



Between Rights and Realities: Human Rights Education for Immigrant and Refugee Youth in an Urban Public High School

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This article presents data from a two-year ethnographic case study to explore how immigrant and refugee youth in the United States made sense of participation in a weekly human rights club after school. Three types of student responses to human rights education are exemplified through the profiles of students. The article offers new insights on studies of immigrant youth as well as possibilities that exist at the intersection of human rights education and anthropology of education. [immigrants and education, human rights education, refugee youth, urban schooling, social justice]

Studies of the experiences of ethnic minority, immigrant, and refugee youth have become increasingly central in the anthropology of education. In the United States, immigrants make up nearly 13% of the population, and some states boast even larger proportions of foreign-born individuals, such as California (27%) and New York (22%) (U.S. Census n.d.). “Newcomer” youth are defined by scholars as those who have immigrated within the last 10 years (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2015) and classified by the numerous public high schools that have emerged nation wide to serve this population as those who have come to the United States within the past four years. Newcomers to the United States face higher poverty levels than children of immigrants but also have been reported to have higher levels of optimism and belief in the education system, despite language and documentation status barriers (Hopkins et al. 2013; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2009; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2010). Some research exists on newcomer schools related to language acquisition (Bartlett and García 2011), homework practices (Yip 2013), post-secondary transitions (Jaffe-Walter and Lee 2011), and the overall school ethos, relationships, and efficacy (Bartlett and García 2011; Fine et al. 2007; Jaffe-Walter 2008; Malsbary 2014). This study examines students’ diverse responses to explicit instruction in human rights amid discourses that circulate in a newcomer school community about immigrant rights and social justice.

Human rights education (HRE)—or the incorporation of rights *content* and *processes* (through participatory pedagogy that seeks to link knowledge with attitude change and action)—often remains in the realm of practice (handbooks, curricula; see for example Flowers, 2003) or prescriptive scholarship (justifications, calls for expansion; see, for example, Tibbitts 2002; Osler and Starkey 2010). Among those seeking to analyze HRE and its proliferation, sociologists of education have documented the rise and global convergence of rights language in formal schooling and textbooks internationally (Meyer et al. 2010; Suarez and Ramirez 2004). Further interdisciplinary qualitative research has examined government-mandated, optional, or nongovernmental courses or reforms to explore more fully how cultural processes and realities mediate instruction about universal

rights and principles (Bajaj 2012; Bellino 2014; Mejias 2013; Wahl 2013). Few studies, however, utilize an extended empirical and ethnographic approach to explore how youth interpret and integrate rights education in their processes of self-making (Hantzopoulos 2012, 2016), in this case by young migrants and refugees who live on the margins of their host society (due to documentation status, poverty, or linguistic barriers, among other factors).

This article presents a qualitative case study that utilized ethnographic methodologies to explore how immigrant and refugee youth to the United States made sense of HRE as part of a weekly after-school club run by the research team. Within a school-based ethnographic case study, we utilized participant observation, interviews, and focus groups. The research team visited the school weekly to conduct data collection and also run a human rights club (one and a half hours in duration each week) for youth. In this article, we present findings from two years of data collection and ongoing analyses of this research study with immigrant and refugee youth in a newcomer high school in the mid-sized city of Oakland, California.

In the sections that follow, we first provide a conceptual framing of the various approaches to HRE. Second, we review the array of methods we employed in this study. We then identify various discourses about rights and citizenship that circulate at the newcomer school. Next, three types of student responses to HRE—in this case, through the human rights club specifically and to the larger school discourses on rights—are exemplified through the profiles of three students that are representative of trends and themes in the larger data. Although much has been written about how HRE *should* be developed, very little empirical work exists on what meanings students make of participating in HRE programs.

Our data point to three distinct ways that students in the club made sense of HRE in light of their migration and transnational schooling experiences. HRE offered (1) a *window* into past and present realities; (2) a *mirror* for reflecting on students' own experiences of rights violations; and (3) a *prism* for heightening their critical awareness of access to rights and resources amid unequal forms of citizenship. Christine Sleeter, in discussing curricular approaches in multicultural education, draws on Style's (1996) window-mirror metaphor arguing that "both mirrors into his or her own world and windows into someone else's have value" (Sleeter 2005, 149). For immigrant and refugee youth learning about human rights, windows, mirrors, and prisms—our addition to the metaphor—offer important tools for reflection, analysis, and engagement. The prism is a necessary addition for exploring the complex and potentially transformative outcomes of HRE—as well as various other forms of social justice education—for marginalized youth in diverse settings. We conclude with a discussion on how the data offer new insights to studies of immigrant and refugee youth as well as the possibilities that emerge at the intersection of HRE and anthropology of education.

