

2018

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Recommended Citation

Bajaj, Monisha. (2018) . "Conceptualizing Transformative Agency in Education for Peace, Human Rights, and Social Justice," *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, 2(1) .

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Conceptualizing Transformative Agency in Education for Peace, Human Rights, and Social Justice

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Abstract

The concept of “agency” lies at the core of many liberatory forms of education that draw from Paulo Freire’s theories of education raising learners’ critical consciousness and equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and networks to act for positive social change (Freire, 1970). The term agency is

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¹ This article builds off previous published work, namely this article: Bajaj, M. (2009). 'I have big things planned for my future': The limits and possibilities of transformative agency in Zambian schools. *Compare*, 39(4), 551–568.

I would like to also acknowledge the support of the Rockefeller Bellagio Center where many of the ideas for this article were developed during my time there as a fellow in the Youth as Agents of Transformative Change thematic residency program in 2017.

utilized widely across disciplines to refer to a variety of behaviors and actions. This article explores the concept of transformative agency, which lies at the center of educational projects, namely: peace education, human rights education, critical ethnic studies, and social justice education. These educational interventions have often been fought for and won through walkouts, massive student mobilizations (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), and/or social movements exerting pressure on educational policymakers in distinct contexts (Bajaj, 2012). This article situates transformative agency within its larger theoretical and conceptual dimensions in order to offer scholars and practitioners important insights for their engaged work. The sections that follow offer an overview of discussions of agency in relevant scholarship and then posit a conceptual model for transformative agency in the fields of peace, human rights, and social justice education.

Agency & Resistance in Educational Research

Notions of student agency are central in resistance theories, which emerged from the theoretical propositions put forth in the 1970s onward through educational studies suggesting the multiplicity of ways in which students, teachers, parents, and communities can contest the process of social reproduction through schooling (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Foley, 1991; MacLeod, 1995; Weis, 1996; Willis, 1977). These theories countered the highly deterministic nature of reproduction theories that posited that socioeconomic class is reproduced generation after generation through public schooling (Althusser, 1979; Anyon, 1980; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Sociological studies of student resistance in public schools in Europe and North America largely equated agency with opposition to dominant cultural discourses and practices that often resulted in “self-damnation” (Willis, 1977, p. 3) or “self-defeating resistance that helps to recreate the oppressive conditions from which it originated” (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 310). Recognizing the existence of agency in marginal urban U.S. communities, O’Connor (1997) argues that these ethnographies of student opposition acknowledge only a “partial” resistance because “these same resisters

willingly accommodate other aspects of the dominant discourse and become active participants in their own subordination” (1997, p. 601). In his work on educated and unemployed young men in India, anthropologist Craig Jeffrey (2012) discusses “negative agency,” or “instances in which children and youth reproduce and deepen dominant structures of power” (p. 245) through their actions. Building on these various conceptualizations, it is important to note that domination does not always result in opposition, that not all oppositional behavior is a form of resistance, and that not all forms of resistance are socially deviant (Bajaj, 2009). Jeffrey (2012) notes that “young people’s social practices [can be] simultaneously progressive and reactionary” (p. 250). Agency is complex, and is a core component of resistance, with the two terms often used interchangeably.

In educational research, two groupings of resistance emerge through ethnographies of schooling and examinations of social inequalities in education: (1) oppositional resistance, and (2) transformative/strategic resistance (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Giroux, 1996 & 1997; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Willis, 1977). Scholars have asserted that individual consciousness and community resistance through collective action have some role to play in transforming schools from serving only the dominant class to serving the interests of other sectors in society as well (Apple, 1982; Foley, 1991; Freire, 1970; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Noguera & Cannella, 2006). Through the cultivation of an individual and collective consciousness based on a critique of social inequalities, belief in one’s present or future agency may ensue. Departing from traditional resistance theorists who see agency primarily as opposition (Willis, 1977; MacLeod, 1995), critical theorists Aronowitz and Giroux assert that “the concept of resistance must have a revealing function that contains a critique of domination and provides theoretical opportunities for self-reflection and struggle in the interest of social and self-emancipation” (1993, p. 105). Further, Solorzano & Delgado Bernal define “transformational resistance” in contrast to oppositional or conformist forms of resistance examining the collective action of Chicana students in Southern California as “political, collective, conscious, and motivated by a sense that individual and social change is possible” (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 320). Scholars Tracy

