, having migrated by himself and working as a day laborer for over year after having arrived in the US: "He showed up at like 5:45 p.m. and I was leaving, the doors were locked and there was a kid whom I've never seen before. He said, "Miss, I'm 17 and I really wanna go to school, can you help me?" Ms. Monica helped him enroll the next day.

After the parada, we go to an evangelical church run by Amalia's father that is comprised mostly of indigenous Guatemalans from the Mam community. We sit in a circle and the pastor speaks in broken Spanish (his daughter, Amalia, one of the student leaders of the walk, translates from Spanish interspersed with Mam into English for the participants). We learn about the challenges facing the community, where most of the parishioners live, and how the church hopes to expand and have rooms where recently arrived migrants can stay for a short period. As we are leaving the church for lunch at a local Guatemalan restaurant with students and their family members organized by the school, one of the youth working at the church asks more about OIHS. Juan says, "At Oakland International, they teach you English, help you with legal assistance to get your papers, and it's all free." Amalia adds that the school treats everyone equally and that she loves it. Rosa, the school counselor explains that the requirements to get into the school are being in the US for four or fewer years and being aged 14–17. She encourages the young man to come by to learn more.

Ms. Janine who is on the Guatemala walk mentions that all the teachers are on different walks as it is a mandatory professional development day today. She says she loves these walks and that she's previously done the unaccompanied minors walk where they met with pro bono lawyers who help students, and the Karen-Burmese walk, saying, "it's good for us to know what our students are going through." After lunch, the teachers go back for a discussion about what they learned on the walk and how it can be incorporated into their teaching and advising of students.

The community walks, tailored to the immigrant and refugee population of Oakland International High School, have been replicated by various other schools. The dialogic and reciprocal learning about communities were led by students and families where possible (in the case of the unaccompanied minor walk, Ms. Monica noted, it's more difficult) and offered useful information for making the school and its practices more tailored to the needs and realities of their diverse students. Ms. Monica also noted that when family members come to the school (which for some families is quite far from where they live given gentrification and the geography of the city), home visits (another part of Oakland International's SPRP approach) and community walks mean that family member has "at least one person they know when they come to school who has made an effort to connect with them," facilitating a more open relationship (interview with Ms. Monica). As in both CRP and in SPRP, relationships between teachers and families, schools and communities are central to making schooling relevant to students living on the margins.

These community walks offer one example of the intersection between SPRP's tenets one and two: the importance of curriculum and pedagogy directed towards critical consciousness and engaging directly with students' communities. By having students design and lead a portion of the community walks, Oakland International teachers direct their curriculum and pedagogy towards students' home countries and communities, thus engaging students in critical analysis and contextualizing of their own experiences. These community walks also strengthen students' academic skills. By presenting about their home countries, students practice the ability to gather information on their home countries and share it with a large audience in English. The community walks offer one example of centering the students' lives at the core

of the schooling experience and engaging teachers and administrators directly within the students' communities so that they can better address students' material conditions (SPRP's third tenet).

### **Tenet 3: Attention to the material conditions of students' lives**

If you're hungry, you can't learn. If you're suffering from an undiagnosed health issue, you can't learn. If you're in the throes of posttraumatic stress, you're not going to be able to focus on math, or at least not very well. So the idea of a full service community school is that schools should be a hub for all of these different services that are co-located on campus. Having those services co-located on campus or through these close intentional partnerships allows us to say, "You need a lawyer? Here's the place they said they have lawyers," and someone will go with you to do a warm hand-off.

I think the full service community school model actually makes so much sense in all education contexts, but especially in the newcomer context. If you immigrated to the United States and you enroll in school as a child, this might be the only trusted institution that the young person and their family are connected to. Our students come with the most unbelievable and beautiful and mind-boggling resilience, and skills and assets, but they bring a ton of challenges. A lot of our students have experienced trauma. We have students who fled as refugees from war and violence. We have one refugee from Syria and we're expecting to get more. We have an increasing number of refugees from Eritrea who fled forced conscription and war.

