Learning the Colonial Past in a Colonial Present: Students and Teachers Confront the Spanish Conquest in Post-Conflict Guatemala

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In Guatemala, three centuries after Spanish conquest and in the wake of more than three decades of internal conflict, the framers of the 1996 Accord for a Firm and Lasting Peace placed educational reform at the center of efforts to make peace with this contentious past. This article, based on a multisite qualitative study, describes how Guatemalan teachers, working within an ostensibly standardized national curriculum aimed at creating a common historical narrative, differed in their presentation of Spanish colonialism. In the social studies classrooms of two different settings, a private school serving affluent Ladino students and a public school serving low-income indigenous students, young people constructed *usable pasts* amid distinct approaches to this era. In the first, a static, fixed version of colonial history distanced these young people from their indigenous co-citizens; students described the colonial era as part of a completed and distant past. In the second classroom, the teacher framed colonialism as an enduring part of students’ lives; students articulated the continued reach of the colonial era through language loss, structural inequality, and cultural devaluation. In this postconflict setting, curricular attempts to use historical study to create a new, unified, national identity were met with local challenges embedded in distinct historical memories.

Remember that Spain didn’t send an army to America. That it was simply people who were deciding to come to win a fortune, some sort of life. (Profe Diaz, 1 Ladino teacher at a Guatemalan private school)

They came and killed. They murdered the pueblo. They took it and claimed it for Spain. (Profe Pedro, indigenous teacher at a Guatemalan public school)
In his interpretation of his country’s colonial history, Guatemalan historian Severo Martínez Peláez argues that the “colonial reality remains a pivotal frame of reference” (1970/2009, p. 280). Three hundred years after Spain conquered the region, in the wake of more than 3 decades of brutal civil war, the writers of the internationally sanctioned Accord for a Firm and Lasting Peace sought to make peace with this contentious past, calling for a series of educational reforms to mend the undeniable rift between indigenous and Ladino-defined citizens. The resulting Curriculum Nacional Base (CNB) proclaimed that an understanding of the past was fundamental to the process of reconciliation.

Yet, as the words of the social studies teachers previously quoted indicate, the sense made of this colonial past varies widely across Guatemalan classrooms. In affluent, El Colegio, Profe Díaz presented the invading Spaniards as private citizens seeking a better life. Meanwhile, in indigenous El Básico, Profe Pedro bluntly voiced a distinct perspective on the conquest—one of murder and territorial displacement linked to contemporary struggles for postconflict reconciliation. Analysis of data collected in a variety of school settings indicates that “the coloniality of power” (Quijano, 2000, p. 569)—persistent racism, discrimination, and economic and racial inequality, which are legitimated through the cooptation of structures of common sense and the hegemony of Eurocentric epistemologies—continues to shape Guatemalan students’ understandings of the colonial past. This article compares this phenomenon in two distinct settings, El Colegio and El Básico, to illustrate how students’ and teachers’ positions within societies marked by structural racism and inequality shape their coconstruction of what Barton and Levstik (1998) have termed “usable pasts,” or the ways in which students draw upon the historical past as they make meaning of their lives and of contemporary events.

This article describes how two Guatemalan social studies teachers, working within a common national curriculum, treated the Spanish conquest and its aftermath. One presented a colonial history—“the study of the history of European hardship and progress” the other a history of colonialism—“narratives of injustice” (Newbery, 2012, p. 32). Their students, in turn, marshalled the history of the conquest and colonial era to form “usable pasts” (Barton & Levstik, 1998). Based on a subset of the data from a multisite ethnography, this article seeks to answer two questions:

1. How do Guatemalan teachers within historically and demographically distinct school communities approach the teaching of history, and the colonial era in particular, within the contours of the national curriculum?

2. What sort of usable pasts do students emerge with, and what are the implications of these understandings to their interpretations of contemporary social phenomena?

By comparing instruction in two Guatemalan settings, we consider how history education unfolds amid distinct social, economic and cultural contexts, with particular emphasis on teachers’ and students’ interpretation of colonialism and its legacies. Although we cannot extrapolate from these two cases to make assertions about history education across the country, this examination provides insight into the profoundly situated nature of historical understanding.

**SITUATING THE STUDY: COLONIALITY AND POST-CONFLICT HISTORY EDUCATION**

In this background section, we apply the concept of coloniality to the Guatemalan context and consider its relevance for post-conflict history education in that country. We also describe the
notion of usable pasts and narrative schema as ways of conceptualizing the historical understandings that emerge from the complex tangle of educational reform enacted within a colonial present.

Coloniality and the Colonial Present

In 1524, Pedro de Alvarado led the forces that came to be known as the Spanish conquest of Guatemala (Lovell, 1988). The indigenous people of Central America, devastated through outbreaks of disease, and facing off against the superiority of Spanish weaponry, were brutally, albeit unevenly, brought under Spanish control as the empire reorganized space, founding towns and villages to control the population and establishing an *encomienda* system where wealthy Spaniards held indigenous communities in servitude under an exploitative tribute and labor system (Lovell, 1988). When Guatemala gained independence from Spain in 1821, the constant power struggle between liberal and conservative factions further complicated the relationship that indigenous Guatemalans had to the state, especially as the Liberal Reforms of the 1870s subdivided native lands that had previously been communally held (Lovell, 1988).