Robinson and Janie Ward (1991) in their work with adolescent African American youth refer to such collective consciousness raising and subsequent actions as “resistance for liberation.” Freire (1970) argued that education must heighten students’ critical consciousness as they come to analyze their place in an unequal world, and that resultant from this elevated critical consciousness is a transformative sense of agency that can lead to individual and social change (Bajaj, 2009; Noguera, Cammarota & Ginwright, 2006; Giroux, 1997; Noguera, 2003).

While scholars such as Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) examine how transformative resistance fuels student movements for educational justice, many of the participants decades-later in programs that were fought for and won experience an alternative educational space designed to cultivate their transformative agency to carry on legacies of struggle and social justice work. Transformative agency can be fostered among students in various settings and more recent empirical research in the United States and globally has identified such agency-enabling factors as participation in activist-oriented afterschool programs (Bajaj, 2009 & 2012; Kwon, 2006), knowledge of and personal contact with those engaged in collective struggle (O’Connor, 1997) and deliberate efforts to foster agency through school discourses and practices (Bajaj, 2009, 2012; Miron & Lauria, 1998; Shah, 2016).

Liberatory Education

Conceptualizations of agency with regards to children and youth exist across a variety of fields and disciplines. Given the inter-disciplinary nature of education for peace, human rights, and social justice, it is useful to examine the dimensions and insights from different paradigms and perspectives. While there are many forms of liberatory education, this article focuses on three distinct traditions that each emerged in their own contexts with different approaches, models, and orientations. Such programs can be school-based, such as the Humanities Prep School in New York discussed by Hantzopoulos (2016); afterschool or co-curricular, such as the organizations [Global Kids](#) and [Brotherhood/Sister Sol](#) (Wilcox et al.,

2004); community-based, such as the [Radical Monarchs](#); and/or through summer camps and programs, such as [Seeds of Peace](#), [Bay Area Solidarity Summer](#) and [Camp Akili](#).

Peace education responds to various forms of conflict and violence (direct, structural and cultural) and creates new forms of educational praxis in social contexts across the globe (Galtung, 1969). For the most part, the field emerged after World War I and II as educators sought to prevent future wars by teaching for peace (the work of Maria Montessori being a notable example). More recent scholarship on critical peace education lends towards a more activist approach that interrogates power relations, structural forms of oppression and the importance of learners' agency (Bajaj & Brantmeier, 2011; Bajaj, 2015; Bajaj & Hantzopoulos, 2016).

Human Rights Education (HRE) emerged as a global field of practice after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 in the aftermath of the devastating second World War that claimed the lives of more than 60 million people. Article 26 of the UDHR established not only a right to an education for all children, but an education directed towards “the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

Despite its initial mention in the 1948 UDHR, human rights education as a global movement only gained considerable momentum after the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s as the United Nations took up the cause of promoting HRE and social movements incorporated global human rights frameworks into their local struggles more. Today, HRE exists in classrooms and non-formal learning spaces worldwide. More recent scholarship on transformative human rights education focuses more on learners' experiences and agency within HRE efforts (Bajaj et al., 2016).

Social justice education has a long tradition and has been conceptualized by scholars Lee Anne Bell & Maurianne Adams in their important book *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* first published in 1997. They define social justice education as “an interdisciplinary conceptual framework for analyzing multiple forms of oppression and their

intersections, as well as a set of interactive, experiential pedagogical principles, and methods/practices” (p. 2). They further add that:

The goal of social justice education is to enable individuals to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand the structural features of oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems. Social justice education aims to help participants develop awareness, knowledge, and processes to examine issues of justice/injustice in their personal lives, communities, institutions, and the broader society. It also aims to connect analysis to action; to help participants develop a sense of agency and commitment, as well as skills and tools, for working with others to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part. (p. 2)

Bell and Adams recognize the importance of the *process/pedagogy* and *content* of social justice education, similar to peace and human rights education.