Human Rights Education

Legal anthropologist Marie-Benedicte Dembour (2010) offers categorizations of human rights scholars and places them in four schools, some of which map neatly onto typologies of HRE. Dembour's first two schools include the natural school, which views human rights as "God-given," and the deliberative school, which focuses on "human rights as political values that liberal societies *choose* to adopt" (Dembour 2010, 3, emphasis in original). HRE stemming from the deliberative school might focus on *values and awareness* for students or professionals such as police, judges, etc. (Tibbitts 2002); and *compliance* with and *political literacy* (Keet 2010) in international and domestic laws. For Dembour, the distinction between natural and deliberative schools is the focus in the latter approach on societal agreement on rights as opposed to an inherent value for them; for HRE, the distinction

matters less because human rights in these forms are presented to learners as a series of absolutes with a focus on declarations and norms regardless of how society converged towards agreement on their value. Dembour's third "protest" school—wherein rights are relevant insofar as they animate the struggles and efforts of subaltern groups seeking to close the gap between rights and realities—aligns with critical and transformative approaches to HRE (Bajaj 2011, 2012; Keet 2010; Tibbitts 2002).

Critical or transformative HRE approaches rely heavily on Freirean notions of dialogue, agency, and collective action for marginalized groups (Freire 1970). Education, critical reflection, and social action rooted in analyses of power and social location inform how HRE ought to be conceptualized, designed, and implemented in these approaches. We place ourselves in this latter protest school, viewing *human rights as a verb*—as an active engagement that individuals and communities utilize as a means of critical consciousness raising for the furthering of rights guarantees and social justice (Freire 1970; Meintjes 1997). In the field of anthropology, scholarship has examined how subjectivities are created through rights (Cowan et al. 2001), with attention to vernacularization (Merry 2006) and how "'human rights' (understood diffusely) must be both theorized and legitimated *in terms of* the groundedness of social practices" (emphasis in original, Goodale 2009, 13–14). Yet, much of the HRE literature treats rights as static and normative goods to be imparted to learners and HRE to be evangelized to policymakers. We sought instead to design the human rights club in this research study to give primacy to the conditions under which marginalized communities approach and redefine human rights based on context and dynamic conceptions of culture. Our approach complemented the ongoing school-wide practices and messages related to human rights.

In the field of anthropology of education, while increasing attention is being paid to transnational civic identities (DeJaeghere and McCleary 2010; Dyrness 2012), newcomer youth (Bartlett and García 2011; Fine et al. 2007; Hopkins et al. 2013), and the in- and out-of-school processes that shape notions of identity and belonging (Abu El-Haj 2009; Levinson 2005; McGinnis 2009), few ethnographic, school-based studies of HRE exist and HRE has been undertheorized in terms of how young people make sense and meaning of their experiences, in this case, immigrant and refugee youth. The inquiry approaches of anthropology of education offer important analytical frames and methods to apply to the study of HRE especially because so little research on youth experiences, responses, and meaning making within such programs exists. As such, the data that follow contribute to the sparse empirical literature on how HRE shapes youth identity as well as to larger discussions within educational anthropology about civic identity for newcomer youth in U.S. schools and communities.

Methods

The data presented emerged from a two-year ethnographic case study of a newcomer public high school, Oakland International High School (OIHS), in the urban center of Oakland, California. Oakland has about 400,000 residents, and the English Language Learner (ELL) population in all the district's 118 schools is approximately 30% (OUSD 2015). Founded in 2007, OIHS is part of the national Internationals Network for Public Schools, which have helped open over 20 schools nationwide that focus on newcomer ELLs.

The data for this article came from 24 months of data collection (June 2014 through June 2016) that included a variety of ethnographic methods: 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 using different colors in a single shared document chronologically throughout the year); semistructured individual interviews with

district officials and school staff/teachers; focus groups; and visual methodologies (Krueger 2010). While many uses of visual methodologies include photographs and often utilize photovoice as a method (Luttrell et al. 2011), we chose instead several activities where respondents drew or assembled, for example, trees representing critical aspects of their beliefs and aspirations, life maps with key events (a similar idea to the school maps in Krueger 2010), and collages with images related to their lives, as forms of data along with what students said about their visual representations and products they created. Students also sometimes brought in photos or items from their homes to talk about in the weekly human rights club meetings; these artifacts served as important prompts for our questions about students' transnational lives and how notions of rights and civic identity were being shaped. Visual data, along with transcripts and field notes, were analyzed by the research team by identifying representative themes that emerged across the data. The three students discussed in this article represent the central themes related to student responses to HRE (among the 10 participating students in the study) that emerged repeatedly in the data.

Human Rights Education and Ethnographic Techniques

In our early discussions with school administrators and with a desire to foster reciprocity and rapport, it was decided that an after-school club could be a way for the researchers to naturalize our presence at the school and get to know respondents. The school identified the need for more after-school offerings that could help students practice English. Given the background of the researchers (who had curriculum development and teacher training experience), and the limited options of academic after-school offerings, it was decided in the early summer of 2014 that the research team would offer a weekly human rights club, one and a half hours in duration. HRE offered us, and offers those interested in participatory approaches, a critical stance and valuable content for newcomer students to engage with; such an approach also insisted on keeping discussions open by allowing youth to respond to and disagree with human rights themselves rather than directing them to specific answers or outcomes. Our participant observation included running of the club as well as general involvement in school activities as part of a strategy to have "thick participation" in our research setting (Sarangi 2007). Such participation, we believed, would enable both the thick description and "thick analysis" (Macgilchrist and Van Hout 2011) that characterize studies in anthropology of education.