In the mid-1950s, the government of the democratically elected Jacobo Arbenz made an effort to address the pervasive inequalities that reached back to colonial structures through land reform legislation. Unpopular with multinational corporate interests, Arbenz’s overthrow in a US-sponsored coup sowed the seeds for a protracted armed conflict that pitted left-leaning, mostly indigenous, insurgents against a militarized state that sought to root out an internal threat that was often couched in racial and ideological terms. The 30-year armed conflict, ending with the 1996 Peace Accords, left more than 200,000 people dead or disappeared (Commission for Historical Clarification, 1999).

Though the colonial period itself roughly spanned from Pedro de Alvarado’s conquest campaign in 1524 to independence from Spain in 1821, scholars, drawing on Marxist and post-colonial theory, have argued that colonial structures and practices established in the colonial era proved to be durable, as they were modified, yet mostly maintained even through independence, liberal reform, and US intervention. For Martínez Peláez, the residual effects of the colonial era are exemplified in contemporary understandings of Indian culture as being subordinate to the culture of Ladinos, which Martínez Peláez argues is a “colonial product” (1970/2009, p. 291), and in the durability of a feudal colonial regime, whose social striation is a persistent characteristic of Guatemalan life. Quijano (2000) too, points to these twinned concepts in the Latin American experience—economic exploitation and racism—as elements of the lived dimensions of what he calls “coloniality of power,” an enduring structure that serves to perpetuate a social and cultural caste system and harness it in the service of a global capitalist economy.

Although this exploitation has material dimensions (e.g., capitalist production and consumption and the conditions of labor), it also perpetuates the “colonial and epistemological violence” (Lander, cited in del Valle Escalante, 2009, p. 10) of the conquest, which results in a devaluation of indigenous epistemologies, values, and languages. Contemporary schooling in Guatemala is, according to del Valle Escalante, bound up in this coloniality. Schools are central to the reproduction of colonial power configurations, bringing student subjects into synch with ideologies predicated on eurocentrism and on the racial inferiority of indigenous students and their ways of understanding the world, thereby facilitating “control of the workforce, natural
resources, and products, based on capitalism and the global market” (del Valle Escalante, 2009, p. 9).

Coloniality is manifest in the differential access to resources experienced by Guatemalans from distinct ethnic and economic communities. The country’s unequal land tenure system, for example, can be traced back to the Spanish expropriation of indigenous land during the colonial era, and their creation of a plantation, or *encomienda*, system where indigenous Guatemalans were forced to engage in slave and tenant-farmer labor (Martínez Peláez, 1970/2009, US Agency for International Development [USAID], 2010). Unequal educational attainment also reflects this coloniality: Ladino children complete 6.3 years of school on average as compared to indigenous Guatemalans, who complete 3.5 (World Bank, 2004). Literacy rates are telling of racial and ethnic disparity and intersectional oppression, as well. This is most acutely felt by indigenous women: only 39% of indigenous women between the ages of 15 and 64 are literate, as compared to 68% of indigenous men, 77% of Ladino women, and 87% of Ladino men (Hallman & Peracca, 2007). And although inequality can be indexed according to different educational opportunities and outcomes and overall access to resources, it is also mirrored at the national level. Guatemala’s Gini index, a measure of income inequality, of 53.7 makes it one of the most unequal countries in the region and in the world (World Food Programme, 2015). This sense of being devalued, of being unequally positioned, is understood by indigenous students in the country’s schools. In the words of one indigenous student interviewed for this study: “[They make it seem as though] indigenous people aren’t valued, and Ladino people are.”

A framework of coloniality can also help to guide interpretations of the vastly disparate effects of the armed conflict, a 36-year battle between government and insurgent forces, on Maya populations. Among the over 200,000 Guatemalans who were murdered or disappeared during the conflict, 83% were indigenous (Commission for Historical Clarification, 1999; USAID, 2010). The nature of human rights abuses and the internal displacement of between 500,000 and 1.5 million people due to the prolonged conflict add to the genealogy of inequality predicated on colonial violence (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, 2013). The Commission for Historical Clarification, evincing that indigenous Guatemalans had been targeted by state violence through the Guatemalan army’s insistence on defining the concept of an internal enemy in racial terms, concluded that “the undeniable existence of racism expressed repeatedly by the State as a doctrine of superiority, is a basic explanatory factor for the indiscriminate nature and particular brutality with which military operations were carried out against hundreds of Mayan communities” (Commission for Historical Clarification, 1999, p. 24). Despite this compelling evidence, there is little consensus on how people today understand and talk about the racial dimensions of the conflict, hinging, in large part, on competing definitions of the word “genocide” and distinct concepts of racial difference that are inseparably connected to coloniality.

Overwhelmingly, Guatemalans point to economic factors and a perception of insecurity, as opposed to racial discrimination, as the country’s biggest problem; when asked to identify the country’s gravest problems, those surveyed by Latinobarómetro pointed to delinquency (30.3%) unemployment (19.3%), the economy (7.6%), and poverty (4.4%) (Latinobarómetro, 2013). Only 1.3% pointed to violations of human rights as a national problem, .1% responded that social injustice was a problem, and of those polled, only .1% believed that racial discrimination was the biggest problem facing the country (Latinobarómetro, 2013). The separation of economic issues from matters of racial and ethnic discrimination is in line with the workings of coloniality, which, in part, functions through its ability to coopt structures of common sense (Quijano, 2000).
Seeing problems of poverty and discrimination as discrete and distinct belies a larger tendency to individualize social suffering as opposed to understanding it as structurally constituted and maintained. This reality becomes naturalized over time and forms the colonial present within which children in Guatemalan schools learn about the colonial past. Thinking historically has the potential to help people do the work of connecting the symptoms and the causes of enduring inequality. But history education in post-conflict societies must balance competing demands placed upon it as both a strategy of reconciliation and a tool of critique (Cole, 2007).

