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**Adolescent Transformation Through Human Rights Education**

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## **Introduction**

Human rights education is an essential part of realizing human rights ("Human rights education," 2012). The purpose of this paper is to analyze the impact of human rights education on adolescents as a transformative learning process. Through this analysis, I suggest that human rights education for adolescents is an effective means to promote human rights due to the transformative agency it instills in them. First, I will present how transformation in education is understood according to the current literature, and link transformative learning theory in adults and transformation in young people. I will then examine transformation in youth through human rights education and follow with examples of the development of transformative agency in young people who participate in human rights education programs. Finally, I will apply the concept of transformation to the experiences of four former student participants of the Advocacy Lab's human rights education program at Wings Academy High School in the Bronx, New York. Relating back to the literature, I will draw connections between the students' experiences and current research on transformation and transformative agency.

## **Thesis**

I argue that human rights education can foster transformative agency in adolescents. Transformative agency is described by Bajaj as "belief in one's ability to improve individual social mobility and transform elements of one's society (Bajaj, 2009)." For example, through their participation in a human rights education class or program, an individual may transform their feelings of apathy regarding their ability to affect change to feelings of empowerment. They develop a critical consciousness, the ability "to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality (Freire, 1970). In

order for critical consciousness to develop, I would argue that an individual must believe they have the ability to affect change. Thus, to move from apathetic to empowered with critical consciousness, one must experience a transformation in their beliefs (in the power to affect change), feelings (replacing apathy with empowerment) and actions (replacing non-action with action).

### **Transformative Learning Theory**

To understand the transformative experience of adolescents through human rights education, it is important to consider the background of transformational learning theory. I posit that there are similarities between the transformative learning process for adult learners and the transformation that takes place for adolescents through human rights education.

In the context of transformative learning theory, Mezirow defines transformation as “a deep structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions (Kitchenham 2008 quoting Transformative Learning Center, 2004)” and transformative learning as “the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience as a guide to action (Taylor 2007).” The change in thoughts, feelings, and actions occurs through changing how one interprets their experience, which influences how they act.

For this change to occur, that is, for learners to change their meaning schemes or specific beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions (Kitchenham, 2008), they must engage in critical reflection on their experience, which leads to perspective transformation, in which they develop new understandings of the world, and understand why past understandings constricted their world (Kitchenham, 2008). Perspective transformation allows us to not only develop new understandings, but act on them.

More specifically, Mezirow outlined ten phases of transformative learning theory. These phases include:

- 1) a disorienting dilemma
- 2) self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame,
- 3) a critical assessment of assumptions
- 4) recognition that discontent and transformation are shared and others have been through this change
- 5) exploring options for new roles, relationships and actions
- 6) planning a course of action
- 7) knowledge and skills for implementing plan
- 8) trying new roles
- 9) competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationship
- 10) reintegrating into one's life on basis of conditions of one's perspective (Kitchenham, 2008).

He later added the phase of renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships (Kitchenham, 2008). These phases will be revisited in the analysis on transformation in adolescents through human rights education.

There have been criticisms and iterations of the theory by scholars such as Boyd and Myers who consider transformation to be more of a psychosocial process as compared to Mezirow's more rational explanation. Boyd and Myers and Mezirow all incorporate the rational, intuitive, and emotional into their theories. The main difference is where the emphasis lies. This demonstrates that no single mode of transformative learning exists (Imel, 1998).

## **Adults and Transformative Learning**

Mezirow emphasizes that transformative learning is “the essence of adult education (Mezirow, 1997),” with the aim of developing autonomous individuals who think critically about their lives and determine their own values, meanings, and purpose (Mezirow, 1997). According to Mezirow, transformative learning is only applicable to adult learners because it requires a frame of reference that is already well developed. This frame of reference shifts as learners engage in critical thinking and self-reflection (Mezirow, 1997). I would argue that the aim of transformational learning described above is achievable for adolescents as well as adults. Particularly in considering human rights education, it is important that it not be taught as an ideology through what Freire calls the banking method, or a mere transition of knowledge from teacher to student (Freire, 1970). To be a critical, independent thinker, acting on one’s own values are essential for human rights to be meaningful to the individual.

