We Come to Form Ourselves Bit by Bit: Educating for Citizenship in Post-Conflict Guatemala

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Over the past several decades, the implementation of democratic citizenship education has become a common prescription for the civic reconstruction of post-conflict societies. Across the globe, educational changes are seen as fundamental to the creation of peaceful, tolerant, and democratic civic identities, the key to “social reconstruction, a better future, and a lasting peace.” Drawing on qualitative data from varied schools in postwar Guatemala, this article illustrates a critical dilemma in post-conflict civic education: the difficulties of engaging directly with past and present injustice while moving toward a shared national identity. Global models of democratic, multicultural, and human rights education alone are inadequate for creating a new sense of citizenship in a country in which young people’s sense of belonging and their interpretations of the past are deeply connected to how their communities are positioned within a profoundly inequitable power structure.

KEYWORDS: democratic citizenship education, historical memory, post-conflict education, Indigenous education, postcolonial education

“It’s good [the genocide trial of retired general Efrian Rios Montt] because he is going to pay for the harm he did to the Indigenous people.”
—Lilia, student at a public school serving Indigenous students

“We are all more or less in agreement that when he did it [ordered massacres] he was general of Guatemala and was ensuring the good of everyone.”
—Eva, student at a private school serving affluent Ladino students

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In 1996, the United Nation’s General Assembly commissioned a study on how violent conflicts affect the world’s children. The language of the resulting *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* demonstrated a particular perspective on the role of education in such societies. “The contents and process of education,” it proclaimed, “should promote peace, social justice, respect for human rights and the acceptance of responsibility. Children need to learn the skills of negotiation, problem solving, critical thinking, and communication that will enable them to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence” (United Nations General Assembly, 1996, p. 255).

In that same year, the extended armed conflict in Guatemala between army and guerilla forces, an unequal, 36-year struggle, came to an end with the signing of the *Firm and Lasting Peace Accords*. These U.N.-brokered accords included a promise by the government to “design and implement a national civic education programme for democracy and peace, promoting the protection of human rights, the renewal of political culture and the peaceful resolution of conflicts” (United Nations General Assembly, 1997, p. 11). Embedded in the Guatemalan Peace Accords and related documents were policy directives centering national civic reconstruction on the creation of a new Guatemalan citizen, one devoted to peace, human rights, multiculturalism, and democracy. As in many post-conflict settings, both internal and external actors viewed the educational system as central to this effort.

Transforming civic identity through education, however, is no simple task. Lilia, in a discussion with her Indigenous-identified peers at their village school, approved of putting Rios Montt, general during the bloodiest years of the armed conflict, on trial for genocide, seeking justice for “the harm he did to the Indigenous people.” Meanwhile, considering the same events a few kilometers away, Eva summed up the feelings of her affluent Ladino classmates, explaining that they all “were more or less in agreement” that the general’s actions during the war were justified, as he had been “ensuring the good of everyone.” These young Guatemalans’ memories and notions of belonging, situated amid starkly different relationships with the country’s history of conquest, colonization, exploitation, and repression, competed with a national civic education policy that put trust in the healing powers of tolerance and democracy. The students’ contrasting discourses reveal the need for closer attention to how young people in post-conflict settings construct relationships to the state and its history if the goal is to craft meaningful and effective democratic citizenship education.

This analysis indicates that Guatemalan young people’s interpretations of their country’s turbulent past and complex present are deeply connected to how their communities are positioned within Guatemala’s profoundly inequitable power structure. Drawing on qualitative data collected from three distinct types of schools, I argue that the civic understandings of students in Indigenous, Ladino, and integrated settings illustrate a critical
dilemma in post-conflict civic education: the difficulties of engaging directly with injustice while moving toward a shared national identity. Drawing from these portraits of civic belonging and historical memory across a divided country, I conclude that global models of democratic, multicultural, and human rights education alone are inadequate for creating a new sense of citizenship in Guatemala and suggest that an integrated schooling experience, curricula that attend to past and present injustice, and teaching practices for active civic engagement would greatly enhance these efforts. These findings may be applicable to other post-conflict societies as well.

The Guatemalan Context

Guatemala’s history stretches back thousands of years to a precolonial Maya civilization marked by astounding artistic, astronomical, and engineering accomplishments; brutal Spanish subjugation and exploitation of Maya descendants; independence from Spain largely benefitting the elite; liberal reform; U.S. intervention that violently replaced a populist leader with a military regime eventually leading to military dictatorship; and a 36-year-long armed struggle between populist guerilla groups and the country’s military regimes (Perera, 1993; Sanford, 2003). Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Guatemala’s Indigenous population suffered disproportionately and systematically (Grandin, Levenson, & Oglesby, 2011). Indigenous Guatemalans were exploited for labor, lived in poverty, and had limited access to resources and opportunity. They were also the subjects of violent repression.

Of the estimated 200,000 people killed during the armed conflict, over 80% were Indigenous (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, 1999; Rothenberg, 2012). The report of the Commission for Historical Clarification, Guatemala’s truth commission, found the state responsible for 93% of the human rights abuses documented from this time. Yet, in contrast to many other regions in the Americas, and despite this consistent, state-sponsored oppression, these communities have remained intact, maintaining language and traditions. Today, in this country of 15 million people, up to 60% of Guatemalans consider themselves Indigenous (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2011). Guatemala’s Indigenous citizens continually craft hybrid practices and identities amid rapidly changing local and global contexts (Goldin, 2009; Seider, 2002; Way, 2012). This includes a new sense of pan-Maya identity emerging over the past several decades, *el movimiento Maya*, spurred in part by the political organization of the armed conflict, around which many Indigenous Guatemalans have mobilized (Fischer & Brown, 1996). As party to the development of the 1996 Peace Accords, Indigenous groups successfully advocated for a wide swath of rights and recognitions to bring their disenfranchised voices into national conversations (Hale, 2006).

Today’s Guatemala remains plagued by inequality and pervasive violence (Burrell, 2013; McAllister & Nelson, 2013). Political corruption scandals
and perceptions of police misconduct exacerbate insecurity, complicate political participation, and call into question the legitimacy of electoral politics, law enforcement, and the judicial system; recent mass demonstrations protest governmental impunity and fraud (Isaacs, 2014; Malkin, 2015). Vast economic disparities persist (Taft-Morales, 2014). The country has the world’s fifth highest child malnutrition rate and the lowest literacy rates in Latin America for youth ages 15 to 24. Many Guatemalans have emigrated; in 2013, foreign remittances from Guatemalans living outside of the country totaled $5.1 billion, over 10% of the gross domestic product (Maldonando & Hayem, 2014). One out of every 12 Guatemalan citizens lives in the United States (Brown & Patton, 2013). Guatemalans of all backgrounds sustain connections beyond village and national borders. This is the context within which educational policy designed to encourage democratic citizenship operates and within which young people develop identities as Guatemalan citizens.

Situating the Study

Civic Education in Post-Conflict Settings

Over the past several decades, the implementation of democratic civic education has become a common prescription for the civic reconstruction of post-conflict societies. Across the globe, educational changes are seen as fundamental to the creation of peaceful, tolerant, and democratic civic identities, the key to “social reconstruction, a better future, and a lasting peace” (Levine & Bishai, 2010, p. 663). Intergovernmental organizations, such as the U.N. and the World Bank, have been at the forefront of global promotion of democratic citizenship, evidenced in the similar language employed in civic education documents of various nations (Cole & Barsalou, 2006; Quaynor, 2011). “Transnational in character,” these “policyscapes” of global citizenship education employ “a particular constellation of visions, values and ideology” centering on human rights, democracy, and tolerance (Carney, 2009, p. 79). As DeLugan (2012) notes, such initiatives rest on “a universal template based on selected principles and human values . . . seemingly intended to be interchangeable from one postconflict nation-state to the next” (pp. 21–22).