Postconflict History Education and Usable Pasts

In postconflict societies, curricular reforms attempt to change how people come to envision themselves in relation to those with whom they share a conflictual past (Cole, 2007). To do this, reforms target the sociopsychological infrastructure underlying conflict, seeking the production of new affect and emotions, as well as an historical understanding of the causes that contributed to conflict (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009; Barton & McCully, 2012). Not surprisingly, history education is seen as an appropriate space within which to actualize the goals of cultivating mutual understanding and a shared sense of the past by changing people’s narratives and historic arsenals (Cole, 2007; King, 2005). But history education also occupies a tenuous space within the formal curriculum in many post-conflict contexts. Many countries struggling to overcome conflict avoid history in favor of citizenship education (Cole and Barsalou, 2006). The ascendance of human rights discourses has also brought about a curriculum shift from history to civics and social studies as the emphasis on human rights is thought to be easier to convey in a curriculum centered on civic identity (Meyer, Bromley, and Ramirez, 2010). These factors complicate the framing of history in general and colonial history in particular and comprise the context in which reforms are enacted.

All of these factors are at play in the Guatemalan setting, in which the postconflict national curriculum is aligned along four axes: unity in diversity, democratic life and culture of peace, sustainable development, and science and technology (Ministerio de Educación, Guatemala [MINEDUC], n.d.-b). The grounding principles of the reform, with its call for peace, diversity, democracy, and technological competency can be seen as a broad social project aimed at remediating structural inequalities and at trying to change the ways students understand difference. The curriculum proclaims three functions: to make visible social problems and create “critical social perspective,” to establish a close connection between daily life and life in schools, and to use the unique community and family contexts in which education occurs to generate learning experiences (MINEDUC, n.d.-b). But rarely is the curriculum taken up in predictable ways in local contexts. The history education proscribed by curriculum mandates is but one piece of how students come to think historically and to make meaningful linkages to the past. Among the complicating variables, student understandings of history are mediated by the histories of their communities, the stories they encounter at home, their teachers’ perceptions of historical significance and teacher engagement with controversial issues, and popular culture (Barton & McCully, 2012; Bellino, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b; Cole, 2007 Kitson, 2007). As the data from our classroom observations, focus groups, and interviews highlight, there is a central tension in postconflict history education between supporting the work of reconciliation and coexistence on the one hand and putting forward a critical history on the other (Bellino, 2016; Cole, 2007).
Although postconflict educational reforms aim to change collective and individual identities, apprenticing students into the project of nation rebuilding, students make their own meaning and forge their own sense of self within a larger community. Students encounter history in specific stories told in school within a matrix of teacher practice and curriculum content, developing what Wertsch (2004) has called schematic narrative templates, or a more abstract sense of historical consciousness; absent specific details, students fall back on particular narrative schema in their understanding of the past. These narratives are an important form of learning and of building a collective memory central to the modern state, and these abstract understandings implicate students in collective identities that draw on the past in particular ways (Wertsch, 2004). The narratives about history that students take with them after they leave the classroom become what Barton and Levstik (1998) have called a “usable past.” In this regard, the past serves as a legitimization of the present, functioning as historical memory that links student lives to other times and spaces and ensures a sense of continuity and community (Barton & Levstik, 1998).

We turn next to the case of postconflict educational reform in Guatemala to consider how the Spanish conquest and colonial era are portrayed at different grade levels in the resulting national curriculum, the CNB.

THE CNB AND COLONIAL HISTORY

Postconflict educational reform in Guatemala comes out of the historical mandate set forward by the 1985 Guatemalan Constitution, which upholds education as a right, central not only to individual development, but also essential to the development of the nation. Moving beyond international declarations of rights and reconciliation intended to mend the historical rift between Maya and Ladino citizens, the international community and Guatemalan government ushered in a series of educational reforms whose stated purpose was to “know, rescue, promote, create and recreate the moral, spiritual, ethnic, and aesthetic qualities of the Guatemalan people” (Comisión Paritaria de Reforma Educativa, 1998, p. 45, see also Ivic Monterroso, 2013). To those ends, the CNB was written to codify both the moral and attitudinal desires of the Peace Accords and to provide the academic content and skills necessary for nation (re)building.