We have about 95 unaccompanied minors. These are very young people who cross the border by themselves. They generally are fleeing very acute community violence. We have students who have been sexually assaulted, who've been assaulted physically and threatened by the gangs or had family members killed by the gangs. They may have had this happen to their neighbors and they're terrified, so they left. The journey itself is incredibly challenging. So mental health is incredibly important here; traditionally school mental health is connected to insurance and a lot of our students are not insured. I spend a lot of my time getting counselors and interns who speak students' languages. (Interview with Ms. Monica, school administrator)

Another dimension of socio-politically relevant pedagogy for newcomer immigrant and refugee youth is having schools understand and meet their material needs. CRP encourages educators to attend to issues of inequality and scarcity, and in SPRP, we build upon this to explore how school-community partnerships can address the material conditions of students' lives. As noted in the interview excerpt above, having services co-located at a high school as perhaps the main institution newcomer students and families have interactions with, provides an important point of access to resources that can meet some of the immediate and basic needs of families. OIHS was part of an effort district-wide to create full-service community schools, efforts that have been underway in many states and that demonstrate larger notions of caring in education (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Bajaj, 2009; Noddings, 1984). While such efforts allow for greater funding for school staff members to coordinate such services, a component of SPRP includes advocating for such types of reforms given the needs and realities of newcomer populations. OIHS had various ways that it addressed the material conditions of often-extreme poverty, trauma, and the need for legal representation among students.

One basic need is food, and the school innovated in a few ways to address this. First, the school offered both school breakfast for all students and free/reduced price lunch for most all students (over 95% qualified). Second, a school staff member in charge of community partnerships worked with the county's food bank to have them send a mobile truck to the school once a month. On those days, there was an early release and students and families could be seen taking home bags of eggs, vegetables, fruits, grains and legumes from the large green truck parked in the school's parking lot. Third, the school has a school garden for the students to tend through an after school gardening club, and another plot where families can grow fruits or vegetables that they can take home. One day during our research, there was a sign on a bulletin board that someone from the county was coming to enroll families in food stamps at the school, and another day, a sign noted that someone was available to help students and families enroll in health insurance.

Trauma, as discussed in the interview excerpt above, was a particularly difficult challenge that impeded students' ability to focus and engage in academic endeavors at school (Birman et al., 2008). Ms. Monica coordinated various counseling services from social service agencies to interns from graduate programs to ensure that counselors with understandings of the students' backgrounds and languages were rotating through the school weekly to serve students. In total, she noted that a team of 16 counselors were serving students at the time of our interview, some funded by the district, other by

social service agencies, and some doing fieldwork hours or volunteering. Counselors spoke Spanish, Arabic, and other languages in order to best understand the students' they were working with. Coping with anxiety, stress, violence, or sexual assault in the past, during migration, or upon arrival to the US were important components of attending to students' well-being. Often, the communities that students came from considered seeking mental health services as taboo or stigmatized; having such services as part of one's school day facilitated students receiving the assistance and care needed. In 2016, the school created a wellness center where students could go during the school day if the needed to step out of a class or see someone immediately. Through these structures, regular counseling appointments became a normalized part of the school culture as well, and one student noted that having an appointment with a mental health counselor was as common and accepted as seeing one of the school's academic counselors.

For students who are undocumented and those who are unaccompanied minors, legal services proved to be an important need. The school district hired an official to address the needs of unaccompanied minors and that official coordinated with pro bono or low-cost lawyers to ensure students had representation. Working with the district point person, OIHS sent staff with students to their hearings since missing these hearings could have dire consequences. Additionally, important information sessions and workshops were held at the school for students and families about legal issues related to immigration status, changes in laws or policies, access to housing, and so forth.

### **SPRP: Centering the economic, the political, and the transnational**

Socio-politically relevant pedagogy, as demonstrated by the practices at Oakland International High School, provided a holistic understanding of students' lives, their needs, and the preconditions to their effective engagement in learning. It also demonstrated "critical" or "authentic" care about students and their families (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999), and attention to the social, economic, and political dimensions of students' lives. SPRP recognizes that for students to achieve academically, there are basic needs that must be met first. By placing the needs of each student at the center, students were set up to successfully complete academic challenges as well.