## **Human Rights Education and Transformative Learning Theory**

According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights,

“Human rights can only be achieved through an informed and continued demand by people for their protection. Human rights education promotes values, beliefs and attitudes that encourage all individuals to uphold their own rights and those of others. It develops an understanding of everyone's common responsibility to make human rights a reality in each community. Human rights education constitutes an essential contribution to the long-term prevention of human rights abuses and represents an important investment in the endeavour to achieve a just society in which all human rights of all persons are valued and respected (“Human rights education,” 2012).”

In developing these values, beliefs, and attitudes, the practices identified by Taylor that are considered essential to foster transformative learning are important to consider. They are summed up by Tibbitts below (Tibbitts, 2008) with my explanations added as to how they apply to human rights education:

- “Ideal learning conditions to promote safety, openness and trust.”

In teaching and learning about human rights education, sensitive and personal issues are often raised. These conditions are necessary to ensure the learner feels comfortable sharing their thoughts, feelings, and personal experiences surrounding these issues.

- “Effective instructional methods support a learner-centered approach and promote student autonomy, participation and collaboration.”

For students to develop their own value system around human rights, they must be supported in having the space to think critically and develop and express these values. All students must feel that their skills, knowledge, and opinions are welcomed and respected. Importantly, human rights exist in relationships. Students must feel they are part of a group as it is difficult to work alone to protect and to exercise human rights.

- “Activities encourage the exploration of alternative personal perspectives, problem-posing and critical reflection.”

As stated above, human rights are about relationships. The focus is on rights for all people, and responsibilities to all people. Exploring alternative personal perspectives allows people to develop empathy and compassion and, thus, better support others in claiming their rights. Critical reflection is essential in allowing students to develop their own opinions and value them.

- “Teachers need to be trusting, empathetic, and caring. The environment must support personal self-disclosure.”

As students learn about sensitive, difficult issues such as human rights abuses, perhaps for the first time, or as they face their experiences with abuse, as witnesses to abuse, or even as perpetrators of abuse, they must be met with a teacher who will provide the space

and support for students to grapple with the issues. The teacher has one of the most important responsibilities in ensuring the environment is supportive as they likely have the most direct and frequent contact with the students in working through these issues. Others should be involved in ensuring the environment is supportive, including school administrators, if the learning is taking place in a school setting, and, of course, the participants themselves.

- “It is essential to discuss and work through emotions and feelings before engaging in critical reflection.”

Whether the students have direct experience with human rights abuses or are just learning about these issues, emotions and feelings will certainly arise. Students must be given an opportunity to express these in a safe manner and space before thinking about them in-depth from a critical standpoint.

- “Feedback and self-assessment assist the process of transformative learning as do solitude and self-dialogue.”

To receive information from others and from oneself regarding how one is experiencing transformation is essential to deepen one’s thinking about the process and understand any change in their knowledge, skills, and values as it is happening.

Additional techniques from human rights educators include allowing tensions to arise and be worked out in a group setting and ensuring critical analysis and reflection at multiple levels including the personal and societal, particularly as this analysis relates to problem solving and developing critical consciousness (Tibbitts, 2005).

The findings above make it clear that there is much overlap of transitional learning theory and teaching human rights for transformation and also that for transformation to take place