HRE literature emphasizes the need to be context dependent and flexible, and to include three general dimensions: content related, affective, and action oriented (Bajaj 2011; Tibbitts 2002). In order to design an approach that touched on these three components, we sought to achieve a balance between knowledge about international human rights (content), examples of abuses/nonfulfillment (content and affective in terms of the empathic responses such examples produced), and case studies of community-based organizations and nongovernmental organizations working toward human rights (content and action-oriented in that these examples modeled possible action). While some scholars argue that "declarationist" approaches to HRE cannot be critical (Keet 2007), we found that offering examples of how social movements (like civil rights activism in the United States or underground journalism in Burma)¹ utilized international norms to advance their causes could produce critical and informed insights from youth.

The club meetings were also structured with participatory pedagogy and transformative educational approaches in mind. We planned the human rights club meetings as follows: a check-in with students so that everyone could let others know how they were doing; an opening team-building or ice breaker activity; a main activity usually involving a game, role play, film screening, or other activity; and a wrap-up discussion. While we developed curriculum for the club and introduced the students to human rights with particular

examples of abuse and fulfillment, the club activities were extremely flexible and often changed in response to student interests and concerns. If other topics were deemed more relevant, our discussions veered into different areas. We viewed these activities as a sort of focus group prompt: our discussions could start and stay on the planned activity or take another direction and become about topics entirely tangential to the lesson plan or even to human rights. Data presented in this article primarily draw from year one of our data collection in which the club met 30 times during the school year (2014–2015) and also went on five field trips. At any given club meeting, there were between one and 10 students present, with a usual committed group of six students who attended most meetings and activities (predominantly young women, with the exception of two young men who regularly attended). Students ranged from 15 to 20 years in age.

All students were informed of the dual purpose of the club as another after-school option available to all students as well as part of a larger research project. Students (and guardians when students were under 17) were provided with consent forms (which were translated and explained), and no student was turned away from the club for not wanting to be part of the research study. Unlike the regular school day marked by increasing high-stakes testing, the after-school club had no set curriculum to accomplish nor any examinations, which allowed our club's agenda to be constantly re-evaluated and adjusted as needed. This is not to say that HRE cannot effectively operate in school settings during the regular school day as scholars have shown (Bajaj 2012; Hantzopoulos 2012); in this particular school, however, the rapid push for English language proficiency and mastery of content for acquiring a high school diploma limited the curricular space for much HRE in the formal curriculum.

Of the regular attendees to the human rights club, most of the students were from Burma, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Philippines. Many students had been refugees in another country in Asia prior to migrating to the United States. Few studies have examined the experiences of South and Southeast Asian newcomer youth (Lee and Hawkins 2008; Ngo 2006); this particular school had nearly 20% of the student population from these regions, primarily from the countries of Burma, Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka. Nationally, these groups have been termed *invisible newcomers* as noted in a report with that title which found that in 2011, "refugees from Burma and Bhutan made up 56 percent of refugees resettled in the U.S." (APIASF 2014, 6). The students in the human rights club were part of this invisible group both in policy discussions and also in educational research and practice.

As a team, we brought our selves and our identities to the research. Our collective identity as a professor and two doctoral students—at the time the research was carried out—influenced our rapport and relationship with members of the school. We sought to distinguish ourselves from teachers so as to minimize any power-over dynamics that may have been operating. Some students may have perceived us to be school staff or teachers, which may have influenced the way they responded to us; however, we sought to minimize such dynamics by clarifying our roles when needed and through our regular presence at the school over the two years.

As individuals, we had a variety of backgrounds that influenced our interactions: South Asian American (Bajaj), Filipina American (Canlas), and Nicaraguan American (Argenal) (married to a Burmese person of Nepali descent with personal connections, by coincidence, to some of the students' families). Two of us spoke 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 United States) and with some family members who were refugees (Bajaj) or victims of political violence and torture (Canlas); as a result, we viewed human rights as dynamic and in-process, not as abstract legal norms to proselytize or blindly adhere to.

School-Wide Human Rights Discourses at Oakland International High School

As you enter the double doors of Oakland International High School, a mural with a colorful globe greets you. As one enters the school grounds, there are images of Martin Luther King Jr., Rigoberta Menchu, and Aung San Suu Kyi with quotes exemplifying freedom and human rights. Today, there are remnants from the recent May Day parade organized by student leaders and teachers that marched through the neighborhood to raise awareness about the rights of immigrants and refugees. On the ground is a fading “Immigrant rights are human rights” in chalk on the walkway up to the school entrance.

In the cafeteria fly dozens of colorful flags from all over the world, including the approximately 40 countries that students at the school hail from. Posted around the flags on the cafeteria walls are images of actual students rather than famous persons, allowing students to literally “see” themselves in the school. As we enter the classroom, Ms. Janine is talking to a recently arrived young man from Honduras in Spanish. He is talking about gangs that operated in his hometown, and she is asking him what he likes about being in the United States. Ms. Janine’s husband is from Mexico, and she has seen his town suffer from drug cartels and gang violence on her visits there over the years.