Literature examining these efforts describes tension, in many settings, between the desire to create a “usable past” that might help move the society forward into a post-conflict future and the equally pressing need for an honest reckoning about the country’s difficult history (Fullinwider, 1996, p. 222). This “clash between the needs of postconflict . . . societies and the accurate depiction of a negative past” challenges those crafting curricular approaches, as with the ongoing dispute in Guatemala over which version of the history of the internal armed conflict to include in the new national curriculum (Cole, 2007, p. 19; Oglesby, 2007). Discomfort with digging into the
historical specifics of conflict, combined with the influence of international actors, can translate into curricula and practices designed to avoid controversy (Cole & Murphy, 2009; Joseph, 2005; Niens & Chastenay, 2008; Quaynor, 2011). Closely related is the difficulty of designing a curricular approach to healing identity-based conflicts embedded in longstanding structural inequalities (Ben-Porath, 2006; Niens & Chastenay, 2008).

Finally, teachers and their pedagogical choices can complicate the enactment of civic education policy. Teachers may not be committed to a revised curriculum, may choose to ignore a new textbook, or may face political and social pressures to avoid controversy (Cole, 2007; Cole & Barsalou, 2006; Cole & Murphy, 2009). Pedagogies that encourage dialogue, debate, inquiry, and discussion to develop democratic citizenship may be out of their reach, either through lack of training, inadequate resources, political climate, or personal choice. Although civic education policies depend on teachers to transform society through their practice, their goals, preparation, and constraints are seldom considered in these edicts (Robertson, 2012). "Globally circulating discourses" about educational practice can be far removed from what teachers actually do within their classrooms (Paine & Zeichner, 2012, p. 574; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012).

Democratic Civic Education in Latin America

The Guatemalan case is situated within Latin America, a region where democratic civic education has been on the rise. Since the late 1990s, Latin American countries have been transforming their civic education programs from a focus on “national identity and allegiance” to “fostering democratic citizenship” (B. Levinson & Berumen, 2007, p. 1). Reflecting global trends, as noted previously, much of the language around democratic citizenship education in Latin America comes from international bodies such as the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos (OEI), and U.S.-based nonprofits such as the Center for Civic Education (B. Levinson & Berumen, 2007). Analyses of textbooks from Argentina and Costa Rica, curricula in Colombia and Guatemala, and educational policy in El Salvador point to global influences on civic education in this region (DeLugan, 2012; Schulz, Ainley, Friedman, & Lietz, 2011; Schulz & Gonzalez, 2011; Suarez, 2008). Amid these policy scapes, common issues across the region—violence, class and ethnic divisions, the position of Indigenous citizens, political corruption, foreign intervention, and protracted oligarchy—are often left untouched in revised curricula.

Civic Education in Guatemala

The Guatemalan Peace Accords tasked post-conflict healing and the development of a culture of peace and democracy to the country’s educational system (Tawil & Harley, 2004; United Nations General Assembly,
In an extended and complex process, a variety of Guatemalan experts, with technical advice from international agencies, turned these mandates into a new national curriculum, the Curriculum Nacional Base (CNB). The CNB fulfilled its responsibility to create “democratic life and [a] culture of peace, [and] unity in diversity” largely within the social studies curriculum (Ministerio de Educación, 2013, n.d.). In curricular materials, attention to international human rights doctrine, multiculturalism, the Peace Accords, and the details of democratic participation eclipsed specific historical and contemporary issues in Guatemala (Bellino, 2014; Oglesby, 2007).

This globalized framing lent a generalized feel to the language of the CNB, reflecting what Shamsie (2007) called “the OAS broader peace building paradigm of liberal internationalism” (p. 419). Larger questions of justice and responsibility were sidestepped in the curriculum by positioning the armed conflict as a step in Guatemala’s inevitable progress toward peaceful democracy (Bellino, 2016). As Oglesby (2007) notes:

> In the recent textbooks and in material produced by both human rights groups and international institutions, the inclusion of material on the war is a brief prelude to a much longer elaboration of other topics related to civic education and citizen formation. (p. 183)

### Sociocultural Understandings of Civic Identity

Despite the global emphasis on classrooms as the primary arena for civic reconstruction, we know little about “the dynamic and conflicting ways in which these principles play out for students in postconflict societies” (Quaynor, 2011, p. 34). Students, explains Luykx (1996) in her study of civic development in a Bolivian normal school, “bring their own meanings, practices, and values to the pedagogic situation” (pp. 263–264). These are complex and situated amid memory, belonging, and structures of power (DeLugan, 2012; Dyrness, 2012).

This investigation foregrounds the experiences of youth and educators in the educational venues in which civic education policies are meant to be implemented. Civic development is a situated, constructive process rather than one of cause and effect, complicating the notion that policy leads to practice in a straightforward manner. Grounded in a critical, sociocultural approach, I argue that civic identities take shape within the nested settings of community, school, and society, situated amid larger political and economic structures (Abu El-Haj, 2009; M. Levinson, 2007; Rubin, 2007). The civic learning proposed by Guatemala’s globally framed educational policy is differentially enacted across the country, intimately bound up with senses of belonging and memory that are tied to students’ and educators’ positions within distinct geographic, historical, and cultural spaces (Bellino, 2015,
Belonging, Historical Memory, and the Coloniality of Power

This analysis is undergirded by three concepts that help to make sense of the data collected over the course of the project: belonging, historical memory, and the coloniality of power. Belonging “reflects the complex relations that people and their descendants have to different locales, multiple realities and shifting social and political landscapes” and is fundamental to how Guatemalans see themselves in relation to the state (Albiez, Castro, Jüussen, & Youkhana, 2011, p. 13). Closely related are the ways that young people and teachers remember and interpret the country’s history, the “historical memories” through which “groups, collectivities, and nations construct and identify with particular narratives about historical periods or events” (Hite, 2011). Buckley-Zistel (2009) notes, “collective identities are produced through memory discourses since remembrance has a coercive force which creates a sense of belonging” (p. 32). Underlying these differentiated senses of belonging and historical memory are deep-seated structural inequalities rooted in the European colonialism that threw the Indigenous peoples of the Americas into the racialized caste system and vast civic and economic disparities that persist today, a “coloniality of power” in which “the structure of power was and even continues to be organized on and around the colonial axis” (Quijano, 2000, p. 568). These three concepts are fundamental to understanding young people’s sense of themselves as citizens in varied Guatemalan settings.

Methods

This study was designed to explore civic identity from the perspective of diverse participants, taking into account the locally negotiated nature of identity construction and the larger social, economic, and historical context. As such, the following questions are central:

How do Guatemalan youth develop as citizens within varied school settings?
How do youth in different school and community contexts understand and express identities as Guatemalan citizens?
How do social studies and other civic-related curricula and practices frame civic learning for Guatemalan youth in different secondary school contexts?
What current issues, personal and community concerns, memories, histories, family stories, and daily experiences become salient in this process?
To investigate these questions, I gathered extensive data on the ideas and experiences of a range of students learning in a variety of settings.

School Entry and Participant Selection

I arrived in Guatemala in December 2012 with limited contacts and the desire to connect with schools, students, and educators across a range of income levels, locations, and ethnic identifications. A departmental educational director introduced me by letter to the directors of El Colegio, a private K–12 school, and El Instituto, a public secondary school, where I began data collection immediately. Later, an El Instituto teacher invited me to visit El Básico, a public middle school in a small village where she also taught. I learned about a fourth school, Nuestro Futuro, from a traveler who had visited it. In search of a rural, Indigenous site and intrigued by this secondary school’s focus on historical memory and community development, I reached out to a teacher at the school and was invited to visit. El Internacional, the private, urban K–12 school my children attended at the time, became a second private school site, the fifth school of my investigations. I collected data at each site for varying amounts of time, ranging from my intensive, multi-day visit to Nuestro Futuro; a limited number of visits to El Internacional; and my consistent presence at El Básico, El Instituto, and El Colegio over the duration of the study. Field research was completed in six months.

At each site, I described the project to the director, who then referred me to social studies and Indigenous language teachers in whose classes, with their permission, I observed and recruited students to participate in focus groups and interviews. I received letters of approval from each director, explained the study and discussed informed consent with all teachers and students, and received signed consent forms from all participating adults and students (and students’ parents for those under 18 years of age). The project and consent forms were approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at Rutgers University and by my Guatemalan host institution, the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala.