through human rights education, certain elements must be present. It is important to note that human rights education is not inherently transformative. As Tibbitts demonstrates in her description of three models of human rights education, human rights education may be taught in various ways, with various goals. The transformative model of education is concerned with human rights and advocacy. This differs from other models (although, elements of the different models may be combined.), such as the values and awareness model and the accountability model, in that it encourages critical thinking about human rights issues and how they apply to oneself, one's community, and the global community. This model is often used in working with a group whose rights have been violated, which would make them more likely to become human rights promoters (Tibbitts, 2002). Importantly, this is not essential. The transformative model may be implemented in a classroom setting. When students study a human rights violation closely and connect on a personal level with the issue, transformation can occur even if the students have not been affected by the human rights abuse directly. (Tibbitts, 2002). This is a model that has been used by nonprofits running human rights education programs working with adolescents such as Facing History and Ourselves (Barr, 2005), and the Advocacy Lab, as will be expanded on below. Whether working with a community of young people who have been faced with human rights abuses or presenting young people with an opportunity to closely examine human rights violations, transformation can occur through this model by providing students with opportunities for "self-reflection and support within the community of learners (Tibbitts, 2002)."

### **Transformation through Human Rights Education Programs for Adolescents**

Transformation through human rights education has been demonstrated in a number of human rights education programs. The transformative experiences of adolescents in these programs have been quite remarkable. For reasons stated earlier, Mezirow argued that

transformative learning theory was a theory of adult learning (Mezirow, 1997). I suggest that transformative learning theory may also be applied to adolescents, even as they may still be developing their frames of reference. Transformation, defined as “a deep structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions (Kitchenham 2008 quoting Transformative Learning Center, 2004)” has been observed in students in human rights education programs. The following examples are from human rights education programs which use the transformational model of human rights education in diverse ways. Certainly, different factors account for the results in each study, but each human rights education program contains elements of the transformational model. While comprehensive analyses of each program are not possible due to the scope of this paper, positive results are summarized below:

1. In one study on transformation in adolescents who were learning about the Holocaust in a high school in Michigan, the researcher found that “one of the most powerful recommendations emanating from the data collected in this research study was that teachers can initiate and facilitate transformation during the student learning experience (Carlberg, 2008).”
2. In a human rights education program in India, students receive three years of human rights education as adolescents. Most students reported positive effects of the program, some even calling it a “transformative force” in their lives. Students were impacted by intervening in abuse in a number of ways including boys who began to share in the housework with their sisters or refused to take more food than their sisters as they had usually received, girls asserting their right to participate in society such as through dance, students interacting with other students from lower castes (even against their family’s wishes), and students advocating for their right to eat

clean food, free of insects and stones. In more extreme examples, students successfully advocated against female infanticide and intervened, albeit not always successfully, in domestic abuse. Besides advocating against abuse, students have also reported or threatened to report human rights violations, and raised awareness about human rights. Human rights education facilitated the transformation of values, attitudes and behaviors of the students at the individual, school, family, and societal level (Bajaj, 2012).

3. In a study in Zambian transformative agency in students who attended an alternative school with a human values curriculum, as compared to their siblings who attended a government school, it was found that students who attended the alternative school had a stronger sense of transformative agency. They felt that they could create positive change in their communities and wanted to do so (Bajaj, 2009).
4. In a study on early adolescents' reflections on social justice through a Facing History and Ourselves program, which seeks to "promote young people's capacity and commitment to be thoughtful and active participants in society who are able to balance self-interest with a genuine concern for the perspectives, rights and welfare of others" (Barr, 2005), it was found that the program fostered transformation in students through critical reflection that allowed them to closely explore their perspectives and their relationships to themselves and others (Barr, 2005).
5. In a study conducted on a program in the Netherlands where the students from different countries learned about the Holocaust and the conflict in Bosnia in-depth, it was found that students were able to critically reflect on the issues, were motivated to

continue to educate themselves about human rights, and gained deeper perspectives from students from other countries (van Driel, 2005).

These experiences demonstrate the varying degrees of transformation in students' values, attitudes, and behaviors as they relate to human rights education.

### **The Advocacy Lab**

This section analyzes the transformative agency of students who participated in the Advocacy Lab's human rights education program at Wings Academy High School in the Bronx, New York. The mission of The Advocacy Lab (AdLab), a nonprofit organization in New York City, is to empower youth to take action for human rights. Partnering with teachers in New York City high schools, Advocacy Lab facilitators provide in-class human rights education and advocacy skills training over the course of the school year. The goal of the program is to prepare students with the knowledge, tools and confidence to create positive social change in their communities and in the world. Working in high schools with limited or no access to human rights education, AdLab facilitators collaborate closely with classroom teachers to nurture a grassroots human rights culture among youth.

