

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Teaching Human Rights from Below: Towards Solidarity, Resistance and Social Justice

by Melissa Canlas, Amy Argenal, and Monisha Bajaj



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS

## Introduction

The call for human rights education (HRE) in schools is growing, but there remains a large gap in empirical research around HRE, particularly in the United States. There is an additional need for increased research focusing on human rights curricula and pedagogies that serve low-income students of color, and immigrants and refugees in the United States. In this article, we discuss our curricular and pedagogical strategies and student responses to lesson plans and activities that build solidarity, resistance to dominant and assimilative narratives, and promote social justice for a high school human rights club that serves immigrant and refugee youth. We are a professor (Monisha Bajaj) and two doctoral students (Amy Argenal and Melissa Canlas), who are involved in research collaboration with a public high school in a large urban area on the west coast of the United States. Our approach focuses on combining a transformative human rights perspective with the praxes of critical pedagogies and social justice with three key themes: student-centered human rights pedagogy, cultural wealth and HRE, and students' turning human rights language into action.

## Conceptualizing a Human Rights from Below

*Human rights cultures have long been in the making by the praxis of victims of violations, regardless of the mode of formulation of human rights standards and instruments. The single most critical source of human rights is the consciousness of peoples of the world who have waged the most persistent struggles for decolonization and self-determination, against racial discrimination, gender-based aggression and discrimination, denial of access to basic minimum needs, environmental degradation and destruction .... Clearly, Human Rights Education (HRE) must begin by a commissioning of a world history of people's struggles for rights and against injustice and tyranny (Baxi, 1997, 142).*

Human rights offers a language that speaks to the basic dignity inherent in all human beings. Human rights education may take the form of the dissemination of knowledge around international conventions and treaties, the analysis of how nation states interact with the United Nations, and the examination of the intersections of human rights with social change movements. Because HRE in the United States primarily exists in law schools, there has been a legal focus—understanding international law and how it can be utilized. This is a technocratic understanding of human rights and affirms HRE scholar Andre Keet's critique of normative HRE as being overly "declarationist" (2007). Legal scholar Marie-Benedicte Dembour (2010) identifies four "schools" of human rights scholarship (natural, deliberative, protesting, and discursive); the struggle to close the gap between rights on paper and realities on the ground characterizes the "protest" school

where we place our HRE work with scholars such as Upendra Baxi quoted above.

Agreeing with scholars who call for "critical" (Keet, 2007) and "transformative" HRE (Bajaj, 2012; Mackie, 2009; Tibbitts, 2005), we approach human rights education "from below" acknowledging the radical legacies of human rights movements that struggled against racism, xenophobia, oppressive regimes, and colonialism. For example, in the United States, American human rights history brings to light the use of human rights language in framing racial justice by such civil rights activists as Ella Baker and Malcolm X, and W.E.B. DuBois' and Paul Robeson's petition to the United Nations to investigate the widespread lynching of African Americans as a form of genocide (Anderson, 2003). Human rights offers a way to build solidarity to fight against repressive regimes and oppressive systems. Although HRE has been diluted or non-existent in education in the United States, there exists a radical history of activism and movement building using human rights language that educators can draw upon (Grant and Gibson, 2013).

***Our approach focuses on combining a transformative human rights perspective with the praxes of critical pedagogies and social justice with three key themes: student-centered human rights pedagogy, cultural wealth and HRE, and students' turning human rights language into action.***

Human rights education from below describes how marginalized communities have used human rights in their liberation struggles and offers a way to teach about human rights utilizing participatory and community-based methods. In this approach, human rights offers a shared language of resistance and solidarity that allows groups across borders to engage in similar struggles—with differing methods and contextual conditions—in the name of equal rights and social justice. Through human rights education grounded in critical analyses of power and unequal social conditions, students are able to engage with injustices and examine how individuals, groups, and larger movements have used human rights frameworks to reclaim dignity, expand rights, and develop solidarity as forms of critical resistance both locally and globally.

