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The “Warm Embrace” of a Newcomer School for Immigrant & Refugee Youth

This article examines the approaches of a public high school for newcomer youth, Oakland International High School in California, that provides holistic wrap-around services to students. By not isolating students from the larger context of their families and communities, the school’s approaches allow for greater reciprocity between school and home. This article presents examples of the intentional practices the school engages in within and outside the classroom to foster mutual

learning and community engagement, resulting in greater support for the socio-emotional, academic and material needs of students. Implications for practice are woven throughout in the description of how Oakland International High School leverages community partnerships and flexible design of their curricula, support structures, and family engagement strategies to meet the needs of its immigrant and refugee students.

Being at Oakland International High School 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. It was really emotional leaving high school when I graduated because there was so much caring—it was like a family. I really miss it. (Mangita,¹Refugee from Bhutan, 20 years old)

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Color versions of one or more of the figures in the article can be found online at www.tandfonline.com/htip.

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Across the globe, an estimated 245 million people live in a country other than that of their birth (UN, 2016); in the United States, immigrants and refugees comprise 13% of the population (US Census, 2011). Since the 1800s, public schools have been the primary site for the acculturation of newly arrived migrants, focusing on the alienation of their linguistic and cultural resources for assimilation

¹ All students have been assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

into US society and English language proficiency (Alba & Nee, 2003; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Tailored to the specific needs of newly arrived adolescents, and providing a more asset-based approach to building on the culture and language of these students, newcomer schools emerged from the 1980s onward to provide academic and socio-emotional support to immigrant youth. Many of these schools are linked through the Internationals Network for Public Schools (INPS) and, in 2007, Oakland International High School (OIHS) opened in California, the first INPS school on the west coast of the United States.

This article discusses how OIHS embraces students and their families through a holistic approach. We first detail the school's family and community engagement strategies, followed by its approaches to address student trauma and socio-emotional wellbeing; last, we focus on how responsive teachers and staff members adjust curricula and practices to adapt to the realities of students' lives.

We approach this article from different vantage points: Sailaja Suresh is a founding teacher, former coprincipal, and current director of the Lab School at OIHS; Monisha Bajaj is a researcher who has been partnering with and collecting data at OIHS for 3 years. In discussing OIHS, we engaged Weis and Fine's (2012) call for *critical bifocality*, which posits "that structures produce lives at the same time as lives across the social class spectrum produce, reproduce, and, at times, contest these same social/economic structures" (p. 176). With this *critical bifocal lens*, we bring into focus in this article the approaches of OIHS and its educators, with an eye towards youth resilience and agency amidst neoliberalism and widening inequalities in the global economy.

OIHS

Inspired by INPS schools in New York, OIHS opened as the first newcomer high school in California some 10 years ago. The school has approximately 375 students from over 32 countries and aged 14–21. About 30% of students are refugees or asylees, 25% are unaccompanied minors primarily from Central America, and 95% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, one indicator

of economic hardship. Because many newly arrived immigrants and unaccompanied minors are young men traveling by themselves, the school is predominantly male (58%) and from Mexico or Central America (67%), with smaller but significant populations from East and Southeast Asia (10%), South Asia (7%), the Middle East (10%), and sub-Saharan Africa (3%).

OIHS' mission statement highlights the goal of students becoming "active participants in our community" through collaborative and project-based learning: for example, all students complete a final portfolio each year to serve as a more holistic form of assessment than a mere exam. Importantly, the school's values include the belief that "Education is a Civil Right—We believe that everyone has the right to an education." English-language learning is woven through every subject with content and language goals posted at the front of each classroom. Students have a variety of in-school programs such as a focus on media and film and after-school programs ranging from a DREAMers project (for undocumented students) to soccer to academic enrichment and tutoring. Parents can also participate in weekly English, computer, and gardening classes, during which they tend to a small garden behind the school with various fruits and vegetables from their home countries, harvesting and sharing their crops with other families. Some of these efforts require additional funding than what a public noncharter school like OIHS receives; the school has secured grants and support for some of their programs; other initiatives have emerged through robust community partnerships (as is described later in this article), such as the mobile food bank that comes to distribute free foodstuffs to families at OIHS once a month. OIHS rightly describes itself as a "full-service community school."