The Spanish conquest and colonial era are present in the CNB across the grade levels. Students in tercero básico (roughly eighth grade) must be able to “describe the characteristics of society based on the changes produced by colonization and the interaction between indigenous people and Spanish colonizers in the redistribution of land, population, and cultural values” (MINEDUC, n.d.-a). This standard or competency is specifically broken down into an indicator that requires students to be able to “identify the transcendence of ancient cultures in the sociocultural formation of Guatemala” (MINEDUC, n.d.-a). Students in the middle grades study Guatemalan indigenous cultures and are required to compare the cultures to other ancient cultures, looking at how the indigenous groups interacted and where and how they lived. Students are also required to “deduce the consequences of the conquest and colonization,” which includes learning about Spanish institutions in the Americas, land and property regimes in the pre-Hispanic and colonial era, mestizaje and evangelization, and the “actual situation of indigenous pueblos in Guatemala and Latin America” (MINEDUC, n.d.-a). This standard is further articulated, requiring students to “link the actual situation of indigenous pueblos in Latin America and Guatemala to colonial history” (MINEDUC, n.d.-a).
The standards that concern the conquest and colonial era explicitly require students to link the present to the past, not only in terms of looking critically at how the colonial era reverberates in power and politics, but also looking at the sustained cultural influence of indigenous communities. Moreover, the curriculum attempts to trace transcendence as lived in culture and is not content with holding the past and the present as discrete periods. The curriculum requires students to constantly envision the way in which the past is lived in their present. The attitudinal goals of the CNB for this grade level and subject area do this same work. By the end of the grade, students should have “respect for cultural differences,” they should “reject inequality and all forms of discrimination,” and they should have “empathy for situations far away in time and space” (MINEDUC, n.d.-a). The past and the present are linked together through culture, structures of power, and traditions that find their roots in the colonial era. In addition to recognizing this, values are written into the curriculum, values that beg students to have empathy for their past.

Students at the bachillerato level (high school) are also required to reflect on the past and its importance in daily life. Students must “identify characteristics of contemporary Guatemalan society from diverse perspectives, its origin, and multicausality” (MINEDUC, n.d.-c). An indicator of this standard is that students be able to “recognize that contemporary society is the result of historical processes” (MINEDUC, n.d.-c). Although there are no attitudinal goals at the bachillerato level, one of the more specific content requirements for being able to understand this connection of past to present is that students be able to “explain how new social scenarios are generated out of independence and the forms of domination inherited from the colonial past” (MINEDUC, n.d.-c).

The CNB is the guiding document in both private and public schools in Guatemala. This analysis considers the enactment of this curriculum in two distinct Guatemalan settings, exploring how history teaching and learning takes shape amid the enduring legacies of colonialism within this postconflict nation, highlighting the implications for students’ disparate constructions of a usable past.

METHOD

Methodological Orientation

This study is grounded in a critical, interpretive approach that attends to the socially constructed nature of learning and experience amid larger structures of inequality (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999; Mehan, 1992). Designed to explore the situated experience of history learning in distinct settings, the study from which this analysis is drawn uses a multisite ethnographic approach to follows the phenomenon of civic development and history learning across varied Guatemalan contexts (Marcus, 1995).

Data Collection

The data used for this analysis was drawn from a larger study initiated by the second author. Author 2, assisted by Author 1, conducted classroom and school observations, interviews with
students and teachers, and focus groups with students in six schools. Other publications resulting from this research focus on different schools out of the six studied (see Rubin, 2015). This analysis contrasts two schools, the private El Colegio, which served affluent Ladino students, and the public El Básico, which served low income, indigenous students to better understand the complex ways that community context shapes historical learning. Although this analysis calls attention to the difference in the educational experiences of Ladino and indigenous students in Guatemala by illustrating the lived experiences of coloniality, this presentation of the thoughts and civic stances of teachers and students in these two schools is not meant to represent the full range of thinking within contemporary Guatemalan society about the colonial past or contemporary legacy of colonialism. However, a side-by-side consideration of how the colonial era is taught in disparate Guatemalan settings provides insight into the complexities of learning about the time period amid enduring inequalities rooted in an earlier era.

This analysis draws on classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, and student focus groups. We observed 10 class sessions in each site, attending to pedagogy, content, student participation and student–teacher interaction during lessons. We conducted standardized, open-ended interviews with a social studies and citizenship development teacher and with 10 students at each site (Patton, 1990). We conducted focus groups, described in the following, with a total of 25 students at each site. All classroom observations, interviews, and focus groups used in this analysis were conducted in Spanish and translated by the authors.

In focus groups, students discussed a set of 35 of civic images drawn from contemporary and historical Guatemalan life. This technique has been used successfully in history and civic learning research to facilitate discussion on abstract themes—in this case the themes of national history and civic identity (Barton & Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 1998). Students selected and sorted these images, chosen from historical, political, cultural, and economic themes in Guatemala, in response to questions such as: What were the best moments in Guatemalan history? What were the worst moments in Guatemalan history? Which images represent events that you’ve learned about in school? These sessions provided rich sources of data. Finally, we drew heavily on the CNB and several other legal documents, including documents from the education reform.

Data Analysis

The analysis employed a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), “an inductive strategy for generating and confirming theory that emerges from close involvement and direct contact with the empirical world” (Patton, 1990, p. 153). Multiple forms of data collection allowed us to triangulate themes emerging from different data sources (Creswell, 2007). We generated several main categories: civic learning at school, civic stances and analyses, government and politics, identity, national history, poliscapes, social class, importance of education, memoria historica, and protests. We then triangulated our data across observations, focus groups, and interviews. Multiple readings of the extensive data set generated 103 codes, which were then organized thematically into broad analytical categories (e.g., learning history, learning indigenous language and culture, learning about the armed conflict, problems facing the country, social class). We used the online data management system
Dedoose to manage coding, categorization and generation of analytical memos on emerging themes.