Research Sites

All of the research sites included in this analysis were located in Guatemala’s central highlands region, where the majority of the country’s population is concentrated. They are situated in urban, village, and rural areas. This is a region of rapid language shift, as more and more young people in Indigenous communities are raised speaking Spanish rather than their community’s language. It is also the site of high rates of Indigenous language activism and subsequent enactment of bilingual educational policies, manifested in varied ways in the schools featured in this study (Garzon, Brown, Richards, & Ajpub’, 1998).

Table 1 displays the research sites included in this analysis.
This study was designed to balance breadth and depth. The combination of classroom observation, focus groups, and interviews with multiple students offered depth while subjects selected from a variety of schools—including, when possible, more than one school with particular demographic characteristics—provided a breadth of perspectives and data types. All data collection was conducted in Spanish except for focus groups and interviews at El Internacional and the interview with César at El Colegio; these were conducted in English, per participant choice. Table 2 displays the data set and collection methods.

I collected the majority of data. A graduate student researcher joined me for the final six weeks of data collection, apprenticing into the research process by observing all research activities, then seguing into collaborative and finally individual data collection.

### Table 1
**Data Collection Sites**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Size</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El Básico</td>
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<td>Village</td>
<td>Middle school</td>
<td>Indigenous, low income</td>
<td>500</td>
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<tr>
<td>El Colegio</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>K–12</td>
<td>Ladino, middle-high income</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Instituto</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Middle and high school</td>
<td>Indigneous, Ladino, low-middle income</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Internacional</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>K–12</td>
<td>Ladino and foreign, middle-high income</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuestro Futuro</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Indigneous, low income</td>
<td>400</td>
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### Table 2
**Data Set**

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<th>Observations</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Focus Groups</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Youth</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
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</table>

### Data Collection Procedures

This study was designed to balance breadth and depth. The combination of classroom observation, focus groups, and interviews with multiple students offered depth while subjects selected from a variety of schools—including, when possible, more than one school with particular demographic characteristics—provided a breadth of perspectives and data types. All data collection was conducted in Spanish except for focus groups and interviews at El Internacional and the interview with César at El Colegio; these were conducted in English, per participant choice. Table 2 displays the data set and collection methods.

I collected the majority of data. A graduate student researcher joined me for the final six weeks of data collection, apprenticing into the research process by observing all research activities, then seguing into collaborative and finally individual data collection.
School and Classroom Observations

To gain insight into the teaching practices in classes related to civic learning and to become a more familiar presence in the participating schools, I began data collection at each site with school (public space, public events, informal time) and classroom (social studies, citizenship development, Indigenous language, and culture) observations, writing fieldnotes each time.

Student Focus Groups With Civic Images

Perhaps the most unusual data collection method in this project was the use of “civic images,” pasted onto 3 × 5 inch cards, to elicit discussion among students on the abstract topics of civic belonging, national identity, and historical understanding. Using images can help participants “connect core definitions of the self to society, culture and history” (Harper, 2010, p. 13). This technique has been used with success in history and civic learning research (e.g., Barton & Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 1998). Not intended as an objective measure, these tools were designed to ground abstract topics in familiar images so as to provoke rich discussion among students.

Drawing on research, observations while in the country, and discussions with Guatemalan colleagues, I developed a set of 34 recognizable images taken from historical, political, cultural, and economic themes in Guatemala, with an accompanying protocol. The tools were field tested by a Guatemalan academic, revised, piloted with students at El Internacional, and revised again. During data collection, we concluded each focus group by asking students if there were images they felt were missing, irrelevant, or redundant and used this information to adjust the set. Students were enthusiastic about the images, sorting through and discussing them even before beginning the official protocol. Focus group sessions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were audio recorded, with participants’ consent.

Interviews With Students, Teachers, and School Directors

Students were interviewed after focus group sessions to follow up on emerging themes and solicit individual perspectives. Student interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Teachers were interviewed to gain their perspectives on civic teaching, learning, and identity in Guatemala, as were school directors. The adults provided insight about their schools and communities, with questions about how different aspects of Guatemala’s history were taught and what civic issues they felt faced the country. Interviews with teachers and administrators typically lasted for 60 minutes and were audio recorded, with participants’ consent.
Data Analysis and Validity

My approach to data analysis was inductive, designed to “allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data” (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). I generated a large number of codes (103) through multiple readings and open coding of the entire data set. From these codes, I developed broad analytical categories (e.g., school-based civic learning, identity, national history) that ran across data sources and sites. Moving iteratively from analysis to exploration of relevant theory and research (i.e., belonging, historical memory, coloniality of power) and back again, I wrote both thematic memos and extended narratives about each school site integrating theory, research, and data. I then worked across these memos and narratives to develop findings in response to the research questions. All interview and focus group recordings were transcribed in the language in which they were collected (Spanish or English) by a Spanish-speaking, Guatemalan transcriber; I later translated data chunks into English for use in writing.

I used the online data management system, Dedoose, to manage coding, categorization, and generation of analytical memos on emerging themes. As in many research studies, what participants shared typically reflected “what they wanted me most to know and what they construed as being worth talking about” (Luttrell, 2000, p. 504). For this reason, it was important to provide multiple vantage points on the same questions so that codes could be triangulated across school, participant, and data source; all major themes appeared across these groups. Findings, although not generalizable across Guatemala or other post-conflict societies, illuminate the complex ways that young people experience citizenship in these particular settings, revealing problematic aspects of a globalized approach to post-conflict civic education.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As Ruth Behar (1996) writes, “Nothing is stranger than this business of humans observing other humans in order to write about them” (p. 5), and all the more so when this is done across national and cultural boundaries. As a university-educated, White, North American, affluent (in comparison with students and educators at most of the sites) academic, there were many obvious differences between the majority of the study participants and myself. There were also points of connection, in particular with the participating educators, with whom I shared professional interests, our challenges (with many) as working women and mothers, and a common concern with social justice, youth development, and the necessity of understanding history.

I sought to employ what Luttrell (2000) calls “good enough methods,” not pretending to be able to “eliminate tensions, contradictions or power
imbalances,” but seeking to “name them” (p. 500). The most obvious imbalance was the vast disparity of resources and opportunities available to my assistant and myself in comparison with most of the participants. For this reason, we tried to “tread lightly,” forming cordial relationships but not stepping into participants’ social and family lives, as often occurs during ethnographic fieldwork. We found that most participants, youth and adults, were interested in the goals of the study and eager to engage in conversation on the topics.

We listened carefully and reflected continuously about how our perspectives limited our understandings. This was especially clear during the focus group activity when it became apparent that certain images were irrelevant to students (logos of the guerilla forces during the armed conflict, a map of the early 19th-century Federal Republic of Central America) while others were lacking (Jesus, a family). We revised the set based on these observations. This reflexivity greatly enhanced the study.

Findings

In this findings section, I analyze how students and educators in three types of schools engaged with the country’s history, the edict to study Indigenous language and culture, and the armed conflict that dominates contemporary Guatemalan history. While students and teachers in the schools serving Indigenous students interpreted curricula against the backdrop of past and present repression, affluent Ladino students and teachers distanced themselves from the past and their Indigenous co-citizens. In an integrated setting, young people developed a novel and shared sense of citizenship, engaging with Indigenous language and cultural practices and examining the country’s economic and political inequalities. These three cases demonstrate the strength of belonging, memory, and the coloniality of power in post-conflict sites, complicating the use of a generalized democratic civic education to reconcile civic discord. Ideas for how civic education efforts might be reconfigured to engage students more actively and directly with history and with each other are embedded in this analysis. In the following sections, I describe each case in turn.

“We Remember This So That a Scar Doesn’t Remain”:
Memory and Belonging in Indigenous Educational Settings

Nuestro Futuro and El Básico comprise the first case. Nuestro Futuro was a rural public secondary institute far from the urban Guatemalan center. Serving students ages 12 to 17 from one of the country’s smaller Indigenous groups, the curriculum focused on rural development and historical memory. El Básico was a village middle school near a city, serving Indigenous Kaqchikel students ages 11 to 15. Both schools were worn, dusty, and poorly equipped, with few books or other resources. Nuesto
Futuro was considerably more impoverished, with plastic picnic tables instead of desks, concrete floors, and outdoor plumbing. At both, students wore school uniforms; a few girls wore traditional skirts instead of pants; male teachers wore Western style dress, as did some female teachers, while others wore traditional huipiles and skirts.10

In these two schools, students and teachers interpreted the curriculum against the backdrop of past and present repression, refashioning the study of history to include what had befallen their community. At the same time, they contested essentialist narratives of indigeneity, expressing varied views on the state-mandated study of Indigenous language and culture and reinterpreting “ancient” traditions to meet their current needs in the face of inadequate state mandated approaches.