We begin setting up the chairs for our human rights club with the planned lesson for this day on human rights issues in Burma. Over the loud speaker, several announcements are made. Today the DREAMers project for undocumented students is meeting, Ms. Sheena is taking several senior girls to pick out prom dresses at a nonprofit that collects donations for such occasions, and teachers are in the faculty lounge, settling in for a long afternoon and evening with popcorn and pizza while screening entries from all the video production classes for the annual film competition. After our club meeting, I pop in to the teachers’ lounge to ask Ms. Denise, the after-school coordinator, a question. She invites me to stay and vote on some of the films; the video teacher Ms. Nancy has prepared an Academy Award-like ballot to help determine the winners. The stories in the films are different, but the themes are consistent in the ones I see—frustrated and/or fulfilled romance, cultural conflict, academic aspirations, stress over upcoming exams, teen gossip, and the trials of life in a new place. (Excerpt from field notes, May 2015)²

OIHS was established as part of a national network of public high schools designed to meet the needs of newly arrived immigrant and refugee youth. The school defines newcomers as those who have arrived in the past four years, and regardless of age, students usually enter in 9th grade in order to give them four years to complete their high school requirements; in practice, many students take up to six years (the maximum the school allows) to complete and take community college classes concurrently to complete their remaining requirements. Many teachers have worked at other newcomer high schools and speak other languages—primarily Spanish—because, according to school administrators, 60% of the school’s nearly 400 students are from Latin American countries.

The school’s mission statement highlights the goal of students becoming “active participants in our community” through approaches related to collaborative and project-based learning. Importantly, the school’s values include the belief that “Education is a Civil Right —We believe that everyone has the right to an education.” All the students are English Language Learners and recent migrants—with a mix of documentation status and national origin—and 95% of the students qualify for free or reduced price lunch, one indicator of socioeconomic hardship. In recent years, many of the incoming students have been unaccompanied minors arriving to the United States from Central America through precarious migratory routes and fleeing from horrific violence in their home countries. The school seeks to engage students academically, to address psychosocial dimensions of trauma related to violence faced in their home countries or during the migration process, and to address students’ material needs with donations from food banks as well as connections to legal services to assist with authorization and documentation processes. Parents can also participate in weekly English, computer, and gardening classes; in fact,

parents regularly tended a small garden behind the school with various fruits and vegetables from their home countries and shared the harvest with other families. The school rightly terms itself a “full-service community school.”

Various discourses about immigrant rights and global citizenship circulated broadly throughout the school, evidenced through artwork and posters as well as curricular and extra-curricular content. For example, a stack of books, one for each student, illustrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through photographs from around the world topped the shelf in Ms. Janine’s English classroom. After-school offerings, in addition to the human rights club, included a Gay-Straight Alliance founded by a teacher and a handful of students, a community art project for undocumented students, and youth leadership, as well as offerings like soccer, basketball, cooking, dance, advanced math, and gardening.

The Oakland International school community offered an environment in which the introduction of a weekly human rights club was aligned with the ethos of the institution. Administrators were very receptive when we first discussed the possibility of launching a human rights club and made significant efforts to promote it: the after-school coordinator made frequent announcements and helped publicize the club around the school campus and teachers encouraged students in their classes to attend. An enabling environment is central to the function and coherence of any school-based or co-curricular HRE program (Bajaj 2012; Hantzopoulos 2012 and 2016). Student responses to specific instruction about human rights instruments—as well as to case studies of violation and fulfillment of rights—and social activism to expand human rights for marginalized groups occurred within the larger school climate in which rights discourses were in the air.

Newcomer Youth Responses to Human Rights Education

“Can’t We Form a Human Rights Organization?”: Human Rights Education as Window

Kamana joined the human rights club in October when she heard we were taking a field trip to a local human rights photography exhibit. We had heard of her prior to her joining the club, and some of the club members were her friends, but she made sure to show up on the overcast Friday morning just in time for us to catch the bus and head to the exhibit at a nearby university. Using her perfectly done nails to text on her cell phone while we waited for the bus, Kamana was 19 years old and a senior at the school. Later, while viewing the exhibit, she said she was so curious about “what’s happening to those people” and what it was like for the photographers to take their pictures. After the field trip, she became a regular attendee at the club. The following week, she talked about how the photo of a woman staring into a mass grave in Iraq stayed with her; and she nodded in agreement when other participants also said they were moved by seeing the photos from around the world.

Kamana had migrated from Nepal where her family had been stateless because of border conflicts between Bhutan and Nepal that relegated her family to a refugee camp on the Nepal border. Her home in the United States was multigenerational with seven residents ranging from her grandmother in her 70s to the youngest of her three siblings who was 11. Her parents had little formal schooling (her father studied up until grade 5 in Nepal, and her mother had never attended school), but they encouraged her schooling in the United States. Her father was very active in the Nepali immigrant community, and we had heard that Kamana’s marriage arrangements were being discussed with the relatives of an older Nepali man working in the United States. We hadn’t learned where those discussions went at the time of this writing. She sometimes talked about how friends of hers back in Nepal were already married. When asked about the future, Kamana said that

within the next 10 years she would be a mother, along with her professional goal to be a nurse.