Validity and Limitations

As a qualitative, interpretive study, this inquiry cannot be replicated; nor can it be used to make generalizations about history education in Guatemala and beyond. We used the qualitative tools of triangulation across multiple data sources, seeking nonconfirming data, and looking for repeated patterns to create an interpretation that we feel is reflective of the ways that teachers and students engaged with the nation’s history in these particular settings. The insights developed though this close study of classroom events and student and teacher perspectives may shed light on the variable and situated nature of history learning in general, but cannot be used to predict how this process might unfold in different settings.

Researchers’ Roles

Both authors are White, North American women who are fluent in Spanish and have spent a number of years in Latin America. We attempted to address the linguistic and cultural differences between the participants and us by collecting data from multiple sources, soliciting feedback on protocols from participants and a Guatemalan scholar, and discussing findings with interested participants and local scholars. Aware of the power disparities between North American academics and working class Guatemalan youth and educators, we hope that, through careful and attentive data collection and analysis emphasizing the experiences and ideas of people whose perspectives are not often reported and attention to secondary sources, we have somewhat counterbalanced these deficiencies.

COLONIAL HISTORY AND HISTORY OF COLONIALISM: LEARNING ABOUT THE PAST IN TWO GUATEMALAN SCHOOLS

This article focuses on the presentation of Spanish colonialism in the social studies classrooms of two distinct Guatemalan settings: El Colegio, a private school serving affluent Ladino students, and El Básico, a public school serving low income indigenous students. In the first setting, the teacher presented a static, fixed version of colonial history that distanced the students from their indigenous cocitizens. In the second setting, the era was framed as an enduring and active part of student reality, part of an ongoing and persistent history of colonialism. Student interpretations differed correspondingly, with students in El Colegio narrativizing the conquest and colonial era as a completed event through which they bore no benefit; El Básico students emphasized the lived and enduring effects of colonialism, such as language loss, discrimination and devaluation along racial lines.
Colonial History at El Colegio: Empathy for the Past but Not for the Present

Community context. El Colegio, a private school, served students at the primaria, básico, and bachillerato level and had a mostly Ladino staff and student body. The affluent student body came from the surrounding area with some students traveling for more than an hour a day to attend. The parents of students at El Colegio worked mostly professional jobs and many were employed in government and industry, with the father of one student working as an attorney for General Rios Montt, who was on trial for genocide while this study was being conducted.  

Colonial history in the classroom. Profe Diaz, a Ladino-identified teacher at El Colegio had worked as a teacher for more than 26 years. As a social sciences and citizenship development teacher, he saw his primary role as augmenting the historical understanding that students gleaned from textbooks: “I broaden the information in many cases, when you tell them [students] things, they’re more attentive than when they’re reading.” He reflected on his own purposes and goals:

[My goal is to make it so] that they have a bit of consciousness. I don’t think you can open their eyes completely and that they’d be totally aware of what is happening, but at least you can make it so they have a little more consciousness of what the situation is in our country—the economy, society, the globalization we are experiencing, that sort of thing. That at least they have a little bit of that notion, so that they’re not enclosed in a bubble of fantasy and happiness, because that’s not really how it is.

This was in conflict with the way that history was nearly absent from the curriculum, as Profe Diaz remarked: “History is now light theme like a brush stroke that happens on top. I think that 80% of the content is about other things, not history.”

During his lesson on the conquest, Profe Diaz sought to cultivate student empathy for the Spanish. In doing this, he also relied on and reproduced a particular understanding of the identity of indigenous Guatemalans. He began the class by trying to give his students a sense of historical perspective on the world views of the invading Spanish.

You can see, obviously, the point of view that they took to reach that conclusion [that conquest was justified]. You consider yourself civilized; if you arrived in some tribe in Africa or something like that, you would think that they’re uncivilized. But for them, they’re the civilized ones and we’re the savages. This is what we worked on yesterday, in relation to the cosmovision of colonial society. Here on page 49, the society during the colonial period, in 1524 to 1821, they just wanted to Christianize the indigenous. The whole idea of the conquest was to make themselves rich and to have a lot of land and that’s why they came. Remember that Spain didn’t send an army to America. That it was simply people who were deciding to come to win a fortune, some sort of life.

Profe Diaz approached the conquest through an analysis of political economy and as an antecedent to later forms of governance. He detailed the brutality of the encomienda system, conditions of work and forced labor, social configurations that came out of the era including how the colonial apparatus categorized and managed indigenous populations, organization of colonial city spaces, infrastructure, and governance and administration. He returned to the Spanish, explaining “It’s a matter of the thinking of the era. The Spanish came with the idea that they were
‘elected by God’ to catholicize the indigenous people. They really believed this—that they had the divine right to do what they did. For them, it wasn’t bad.”

The lesson charged students to seriously consider the worldview of the Spanish, taking it into account as students cultivated empathy for the past. Profe Diaz began with a lesson hook that required his students to take historical perspective, to think about what they would have done. As he moved forward with his lesson, he emphasized that the conquest was not a military action, but rather, the result of a series of actions of individual adventure seekers which then became formalized through the establishment of colonial government.