National History

History was both part of the official curriculum and inseparable from expressions of identity and belonging in El Básico and Nuestro Futuro. Highlighting the impact of Spanish conquest on the original inhabitants of the area, social studies and citizenship development teacher Profe11 Pedro of El Básico, a resident of the community and Kaqchikel himself, told a version of history distinct in tone and perspective from the matter-of-fact version offered by state-approved textbooks and outlined very generally in the CNB. He described Spanish colonialism to his students, tying them directly to the region’s precolonial Maya population.

“Sadly,” he began, “they [the Spanish] came to assassinate all our culture. They came and they killed, they assassinated, they raped the Maya population. And as part of this, they took our territory.” In this telling, he and his students belonged to the same people as those original inhabitants, suffering and continuing to pay the price of events taking place over half a millennium earlier.

In interviews conducted amid the din of dusty outdoor hallways, students expressed identification with the vanquished Maya. Josue explained that one of the worst moments in Guatemalan history was “when the Spaniards came. What they did, they stole everything . . . they were bad, the Spaniards, they came here to rob. They took everything.” For Emilio, the “people of Guatemala” were the Indigenous groups living in the area when the greedy and treacherous Spaniards arrived. He attributed Guatemala’s current poverty to the trickery of the Spanish, explaining,

When Spain came here to Guatemala, Guatemala wasn’t poor. Because they say that before, there were gold and silver, everything, but the Spaniards when they came, they say that they subordinated the people of Guatemala, they made them think that a little mirror was better than gold and silver.
Students at both schools expressed a sense of trans-historical Indigenous belonging, equating precolonial Indigenous people with their own contemporary Indigenous communities. Selecting from the civic images set those they felt “made them proud” to be Guatemalan, El Básico students chose Tecún Umán, Guatemala’s official national hero, thought to be the last ruler of the K’iche’ Maya. They chose him, they said, “because he defended us against the Spaniards.” Students said they were proud because “he was Indigenous [and] we also are Indigenous,” a direct identification that referenced both oppression and resistance.

Students in focus groups at Nuestro Futuro also selected Tecún Umán. “He was the king of the Maya,” a student explained, echoing the common national narrative, “and he fought until the end with the Spanish, but he couldn’t overcome them. They killed him, and for this we will always remember him.” Selecting conquistador Pedro Alvarado as one of “the worst parts of Guatemalan history,” Nuestro Futuro students explained that he was terrible “because he invaded Guatemalan lands,” equating Guatemala, a postcolonial construct, with precolonial Maya territory in a way that students in the other cases did not.

Beyond this identification with the precolonial Maya, Nuestro Futuro’s curriculum and educational practices included a focus on remembering injustices suffered by the Indigenous community throughout time. “They [the teachers] teach them [the students] about the political situation,” said Sonia, director of the nonprofit organization that ran the school, describing the school’s history curriculum. They teach the students how people [the ruling elite], to keep power, used mechanisms to pacify the population from very early. They took grandparents to work on farms, indebted them. [They teach about] the role that other states have played in financing this situation. This year, they used two texts, one in [the Indigenous language], about the Maya community, the history of [the community].

Living amid inequalities rooted in historical structures of oppression, the school’s Indigenous educators created materials to supplant a national curriculum that did not, in their estimation, meet their students’ needs to understand their history.

Indigenous Language and Culture

To fulfill the mandate in the Accord on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples for the “recognition, respect and promotion of indigenous cultural values,” the CNB called for schools to include instruction in Indigenous language and culture and to promote multiculturalism (del Valle Escalante, 2009; Tetzaguic & Grigsby, 2004; United Nations General Assembly, 1995). While these edicts were fundamental to the demands of
Looking out at a large group of boys playing soccer on the dirt plaza that served as a field, Profe Pedro described El Básico’s surrounding village:

This is a highly Indigenous community where the population is descended from the Maya-Kaqchikel culture. I’m sure you’ve noticed the typical dress—a very colorful huipil, with various drawings, designs that represent what the ancestors said—the flora, the fauna, the green that represents the hope of the Maya people. And also the skirt that goes down to the ankles.

Relationships to Indigenous customs and language were complex. In Profe Pedro’s view, traditional dress “was being lost” to the conventions of Western attire in light of the labor required for huipil production and the value of huipiles in the tourist market. He pointed to evidence of this shift in the community, where women often wore traditional skirts paired with Western-style t-shirts or blouses.

The relationship to Indigenous language was also complex. In an interview, student Maria condemned the Spanish for taking away Indigenous language, seeing a direct line between colonialism and her personal language loss. Speaking of the Spaniards, she said, “because they came, today we speak Spanish, but before the people spoke Kaqchikel.” Her grandparents spoke Kaqchikel with each other, she explained, but did not teach it to her parents or to her. She enjoyed learning it in school. Language maintenance was variable: In focus groups, some students reported speaking Kaqchikel at home, others Spanish, some described a mix of languages in use.

Profe Pedro offered an example of how distinct orientations to language might arise:

My father spoke it, but my mother was from another place, she didn’t speak Kaqchikel, and when we came here my father was part of the army, my mother took care of us more. Then my father was working, my mother with us, and we didn’t learn to speak Kaqchikel.

Teaching students Kaqchikel was, as intended by the Accords and CNB, a form of cultural “rescue” (rescate), but one that was not always appreciated. “It’s very difficult,” explained Profe Pedro, “because the parents of the family analyze it and say ‘okay, my child, what good will Kaqchikel be to you? Better to learn English because it will open many doors for you.’”

In an interview at Nuestro Futuro, Edelmira expressed a similar ambivalence. Would she teach her Indigenous language to her children when she had them? She explained:
For me, I wouldn’t want to teach them [the Indigenous language] because here in the institute they always use Spanish, . . . so what happened to me when I was a little girl, they didn’t teach me Spanish and now I can’t really pronounce the words.

Rather than focusing on teaching Indigenous language to students who were often fluent in it and wanted to learn Spanish and English, Nuestro Futuro educators infused the curriculum and pedagogy with locally fashioned Indigenous connections. Directora Sonia explained the school’s approach to teaching rural development as “learning about their ancestors’ ways of caring for the earth.” A student explained that the school “taught them the work of the ancestors, customs that we shouldn’t lose.” Agriculture and culture were deeply connected to each other and to Indigenous ancestry. “We should keep working in the fields,” one student explained. “Some [educational] establishments don’t [value] labor, but only study, so students don’t remember how the ancestors worked, what they planted.”

This connection to Indigenous ancestors suffused the school’s teaching methodology. In Nuestro Futuro’s hot and dusty classrooms, young people sat in groups of four—two girls and two boys—around worn plastic picnic tables, discussing photocopied texts. Lead teacher Profe Rolando told me that the seating arrangement came from Maya cosmology, four students representing four directions, four different elements, balancing each other out. “We each have our own way of thinking,” student Jesus explained to me as I watched the class. “We all have our own perspectives and can learn from each other,” another affirmed, interpreting this practice. When Profe Rolando asked the students to explain the school’s values to me, multiple students proclaimed, “respect for the ancianos” (elders). Students’ sense of Indigenous belonging was strong in both of these schools, complex and situated, belying the simplicity of the policy edict to preserve language and culture.

The Armed Conflict

In both schools, teachers went beyond the national curriculum to educate students about the country’s internal armed conflict. El Básico’s Profe Pedro spoke with his class about the recent Rios Montt genocide conviction.