Critical ethnic studies, which include examinations of power, race, nation and history, fall under social justice education as a situated form tailored to specific populations. Other forms of social justice education include anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2000) and anti-racist education (Pham & Kohli, 2018), among others.

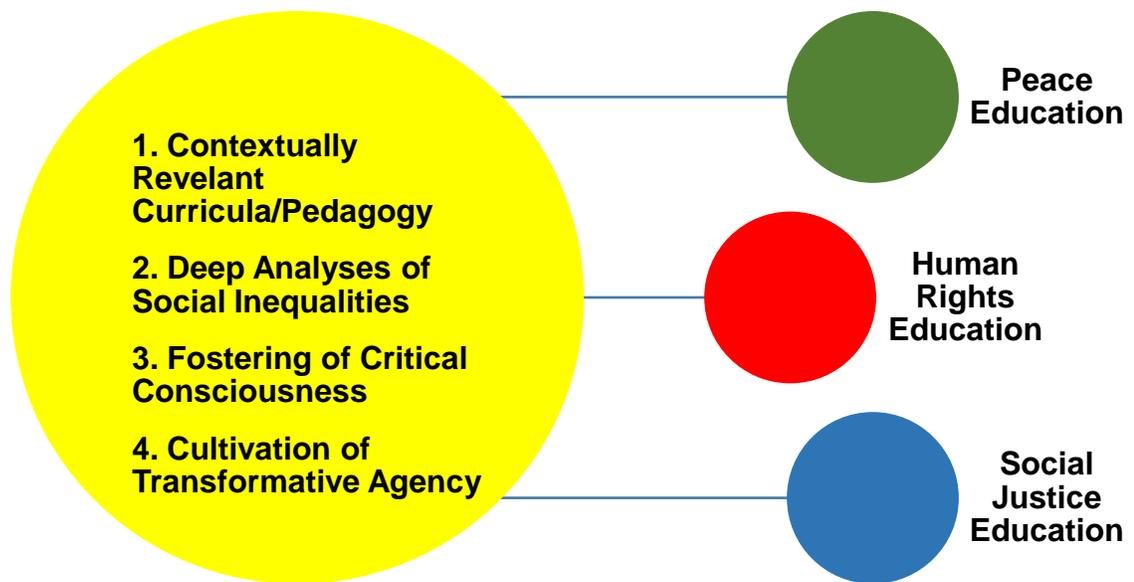


Figure 1: Common Tenets of Liberatory Education

Understanding different forms of liberatory education and how they emerge in distinct contexts is a useful endeavor, but one that is beyond the scope of this article. As Figure 1 demonstrates, each of these educational projects in distinct global locations, share certain common tenets that allow for their grouping under the umbrella of “liberatory education.” Furthermore, despite their key differences, peace education, social justice education and human rights education—in their more critical and engaged forms—coalesce around the goal of fostering transformative agency in students, or the ability to act in the face of structural constraints to advance individual and collective goals related to positive social change (Bajaj, 2009; Bourdieu in Reay, 2004; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Dimensions of Agency in Liberatory Education

This section explores conceptualizations in scholarship from different fields about the dimensions of agency. It also focuses on the

potential pitfalls when seeking to cultivate the transformative agency of marginalized populations (children, youth, and adults) who face barriers—and sometimes, even violent backlash (Bajaj, 2012)—in enacting the lessons learnt in sheltered educational spaces that have alternative norms than those of the larger society. Conceptualizations of agency draw from French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theorizations of structure and agency; Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argued that, through the reproductive mechanisms of schools and other social structures, individual subjectivity is produced that *aligns* with existing relations of power. As a result, students with more “social and cultural capital” are able to reproduce these privileges through schools that value the dispositions, tastes and practices of dominant classes. Through the same process, marginalized students internalize their subordination through the *habitus*, “the set of common sense assumptions and embodied characteristics that are indelibly marked by such social factors as class, race and gender” (Kennelly, 2009, p. 260).