Public schools are often the only state institution to which immigrant families can connect, especially as they provide access by law, regardless of immigration status. That said, some schools welcome students and families, but others fail to meet their needs and contribute to the extremely high dropout rate of newcomers, which is approximately 20% in

California for ELLs and immigrant youth (California Department of Education, 2016a). OIHS sees the results of their refuge and warm embrace in the college persistence data of their graduates, who stay enrolled in college at the same rate as other Oakland graduates, despite the challenges of being English language learners and newcomers to the country (National Student Clearinghouse, 2012): 63% of OIHS alumni are still enrolled in college 3 years after their high school graduation, as compared to 61% of all district high school graduates.² The deep partnerships and thoughtful practices present throughout the school day underlie the results the school is able to achieve at graduation time and beyond. The sections that follow provide an overview of three areas that can particularly inform educators, school leaders, and policymakers: (a) family-community engagement strategies for newcomers, (b) trauma-informed practices for socio-emotional wellbeing, and (c) responsive and flexible curricula.

Community and Family Engagement

As a community school, OIHS is able to provide holistic, wrap-around services to students, largely because of the many deep partnerships they have forged with agencies throughout the Northern California Bay Area. Like other community schools, OIHS truly "sees the community as a resource for the school, and the community views the school as a resource for itself" (Trujillo et al., 2014, p. 899). Legal aid agencies lead *charlas* (conversations) and information nights at the school; guest speakers from the neighborhood participate in an annual Career Week; parents attend monthly mobile pantry events hosted at the school

by the county's food bank. These partnerships ultimately lead to a greater alignment of academic, socio-emotional, enrichment, and legal services for the benefit of students and their families. And, literature has shown that such wrap-around services can effectively increase school attendance, student wellbeing, and academic achievement (Dobbie, Roland & Fryer, 2011; Georgis, Gokiert, Ford, & Ali, 2014).

The impact of the reciprocal nature of the school's partnerships with other agencies and organizations is most profoundly evident in OIHS' annual Community Walks. To better connect with the school's diverse newcomer student communities, OIHS offers a Community Walks professional development day for teachers and staff members. Designed by parents, students, and community leaders, OIHS teachers and staff members visit student communities while being shown important landmarks and cultural centers; meeting with community leaders, advocates, and service providers; and breaking bread 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 and staff members about students' backgrounds, challenges, community and cultural assets, and the educational concerns of OIHS' 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 teachers become the students and students and families become the teachers" (as cited in Bajaj et al., 2017, p. 266).

The annual Community Walks are often the most-cherished professional development experiences for OIHS staff members. They begin their learning about students' communities through articles, videos, and recent publications prior to the event itself. On the day of Community Walks, students start the day by leading staff people through a lesson or a circle focused on issues in their communities. For example, in 2016, 7 simultaneous walks took place on the same day focused on diverse communities such as Yemeni, Afghan, Burmese, and Central American immigrants. Unaccompanied minors showed a clip of "La Bestia" from the movie *Sin Nombre* and then

²When looking at college readiness rates at Oakland Unified School District and the district as a whole, the picture is even clearer: Only 24% of ELL students across the district graduate A-G compliant, meaning that they have completed the coursework necessary for admission to a four-year state university. For the district as a whole, 46% of all graduates in OUSD have completed all their A-G requirements. For OIHS, 51% of their students graduate A-G compliant, more than double that of their ELL peers across the district (OIHS WASC Report, 2016).