In cultivating empathy for the Spanish, Profe Diaz also had a clear idea about how he wanted his students to see indigenous Guatemalans. As he outlined the Spanish mandate to conquer, he gave his explanation of why the indigenous people didn’t fight back: that slavery had dealt them such a blow that they saw very few options. Making a connection between colonial subjugation and contemporary inequalities, a student raised her hand and offered, “It’s that, maybe it wouldn’t exist, the . . . it’s that if this hadn’t happened, we wouldn’t be here now, you understand? It’s racism.” Profe Diaz responded, first making an analogy with the African American struggle for civil rights in the United States, saying, “Look, the same happened in the United States. . . . In the middle of the twentieth century, you remember Martin Luther King, he was fighting for his civil rights, and the people of the Black race in that country, in some cases, in some groups, now it is [racism] much less.”

In the Guatemalan case however, he continued, “The indigenous people in our country are still just as resentful against the Whites. Even now, if you are out there some bow their heads when someone like us comes. And they speak softly [when you’re] around, and there are some who still say ‘patróncito,’ that the White man is the patrón.” Reflecting Ladino anxiety about the permanence of difference and the resentment of Whites by indigenous Guatemalans (Hale, 1996, 2005), the repetition of you drew an identity boundary in which his Ladino students were included in his analysis as the object of indigenous resentment and subsequently produced as White in relation to indigenous otherness. Profe Diaz’s students were being taught about the deferential Indian, incapable of agency, “‘submissive, fatalistic, sad, enduring a vile subservience without complaint’” (Arguedas, cited in del Valle Escalante, 2009, p. 21). In this lesson, students learned more about the origins of the imagined silent Indian than about their own privileged role vis-à-vis a colonial past. In this sense, Profe Diaz avoided critique of structural inequalities yet maintained a commitment to his own professed goal of helping students understand the present. Although present day social ills were related to the configurations of the colonial past, coloniality—as a set of structuring principles that devalued native culture and resulted in diminished opportunities in contemporary society—was denied in the present, and the colonizers were understood as relics of a distant time.

**Student usable pasts.** Student usable pasts at El Colegio reflected their classroom experiences as they emphasized chronological thinking and facticity in their responses to focus group questions. At El Colegio, we asked a student who had become the de facto leader to explain an image he had added on when we asked his group the question: Which images represent events that you’ve learned about in school?
Student: And also ... Pedro de Alvarado, the Spanish conquistador and governor of Guatemala because he conquered us so now we have to learn the story from when we’re all little children that they teach us that Tecún Umán is our representative and starting when we’re little they teach us that.10

Interviewer: So you learn that they’re heroes in primary school?

Student: Yeah. In middle school also. But this year and last year we didn’t.

Interviewer: Because you already know? And when you talk about the conquest, what’s the conversation like? Does it have to do with being an invasion or like a mixing of the races?

Student: It’s both of those things. It’s how we ended up how we are now.

The student’s reasoning for his choice “it’s how we ended up how we are now,” was offset by the almost mechanical nature of having been exposed to the narrative year after year, a sentiment that came through in his tone (“so now we have to learn the story”). Additionally, although Pedro de Alvarado was seen as important—the student made no distinction between the “heroic” qualities of the two figures—Tecún Umán was positioned as the “representative” of the Guatemalan people as though there existed a one-to-one equivalency between the two men, a provocation by de Alvarado and a swift, heroic response by a cultural standard bearer such as Umán. History became a story that must be learned, a way of understanding how the country arrived at the present through learning the stories, almost myths, of the past. The conquest was understood by students as a series of legends (as in Tecún Umán) and as an explanation for “how we ended up where we are now.”

Although students at El Colegio maintained that the past could be a method of understanding the present—“it’s how we ended up how we are”—these usable pasts also served to distance contemporary social problems from their causes, allowing for a racial understanding of their co-citizens forged within the coloniality of power. One student, when asked in a follow-up interview about the biggest problem facing the country explained:

The most important problem I would say is poverty ... that a lot of people die from the extreme poverty they’re in and extreme malnutrition because they don’t have the resources to feed their children. Also, the birth rate for indigenous women, more than anything, they have a lot of kids, they have up to 12 or 13 kids and they also don’t think about how the resources they have won’t be sufficient for all of the little beings that they have, so that’s what makes it so we have an extreme population.

Pointing to indigenous women in particular, this student identified poverty as the country’s principal problem, but in so doing, relied on a particular understanding of indigeneity in contemporary Guatemalan society, one that was not too far afield from Profe Díaz’s characterization in class. Citing the birthrate of indigenous mothers, the student envisioned them as a monolithic category of otherness whose ignorance led them to contribute to the country’s gravest problems. The student elaborated, when asked a question about who had the responsibility for fixing the problem:

I think that the people are responsible [for fixing the problem]. Women, most of all, because, I mean, you should think about, for example, if I only live on 100Q a day, the most that I can do is have one child, or something, but I shouldn’t have so many, because I think that they don’t think of the
trouble they’re going to have and that they’re not going to be able to feed their children or give them education.

Relying on the concept of individual agency, the student separated poor, indigenous, women from larger sociohistorical formations forged over centuries. The usable past constructed within this student’s social studies classroom did not equip him to critically interrogate contemporary suffering and connect it to historical patterns.