Anthropologists of education have built on Bourdieu’s theories to define agency as the “inherent creativity of the human being given expression through subjectivities that both fashion and are fashioned by the structures they encounter” (Levinson et al., 2011, p. 116). Further, through forms of emancipatory or liberatory education, students can come to question the received wisdom about relations of power and, in turn, interrogate both the content they have learned, and the processes through which marginalization occurs. Critical inquiry and engagement, which are at the core of peace, human rights, and social justice education, are inherently relational and contextual endeavors; and agency, empowerment, and resistance are often espoused as a desired skill, capacity, and outcome for learners.

In conceptualizing transformative agency, I present four dimensions explored in scholarship from various fields to offer a framework. In this model, transformative agency is constituted by (1) Agency that is sustained across contexts and time, (2) Agency that is relational and enacted with others; (3) Agency that attends to the bounded-ness of peoples, histories, cultures, and contexts (Chavez & Griffin, 2009); and (4) Agency that is strategic with regards to analyses of power, long-term consequences, and

appropriate forms of action. Taken together, these dimensions can ultimately better equip learners to interrupt and transform unequal social conditions and, I argue, constitute the four necessary components of “transformative agency.”

Component 1. *Sustained Agency*

Students are participating in an after-school program run by a community organization that explores social issues from a critical perspective. Through interactive pedagogy, critical inquiry and the caring space cultivated by the facilitators, students develop a social action project to intervene in a local injustice. They come back to the space to reflect and plan further actions. Their collective agency has been fostered in a process that Paulo Freire referred to as the cycle of *praxis*, wherein theory spurs reflection which spurs action and further reflection (Freire, 1970).

But, what happens to agency once cultivated? Many scholars have examined how youth in particular may exhibit agency while they are in educational programs where alternative social norms are valued (Bajaj, 2009; Murphy-Graham, 2009; Shah, 2016), such as the hypothetical one mentioned above; once students leave, however, the pressures and norms of the larger society often result in a dissipation of the ability to act independently towards transforming unequal conditions (Kabeer, 2002). Scholars have termed this “situational agency” (Bajaj, 2009) or “thin agency” (Klocker, 2007). Klocker, in her work on child domestic workers in Tanzania, defines “thick agency” as contingent upon “actors with varying and dynamic capacities for voluntary and willed actions” (p. 85); this stands in contrast to marginalized children, youth, and adults whose ability to act is constrained (“thin agency”) by “highly restrictive contexts” (p. 85).

In scholarship in childhood studies and international education, various factors are discussed with regards to creating more sustained and “thick” agency. In her work on girls’ schooling in India, Payal Shah discusses education as a potential “thickener” of poor girls’ agency; once educated, more options may exist for economic mobility and stronger marriage prospects in terms of girls entering families with potentially less

violence and social restrictions on their freedom. Erin Murphy-Graham (2009) similarly examines an educational program for young women in Honduras that expanded their understanding of gender inequities with a cohort of learners, and cultivated their agency when considering their next steps. Other scholars have discussed extensions of the alternative space in which agency was first cultivated (for example, in my previous research in a school espousing peace education in Zambia and in a human rights education program in India) through alumni networks, opportunities for ongoing involvement, and mentorship from teachers and administrators (Bajaj, 2009; 2012).

Sustained agency as a component of transformative agency within education for peace, human rights, and social justice requires attention to how educational spaces can prepare learners for transitions into other contexts where norms may be different and create mechanisms for self-reflection, group insights, and shared problem-solving even beyond the protective educational setting.

Component 2. *Relational Agency*

Relational at its very basic definition merely refers to the ways that humans are connected; when exploring *relational agency* vis-à-vis the larger conceptualization of transformative agency, this constitutive element establishes that individuals cultivate agency with others, in dialogue, and through interactions. In her work in the field of feminist studies and in her research with young activists, Jacqueline Kennelly (2009) defines relational agency as:

the contingent and situated intersection between an individual's social position within a *field* of interactions, and the means by which the relationships within that field permit that individual to take actions that might otherwise be inconceivable—or, in other words, permit them to achieve a *habitus shift*. (p. 264, *emphasis in original*)

In Kennelly's research, interactions with others fostered the development of agency within a subculture of activist young adults in urban centers in Canada.