shared stories about their own journeys across the border, riding the train, catching food from kind strangers alongside the railroad tracks, and watching helplessly as others fell off the train during their journey. (“*La Bestia*,” also known as The Death Train, is the name used by many migrants in reference to the wide network of trains that run throughout Mexico, which hundreds of thousands of hopeful immigrants ride each year on their journey to the United States). Yemeni students had adults participate in a circle about Islamophobia and the impact that has had on their lives. After the discussion, groups visited various locations throughout the Bay Area that are culturally or socially significant to the respective community. Participating staff members visited the International Rescue Committee to learn about the refugee resettlement process, attended prayer at the local mosque, or learned about Special Immigrant Juvenile visas from the community legal aid organization, *Centro Legal*. The Community Walks always end with a circle back at OIHS, during which staff members can debrief their experiences and share their learnings with each other. Community Walks place students and their strengths and challenges at the heart of this professional learning experience for the staff, making it not just a deep learning experience, but also a great moment of community building for the entire school.

Trauma-Informed Approaches

The first time I came to school, Coach Ben asked me, “Do you want to play soccer? Here, we have practice Tuesday and Thursday.” That helped me to stay in school. It was hard for me in the beginning to stay in school, but to have a person telling you that you belong in this community, that really helped. (Jose, unaccompanied minor from Central America, 12th grader at OIHS)

Within a student population made up entirely of newcomer students, many of whom are unaccompanied minors, refugees, asylees, and students with interrupted formal education, integrating a trauma-informed approach is essential to building successful relationships with students. The school’s

professional development is tailored to foster staff understanding of students’ cultures and communities, but administrators have also made a concerted effort to ground their collective work in an understanding of how trauma affects the brain and learning. Within the school, adults strive to make students feel safe, welcome, and trusted in big and small ways. Advisors check-in with their students daily about their grades and weekly about their lives in community circles. The Wellness Center is open throughout the day for drop-in visits by students who need help with social service applications, health appointments, or who just need a snack or a socio-emotional breather. The intentional focus on building safe spaces and trusting relationships with adults is evident in the strong community at the school. According to the California Healthy Kids Survey (2016), 80.8% of students surveyed at OIHS responded to the question, “How safe do you feel when you are at school?” with a response of *safe* or *very safe*, as opposed to only 54.8% of students at all schools throughout the district.

Each year, OIHS has strengthened the socio-emotional services available to students by expanding partnerships and by intentionally finding staff people with linguistic and cultural competency to address students’ many varying needs. In 2016, OIHS worked with a local agency called Partnerships for Trauma Recovery to hire their first Arabic-speaking mental health counselor—the only one in the entire district. She has a caseload of 13 students, whom she meets with on a weekly basis. In fact, over 190 students received counseling services during the 2016–2017 school year, which represents more than half of the entire student population. Counselors are able to provide individual and group counseling in English, Arabic, Spanish, Farsi, Karen, Vietnamese, and Cantonese. Receiving counseling services is remarkably unstigmatized at the school, as so many students receive counseling each year.

Each week, teachers meet to case manage and design academic and social interventions for struggling students. During this time, they make referrals to the Coordination for Student Services Team (COST), which includes all the mental health counselors working at the school through partner

agencies. The COST team then meets together each week to manage the different interventions that are being coordinated for each individual student, matching them to counselors based on language need, to home-based tutors for extra academic support, or to other partner agencies, as needed.

Soccer Without Borders (SWB) is one partner agency that has been working at the school since its opening in 2007. Founder Ben Gucciardi and his staff have an office at the school where they meet weekly with the COST team, and where they plan their daily soccer practices with all six OIHS teams. The SWB mission is to use soccer as a vehicle for positive change, providing underserved youth with a toolkit to overcome obstacles to growth, inclusion, and personal success. Through their after-school program and strong adult-student relationships, students build cross-cultural friendships, learn how to communicate in English and engage with each other and with adults about difficult topics, and find a safe place in a sport that they have often grown up loving. Coaches are very intentional in their conversations with students and in their circles during practice about building up students' socio-emotional skills and trust in each other. In 2013, following a fight on campus, instigated by a visitor from a different school, the soccer team mobilized by coming to school early the next morning with signs in multiple languages that said, “We Want Peace in Our School.”