In 2014 our research team launched a Human Rights Club of five to ten students meeting weekly for 1 ½ hour sessions in a high school for newcomer refugee and immigration youth. The club met over 30 times during the school year and took five field trips where students delved further into human rights issues. We developed interactive lessons related to human rights and prioritized students' experiences in the club's content, structure, and practice. Our curriculum was flexible and was revised to respond to students' interests and concerns. The research team also participated in school events as part of an ongoing collaboration rooted in the principles of community-

engaged scholarship (Giles, 2008). As educators, we incorporated into our practice community building, self-reflection (for students and educators), critical dialogue, and “reading the world” (Freire, 1970), which meant examining the social, economic, and political conditions that shaped the experiences of students and their communities. We also encouraged students to articulate their understandings of a rights-based language that were relevant to them and their transnational communities.

## Positionality and Relationship to the

This statement of the African-American Policy Forum, co-founded by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, theorizes intersectional analyses of power and social inequality and offers a concise statement of how we view our multiple identities and commitments in relation to human rights and racial justice. We are women of color, each with over ten years of experience teaching and working with immigrant, refugee, or international populations, and share a commitment to a radical and inclusive politics of human rights reflected in our educational, organizing, and scholarly work. Each of us is the child or grandchild of immigrants to the United States and has family stories of rights violations and discrimination both in our countries of



## Research

*We want a loving community across difference. . . . We commit to a vibrant, inclusive, and intersectional social justice movement that condemns racist patriarchy and works to end its daily brutality and injustice. Anything less is unacceptable.*

(excerpt from African-American Policy Forum Statement on the Charleston massacre, 2015)

origin (the Philippines, Nicaragua, and India respectively) as well as in the United States. This is significant because in the United States most educators in public education do not reflect the identities of their students. In 2011, 82 percent of teachers in public schools were white ([www.nces.ed.gov](http://www.nces.ed.gov)) even though students of color are the largest growing demographic in public schools, especially in large urban areas. The three teachers had shared experiences with the participants of the club: one of us came from the same country as one of the participants, another had spent time in the countries of origin of our students, and the third shared connections to the students’



exploration and self-expression, central to both trust building and ensuring for us that the curriculum was reflecting the students' lives. We then introduced visual and artistic activities that allowed students to express themselves creatively and offered an accessible avenue of expression for students who struggled with written English.

One of the first artistic activities conducted with the group was entitled "I am a tree." Students and teachers each drew a tree to represent themselves and to illustrate their roots, strengths, hobbies, and family histories. We then all shared our trees. This activity stressed the importance of each participant's unique experience.

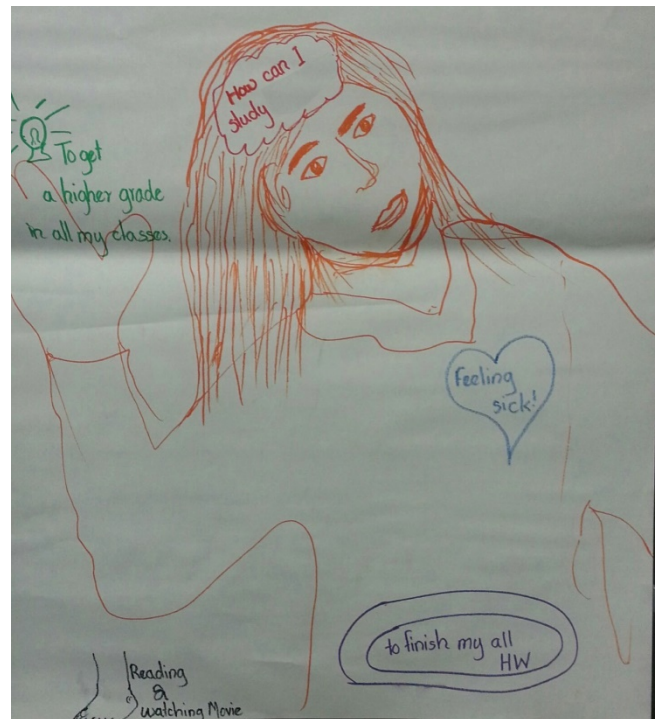
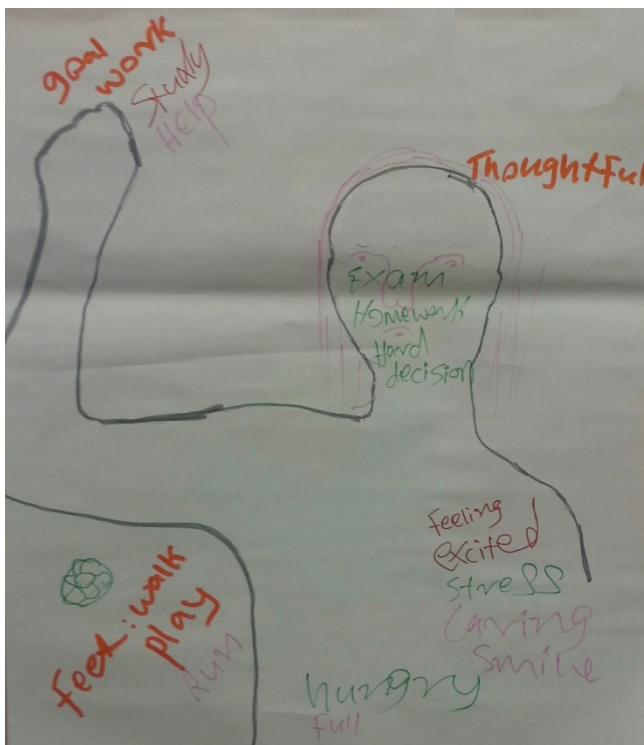
In a similar follow-up activity students drew silhouettes of their bodies on large pieces of paper. They were asked to put in their silhouettes information about themselves in a designated space on the drawing: the head was to be represented by a thought, the heart by a feeling, the hands by a goal or aspiration, the stomach by a need, and the feet by an activity that they enjoy doing. Then each member of the club had a partner trace his/her silhouette on a large piece of paper, complete the statements on each corresponding body part, and decorate their silhouettes. Upon completion, the entire group placed their silhouettes around the room, and took turns reading them and physically standing in each other's silhouette.