Profe Pedro: The theme is genocide. What would genocide be? To kill, exploit, but a human culture. For example, we’ve heard tell of a German, of the Nazis, of the famous. . .
Jose: Hitler
Profe Pedro: Adolf Hitler. The one that committed genocide against the Jews. Now here in Guatemala it is said that Rios Montt committed genocide against . . .
Inez: The Indigenous.
Profe Pedro: Our Indigenous culture. Our Maya culture, but many say that it wasn’t genocide. But there are three important things that we know to declare genocide.

He explained that killing children, mothers, and elders were fundamental genocidal acts, and all had happened to Indigenous communities during the conflict. “With these requisites we can say that there was genocide in Guatemala,” he concluded, “but we all don’t know this, because they [the authorities] don’t explain it, they don’t tell it. We are here. We come to form ourselves bit by bit, and this is what this course is about.”

In a focus group discussion, El Básico students agreed that the ongoing trial of Efrain Ríos Montt was “good” because as Lilia explained, “he is going to pay for the harm he did to the Indigenous people.” Her classmate Maria appeared to equate national identity with Indigenous identity, explaining, “He’s going to pay for what he did to the Guatemalans, for the massacres he carried out.”

At Nuestro Futuro, study of the armed conflict was an even more explicit part of the curriculum. The school itself was founded by a survivor of a local massacre that took place during the worst years of the war and designed to provide secondary education to the Indigenous descendants of small agricultural villages particularly impacted by the conflict. The school’s unique carrera (career focus) in community and rural development was coupled with an equal emphasis on memoria histórica (historical memory) of the armed conflict. On the second morning of my visit, the school held a ceremony to commemorate the Spanish embassy’s burning in Guatemala City in 1991, an event that killed Rigoberta Menchú’s father. Students convened on the playing field, standing in a circle around a candle- and flower-covered altar. Each grade came forward, sharing reflections and offerings. A procession followed, then a prayer. Directora Sonia confirmed the centrality of such events in the school’s curriculum. The educators did not want students to forget “the history,” she said. “It is painful but important.” Historical memory, she explained, echoing Profe Pedro, is “knowing the historical truth. State sponsored education never gives it.”

In a focus group, Nuestro Futuro students chose a photo of the signing of the Peace Accords as an image of one of most important moments in Guatemalan history. “We chose the signing of the Firm and Lasting Peace Accords,” they explained, “because this was a new concept for Guatemala . . . because before then, there were a lot of wars, there were genocides.” Although they noted that violence was still a problem in the country, students credited the Accords for bringing an end to massive, state-sponsored violence that had directly impacted their community, saying, “before they signed the peace [accords] there was a lot of violence in Guatemala and
they [the government] didn’t respect the laws, but since they signed it everything has changed.”

At these schools, locally fashioned approaches directly addressing issues of history and injustice supplanted the CNB’s emphasis on the promotion of a globalized version of multicultural, democratic citizenship. By writing their own textbook and engaging in blunt conversation about the treatment of Indigenous Guatemalans during the armed conflict, these educational communities crafted approaches to civic learning that were rooted in their sense of belonging to a community situated amid historically imbalanced structures of power.

“The War Is Over Already”: Nostalgia and Distancing in Affluent Ladino Settings

The private academies El Colegio and El Internacional make up the second case. On the similarly green, spacious, and conspicuously guarded campuses of these two schools, neatly uniformed students played on manicured fields set amid tidy buildings. In El Colegio’s light-filled classrooms, open lockers showed multiple textbooks, notebooks, and other materials; at El Internacional, a stack of iPads waited on a desk, ready to be borrowed by students. Focused on students’ English language learning, teachers at El Colegio used Spanish as the primary language of instruction with daily classes to learn spoken and written English. At El Internacional, English was the primary language of instruction, although most of the students spoke Spanish at home. Neither school had any students who identified as Indigenous. The teachers at both schools wore Western-style dress, with the exception of the Indigenous language teacher at El Colegio, who came to the school no more than once a month.

In these settings, students and their teachers expressed distance from the past and from their Indigenous co-citizens and identification with the class benefiting from the repressive conditions of the armed conflict. Students spoke nostalgically of that era as a time of security, seeing the Rios Montt trial as a step backward for national progress. The social studies curriculum in these schools, emphasizing “balance” and presenting a Maya history that blended fact, myth, and omission, tended to confirm these views.

National History

Standing in his sun-filled classroom, Profe Diaz, El Colegio’s social science and citizenship development teacher, lectured to his group of ten 16- and 17-year-olds, presenting a description of Spanish colonialism quite different in tone from the El Básico version. Elaborating on the thin textbook account, Profe Diaz said,
The issue was this, it was the thinking of the time. First of all, the Spanish came with the understanding that they were “chosen by god” to Catholicize the Indigenous, so the Spaniard truly believed in his divine right to do what he did. For them it wasn’t bad. They had the firm idea that god had designated them conquistadors and converters of the Indigenous. So, with this thinking you are obviously not going to go down a different path, you are really stuck in the Catholic faith. This was the problem.

It was a rational explanation, told with some degree of sympathy for those who suffered at the hands of the stubbornly religious Spanish, but concluding with the relativistic notion that the conquerors were merely products of their time. Distinct from the tales of Spanish trickery and Indigenous destruction (“assassinating our culture,” “they stole everything”) shared by Indigenous students and educators, this version of the conquest was devoid of direct identification with any of the players.

Victoria, sitting in the front row, iPad in hand, dragged the discussion into the present, identifying the coloniality of power at play. “If that hadn’t happened, we wouldn’t be where we are now. Do you understand me? It definitely would have been very different.” Profe Diaz built on her remark, connecting the colonial past to the divided present and placing himself and his students firmly on one side of this divide. “The Indigenous in our country are still resentful of the Whites. . . . They bow their heads when someone like us comes by, and they talk softly. There are some that still say ‘patroncito’ [little boss].” El Colegio students belonged to “the Whites,” clearly divided from the beleaguered and embittered Indigenous. Like that of the educators at El Básico and Nuestro Futuro, Profe Diaz’s instruction placed his students amid the coloniality of power, but on a different part of the spectrum.

Indigenous Language and Culture

In a primary grade Kaqchikel class, all of the school’s younger students, from kindergarten through third grade, gathered under the canopy of the outdoor eating area. Sitting on neatly arranged metal folding chairs, a television placed on a stand at the front, the teacher addressed the group, asking, "Who are the Maya?" A student raised his hand, saying, "They are the people who lived before." "Yes!" she confirmed enthusiastically, as she started playing an animated version of the Maya origin myth "Men of Corn."

While the school’s youngest students fulfilled their Indigenous language requirement by learning about the Maya as an ancient, essentialized, and even mythical people, a modern Kaqchikel woman confronted the older students with the origin of the country’s current inequalities. Señor Hortencia, leading one of the infrequent Kaqchikel workshops and dressed in her village’s vibrant purple, pink, and green huipil, started class with a Maya spiritual invocation.13 She then directly confronted her room full of 14-year-old
Ladinos. “Why do you think there are majestic temples in Antigua? Whose work was that?” Speaking of the destruction of Maya documents during the conquest, she told the students, “If we had all of these documents, we’d have a different story, not of the Niña, Pínta, Santa María, but that the Spaniards came and un montón [a heap] of people died.” Students appeared both shocked and interested in this different version of history.

At El Colegio, students took the CNB-mandated Indigenous language class in the form of a “workshop” on culture given “every other month or so,” according to the director. Asked why they did not teach the local Indigenous language, he replied,

> Why don’t we teach Kaqchikel? It is a good question. But our students come from various places; the majority of them don’t have an ethnic origin, so we think it isn’t necessary to learn the language. They are Ladinos, so it is better to give them a general vision of Maya culture than to make them learn a language that perhaps isn’t their own and isn’t going to be very useful.

For the director, his Ladino students were not “ethnic” and thus had no use for the local Indigenous tongue. A “general vision of Maya culture” would suffice, leaving time for students to focus on learning English.

El Internacional students—although most were Guatemalan citizens and subject to the same national mandate—did not even have this limited exposure to Indigenous language and culture. Ms. Clara reflected,

> I think we are better in teaching kids to be citizens of the world than we are at teaching kids to be citizens of Guatemala. Our curriculum has no place for learning the [Guatemalan] customs, languages, and traditions. I think we are much better at world history.