Wings Academy, a public high school in the Bronx was the first school to receive the Advocacy Lab's yearlong human rights education program in 2007, and continues to receive the program at present. At Wings Academy, students attend the Advocacy Lab as a standalone elective class which meets for approximately 50 minutes twice each week, for which they receive a grade. Some students self-select, while other are assigned to the class.

In the first semester, students learn about human rights and advocacy through films, presentations, discussions, small group work, meetings with human rights activists, and field trips throughout the city. In the second semester, students choose an issue they would like to advocate for and proceed to develop a human rights campaign on that issue.

The Advocacy Lab is guided by the following principals: respect and dignity for all, claiming rights and sharing responsibilities, student choice, experiential learning, recognition of all student contributions, and connecting the local with the global. The organization aims to fulfill these principals in the human rights education program by establishing a group contract at the beginning of the program, giving students opportunities to shape the direction of the class such as by choosing the guest speakers who visit the class and by choosing their campaign topic and ways they would like to advocate on their topic, and conducting their advocacy campaign in and outside of the school setting. For example, they may hold student assemblies, visit with local government representatives, speak with people in their community about the issues, partner with local human rights organizations, and educate their peers about the issues through actions they conduct throughout the school such as creating art and holding a “day of action” on their issue. Each student has the opportunity to contribute to the advocacy campaign using their knowledge and skills such as through public speaking, creating art, organizing committees, or conducting research. They make the connection between abuses that may be occurring in their local community such as racial profiling of young black males by police with abuses occurring in other countries such as racial profiling of Muslims at airports.

Four recent participants of the Advocacy Lab program at Wings Academy High School shared their thoughts on the program and how it affected them. The students were three Hispanic

females and one Hispanic/African American male. Two of the students completed the program in 2008. One of the students completed the program in 2010 and another completed the program in 2011.

The phases of transformative learning are shared in the chart on the following page, with explanations from the students who were interviewed by me regarding how they experienced transformation and transformative agency throughout the year they participated in the Advocacy Lab program. While each student did not necessarily identify all the phases, and there is some overlap, they all experienced a transformation to varying degrees.

**Adolescents Share their Experience of Participating in the Advocacy Lab Human Rights Education Program at Wings Academy High School in the Bronx, NY**

\*Note that pseudonyms are used to protect confidentiality.

\*\*For the sake of transparency, please also note that I am a co-Founder and former Executive Director of the Advocacy Lab, and currently sit on the board of the organization.

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Kevin*</b>	<b>Zara*</b>	<b>Heather*</b>	<b>Lisa*</b>
<b>Disorienting dilemma</b>  (My words)	Learning about human rights violations and how to advocate through participation in the Advocacy Lab class	Learning about human rights violations and how to advocate through participation in the Advocacy Lab class	Learning about human rights violations and how to advocate through participation in the Advocacy Lab class	Learning about human rights violations and how to advocate through participation in the Advocacy Lab class
<b>Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame</b>	I never really thought about human rights or social justice before starting the class. I knew things were happening but I never put thought into it. I did not think I could create positive change.	Thought about discrepancy between poor and wealth before the class but never attempted to resolve the issues. Did not think I had the power. Thought about people whose rights were violated but could not defend themselves. Thought about why things were this way.	I did not think about social justice before the class... to me it was just a part of history... I did not believe I had the power to change anything in society, not even my school environment. I thought it was okay to conform to what was already out there.	Before the AdLab class, I was always aware of all the violations around me. However, I didn't know they were so close to home and were right in front of my face the whole time. I always thought about domestic violence, and how women do not get their voices heard, or even equal pay. Human trafficking – I knew it was there, but I never actually thought about it because I