Kamana had been at OIHS since 9th grade. She knew many of her peers and was very social, sometimes speaking a few words of Spanish to some of the Central American students, another day speaking in broken Hindi (a language that shares roots with Nepali) to a male student from Afghanistan (who had spent time in Pakistani refugee camps and spoke some Urdu, which is mutually understandable with Hindi). Another day she dragged a student into the club by his arm (he was smiling all the while) trying to get him to join, but he was more interested in the soccer team that practiced at the same time. Kamana was always grinning, often while doing something mischievous or unexpected. During a team-building exercise where students were to lead a partner whose eyes were shut, Kamana snuck glimpses and still crashed into the other students as a joke, laughing all the while.

In November, we watched excerpts from a film about a nongovernmental organization in India that works with children who live in slums to help them advocate for their rights and that addressed issues such as access to education, child labor, and early marriage. As researchers, we felt that it was a way for students to learn about the fulfillment of rights and social action to ensure them, as opposed to viewing scenes from some of the more traumatic films that solely focus on violence and violation. Kamana was engrossed in the film as we watched excerpts over a few weeks during club meetings, stopping to discuss the content and address any English words from the subtitles that weren't understood. Perhaps because she could make out some of the words being spoken in the film in Hindi and Bengali, or perhaps because some of the realities were similar to what she had seen, Kamana was extremely concerned about the girls in the film. Some were shown getting married in early adolescence or dropping out of school to do heavy labor in an open-air brickyard in the blazing heat. She responded in one group discussion that the issues in the film weren't surprising to her because she'd seen much of this; but she asked, "Why is there so much injustice? Why doesn't the government care? The life of the poor is really hard to live. The government knows these underage children are working so hard [in the brick yard]. Why doesn't the government stop that?" She couldn't understand why the issues weren't being addressed given that human rights were supposed to be for everyone. This was a central tension students often raised in discussions of human rights: If governments know rights are being violated, why couldn't those situations be stopped? Kamana asked, "Can't we form an organization to help them?"

Kamana brought up the idea to form an organization to do something for poor children, women, and victims of violence on several occasions and referred to how we should emulate how Mahatma Gandhi, her hero, fought for human rights. When the devastating earthquake hit Nepal later that spring, there was a drive for supplies and donations that was set up in the library in which Kamana had been involved. Just after the graduation ceremony (she participated but didn't actually receive a diploma because she hadn't passed the state-wide achievement test required to get one's high school diploma), Kamana's family decided to move to a different state—where the lower cost of living would be easier to bear. She planned to attend community college there,³ but she seemed upset at the final club meetings to be leaving the protective school environment and her friends for a new city altogether. In a follow-up email during the summer, she wrote "I'm missing you all!!!"

Through exposure to human rights concepts, Kamana was able to see needs and realities outside of her own experience and sought to understand how she might be of assistance. Kamana's situation hardly resembles one of economic privilege, but her first reaction to hearing and seeing stories of human rights being violated was to seek a way to help. Her relative sense of privilege was also linked to her ongoing contact with relatives back home who still lived in refugee camps and weren't able to migrate and be granted asylum as her family had. The examples of action from the film, in this case by nongovernmental

organizations working in the region she was from, inspired her to want to emulate those actions through creating some avenue to provide relief and support.

The empathic and solidarity-oriented response generated through exposure to human rights issues offered Kamana a window into the realities that existed beyond her and perhaps a framework to analyze situations she had seen both before and after migration but couldn't fully understand. In Sleeter's (2005) metaphor, the window pertains largely to students of one culture being exposed to multicultural literature of a group other than their own to foster greater knowledge and empathy. For Kamana, some of the realities she learned about were similar to her own, but the new dimensions seen through HRE were related to how individuals and organizations could take action in the face of hardship, a window into the process of making human rights guarantees real for marginalized communities. This is not to say that she wasn't already perhaps predisposed to caring about such issues but that HRE served as a way to consider *action* in the face of injustices as opposed to merely observing them whether in Nepal or in the United States in her case. For HRE, the view from the window is not merely a passive observation but rather an active form of witness that draws the viewer towards greater understanding and eventually towards action.

"That's Like My Story": Human Rights Education as Mirror

Zau was a 5th year senior—he was still completing high school requirements and trying to pass the state-wide exam while also enrolled at a local community college.⁴ He was 20 years old when he joined the human rights club at the beginning of the school year. He always wore a slightly oversized baseball hat and went everywhere with another 5th year senior, a young woman from another region of Burma. He lived in a cramped apartment on the other side of town from the school with nine others, including four siblings, two cousins, his uncle, and his parents. Zau's goal was to be an engineer in the future, but his immediate term goal was to pass the state-wide achievement exam so he could be done with high school and get his diploma. In an activity the club members did where they had to envision present and future realities, Zau drew a picture of his heart with a flame coming out of it, with the word "Stress. . .!!" written next to the image.

Prior to migrating to the United States, his family had been undocumented migrants in Malaysia, escaping political violence in Burma. The region he was from had been targeted by the military junta in order to recruit men into forced labor, dispossess people of their land, and cause mass displacement (HRW 2009). The regional Chin language was also being stamped out by enforced instruction in Burmese by the military and political authorities. Zau noted that his family had to pull him out of school after grade 5 because their land was taken by the government and he needed to work to support the family without the sustenance their farmland had previously provided. When he migrated to the United States and came to OIHS, he had been out of school for multiple years. In addition to wanting to be an engineer, Zau said in a written activity that "my goal for the future is to go back to my country to teach my people; to make them equal to the Burmese people who control over us." In one discussion, Zau pulled out a photo on his phone of his home in Burma to show the rest of the group; he kept this photo for easy viewing even though he hadn't been back there since his family fled to Malaysia seven years prior.