The multiple ways within and outside of the classroom that Oakland International High School demonstrates socio-politically relevant approaches tailored to their student population builds upon the vision of a culturally relevant pedagogy as applied to the increasing population of newcomer refugee and immigration youth in US schools. While some core tenets of CRP apply, by terming such approaches "socio-politically relevant pedagogy," we re-center the economic and political dimensions of newly arrived immigrant and refugee students' lives, including their higher concentrations of poverty, their often-precarious legal status and risk for deportation, their existence on the margins, and inability in many cases to access state services (public housing, food stamps, etc.), as well as the violence and resultant trauma that many students and families have endured before, during, or after migration. We also seek to center students as transnational agents whose socio-political realities shift over time and are not bound by singular notions of academic success or assimilation into the US. This extension of notions of culturally relevant and related pedagogies for immigrant and refugee youth offers new frameworks in which to situate lived realities and possibilities for resistance and agency by both educators and students.

There is much to learn from customized approaches to newcomer populations who constitute an increasing proportion of students in both mainstream schools and in newcomer-oriented schools, such as those that are part of the Internationals Network for Public Schools. Historically, educational approaches for newcomer students have focused on test preparation in an increasingly high stakes educational terrain, rapid English language acquisition, and acculturation to US norms. Approaches like that of Oakland International High School emphasize understandings of global citizenship, learning from students' communities, and seeing students within the context of the larger material conditions that shape their lives and their learning.

In interviews with graduates of Oakland International High School, the hardships of leaving the protective newcomer space repeatedly emerged. Students who had gone on to community college, four-year

universities, or to full-time work noted that it was difficult to transition to environments where their needs were not well thought about or attended to. One recent alumna of the school, a refugee from Bhutan, noted,

Being at Oakland International was one of the most important things that ever happened in my life. I learned so much, made so many friends, and had so many mentors [at Oakland International]. The school really became like my family. It was really emotional leaving high school when I graduated; I was crying. (Interview with Mangita, February 2016)

Now in college, she noted that it was difficult to get information, professors were inaccessible, and she wasn't happy. As the first in her family to finish high school and attend college, she felt stuck and scared since she didn't want to disappoint them by dropping out. The creation of spaces of caring and belonging [what scholars Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006) and Lee and Hawkins (2008) call "family-like" spaces in their respective work with Latino/a and Southeast Asian immigrant youth], offers points of contradiction to the larger social and political climate for refugees and immigrants who are often relegated to the margins. What SPRP can do, however, is offer youth a vision into what is possible and available (see also Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011), and help cultivate their sense of agency in advocating for themselves once they leave the protective cocoon (Katz, 2005) of their high school.

The three tenets of socio-politically relevant pedagogy for newcomer immigrant and refugee youth offer insights into effective and relevant approaches for this increasing population in the United States, as well as for other minoritized groups in the US and elsewhere, since these practices and approaches are all forms of quality education that can promote excellence. Indeed, school leaders can foster environments in which high expectations and asset-based approaches, coupled with socio-politically relevant pedagogy, can "transform otherwise hostile classrooms into urban school sanctuaries where students and teachers, together, can develop students' academic identities with the purpose of realizing their future aspirations" (Liou, Marsh, & Antrop-González, 2017, p. 79). Indeed, the ability of schools to meet the needs of students, and not push them further into the margins, is the promise of an education rooted in equity and social justice principles.

While much educational scholarship has been centered on narrow notions of academic achievement, the approaches detailed above offer a more holistic treatment of students' lives and broader notions of success. Academic attainment and English language acquisition, while at the core of Oakland International's mission, are often measured in deficit terms. A young woman like Seng from Burma, who was almost captured by human traffickers on her first perilous unaccompanied migration out of Burma to Malaysia, who then worked in restaurants to support her family, arrived in the US with just a few years of previous formal education. Measuring her excellence must take into account that after four years at Oakland International High School, she was proficient in English, completed her school's requirements, developed an extensive portfolio project, and received a full-scholarship to a state college while being a breadwinner and the main advocate for her younger siblings, attending all their parent-teacher conferences at their various schools. Yet, it is precisely the tenets of SPRP that allow students like Seng and many others to persist in school, to see it as valuable and begin to envision new academic and professional pathways in their future. Similarly, SPRP allowed teachers of newcomer youth at Oakland International to invest in students' holistic development despite a policy climate in which they were constantly being told to focus on test preparation, with their evaluations being linked to student performance on high stakes tests.