				thought it only happened in foreign countries.
<b>A critical assessment of assumptions</b>	The class was eye-opening, life changing, interesting. I did not think I would enjoy the class that much but every day entering school, I was looking forward to my AdLab class.	I believe I do have the power to create change. I began to question things more.	My overall experience was enlightening, I felt as though my eyes were being opened to a reality I did not acknowledge and was ignorant of.	I never did anything about these violations because I did not think anyone would listen. I did not think that people my age would care or be interested about what I had to say or about what was actually going on. I felt that my knowledge was very limited about the topics of human rights violations but I knew I had the passion in me, I just did not know what to do with it.
<b>Recognition that discontent and transformation are shared and others have been through this change</b>	I learned so much. I never knew [so much] about torture or that there were ... child soldiers. I feel like I learned enough to teach others about human rights.  The class helped me to realize how much people are like me.	I learned about myself, gained friends, educated myself, and others. Learned about myself and others.	Every time I heard the experience and the cases of those who had lived through injustice my heart poured out to them and I realized the world was not the box I thought it was.  I learned that silence is participating in injustice.	When I first started the class, I thought this was going to be the most interesting thing I was ever going to learn in high school. When I first saw the torture that these women faced, being abused physically, mentally, and emotionally, everything became more

	People are oblivious to things going on.			real. It was like my eyes had been open to a door I only peeped in.
<b>Exploring options for new roles, relationships and actions</b>	<p>Honestly, it made me not take life for granted because things could be worse.</p> <p>I think the biggest difference is now, I care.</p>	I developed close friendships. My relationships with others grew deeper as I wished to share all the things I had learned with them. Giving someone insight on what I had become passionate about was a true gift.	<p>I learned that no matter how small my actions may seem to me it can make a chain of difference that will spread. Writing a blog or simply posting in my Facebook page a quote about human rights can make a change.</p> <p>I learned I deserve to be heard and no one can tell me otherwise. I learned I can do a lot by speaking up and society is what I allow it to be so I have the power to change it.</p>	I felt that I had gained knowledge that I needed to back up my passion. I learned that even the slightest conversation about human rights is raising awareness and that every little thing done counts no matter how small. After the class I saw prostitutes very differently. I always kept in the back of my mind, maybe she's trafficked, and maybe she doesn't have a way out. I did not view them as women who had no respect for themselves but as women who could be trafficked and did not have a way to get out due to fear and pain.
<b>Planning a course of action</b>	I always catch myself trying to [teach] people about things going on	I did proceed to intern for a couple of organizations related to human	The world is not perfect and I may not be able to change it but I can prevent it	After the class, I felt strongly about social justice and still do. Every chance

	in the world [related to human rights].	rights but unfortunately after college my life took a different turn and I had become very focused on my personal issues.	from changing me and that is my power. My mentality changed tremendously, the information I was given in that class has changed my life and today I am and want to be someone that can aid victims of human trafficking.	that I get I talk about human rights; it was even my informative speech for Speech 101 Freshman year of college.
<b>Knowledge and skills for implementing plan</b>	I catch myself still to this day looking up articles about human rights violations. For example, the Kony situation. I was reading everything I can find.	Now I know more and am willing and able to challenge injustice.	I am pursuing a law degree in criminal justice so I may help victims of human trafficking at least find peace in the legal system. I want to make their cases heard and bring them comfort if such may be given to her or him.	I do feel that I have the power to make change because I have many others that share my passion and it only makes our voice stronger. Even by myself I feel that I can make a change because like The Advocacy Lab taught me, every little thing counts no matter how small.
<b>Trying new roles</b>	I always catch myself trying to [teach] people about things going on in the world [related to	Before the course I did not understand or really care about human rights but as the course proceeded I saw why it was	My mentality changed tremendously, the information I was given in that class has changed my life and today I am	I felt that every opportunity I had to talk about human rights it was my chance to shed some light on the darkness that is