We selected these two activities with the goal of putting the students' lived experiences at the center of the weekly activities. By beginning with the students and their histories, we were able to design future activities around their experiences, such as creating collages related to rights fulfillment and violation, and life maps. These activities revealed several common threads among the students: the importance of family, friends, community, and education. Common stresses among students included responsibilities to family and work (nearly all of the students worked nights and weekends), academic performance, and passing the state-sponsored

high school exit exam. As the year progressed, students became more open to sharing other aspects of their experiences, which determined and shifted our conversations and activities in the club.

These activities allowed for students to begin practicing "heart" thinking, the human development skills of empathy and understanding. At the core of human rights is the recognition of the dignity and worth in each human being, and the core of critical pedagogy is the humanization and valuing of our students. As educators, we were sensitive to the realities of trauma that our refugee and immigrant students had experienced so we offered opportunities for students to speak from their own experience through art and dialogue. As students felt more comfortable, they spoke of the traumas of the

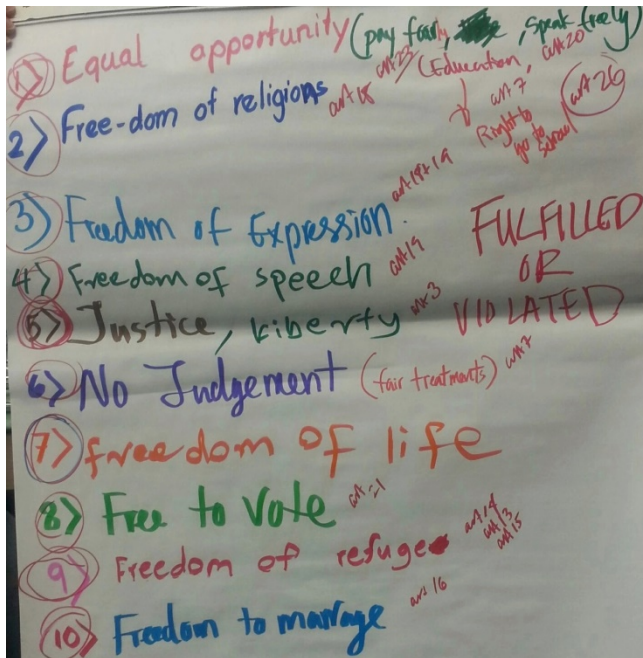


migration process, which included family separation, scarcity of food and resources, forced labor, barely escaping traffickers, interruption of their schooling, experiencing or knowing of others experiencing sexual violence, and the necessity to work to support their families both prior to and after migrating. Their stories allowed club members to engage more deeply with one another and with human rights themes.

## “That’s like what happened to me”: Making Human Rights Education Relevant

During the club sessions we looked for images and videos as tools for discussion. Because the students in the club were English Language Learners, the use of images was helpful in engaging students in discussion and allowing students to literally “see” people like themselves in the curriculum.