In a focus group, when asked if they learned about Indigenous culture at school, a student answered the question in relation to the ancient Maya rather than their contemporary descendants,

> Not really. We learn more about Semana Santa, the marimba [Catholic and secular national traditions], but they don’t talk about the Maya culture, and sometimes what they say isn’t true . . . they haven’t changed [the curriculum] in years and sometimes there are things that don’t make sense at all.

Exposure to the Maya was limited to a brief and not particularly accurate study of pre-Columbian people. Yet many El Colegio and El Internacional students were intrigued by and proud of the ancient Maya. Many selected an image of Tikal, an archeological site of an ancient Mayan city, as one of the most important things in Guatemalan history. Many of these Ladino students wore Maya zodiac signs. One 15-year-old girl studied what she described as “Maya shamanism.”
Despite this respect for the ancient Maya, students at these schools saw themselves as belonging to a group distinct from their contemporary Indigenous co-citizens. An El Internacional student, speaking about Indigenous weaving in a focus group, explained “you always see it in the streets.” “They are selling their stuff,” added another. “They don’t have anything else to do with their lives,” a third contributed, pronouns indicating lack of common identity with these fellow citizens. Indigenous people were, in their view, educational and appropriate for tourism. “In Antigua [a popular site for tourism] you see a lot of them, because of tourism,” explained one student. “Every time you go to Pana [Panajachel, a tourist spot popular with foreigners and affluent Guatemalans] there are people who dress like that, and they teach us the culture.” In a focus group, El Colegio students selected an image of the garbage dump in Guatemala city and of an Indigenous woman cooking on a wood burning stove to illustrate what they felt were some of the biggest problems facing the country: poverty and the Indigenous birth rate. “They have up to 12 or 13 children,” said Melisa, “they don’t think about how they are going to support all the creatures they have . . . this [is] what has brought Guatemala to have an extreme population.” This apartness was not neutral but had negative connotations. “I don’t think anybody would be proud to say they have Indigenous blood,” said Ms. Clara. “There is still a stigma here; the kids insult each other by using the term Indio. It’s still an insult. No one would say, ‘oh you know I have Kaqchikel blood in me,’ it’s not a point of pride.”

The Armed Conflict

These students’ and educators’ historical memory of the armed conflict was completely different from that of students and teachers in El Básico and Nuestro Futuro. According to Profe Diaz, “The armed conflict doesn’t interest them because . . . it is very distant for them. It didn’t affect us directly, including me as a teacher, it didn’t affect me either.” Educators and students in these settings strove for equivalency when discussing the armed conflict. In a focus group, students selected an image of the signing of the 1996 Accords in response to a question about the most important events in Guatemalan history. César explained the selection, saying, “Because it brought peace between two cultural groups, the guerillas and the government.” This notion of two equal sides was the official stance of the school. “It is good that the student has the two versions, really,” said El Colegio’s director. “For example, now we have the genocide case of Rios Montt. We have to be aware that the army carried out crimes, but also that the guerillas did the same; we have to have the two points of view.” These views were consistent with textbook accounts minimizing detail and apportioning equal blame for the conflict.

Students at El Internacional, responding to an image of Efrain Rios Montt, spoke in focus groups about the genocide charges against him.
“Really there wasn’t genocide in Guatemala,” said David. “There wasn’t genocide; I feel that they are only judging one side. They aren’t doing anything to the guerillas,” echoed Diana. In contrast with Profe Pedro of El Básico’s invocation of the Holocaust, an El Colegio student explained, “Everyone compares Hitler and Ríos Montt, but he never discriminated against the Indigenous like that.” Ana agreed, saying, “Maybe they are saying that he committed genocide, but they didn’t exactly exterminate the Indigenous race because there are still a lot of them.”

Students felt the Peace Accords should have put an end to the issue of the armed conflict, questioning recent attempts to prosecute war criminals. “If they are going to try Ríos Montt,” said César at El Colegio, “they should also try Rigoberta Menchu, because when they signed the Peace Accords they said that it [the armed conflict] was erased.” “It supposedly ended the guerillas, there was an erasure and a new beginning, supposedly.” It should be, “a new beginning for Guatemala.” “The war is over already,” said Mateo, frustrated with the trial. Indigenous people were “not respecting what this peace signing was.” Francisco from El Internacional complained, “I think people should move on already.” Not seeing a direct connection between themselves and this history, students were eager to relegate it to the past.

Students’ historical memories of the time of the armed conflict, derived from family talk and story, were at odds with those of their Indigenous peers. It was unclear to them that this was a better time for the country. El Colegio students spoke about this animatedly in focus groups, responding to an image of a group of gang members that they selected as one of the problems they felt their country faced. “My mother told me that maybe it was better before because there wasn’t delinquency.” “Before there weren’t gangs.” “My mother told me that when there was the general [Ríos Montt], the violence was totally reduced because there were punishments. If someone robbed, they’d cut off a finger.” “My grandparents said that before everything was safer, that you could be in the street and there wasn’t danger that they would assault you or rob you.” El Internacional’s Francisco echoed this in an interview, explaining

My mom says it was safer [before] than today. Now violence is everywhere. Pérez Molina [current president] said he would reduce violence; that’s why everybody voted for him, he was a [member of the] military and Guatemala used to function well when the military ruled. It was when we changed to another approach that everything got bad. He’s from the army so people thought it would be like in the old times when we were safe.

The military government “was kind of extreme, but it worked.” Expressing nostalgia for those years, these students identified not with those who were the victims of military violence but with those who benefited from the oppressive regime.
Operating within an affluent, Ladino context, El Colegio students’ understandings of civic issues were marked by privilege. Señor Isabel, who taught a course focused on civic research and action, reflected, “they live in a bubble and they don’t know what Guatemala is like.” Profe Díaz hoped to “open their eyes” so that

at least they can have a little more consciousness of what the situation is in our country, the economy, the society . . . that at least they have a little bit of a notion and aren’t enclosed in a fantasy bubble.

Despite educational policies oriented toward ending civic discord, with little in the curriculum to challenge their worldview, these students’ historical memories put the armed conflict in the remote past. Belonging to a different Guatemala from that of their Indigenous peers, El Internacional and El Colegio students had different readings of the pervasive inequalities shaping their country.

“We All Come From the Maya”: Crafting a New National Imaginary in an Integrated School

The third and final case is El Instituto. The open-air courtyard of this public secondary institute for girls was paved with clean, worn concrete and ringed by an equally clean and worn tiled walkway. Large numbers of girls, seated in old wooden desks, flowed out of the crowded classrooms surrounding the courtyard. A bell rang, and girls filled the courtyard. The majority wore uniforms, a substantial minority wore traditional Indigenous dress, both skirt and huipil. Teachers wore Western-style clothing, except for the Indigenous language teacher. In this integrated setting, Indigenous and Ladina working-class students expressed belonging to a transhistorical Maya people, engaged with the challenging aspects of the country’s history, and formed friendships across ethnic divides.

National History

Profe Carlos, one of the school’s directors, described the history curriculum at El Instituto, which included “the discovery of the Americas, the conquest, the pre-Columbian era, colonial times.” In a focus group, students shared a similar conquest narrative to that of the students in El Básico and Nuestro Futuro. “There was gold here, and in exchange for the gold they gave the Maya mirrors,” one student explained, responding to an image of the conquistador Pedro Alvarado, selected by the group to represent an important event in Guatemala’s history. “Maybe because they didn’t have the knowledge, they didn’t know what a mirror was so they were surprised, and they gave the gold to the Spaniards.” This was the origin of the country’s poverty: “Because of this Guatemala was left without gold; they came and took it all away.”
The students also studied the armed conflict and Indigenous oppression. They had read *La Hija del Pluma*, a book about the armed conflict told from the point of view of an Indigenous girl who fled her village to take refuge in Mexico, and they had learned about Rigoberta Menchu (Zak, 1986). “She was an exemplary woman,” one student reflected, selecting Menchu’s image as one of the things that made them most proud to be Guatemalan, “because despite being Indigenous—and the majority thought that the Indigenous couldn’t do anything and were lesser than everyone else—she demonstrated the opposite.” Girls in another focus group discussed the woman they fondly called “La Menchu,” selecting an image of Rigoberta Menchu accepting the Nobel Peace Prize to indicate one of the most important moments in Guatemalan history. “She won the Nobel Prize,” she was an inspiration because “she suffered during the war.” “She stood out, despite being a woman,” “and despite being Indigenous,” “and despite being poor.”