### ***Implications for further research and practice***

Globalizing our understandings of what education *is* and *does* can offer those seeking to serve newcomer youth important frames of understanding for what constitutes relevant education. Many parents and families want students to achieve economic and social mobility; indeed, these aspirations may drive the often-perilous migration process. In addition to academic achievement, newcomer students can greatly benefit from resources that address their social and emotional well-being, curricula and pedagogy that allow them to understand their lives and past experiences within a framework of global citizenship (albeit

in an extremely unequal global political economy), and attention to their multiple identities as students, workers, caregivers, migrants, and so forth.

Urban schools are often the first site of integration for immigrant and refugee youth and existing educational approaches may not match the needs and realities of these students. Theories of cultural relevance and sustenance in education offer important insights for educators and schools, but they do not always have newcomer students in mind when being developed. The increasing scholarship on newcomer youth is, however, shifting this terrain. For example, scholars such as Lee and Walsh (2017) emphasize immigrant youth's hybrid and evolving identities in articulating a socially just, culturally sustaining, pedagogy that centers agency and political participation. This study seeks to contribute to these ongoing conversations in order to improve the ways in which newcomer youth experience schooling in the larger expanse of their transnational lives.

In advocating for a socio-political turn to issues of cultural relevance, responsiveness, and sustenance in education, further research might examine and theorize the biopolitical forces of pedagogical processes (Foucault, Davidson, & Burchell, 2008). Engaging theories of racialization, the body, and power (Puar, 2007; Spillers, 1987; Weheliye, 2014; Wynter, 2003) would further advance our understandings of how agency and resistance are constituted among transnational immigrant and refugee youth in and outside of schools (Butler, 2015). Similarly, moving beyond static notions of national identity for immigrant and refugee youth can further complicate our understandings of the experience and consequences of complex, polycentric identities that transnational immigrant and refugee youth possess (Blommaert, 2009).

Scholars and educators working with diverse populations can build upon the tenets of SPRP put forth here to advance equity and social justice, namely by (1) curriculum and pedagogy aimed towards the cultivation of critical consciousness related to local and global issues, human rights, and inequalities; (2) the creation of formal and informal avenues for reciprocal learning between families/communities and schools; and (3) attention to the material conditions of students' and families' lives related to poverty, legal status, housing, and other basic needs. Schools are embedded in larger social, political, and economic structures, and newcomer students experience schooling as an important site of engagement with US society, particularly in the midst of larger narratives about deserving-ness and belonging.

Schools also can be an important site in which to learn about forms of citizenship and critically engage with global power relations, unequal positioning in the larger political economy, and the underlying causes of migration and differentiated access to resettlement. Tailored spaces for newcomers, whether within programs in larger schools or in newcomer-only schools, can offer youth an important tool for analyzing their new society and their place within it. Socio-politically relevant pedagogy offers frameworks for schools and teachers to view students holistically within the larger transnational dimensions and precarity of their lives and prepare them for active and engaged global citizenship.

## Notes

1. It is important to note that while some argue that segregating newcomer immigrant and refugee students into their own schools deprives them of the opportunity to interact with native English-speaking peers, studies have shown that US schools have high levels of segregation (Orfield & Eaton, 1997) and that mainstream schools often fail to meet the socioemotional, linguistic, and academic needs of newly arrived students (Feinberg, 2000).
2. In his work on collaborative action research, Erickson (2006) argues that action ethnography can be a way to make power relations between the researcher and the researched more transparent, lending to the validity of ethnographic studies of education.

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