Coaches also use the close relationships they build with students to provide academic support to struggling students. In addition to tutoring, coaches create contracts with students to support them in reaching their academic goals and improving their behavior during the school day. Many students report that soccer is like a family to them, and that Coach Ben is like a father. “We’ve actually seen, over the last 5 years, [that] 95 percent of our kids who have participated in this program have graduated from high school,” said Gucciardi. “You compare that to Oakland-wide, [where] that’s closer to about 60 percent of students, and among newcomer youth it’s an even a lower percentage than that” (Cate, 2014). SWB builds a community among their students and truly opens doors to greater future opportunities for their graduates by intentionally

aligning their supports to meet students’ needs at OIHS.

Responsive Curricula

At the core of its programming, OIHS teachers practice what Bajaj and Bartlett (2017) termed “a critical transnational curricular approach” (p. 33) that is responsive to current events, builds upon students’ diversity and language assets, and provides students with opportunities for civic engagement in their community. For many years, the 11th-grade US history teacher incorporated schoolwide service learning days into her curriculum related to the Great Depression and the Works Project Administration. Students learned about the different types of projects that were supported by the government around the country in the 1930s, visited WPA sites in San Francisco, and then led a day of service for the school around the community. Similarly, through a later unit focused on the Civil Rights Era, students learned about civil rights actions in the 1960s and 1970s, and then organized the school for an annual May Day march through the city.

More recently, the 2016 election had a profound impact on both staff members and students, who immediately recognized the need for students to learn about how the US government works, about what rights recently arrived immigrants and refugees have, and about what the future would hold under a Trump presidency. This was particularly relevant, given that many students hail from countries that had been declared banned, and many await legal status. In the weeks following the election, 12th-grade government students led teach-in sessions for younger students in their native languages about the three branches of government, about how laws are passed in the United States, and about the Electoral College. Workshops were held in Spanish, Arabic, Mam, Vietnamese, Pashto, Chinese, and Tigrinya throughout the school.

Other teachers built projects, held drop-in question-and-answer sessions, and created clubs

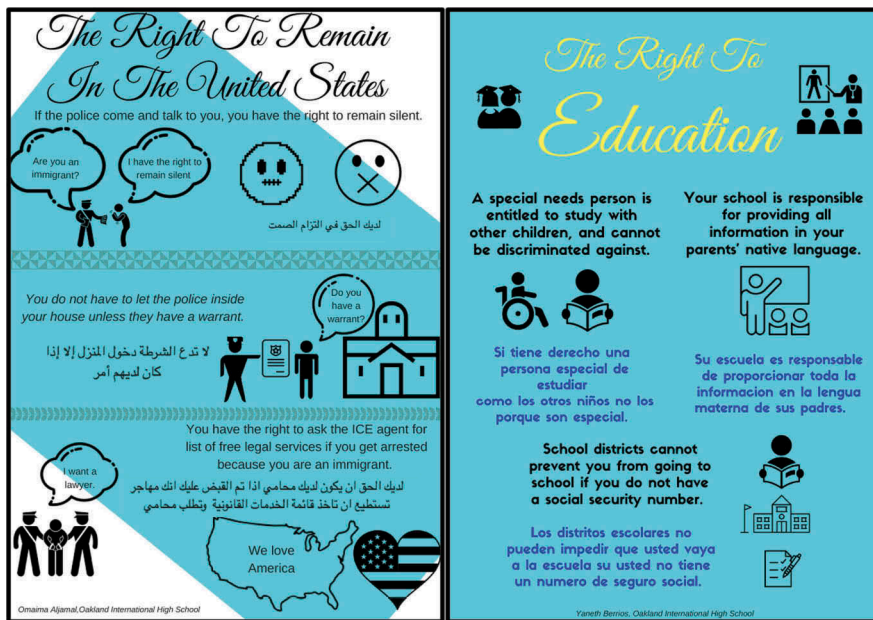


Figure 1. Multilingual “know your rights” posters created by OIHS Students.

in response to the student desire to learn more about how current events would be affecting their lives. In January 2017, the 11th-grade team of teachers crafted a cross-curricular project called, “Know Your Rights,” in which students applied their learning about current events and advice from the American Civil Liberties Union to design posters and postcards about immigrants’ rights with the police, in schools, and with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (see Figure 1).