Both Profe Carlos and Seño Flor, the Kaqchikel teacher, noted that students also studied what the latter called “today’s social problems.” They displayed a more pointed social class analysis than did their peers at many of the other schools. One student explained, “We were talking about social classes, then she [the teacher] said that the elite class were nine families that joined together in a society, and they had the most power.” Another added, “We say that the children of the owners, when they intend to marry it is only with families of the same level.”

This economic critique extended to politics, as the girls considered an image of the president at that time, Otto Perez Molina, selected in response to a question about the biggest problems facing the country.14 “Otto Perez Molina,” a student began, “he said that he was going to end the violence or diminish it and no.” “It’s worse,” agreed another. “Many people say that he is in favor of the upper class . . . because he always appears at events with people who have a lot of money.” They connected money to politics, saying,

There are some parties that go to the left and others that go to the right. He went with the parties of the right, the rich people. Since the beginning we knew that he would go with the rich people.

They linked these class divisions to the country’s identity-based divisions. In a mixed group of Indigenous and Ladina students, one explained, “Otto Perez Molina won in Guatemala [the capital], but in all of the [other] departments he didn’t win because of the Indigenous people; the Indigenous people didn’t want him. I believe that they knew his history.” Indigenous and Ladina students alike at this school displayed a critical and engaged citizenship that took history and identity into account in their analysis and discussions of the country’s civic issues.
Indigenous Language and Culture

Despite the curricular focus on language as a means of cultural preservation, for many girls at El Instituto, indigeneity was not identical to the mastery of a language they did not speak. In an interview, Jenifer explained,

When my uncles wanted to learn Kaqchikel he [her grandfather] didn’t let them because he said that they lived 20 kilometers from the capital [where Spanish dominates] and they didn’t need to use the language. They understand it, but they didn’t learn to speak. My mother speaks a little, but not 100 percent. My grandmother yes. . . . My grandfather spoke Kaqchikel, but he had the thought that we didn’t need to use the language anymore. Besides, I think he had seen a lot of discrimination if you used the language.

Vilma, when interviewed, described a similar process of language loss due to fear and discrimination:

I speak Spanish, my grandparents and my parents speak Kaqchikel. What happened is that when my grandfather was alive, he didn’t want our parents to teach us because our grandparents were afraid that they were going to do something to us, because of speaking our language, so we lost this opportunity. I would have liked to have really learned it. But they didn’t teach it to us and now we realize that it would have helped us a lot. Because of this, they ask us “are you Ladinos?” I can’t say yes; I don’t hide my family. I’m proud to be Kaqchikel although I don’t speak it, but I’m proud that my parents can speak it.

At El Instituto, all of the students studied the local Indigenous language for a full year as a regular class that met several times weekly. "It’s a rescue," said Seño Flor, a Kaqchikel woman who each day wore a huipil from a different village. She explained that while many of the students were Indigenous, most did not speak Kaqchikel. She herself had learned the language as an adult.

There are a lot [of students] in traditional dress and they identify as Kaqchikel when they are asked to identify themselves on the form. . . . So some put that they are Kaqchikel, but there are others who are and they don't want to put it down.

In her class, she taught greetings, vocabulary, songs, and tongue twisters; students did creative projects and studied the customs of different Indigenous villages.

During one of these presentations, a student, barefoot and dressed in traditional dress for the community that she was describing (although she may have identified as Ladina), stood on the wooden teacher’s podium at the front of the class, explaining the meaning of the colors in her huipil. “The black is for the land, the blue is the sky and water. Orange for
corn.” A second girl held up posters of people wearing Western clothes, explaining that Indigenous people were losing their clothing traditions, wearing both casual and formal (Western attire), depending on the occasion, because handwoven traditional dress could be more expensive than Western clothes and many employers required their employees to wear uniforms. In another presentation, a student expressed a connection with the Maya that was frequently made at El Instituto as she explained her huipil, saying, “The figures in the huipil, they now say that they mean nothing, but each one, each one had meaning to our ancestors.”

El Instituto students displayed the fluidity and complexity of ethnic identification in modern Guatemala. For some students, to say Guatemalan was equivalent to saying Indigenous. Teresita, who wore traditional Indigenous dress to school, explained in an interview:

“It is the same, Guatemalan and Indigenous.”
“What about Ladinos?” I ask.
“They are also Guatemalans but they don’t use traditional dress but rather they use pants or skirts, but they continue being Guatemalan by our form of speaking, by our form of being; above all we are *chapines* [the colloquial term for Guatemalans].”
“What is *chapín* for you?”
“It is to say Guatemalans in the heart . . . if you are from here, from Guatemala you can use it.”

Carolina described El Instituto, in an interview, as a diverse mix of students, in which she greatly valued her Indigenous friends, saying,

Here there are thousands of women, they come from different places. I am Ladina but I like to share more with the Indigenous people because they are more respectful, they stand up for what they want, they fight for what they want, they don’t leave one at the last minute, for friendship they are very agreeable.

Hedy reflected on ethnicity a bit differently in her interview, invoking dress and rights.

Here the majority of us are Ladinas who don’t wear Indigenous dress, but there are some that wear typical dress and it is very nice to share with them. There are people that say that they [the Indigenous] are less than us because of this [their dress] but it isn’t so. There isn’t a difference between the groups because they have the same rights as us. They dress differently, but they are equal.

These girls distinguished themselves from their Indigenous classmates but expressed respect, camaraderie, and adherence to a tolerant multiculturalism similar to that found in the CNB.
Some blurred these lines further, broadening notions of indigeneity or, more commonly, Mayanicity, to include both Ladino and Indigenous people. In an interview with Bianca, a Ladina-identified girl, she explained,

To be Guatemalan is to be born in Guatemala. To love the country. I think that yes, we are all Indigenous, because this is where the Maya were born. So we are all Indigenous, but we don’t all wear typical dress. And some don’t have Indigenous last names. . . . I think we all are [Maya]. As here was the Maya race, so in a certain way they were part of us, of our ancestors.

Profe Carlos, a Ladino himself, agreed with this idea, telling me in an interview that “Ladino or Indigenous, they are the terms [used to classify students] but we all come from the Maya.” In this setting, young people were engaging directly with complex ideas of ethnicity and belonging, and although their efforts were not always logically coherent—or were even, at times, essentialized and static—they attempted to articulate the relationship between different forms of identity and forge a new, if messy, understanding of Guatemalan belonging.

The Armed Conflict

Unlike their peers at El Colegio and El Internacional but much like those at El Básico and Nuestro Futuro, El Instituto students agreed that Ríos Montt should be tried for genocide. In a focus group, students segued from their selection of an image of the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords as one of the most important moments in Guatemala’s history into a discussion of the ongoing trial. “Yes, and supposedly it wasn’t genocide, but who knows. In my personal opinion I believe that it was genocide,” said a student. “Yes, yes it was genocide,” agreed another. “We didn’t live it, but maybe our families,” a third concurred. One girl shared how the army abducted her uncle and forced him to fight, a common occurrence in poor, rural areas. Another described a nighttime raid on her family home.

In these students’ estimations, things had clearly changed since those times. A student explained, “Now it isn’t like before. If someone spoke about this [the armed conflict], they would go to the people and pull them away and kill them at once. Now, it is all more liberal.” Profe Carlos confirmed this, describing the disappearance of politically active students while he attended the country’s main public university during that time period. Some were more critical, however. “Supposedly Guatemala has peace,” one student said, in a focus group, “but in reality we can say that there isn’t peace, because they are still killing people, right? A lot of us say that the Peace Accords are only a piece of paper, because there isn’t peace now.” Acknowledging the irony of claiming peace amid the current violence, El Instituto students both condemned the past and critiqued the
An awareness of economic inequality may have undergirded the shared, if complex, sense of national belonging expressed in this integrated setting, where students learned together about local Indigenous traditions and engaged, to a certain extent, with the country’s difficult history.