Taken together, the lesson on the conquest and the usable pasts revealed in student discussion in focus groups help us to draw several conclusions about history education as it is enacted at El Colegio. Both Profe Diaz and his students connected the colonial era to the present, but the relativism granted to the Spanish perspective diminished contemporary indigenous experiences. This was further complicated by the way that the era was taught. The reliance on a political economic and administrative analysis of the past rationalized the conquest in ways that foreclosed a more rounded understanding of its brutality. Finally, the conquest served as a way of understanding racial difference by relying on an essentialized view of Maya citizens, envisioning racism as an emotional display of embodied action—a head bowed down, a whisper of patróncito—without situating these actions within a broader understanding of coloniality.

History of Colonialism at El Básico: “Because They Came, We Now Speak Spanish”

**Community context.** To reach El Básico, we walked out of the gates of El Colegio to the road and caught a crowded chicken bus. Red dust blew and old bottles scuttled across a road flanked by beautiful fields, a sign of the pollution that so many of the students pointed to as the country’s gravest problem. After a short bus ride that sent us up a mountain and down into a valley, we walked from the main square and its artisan market, passing a cemetery with colorful mausoleums. The community served by the school had a population of around 9,700 and townspeople worked in agriculture and in tourism, weaving and producing artisanal products for the local markets which were a popular destination. The majority of the population of the community defined as indigenous, speakers of Kaqchikel, which, spoken by 18.9% of the Mayan language speaking population, was the fourth largest indigenous language group in the country (UNICEF and FUNPROEIB Andes, 2009).

**History of colonialism in the classroom.** Profe Pedro, an indigenous-identifying social studies and citizenship education teacher at the public El Básico, had worked as a counselor and for a nonprofit that helped serve homeless youth before becoming a teacher. Graduating from the local normal school and then university in the late 1980s, Pedro was ambivalent toward what he viewed as top-down curriculum reform. Ultimately, though, he felt a responsibility to his community, saying, “Communities don’t know, they don’t understand if we, here in the public schools, don’t communicate this to them, they become people who reach adulthood and don’t know their rights.” He saw the curriculum as a political tool to buy indigenous support, with the political power structure relying on it to impose a sense of cohesion on a fragmented Guatemala, while in actuality neglecting the promises made in the Peace Accords and the International Labour
Organization Convention on the Rights of Indigenous Communities. He saw the CNB as part of the coloniality of power, explaining,

The CNB has a vision which is to prepare people to work. But who does that benefit? The CACIF, the upper class. Where does that leave values? The values are there, but they’re only there to fill space. It depends on us [teachers] to implement them.\textsuperscript{11}

In this sense, the curriculum was depicted as a mechanism for creating economic subjects, removed from its goals to educate and relate the present to the past. Profe Pedro saw himself as teaching in spite of rather than from the curriculum.

In his class on the conquest, Profe Pedro framed the Spanish conquest as an ongoing event, forming part of a colonial present. He began a question–answer lesson about Guatemalan independence, independence he referred to as “supposed,” later citing the contemporary involvement of international organizations such as the IMF in Guatemala. “When did we become independent? Who did we become independent from? Have you heard of Christopher Columbus?” he asked, initiating discussion of the conquest.

Profe Pedro: The Spanish came and began a…

Student: Fiesta! (party)

Profe Pedro: No. A conquest. They came to conquer.

Smiling at the student outburst, he began to explain the idea of conquest using familiar example,

Profe Pedro: If a guy wants to conquer a girl, he’s going to send her notes, or a little rose, or bring chocolates. He’s conquering her.

Several girls giggled and smiled as Pedro acted out the conquest by appearing love struck.

Profe Pedro: But how did they [Spanish] conquer the Maya? They came and killed. They murdered the pueblo. They took it and claimed it for Spain.

Then, moving the lesson to contemporary government, Profe Pedro wrote the characteristics of the Guatemalan state on the board: independent, sovereign, with three powers—executive, legislative, and judicial.

Continuing his lesson, the teacher asked if students were watching the Rios Montt trial and told students that this was dividing the country. “Politically,” he said, “we are in danger. There’s a divide between the rich and the poor. The state of our rights is in danger. This can create a situation that puts us in conflict with each other.” He transitioned into the idea of genocide, asking students what it was and what they knew. Students did not answer readily. He explained,

Genocide is when you kill and exploit a group of people for their culture. We’ve heard of the famous Hitler. He committed genocide against the Jews. And here we have Rios Montt, who did it against our culture.

He outlined three components that, for him, defined genocide.
First, they killed boys and girls. With them they took our future. Second, they killed mothers. With them they took the generators of life and their unborn children, who could fight for rights. Third, they killed the elders, taking the people who maintained our culture. Yes, it was genocide.

Although the conquest was not the center of the lesson, it was the beginning of the narrative arc that included both the armed conflict and a critique of sustained foreign involvement in Guatemala. He began the lesson on Guatemalan government by reviewing the colonial beginnings of the nation, reminding students that the nation was based on the Spaniards who “murdered the pueblo.” As he moved through the lesson toward explaining the branches of government, the motif of violence and genocide again emerged in what became a brief reference to Rios Montt; understanding what Rios Montt had done was linked to first understanding that the Spanish had done the same. By drawing on students’ understandings of the past, he helped contextualize the present and make it relatable. He also made the present and the past a communal one, referring to “our future” when he spoke about the way in which generations of indigenous Guatemalans had been killed and when talking of Rios Montt, he told students that Montt was the one “who did it against our culture.” The students were riveted, hanging on his words as the rain poured outside.