Zau talked about how different school in the United States was from his prior experience: he found the teachers friendly (students called their teachers by their first names prefaced with a respectful Ms. or Mr. at OIHS), and he was amazed at how girls and boys could sit together and still focus on school work, because they were strictly separated in schools back in Burma.

At one club meeting, the topic of child soldiers came up while referencing a photograph of a young boy with a gun in Uganda we had seen at the human rights exhibit field trip.

Zau was often quiet; but in discussing the issue, he spoke at length: “It’s good to see that it’s not just us, our country, our families facing human rights problems.” The discussion went on to talk about the various ways that children’s right to education gets interrupted. Zau joined the discussion again. He offered,

That’s like my story. I had to go find gold in the mines when I was 11 years old. We had to dig holes 20 feet down, and then go inside to see if there was gold. It was so quiet when I would go inside there. Because the government had taken our farms over and built things on our land, we had to leave and look for work. The mine owners hire children because we have more energy and we are small so we can go inside the holes and go way down into the mines. Plus, if something falls as we dig, we can move quickly to escape. It was really scary, but I didn’t really have a choice but to do it.

Some of the other Burmese students who had also been out of school during the migration process chimed in to say they worked or saw other children digging roads. Seng said it’s because they don’t have enough food to eat, and they have to find money for their family. She’d seen children as young as six carrying dirt and rocks to help out, while slightly older children do hard labor. She said nobody enforced age limits or work hours either.

When we talked at a later club session about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—a document we came back to from time to time in the club—Zau focused on the right to property. He talked about his own family’s experience when property was confiscated and what ensued in terms of his being pulled out of school, having to work in dangerous conditions in a gold mine, and then the subsequent risky unauthorized migration to Malaysia before receiving asylum in the United States. The language of rights and discussions in the club offered him a mirror to not only see himself in the content of what we discussed, but also to put his trajectory and life experiences in a larger context. Given the school’s focus on students’ quick mastery of English, passing state-wide tests, and meeting other requirements for graduation, there were limited opportunities for students to see their stories specifically reflected in their curriculum, though teachers did their best to do so when possible.

The theme of HRE as mirror was one that came up repeatedly as students could relate to the topics under discussion or images we saw in our club activities. Human rights education offered Zau a chance to see himself in the stories presented as well as realize “it’s not just us” who faced these issues. Like in Sleeter’s (2005) conceptualization, the mirror serves as both a tool for self-reflection as well as an opportunity for seeing one’s story of struggle *in relation to* others and within a larger historical and sociopolitical context. Gazing into the mirror allows new elements to become visible behind and around one’s own image creating a more holistic view of one’s own relational positioning. For the human rights club participants, the connection to a global set of both standards and violations offered Zau a framework for situating his lived experiences and to feel less isolated in the hardships he and his family had faced.

“Now Is the Time to Fight for Human Rights!”: Human Rights Education as Prism

Seng remembers the exact date she migrated to the United States: October 24, 2011. She was 16 then and had already undergone two international migrations. The first was an extremely dangerous migration out of Burma at the age of 12 with just her then-14-year-old sister, because it was too risky for her whole family to go together. In the process that lasted over two weeks, she was separated from her sister for a week and didn’t know whether she would make it across to the meeting point designated by the Burmese version of the *coyote*.⁵ There were reports of people being captured by traffickers who sold them into “slavery” as she reported it—this almost happened to her mother and younger siblings on their way to Malaysia. She told us she was

extremely scared and would start crying if she saw police anywhere on the way: "The only thing I could do was all the time praying." For her four years in Malaysia, Seng worked in a restaurant, cooked all the food for her family along with her sister, and attended, part-time, a refugee school run by the United Nations.

Seng was one of the most active and regular human rights club participants, but she also faced a variety of competing demands on her time: her schoolwork as a senior, studying to pass the state-wide achievement test, and her work after school and weekends at a popular nearby restaurant where her mom worked in the kitchen. She often had to answer her phone if someone from the restaurant called and said they needed her to come earlier than usual if things were busy there. Seng often said she had slept very little, and one day in the spring, she even came to the club meeting despite having pulled an all-nighter to work on her senior project. She often used the word "overwhelmed" when we did check-ins.

One day Seng came to the club meeting and said, "There is something I wanted to bring to the club; I was waiting all week." She proceeded to tell a story about a conflict between a Burmese and a Latino worker at the restaurant where she worked. The Latino man had been saying derogatory things to the Burmese man (things like "You Burmese are no good"); one day, the Burmese man punched the Latino worker in the kitchen. The police had gotten involved and there were many things she wanted to discuss to understand better: Why did six police cars come to the restaurant to resolve a small dispute? Why did the officers speak to the Latino man in Spanish but not ask any of the other workers what happened in either English or their (mostly Asian) languages? Why was the Burmese man fired but not the Latino man? Why were none of the other workers allowed to say what they saw to the police? She was upset by this incident and shared her concerns, asking the human rights club what they thought about it. The owner of the restaurant fired the Burmese man, and he was released from jail after the Latino co-worker dropped the charges. Seng said the Latino man and the Burmese man should have *both* been fired because, according to her, they both did wrong things (making derogatory comments and throwing a punch). She thought it was unfair that one person got to tell their side of the story in his own language and the other didn't.