In Payal Shah's (2016) research in India, the relational components of agency—defined differently perhaps than Kennelly—sometimes created “thinner” forms of agency as girls had to weigh further schooling against greater economic insecurity for their families and thus often dropped out or agreed to early marriages as a deliberate choice to improve the economic standing of their families. Deep connections to collective networks, such as families or ethnic groups, thus created pressure to not act solely for the individual good (even if the girl was part of an educational community seeking to collectively resist dominant gender norms), if it meant harm or disruption to the group. For Shah, *relational agency* means examining how rural Indian girls' agency is negotiated among members of a family, intergenerationally and in concert with socio-economic constraints.

Sarah White and Shyamol Choudhury (2007) found through their research with street and working children in Dhaka, Bangladesh that “the influence of adults has been critical in shaping the form that children's agency has taken, through the particular kinds of ‘supplements and extensions’ they provide” (p. 545). The authors found that the initial strategies the children developed which were “deeply counter-cultural, a bulwark against the structural violence which underlay the daily violence and poverty in which the children lived,” shifted through the adult facilitators' participation; facilitators, while providing necessary skills and prompts to the children for dialogue, did not share the children's “counter-cultural commitments” and led the children to “increasingly to reflect a more mainstream set of values” (p. 545). White and Choudhury's work on children's agency in the global South demonstrates that while agency can be collective and relational, it may not necessarily always be transformative. Thus, the four components laid out in this article are required to work in tandem to guide the cultivation of agency towards its transformative potential.

For peace, human rights, and social justice education, the component of relational agency is central for understanding the process of

critical consciousness raising and the desire to act in the face of injustice. Interactions between educators and students, among students in their peer groups, and between students and their families/communities all constitute the basis through which relational agency develops and can incline towards transformative agency when combined with the other three components presented here.

Component 3. *Coalitional Agency*

Aimee Carrillo Rowe advocates for a "politics of relation," which means that who we come to be and how we enact our politics result from our belongings with others. Pushing beyond a "politics of location," which centers the individual, Carrillo Rowe suggests that emphasizing our belongings creates a "coalitional subjectivity," where how we understand ourselves and our positionalities emerges from our relationships—the ones we choose and the ones we were born into. As we approach the questions of power [and] agency, we build on Carrillo Rowe by offering a "coalitional agency" as a necessary extension. A coalitional agency implies that our ability to affect social change, to empower others and ourselves necessitates seeing people, history and culture as inextricably bound to one another. (Chavez and Griffin, 2009, p. 8)

Coalitional agency, as theorized by scholars Karma Chavez and Cindy Griffin, is by its very nature relational, or connected to others; but it is also about connections to larger histories, examinations of power asymmetries, and situating current interrogations within a larger trajectory of intergenerational activism and solidarity. While the framing of "coalitional agency" comes from feminist scholarship (Chavez & Griffin, 2009), it has been applied to examining educational spaces in which Freirean pedagogies are being utilized to raise students' critical consciousness. In my study of a human rights education program for Dalit (formerly called "untouchable") and Adivasi (indigenous) youth in India (Bajaj, 2012), I extended Chavez and Griffin's conceptualization of

coalitional agency to understand how students from different socio-economic, caste, religious, and gender backgrounds worked together to intervene in injustices they witnessed in their communities, such as female infanticide, forced/early marriage, caste violence, and child labor (Bajaj, 2012). By seeing themselves as “bound to one another” as discussed in the quote above, students, after learning about human rights through a three-year course offered by a non-governmental organization, engaged in social action on behalf of others and worked together to promote human rights and alter unequal norms and social relations. In her study of Youth Space, a program in the U.S. Midwest seeking to raise the critical race consciousness of African American youth, Beth Dierker (2016) draws on Chavez and Griffin’s concept of coalitional agency to find that youth agency “resides in connectedness” (p. 31) and aided in the young adults’ formation of a counter-narrative to racial inequality (p. 42).