Students made posters and postcards available to other schools and community organizations in multiple languages, free of charge. In addition, these postcards have been shared widely across the Internet and are a multilingual resource for immigrant communities. Students remarked on how this action-oriented project allowed them to feel more knowledgeable, informed, and passionate about their rights and the realities of the current political moment. Student interest in such engaged learning linked to current political realities allows them to go deeper with their learning, affirming other studies that have found 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).

Discussion and Conclusion

Newcomer youth face many challenges to school persistence and education attainment: poverty, language barriers, often-irrelevant curriculum, a lack of understanding of their realities, and insufficient resources to help them deal with trauma (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2009). When school becomes a place of support, and healing—especially in moments of increasingly hostile immigration policies—students’ trajectories can be significantly altered and improved. OIHS, as a full-service community school that serves as a resource for not only students but also their families and communities, offers a warm embrace to immigrant and refugee youth. As the

founding principal noted in reference to discussions about safety in the post-2016 election period, "Part of being a space of sanctuary is to make students feel loved and held." The representative examples given in this article of community engagement strategies, trauma-informed approaches, and responsive curricula are but a few ways that OIHS seeks to meet students and families where they are at, fostering greater integration and success as they navigate life in the United States.

There is power in the possibility of schools to situate the newcomer student in the context of his or her family, transnational migration, and socio-political context and address a host of needs in one place. Schools like OIHS have leveraged this opportunity to create a place of hope, healing, and academic meaning and achievement. On any given day, one can walk into the courtyard of OIHS and see students, teachers, alumni volunteering or working at the school in some capacity, and families engaged in diverse activities that the school hosts; recently, a cooking demonstration was taking place in the courtyard with Burmese food, the Gay-Straight Alliance was tabling, students were drawing art on the concrete, and parents were tending their small garden plot behind the school.

All students, newcomer or not, have a right to a quality education that is culturally and socio-politically relevant (Bajaj et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Newcomer youth and English language learners have long had some of the lowest graduation and school persistence rates, and studies have shown that cultural and socio-politically relevant pedagogies can influence student attendance and attainment rates (Bajaj et al., 2017; Bartlett & Garcia, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Community Walks draw from families' knowledge and rich community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005); curricula that are responsive to students' concerns, such as in the post-2016 election projects, empower students to be facilitators of knowledge. By innovating with such asset-based curricula and trauma-informed services, and partnering widely with community organizations and government agencies, OIHS offers a

model of how immigrant and refugee youth can be served whether in newcomer or conventional schools. Ultimately, embracing students, meeting their academic and socio-emotional needs, and helping them critically engage with their place in a complex world allows education, as Paulo Freire (2000) noted, "to become the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women ... discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (p. 34).

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Additional Resources

1. **Cervone, B. and Cushman, K. (2015).** *Belonging and becoming: The power of social and emotional learning in high schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
Cervone and Cushman interviewed high school students and teachers in several urban areas, including at Oakland International High School, about their school experiences and compiled their insights and advice to teachers in this book.
2. **Markham, L. (2017).** *The far away brothers: Two young migrants and the making of an American life*. New York, NY: Penguin Random House.

This nonfiction biography of two unaccompanied minors, who are brothers who travel on their own from El Salvador to the United States, offers an in-depth glimpse into the reasons for migration, the journey itself, and the difficulties of adjusting to life and school in the US.

3. **Nazario, S. (2007).** *Enrique’s journey: The story of a boy’s dangerous odyssey to reunite with his mother*. New York, NY: Random House.
A true story of a young boy from Honduras who makes the dangerous journey alone to rejoin his mother in the United States, based on a series of Pulitzer Prize winning articles about the same story in 2002