One of the early activities we organized was a field trip to visit a human rights photography project at a local university campus. Prior to the field trip, we asked



students to write their own rights document, listing ten rights they believed that all human beings should have. We introduced the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and dialogued with students about which of the rights the students identified were or were not represented in the UDHR, and what it means for rights to be fulfilled or violated. This dialogue provided an introduction to human rights language that we practiced while viewing the photography exhibit.

The photography exhibit focused on images about human rights from around the world. Many of the photographs represented the countries of origin of the students. The experience of viewing the photographs was deeply moving to the students. The organizers of the exhibit selected photographs that demonstrated not only violations of human rights but also examples of human

dignity. Students were especially engaged in the photos that represented their home countries. Zau (not his real name) pulled out his mobile phone during the tour to share a photograph from Burma, his home country that was similar to a photo in the exhibit. Students began to ask questions about the issues represented in the photographs. For example, when viewing an image of a child miner in Bolivia and another image of a conscripted soldier in Uganda, one student asked, “Are children forced to do this?”

After the tour, we talked with the students about their reactions. The photographs caused students to connect emotionally and to share their own experiences as refugees in the United States. The prevalence of child labor in the photographs and in the students’ experiences was a concern. Commenting on the photo of the child soldier in Uganda, Seng, a 19-year-old Burmese student, said that there were many child soldiers in her country who were forced to fight. Another student spoke of the common practice of children being hired to work on road projects in her home country, where children as young as six years old worked to dig and carry dirt. Students who were too young to do these tasks contributed by picking up rocks. Zau spoke of his experience as a child laborer, working in mines to scout for gold. At the age of twelve, he worked in mines that were prone to collapse. He worked with a rope tied around his waist so that he could be pulled out quickly if necessary. He said that children were often selected for this work for their size and speed. These personal stories became both an opportunity to engage meaningfully with human rights issues (e.g. the right to work, children’s rights) and to honor the “cultural wealth”—in this case the lived experiences—of students and their communities. The students’ reflections revealed deep reserves of courage and strength that might not be acknowledged or shared in more traditional classrooms, especially when the focus is on graduation requirements and preparing for state exams.

The students expressed sadness, some crying discreetly while viewing the photographs, but they also found them inspiring. The students answered unanimously that seeing the photographs was a meaningful experience. Two students said that seeing the photos made them want to become photojournalists so that they could tell stories and help people. Another student stated that the photographs offered an engaging way to learn about other places and people, and that the photos made him more interested in learning history. A fourth student shared that visual storytelling helped him to understand that the experiences of both struggle and resistance were shared by people around the world: “It’s not just us, our country, families [who experience hardship]. We can see it’s not us alone.”

In addition to the photographs, we viewed several films that documented both human rights abuses and human rights organizing and activism. We chose documentaries in which students could see similarities to their own families and experiences, such as the documentary *Revolutionary Optimists* (Grainger- Mosen, M. & Newnham, N. 2013) that documents how youth in India have worked on various community projects through an understanding of children’s rights. During the film we

would pause to discuss vocabulary and issues that came up during the film such as “What is a slum?”; “What is going on in this situation?”; and “What issues are being addressed?” We concluded each section of the film with journaling and dialogue.

Students remarked on similarities of their experiences to the film. For example, the film shows youth working to make clay bricks in India, and focuses on a young girl who supports her family by making bricking but aspires to continue her education. While some students remarked that they had never seen bricks made in this way before, one student said that her mother worked making bricks in a similar outdoor brickyard. The same student shared that, like many of the women in the film, the women in her neighborhood in Western Burma were responsible for carrying water from the wells because they lacked running water.

Students also made connections to the structural issues that caused the poverty and human rights violations faced by the youth in the film. They asked, “Why is there so much injustice? Why doesn’t the government care? Why don’t they do something?” The film also spurred conversation on the rights of children, issues of gender, access to education, and, ultimately, on the agency and power of youth to organize for their communities. Students remarked upon the youth in the film who organized for better access to water and health care in their neighborhoods. One student stated that she was inspired by the youth activism and how they helped to make their neighborhood better “even though they’re just kids.” She stated, “If I were them, I’d think, maybe this is an adult’s job,” but the film offered examples of youths making change for themselves.