	<p>human rights].</p> <p>I catch myself still to this day looking up articles about human rights violations. For example, the Kony situation. I was reading everything I can find.</p>	<p>important.</p>	<p>and want to be someone that can aid victims of human trafficking. I have spoken for the Advocacy Lab after the class was over but my involvement in human rights is my motivation in college since that is my priority at the time being.</p>	<p>still around us. I was able to inform my family and friends more about the subject then I could have imagined and also give them a book to read, to get a glimpse about what really goes on in society.</p> <p>I do not think that enough people put an emphasis to the topic and I feel that the more people listen, the more we can create a stronger voice for those women who do not have one.</p>
<p><b>Competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationship</b></p>	<p>Personally, I learned so much and have so many memories. I'm still friends with some other students I was in the AdLab with and we always end up reminiscing. With a group of people that care as much as I do, we can create positive change in the</p>	<p>In the end of the class, there was so much I had learned about myself and others around me as well. I learned skills such as public speaking to gain an immense amount of confidence in myself that would in my later years become a very powerful accessory.</p>	<p>With my very actions and words I produce change.</p> <p>Before I thought I could not do anything now I think I can and I will.</p>	<p>The Advocacy Lab changed my opinions and emotions about human rights. My opinions have become more sensitive to the victims' pain. My emotions have changed because I have become more sensitive and strong to the topics. It has made me aware that my actions can have</p>

	world. Maybe not a significant change, but I feel like we can open a lot of eyes.			influence and that my words are powerful to change the life of any woman that is going through a domestic violence issue or any rights violation and that there are people that understand and can help.
<b>Reintegrating into one's life on basis of conditions of one's perspective</b>	I feel completely different about my ability to make a difference in the world compared to when I started the class. Now, I care. I believe, with a group of people, we can make a positive change in the world.	I learned that social change is possible. And I learned to advocate for my peers. I am the same person who always had a desire to [improve people's lives] but I am also different because now I know more and now I am willing and able to challenge injustice.	I think of the other at all times of the day. I am not confined to what my government and justice system is like. I want to help. I've become aware of problems I thought were beyond my own comprehension. I feel capable of reflecting change.	I learned that even the slightest conversation about human rights is raising awareness and that every little thing done counts no matter how small. After the class I saw prostitutes very differently. I always kept in the back of my mind, maybe she's trafficked, and maybe she doesn't have a way out. I did not view them as women who had no respect for themselves but as women who could be trafficked and did not have a way to get out due to fear and pain.
<b>Renegotiating relationships and</b>	I catch myself trying to teach	I developed close friendships. My	Existence and humanity needs	I felt that every opportunity I had

<p><b>negotiating new relationships</b></p>	<p>people about human rights. It made me not take life for granted.</p>	<p>relationships with others grew deeper as I wished to share all the things I had learned with them. Giving someone insight on what I had become passionate about was a true gift.</p>	<p>to be taught and others need to understand the other and stop being so consumed with themselves.</p>	<p>to talk about human rights it was my chance to shed some light on the darkness that is still around us. I was able to inform my family and friends more about the subject than I could have imagined and also give them a book to read, to get a glimpse about what really goes on in society.</p>
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## **Conclusion**

There is much evidence to suggest that human rights education can foster transformation in adolescents. The transformative model of human rights education can provide the appropriate conditions to develop transformative agency and critical consciousness. Throughout the studies cited here and the interviews of the Advocacy Lab participants, human rights education has been demonstrated to contribute to the realization of human rights based on the students' transformation. This includes increasing their level of confidence in their abilities to advocate for human rights; cultivating their sense of justice; developing empathy and compassion for others; gaining knowledge about human rights issues and how to advocate; building a human rights community by strengthening relationships with peers in their human rights class; raising awareness about, and advocating for human rights beyond the classroom; and pursuing their desire to continue to learn about human rights and advocacy.

Based on this research, I suggest that human rights education can contribute to the development of transformative agency in adolescents who will then be equipped with the knowledge, skills and confidence to advocate for human rights. Further research is needed to build support for this argument and explore the positive benefits of transformation through human rights education for adolescents in greater detail.

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