The conversation moved toward some of the labor rights standards and violations, because this restaurant had also received some press for mistreating their workers. Another club member asked, "Where was the boss at the time of this fight? How come they didn't talk to him?" Seng responded, "He is never at the restaurant. Maybe he comes in once a month." We talked about how sometimes it is in the interest of those in power, whether at a restaurant or in society, to pit groups against each other. Seng talked about how immigrants in the United States often fear each other and critiqued how "we don't have the same rights as citizens."

The following week, Seng was the first person to arrive. Melissa and Amy asked how she felt the discussion went that she brought to the club last week. She said,

I felt good about it because I was keeping it inside. I shared it out and I felt light after. Also, I didn't really know the problem but it was bothering me. Because I'm Burmese, at first I was on the Burmese guy's side. But after we came together and shared, I learned that there could be many things that could cause that problem. We cannot say who is right until we know the whole story from all sides. And sometimes not one person is right; it can be complicated.

Seng was always looking for ways to understand the world around her. She would often bring issues and conversations to the club to try to understand issues that were difficult to make sense of, such as the topic she was assigned for her senior project: abortion. She presented all the sides of the issue in her project and was struggling to figure out what she really thought given all the competing arguments. At the end of the school year, Seng

passed the state-wide achievement test, graduated, and received a scholarship to a four-year state college.

Seng struggled to understand how to apply human rights concepts that we discussed to everyday situations that were messier than the stories of overcoming injustice presented in films like *Selma* (that the club saw on a field trip earlier in the school year). As Kamana and Zau's examples above indicate, some students used rights to see local and global issues in new ways and others felt less isolated because of seeing themselves through HRE; however, for Seng, the gap between rights and realities was perplexing. Sometimes hopeful, sometimes pessimistic, Seng, in talking about her experience in Malaysia noted, "the refugees can get caught by the police even if they have papers. The police are corrupt." She further brought up class analyses like how "rich people have rights, but poor people deserve them too." HRE offered a prism through which she understood human society as complex and not always adherent to the laws and norms she so wanted to be upheld.

In HRE, the prism shed light on unequal forms of citizenship, corruption, as well as how differential access to resources could influence one's experience of human rights despite their supposed universality. As such, the prism offered a more complex and challenging perspective to human rights, where contradictions could be both revealed and negotiated. Many students' understandings of their own migration and current realities were complicated by discussions of and exposure to rights issues. The prism was a common frame by the end of the year for students to interrogate and channel their frustration with unfulfilled rights and the gap between laws and actual realities. "I have a sensitive heart," Seng told us, and she was visibly moved by stories of suffering and injustice. At the end of the year, she wrote, "My rights were destroyed by others, but now is the time to fight for my rights back!" While the prism made human rights issues more multidimensional, it also allowed Seng, and other club members, to see clearly that equal justice was everyone's right: male or female, rich or poor, U.S.-born or immigrant.

Discussion

The school setting for recently arrived immigrant and refugee students had various circulating discourses, with the inculcation of information and values related to human rights and social justice being two of many goals. The school sought to prepare students for post-secondary transitions, professional work, integration into a new society, healing from past traumas, and fostering a pan-immigrant consciousness in the school community and beyond. HRE in this setting matched school discourses—that mostly served as a window for students—but also deepened into sustained discussions and learning in the club that met weekly for two school years. Through the club, participants viewed their past and present in new ways through a window, mirror, and prism. The lines between these sometimes blurred and weren't always easily demarcated; the ethnographic accounts of Kamana, Zau, and Seng, however, offer representative data from three participants on how they integrated human rights learnings with their way of making sense of multiple migrations, current realities living on the margins of an urban center, and transnational notions of belonging and citizenship.

While the window and mirror as metaphors have been theorized in scholarship from the field of critical multicultural education (Sleeter 2005), as various educational projects emerge that aim towards rights and social justice, extending the metaphor to include the prism can offer an additional useful frame. While a window allows a view out of or into previously unknown realities or opportunities for action, a mirror can offer new perspectives on elements of one's culture, history, or sociopolitical realities vis-à-vis one's own experiences. Applying and extending the metaphor, the prism refracts light into a spectrum where distinct issues may become clearer or more visible for students, with

deeper understanding and critical analysis ensuing. Through our experience with the human rights club, we argue that the window, mirror, and prism were different, sometimes overlapping, domains in which human rights learning and contextualization occurred for participants; further exploration may yield, in the case of other HRE initiatives, a more sequential progression from window to mirror to prism, albeit perhaps in different order. Whether window, mirror, or prism, HRE and other social justice-oriented educational projects can offer youth new ways of seeing and reading the world—and their place in it (Freire 1970).