Upon the completion of watching the film, Kamana from Nepal asked, “Can our club start a club like [the youth organizers] in the film?” This speaks to the transformative role that HRE can play (Bajaj, 2011), particularly when students see youth like themselves represented as agents of change.

We complemented films about international human rights issues with films about poverty, rights, and organizing within the United States. The documentary film “The Oak Park Story” documents the stories of tenants in a low-income area of California and their multi-racial and multi-ethnic coalition to organize for adequate housing. The tenants of Oak Park Apartments were primarily Latina/o and South East Asian immigrants and refugees who organized together for over ten years to hold their landlord accountable for the horrific conditions of their rental units. Students were shocked to see images of the living conditions of the tenants in the film: units with collapsing ceilings; walls coated with black mold; cockroaches and vermin sharing living space with infants, children, and elders. Students expressed shock that these living conditions existed in the United States. One student stated that the living conditions from the film were worse than the conditions in the refugee camp where she and her family had lived.

Although the documentary does not explicitly frame these issues within a human rights framework, students applied the rights language they had learned and were able to view the example of a diverse group of tenants working in solidarity to achieve an adequate standard of living. In the discussion that followed, students related what they saw to their own lives; for example, Ligaya, a 19-year-old senior who had emigrated from the Philippines, said, “That was like my situation last year in the apartment where we live. The bathrooms were so clogged and the landlord didn’t do anything about it. It smelled so bad. I had to go to my aunt’s house to shower.” The discussion moved on to why individuals are afraid to speak up, and Mireh, who is 16 and from Burma, offered, “People are scared to go to the police because of their immigration status.” Mangita, who is 19 years old and from Nepal, said that the tenants, as bad as the living conditions were, were afraid they might get kicked out of the apartment and have nowhere else to go.

The discussion ended with focusing in the film on the solidarity between the Latino/a and Southeast Asian tenants organizing together for decent living conditions. Students discussed tensions in their own neighborhoods between ethnic groups, as well as in school, and the necessity for solidarity. “Something that inspired me about this story,” Seng said, “is that if the Latino and the Cambodian tenants stayed separate, if they didn’t come together, there would be no achievement. They came together to fight for something bigger and they accomplished that.” Zau concluded, “If you want to make change, you have to talk to other people even if they are different from you.”

## “We all have the same rights”: Solidarity and Human Rights in Action

As the year progressed, students demonstrated an increased desire to move beyond discussions and engage in human rights actions. The club participated in a school-sponsored May Day march in support of migration as a human right. The solidarity demonstrated was significant



since most of the students in the human rights club had

legal status in the United States through political asylum, as opposed to the majority of the students in the school who were Latino/a and undocumented. They chose to march in solidarity with the undocumented students and community members who are at risk for deportation, incarceration, and separation from family. One of the many student-led chants asserted:

*"Who are we? Immigrants!*

*What do we want? Rights!*

*When do we want them? Right now!"*

A group of Burmese students, including some from the Human Rights Club, held signs asserting that no human being is "illegal" and were active in leading the march through the neighborhood. Earlier in the year, Ms. Denise, a teacher at the school, had mentioned that some of the refugee students were asking many of the undocumented and some youth who came as unaccompanied minors why they would take such a risk without knowing if they could stay in the United States. Pan-immigrant solidarity was emphasized and the universality of human rights discussed by the Human Rights Club led to more understanding, empathy, and collective action as demonstrated in the march.

At the school's International Spring Festival, some of the youth decided to sing the song "Glory" from the movie *Selma* that 65 students, including the Human Rights Club, had seen on a field trip. The students wore t-shirts that read "Black Lives Matter"; the participating students were from the Congo, El Salvador, Honduras, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Philippines. Given the fact that there were no native-born African-American students because of the newcomer school's focus on recently arrived immigrants and given the fact of the inter-ethnic tensions in the low-income communities the students lived in, the articulation of a politics of solidarity—sometimes not practiced given the messiness of everyday life in multi-racial and unequal urban communities—was a notable demonstration of students' developing a commitment to equal rights and social justice.

## Concluding Thoughts

Students' increased engagement with human rights and social justice issues became more apparent as the year progressed, and students began to arrive at club meetings eager to discuss issues that arose in their lives or in other classes. A closing activity for the club asked students to create a group mural that represented three things: "something I learned, something that touched my heart, and something I want to do next." The format for this group mural echoed the "head, heart, and hands" structure of the group silhouette activity previously described. Students' responses demonstrated that they had internalized not only that they had human rights but also that they needed to defend these rights for themselves and

others. One student wrote: "I had got destroy[ed] all my rights by other[s], but now is the time for me to fight for my rights back." Another wrote, "I want the world to know what we now know about Human Rights."