Within education for peace, human rights, and social justice, coalitional agency is a praxis of solidarity. It is exemplified in the indigenous Mayan phrase *InLak’ech* translated as “You are my other me” and the Nguni Bantu word *Ubuntu* translated as “I am because we are.” It involves a larger collective imagining in the process of understanding social inequalities, and impels in learners a desire to struggle against them. It can be summarized in the quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” Thus, coalitional agency is an essential component of transformative agency as it provides a collective identity and a connection to a larger community of those working towards social justice and human rights, transcending the barriers of the school and the family and creating for youth a third space (Bhabha, 2004) where rights and justice can be collectively fought for and won.

Component 4. Strategic Agency

Literature from various scholarly fields has examined the tactical strategic agency of children and youth. Tactics can be defined as “immediate responses to the vagaries of fluid events” distinguished from “orchestrated ‘strategies’ aimed at long-term change” (de Certeau, 1984; Honwana, 2005; Vigh, 2006; as cited in Jeffrey, 2012, pp. 248-249). This differentiation between short- and long-term agency is particularly useful when examining situations of children and youth in conflict. The ability to think beyond the present moment in which life and death are in the balance constrain their choices and decision-making. For example, applying de Certeau’s (1984) distinction between tactics and strategies to the agency of child soldiers in Angola and Mozambique, anthropologist Alcinda Honwana provides the following analyses:

Applying de Certeau’s distinction, it seems that these young combatants exercised what could be called a “tactical agency” to maximize the circumstances created by the constraints of the military environment in which they were forced to operate. Many had no prospect of returning home after raiding, and burning villages, killing defenseless civilians, and looting food convoys. This was the life they were constrained to live, both in the years of age when they were abducted from their families and initiated into violence and terror. In this sense they were conscious “tactical” agents who had to respond to the demands and pressures of their lives. The exercise of a “strategic” agency would imply a long-term consequence of seeing the results of their actions concretized in some form of political change, which does not seem to be the case for the majority of the child soldiers. (Honwana, 2002, p. 291)

Given the limited options of child soldiers to kill or be killed, strategic agency may be impossible in certain situations like these.

Strategic agency in peace, human rights, and social justice education requires the possibility to engage in long-term thinking ideally in a collective space, and the ability to engage in deep analyses of power relations in order to chart out a path forward in light of constraints. There

may not always be simple ways for marginalized youth to “navigate plural, intersecting structures of power, including, for example, neoliberal economic change, governmental disciplinary regimes, and global hierarchies of educational capital” (Jeffrey, 2012, p. 246); however, the undertaking of strategic and deliberate analyses of future action is a core component of transformative agency as illustrated in Figure 2 along with the other three dimensions.



Figure 2: Core Components of Transformative Agency

Concluding Thoughts

Conceptualizing transformative agency in liberatory education projects offers a framework in which we can situate our work as educators for peace, human rights, and social justice. By distilling how a particular program may correspond with the dimensions of agency, we can better understand how its work contributes to a larger goal of preparing youth for more agentic futures where their opportunities are expanded. Much funding for school-based or co-curricular programs focuses on academic

achievement, college readiness, risk reduction, and preparation for the labor force. However, while grit and resilience are fashionable terms in educational discourse, offering youth the ability to cultivate their own transformative agency offers them critical analysis of power relations, tools and relationships for collective civic engagement, and long-term strategic thinking for their future. Educational programming that has an emancipatory and liberatory vision can include and better align its curriculum, pedagogy, structure, staffing, and practices to the dimensions discussed in this article.

Peace, human rights, and social justice education can begin at an early age, with more ability of young people to explore systemic inequalities and violence usually by ages 12 and above. There are many forms of integrating rights issues into existing programs in ways that deepen the learnings of participants, in a variety of subjects. Many sports programs even integrate socio-emotional skills or peacebuilding lessons (such as [Soccer without Borders](#), [Border Youth Tennis Exchange](#), and the [Hope through Hoops Program](#) of the Hi5 Foundation). Courses and afterschool programs related to social issues/action, the arts, leadership, and ethnic studies would all be well-suited to greater integration of the components of transformative agency to better enable a more holistic approach to its cultivation.

By fostering a sense of transformative agency—informed by insights from diverse scholarship on sustained agency, relational agency, coalitional agency, and strategic agency—educators, youth, and families can explore gaps between rights and realities, and the necessary individual and collective work that can help achieve a more just society.

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