Through this study, we found that institutional spaces for newcomer youth to reflect on their past and present realities and dislocations provided an opportunity for new analyses and understandings. While many studies on newcomer youth have emphasized the important roles of schools in fostering a sense of belonging (Hopkins et al. 2013; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2009), our study also found that, in addition, students benefitted from concepts and tools that could offer them the opportunity to analyze and reflect on migration experiences, social inequalities, and rights abuses both back in their home country and in the United States. Many of the youth in the human rights club were very young at the time of their first migrations and underwent dangerous journeys to escape political repression. They lacked the information (many parents did not want to talk about what the larger circumstances were) to make sense of what they were experiencing. Upon arrival in the United States, these youth were thrown into a high-stakes educational environment where teachers' linguistic and cultural competency rarely matched these students from countries in South and Southeast Asia. By being exposed to frameworks for situating their migration in larger historical, political, and economic realities (as well as the conditions of their new neighborhoods), participants developed a "critical human rights consciousness" (Meintjes 1997). Social location and analyses of power were central to understanding how newcomer youth made meaning of HRE (Bajaj 2012).

The chance to share and be heard in a small group setting and build trust over the school year offered participants camaraderie as a group as well. Despite knowing most students given its small size, most youth at Oakland International High School tended to socialize by ethnic/national group. At the end of the school year, when one of the human rights club members got a competitive summer internship, a student from a different background said, "Congratulations my brother!" After-school programs offer a space where there weren't grades or teachers who were evaluating student performance and this allowed for some easing of the anxiety that many of the youth faced, as other studies have also shown (Lee and Hawkins 2008).

Although the space of a public high school seeking to serve the distinct needs of newly arrived immigrants and refugees had many dimensions tailored to the student population, it was still impacted by neoliberal educational policies demanding accountability through high-stakes testing, which required youth to quickly learn to negotiate both a new country and a new system of schooling not designed for students like them. It was no wonder students often felt "overwhelmed," as Seng often noted, and "stressed!" as Zau drew on his silhouette during a club activity. The human rights club did not resolve these tensions nor necessarily help students in directly meeting their academic requirements; what youth did say was that it offered them a space to reflect, lighten their load, and understand a bit better the complex realities surrounding their lives. Educational researchers and policymakers can learn from the narratives and counter-stories of youth to the imposition of high-stakes policies, as well as from their experiences navigating schools and post-secondary transitions as newcomers to the United States. Additionally, educational approaches that offer youth a view into their own and others' lived realities—near and far—can offer useful tools for more critical and engaged global citizenship.

Concluding Thoughts

HRE as a field has much to draw from rich traditions of ethnographic study of human rights broadly as well as from sustained and longitudinal engagement with school communities through research partnerships; further, studies in the field of anthropology of education can inform how immigrant youth and families engage with schooling in the United States (e.g., Dyrness 2011; Ngo 2010; Olsen 2008). This project, like others in the field of anthropology of education, utilized “action ethnography” (Erickson 2006) by providing a club and other educational experiences (e.g., field trips) that did not dictate perspectives to students but that opened spaces for critical thinking and reflection.

Recent qualitative studies have shown how HRE produces unintended consequences and sometimes goes awry (Bellino 2014; Mejias 2013; Wahl 2013); further ethnographic studies can engage with HREal efforts in their various dimensions as well as explore the possibility of expanding HRE as a method, as in this study, to generate responses related to the multiple ways in which rights and notions of citizenship are understood. In this study, while the window, mirror, and prism metaphor emerged as domains in which human rights were internalized by youth participants, other domains of learning and meaning making should be explored and theorized among other HRE efforts in different settings.

An ethnography of HRE—in this case, in a school for immigrant and refugee youth—focused our gaze on the affective and potentially transformative dimensions of learning, the role of such learning in self-making processes amid migration, and how global concepts are understood and integrated through students’ own experiences. Anthropologist Sally Engle Merry’s (2006) work on the interplay between local actors and international norms in the creation of human rights vernaculars across the globe—though not in the field of education—lends insights into how teachers and students of human rights can become “translators” of rights locally (see also Bajaj 2012). Ethnographic studies of human rights vernaculars and how participants make sense of them in school contexts have not by and large been engaged by the field of anthropology of education. As HRE increasingly becomes part of school systems across the globe, and as the worldwide flow of immigrants and refugees increases, further attention is needed on how youth—some of whom like those in this study have fled rights abuses in their home countries—understand and respond in complex ways to such educational projects that seek to advance notions of social justice and equity.

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Notes

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1. We deliberately use Burma instead of Myanmar in the text, because the military junta changed the name of the country to the latter and has a record of repression. Human rights groups have consistently used Burma instead.

2. The school's real name is used; however, all respondents have been assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

3. Many community colleges and state universities do not require a high school diploma for enrollment. Students are instead required to take placement tests and can enroll in classes after that (Arenson 2006).

4. In the summer between the first and second year of our research study, the state-wide high school exit examination was put on hold by the governor of California. The practice of having 5th and 6th year seniors returning to the high school to prepare for exams was discontinued indefinitely, but it was a prominent feature of the school in the first year of our study that we present data from in this article.

5. A *coyote* is someone who helps guide unauthorized immigrants into the United States across the border with Mexico (originating sometimes in other countries).

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