There are several components that we believe are central to a "human rights education from below" that distinguish it from only teaching about conventions and international norms. First, students—whether operating from social locations of privilege or marginalization—must be able to feel human in the learning process. Through identifying their personal relationships to ideas of rights, dignity, and empathy, students can explore how their rights and those of others have been fulfilled or violated.

Second, for all students but especially for those who occupy the margins, it is important that they see themselves in the curriculum and see examples of people from their backgrounds as agents of individual or collective change. Honoring what students and their communities have done and have brought to the global terrain of human rights is important in countering some of the "white savior complex" that pervades the field of international human rights in industrialized countries (Cole, 2012). Human rights work in the Global South—where all our students hailed from—is a much more diverse and engaged endeavor and these were the perspectives we privileged in order to have students "see" themselves in the curriculum, in the films, and in the examples they were exposed to.

Third, our experience with a Human Rights Club stresses the relational dimension of teaching about human rights. Creating reciprocal bonds with students as well as with the institutional setting can create a context in which discussions can go deeper. Human rights education has been critiqued for being introduced in a superficial manner by adjusting textbook content or adding an exam question here or there; transformative human rights education requires creating a pedagogical space for authentic conversations that traverse the personal and political, engaging students in meaningful discussions about their histories and their lives.

Lastly, human rights activism—and arguably education based on and rooted in it—has a long history in the United States (Grant & Gibson, 2013). As social service providers seek to integrate newly arrived youth and their families into life in the United States, educators have a role to play in initiating students into a legacy of critical and engaged participation in their new society. Learning about the role of civic actors working towards change allows students to see themselves as part of a global and local community working towards the larger social good. Rather than dislocation and alienation, human rights education offers youth who have already seen many examples of human rights violations the chance to embody a critical global citizenship where their belonging and identity is affirmed, and their commitment to solidarity and justice is nurtured.



## References

- African American Policy Forum. (2015). The Charleston Imperative: Why Feminism & Antiracism Must Be Linked. Accessed 13 July 2015 at <http://www.aapf.org/recent/2015/7/charleston>.
- Anderson, Carol. (2003). *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bajaj, M. (2011). "Human Rights Education: Ideology, Location, and Approaches." *Human Rights Quarterly*, 33, 481-508.
- Bajaj, M. (2012). *Schooling for Social Change the Rise and Impact of Human Rights Education in India*. New York & London: Continuum/Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Baxi, Upendra. (1997). "Human Rights Education: The Promise of the Third Millennium?" In G. J. Andreopoulos & R. P. Claude (Eds.), *Human rights education for the twenty-first century* (pp. 142-154). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Cole, T. (2012). The White Savior Industrial Complex. *The Atlantic*, accessed 13 July 2015 at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.
- Dembour, Marie-Benedicte. (2010). "What are Human Rights? Four Schools of Thought." *Human Rights Quarterly*, 32, 1-20.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Giles, D.E. (2008). "Understanding an Emerging Field of Scholarship: Toward a Research Agenda for Engaged, Public Scholarship." *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 12(2), 97-106.
- Grainger- Mosen, M. & Newnham, N. (2013) *The revolutionary optimists* [Documentary on DVD].
- Grant, C., & Gibson, M. (2013). "'The path of social justice': A Human Rights History of Social Justice Education." *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 81-99.
- Keet, André. "Human rights education or human rights in education: A conceptual analysis." PhD dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2007.
- Mackie, Gerry, & LeJeune, John. (2009). "Social Dynamics of Abandonment of Harmful Practices: A New Look At the Theory." *Special Series on Social Norms and Harmful Practices* Retrieved July 13, 2015, from [http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/iwp\\_2009\\_06.pdf](http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/iwp_2009_06.pdf).
- National Center for education statistics. (n.d.). Education Statistics. Accessed 13 July 2015 at [www.nces.ed.gov](http://www.nces.ed.gov).
- Tibbitts, Felisa. (2005). "Transformative learning and human rights education: taking a closer look." *Intercultural Education*, 16(2), 107-113.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). "Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth." *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, 8(1), 69-91.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.dscribe.com/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).