Conclusions

In this study, young people’s expressions of belonging and interpretations of history did not map neatly onto notions of liberal, democratic citizenship promoted by globalized policy discourses. Students “form[ed]” themselves civically, “bit by bit,” within their schools and communities, amid the curriculum brought to them by their teachers, in many cases only marginally influenced by the CNB. In each of these settings, young Guatemalans and their teachers grappled with the legacies of conquest, structural inequality, and violent conflict from particular positions within the country’s persistently unequal economic and political structures, complicating the notion that a “tolerant,” “democratic,” and “peaceful” citizen could be created through a curricular approach that avoided engagement with the specifics of Guatemalan history and society.

Civic identity is far more complex in real life than it appears in policy documents. “Caught in a swirl of historical change,” writes Luykx (1996), students “attempt to forge a coherent identity from subject positions which recent shifts in their nation’s class/race structure have brought into unprecedented conjunction” (p. 264). El Básico’s Profe Pedro voiced his community’s ambivalence toward learning their heritage language when in a globalized economy, mastery of English was quite valuable. El Instituto’s Seño Flor signaled her commitment to teaching Indigenous language and culture by wearing traditional clothing from a variety of villages, a self-authored display of belonging extending beyond her particular community of origin. Students at El Colegio and El Internacional distanced themselves from contemporary Indigenous Guatemalans but spoke highly of the precolonial Mesoamericans who had peopled the area. At Nuestro Futuro, students sat in groups of four, repurposing ancient tropes. Memory and belonging are essential components of identity, but they continually shift and cannot be described simply or translated easily into particular forms of education. Civic identity is complex and co-constructed by youth and educators in particular communities; civic education must be built with this in mind.

These cases point to some ways forward. Working with scant resources, educators at Nuestro Futuro created a curriculum that directly engaged the past and positioned their impoverished, rural students as environmental stewards and community leaders. Innovative pedagogical approaches, seen as embedded in ancient traditions, met modern needs as young people learned to engage with each other and value listening and difference. The Kaqchikel workshop at El Colegio, in which the teacher directly confronted...
young people with how they themselves benefited from the legacy of the colonial past, hints at an approach that could be extended to help affluent youth reach new understandings of the inequalities that shape the lives of their Indigenous and low-income peers. Studying local Indigenous culture together and looking critically at the country’s political and economic institutions helped El Instituto students from different ethnic backgrounds find common ground.

Such practices indicate that the most powerful approaches may be those that build on local histories, challenge young people to confront their own places within the structure of the society, and foster critical analysis and communication across difference. Dyrness (2012) describes an action research project in which students from a poor and violent community in El Salvador investigate inequality, the rights of citizens and migration, conducting original research within their own community. Similar to findings from studies of youth action research in the United States (e.g., Cammarota & Fine, 2008), she concludes, “opportunity to explore disjunctures in citizenship, particularly the experience of inequality and marginalization in the context of global migration, can be a powerful stimulus for the development of democratically oriented civic identities” (Dyrness, 2012, 57). Engagement with critical social issues through discussion, writing, research, and expressive projects allows students to place themselves in the center of the civic life of their society, assessing their place within it, connecting past to present, and potentially reconceptualizing themselves as civic actors (Abu El-Haj, 2009; Rubin, 2012).

The civic reconstruction of societies torn by conflict is an international concern, and education is frequently envisioned as a key tool for civic transformation in such nations. “Across the world,” Steiner-Khamsi, Torney-Purta, and Schwille (2002) write, “attempts are being made to prepare adolescents for a political and economic order that is shifting” (p. 4). Although unique, there is much in the Guatemalan case that could be used to inform civic education efforts in other societies. Belonging, historical memory, and structural inequality are strong forces across the globe. More accurately identifying these threads in current debates in the United States, for example, might help “revitalize our own efforts at citizenship education for democracy” (B. Levinson, 2005, p. 337). Listening to the voices of young people and their teachers complicates understandings of civic identity but also provides the insight we need to construct civic education efforts that might engage more fully with students’ complex civic selves amid the communities and histories that form them.

Notes

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assistance with data collection, Matilde Ivic Monterrosa for insight, and Thea Abu El-Haj and Reva Jaffe-Walter for helpful feedback. Unless otherwise indicated, the author has translated from Spanish into English all language from individuals, policy documents, and curricular materials quoted in this manuscript.

1During the time of this data collection effort, former president and general Efrain Rios Montt was on trial for genocide of the Ixil Mayan people in the western highlands of Guatemala during in the early 1980s. He was convicted in May 2013, but the conviction was overturned later that month. His retrial began in January 2015. Pseudonyms are used for all people, institutions, and places mentioned in this manuscript. Indigenous (indígena) is the term commonly used in Guatemala to refer to people of Maya ancestry. Between 40% and 60% of Guatemalans consider themselves to be Indigenous, many speaking 1 of the 21 different languages that evolved from a common language spoken about 4,000 years ago (French, 2010).

2Ladino is the term commonly used in Guatemala to refer to Spanish-speaking people with European (mainly Spanish) or mixed ancestry. Unlike the term mestizo (commonly used in Mexico), it does not reference ethnic mixing but rather linguistic assimilation. Hale (2006) notes, “Ladinos are heterogeneous but generally dominant in relation to the indigenous [sic] majority” (p. 3).

3Guatemala’s Truth Commission, the Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, documents the state’s overwhelming responsibility for human rights abuses committed during the armed conflict (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, 1999).

4Freedman, Weinstein, Murphy, and Longman (2008) list Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Germany, Guatemala, Japan, Northern Ireland, and Rwanda as places where educational change has “been expected to lay the foundation for social reconstruction, a better future, and a lasting peace” (p. 663). Levine and Bishai (2010) explore this phenomenon in a 2010 U.S. Institute of Peace report on Iraq and Sudan. A review article by Quaynor (2011) adds Lebanon, Indonesia, Laos, Argentina, Peru, Columbia, Cyprus, and Mozambique to this list, and Tawil and Harley’s (2004) UNESCO project report adds Sri Lanka.

5For example, the textbook Ciencias Sociales y Formación Ciudadana (Fundación para el Enaltecimento de la Herencia Cutural de Guatemala, 2012) has one paragraph on the conflict and four pages on the details of the Peace Accords. Integral Área Humanística (Santillana, 2010) dedicates almost 20 pages to the U.N.’s human development index.

6Guatemala is divided into 22 departments, akin to states in the United States. This department, home to over 250,000 people, contained cities, villages, and rural areas.

7For financial reasons, it is common for teachers in Guatemala to teach in two different schools, one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

8Examples of images: the country’s current president, a Maya archeological site, an Indigenous woman weaving, a national fried chicken franchise, political graffiti, a garbage dump, police, Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu, a luxury shopping center, the Peace Accords. Examples of protocol questions: “which five images represent what makes you most proud to be Guatemalan,” “which five represent the biggest challenges facing the country,” “select all of the images of things you have studied in school.”

9Kaqchikel, spoken in the El Básico community, is one of the larger linguistic Indigenous groups in Guatemala, with around 450,000 speakers. The linguistic group served by Nuestro Futuro is quite small, and therefore I have omitted its name to preserve the anonymity of the participants. All interview and focal group participants in these sites were either monolingual Spanish speakers or bilingual speakers of Spanish and the local Indigenous language. Interviews, observations, and focus groups in these sites were conducted in Spanish.

10A huipil is a traditional, handwoven, and embroidered blouse worn by many Indigenous women in Mesoamerica. In Guatemala, huipiles in each Indigenous community have distinct colors and designs, all with symbolic meaning.

11Profe, short for Professor, is a commonly used honorific for male teachers.

12Nuestro Futuro, a public school, was founded by a Guatemalan nonprofit organization.

13Señor, short for Señora, is a commonly used honorific for female teachers.
In September 2015, after months of street protests involving tens of thousands of citizens, Otto Perez Molina resigned his presidency. He was immediately jailed and as of the writing of this article is facing charges in multi-million dollar customs fraud case (Ahmed & Malkin, 2015).

References


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