Profe Pedro’s lesson could be seen as an attempt at decolonizing the curriculum (del Valle Escalante, 2009). This decolonizing work is related to how framings of the conquest, in particular, lend themselves to politicization and become part of meaningful cultural critique. Though his research took place before both the peace accords and educational reform in Guatemala, Wilhelm (1994) pointed to the varying ways in which teachers used the words conquest and invasion as politically charged choices which, he argued, highlighted the counterhegemonic potential of Guatemalan, particularly, Maya teachers in their teaching of the colonial encounter. Profe Pedro, in teaching the conquest as part of a narrative of violence, conceived of violence structurally. In doing this, he taught a history of colonialism, beginning with the Spanish and continuing through the present day. In a later interview, in response to a question about inequality, Pedro clarified this linkage, as he saw it:

All of this comes from the invasion of Spain in America. . . . It has been transmitted, culturally, from generation to generation, where it’s always that the person who has more takes advantage of the person who has less.

Far from the passive role ascribed to history by Profe Diaz, Profe Pedro emphasized, both in class and in subsequent interviews, the active role of everyday decisions in maintaining the coloniality of power. His history lessons reflected this understanding as he sought to parse the language of colonialism and its enduring effects as opposed to simply teach colonial history.

**Student usable pasts.** Student usable pasts at El Básico emphasized the embodied effects of the conquest and articulated them as cultural loss. As we made our way through the questions, it was harder to coax explanations out of the students, but one question in particular struck a nerve. We asked students to pick an image that represented the worst moment in Guatemalan history. Choosing the image of Pedro de Alvarado, one student began to speak.

Student: When the Spaniards came. What they did. They stole everything . . . in Santiago there were mines of gold; they went in and they were bad, the Spaniards, they came here to rob. They took everything. Who knows where they took it. They are bad [and] because they came today we speak
Spanish, but before the people spoke Kaqchikel [indigenous language], and because of them we learned Spanish.\textsuperscript{12}

Interviewer: And you speak Kaqchikel?

Student: No, and I don’t understand it.

The student, who himself defined as Maya and whose grandparents spoke Kaqchikel, linked the past to the present in terms of cultural destruction, emphasizing the symbolic violence of language deprivation about which he took a long historical view, linking his use of Spanish to the conquest. Although at El Colegio, a student had volunteered that the Spanish were adventurers, not soldiers, and Profe Diaz had confirmed that they had come in search of souls to Christianize, at El Básico, this student’s understanding relied on a darker interpretation of the colonial past, an interpretation less empathetic toward the Spanish. The student passed moral judgment without statements of relativism, understanding the conquest as a cultural loss and describing the Spanish as thieves.

This cultural loss, historically envisioned, impacted students’ perceived relationships to tradition and language. But unlike students at El Colegio, who located the conquest in the past, at arm’s length, coloniality continued to limit indigenous students’ sense of inclusion in political structures. In response to a focus group question about things that divide Guatemalans, one student chose an image of the constitution. When asked to explain the choice, the student elaborated:

Student: I have the constitution of the politicians. Because if they are political, it means the one who is president can do whatever he wants . . . but it’s us that it affects.

Interviewer: You think that politicians’ [actions] affect indigenous people the most?

Student: Yes, because they despise them. In some places, there’s no discretion.

Interviewer: What do you mean by discretion? Explain that a little more. What happens, exactly? What sort of things?

Student: Indigenous people aren’t valued, and Ladino people are.

For these students who pointed to the constitution as an image that they believed to divide the Guatemalan people, the past weighed heavily on their present. Their identity as indigenous Guatemalans who had experienced racism in their daily social and political lives, and had heard of the experiences of their family and friends, mediated their understanding of the past and the present. This was in keeping with Levy’s (2014) emphasis on the role of heritage on student identification with events. In her research, she draws on Lowenthal to define history as “what happened” and heritage as “exclusive myths of origin and continuance” (Lowenthal in Levy, 2014, p. 3).

For students at El Básico, Spanish colonialism became part of this heritage, forming the moral core of student usable pasts and factoring strongly in their claims to collective memories and identities. Students at El Básico forged narrative schema of the Spanish as thieves and the conquest as perpetual. In doing so, they acknowledged the coloniality of power as it shaped common sense understandings of human value, creating a political and social landscape in which they believed their own culture was despised.
CONCLUSION

Far from unifying Guatemalans, the local modes of teaching and learning explored in these two settings indicate that history education in Guatemala is shaped by, and may perpetuate the distance between, indigenous and Ladino Guatemalans. Teachers, influenced by different perspectives on the role of history education and coming to the classroom with different racial, ethnic, and class identities, made choices to either teach colonial history or teach a history of colonialism. Their students formed different usable pasts and marshalled distinct narrative schema when they spoke about Spanish colonialism and its relation to contemporary social problems.

Moreover, these pedagogical choices and student understandings constitute moments in the ongoing process of coloniality. At El Colegio, Profe Díaz’s explanation of indigenous attitudes toward Ladinos indicated the dynamic instability of a Guatemalan racial order, one where Ladino anxiety about difference manifested as essentialized notions of indigeneity (Hale, 2006). His students, too, in pointing toward contemporary suffering as a culturally specific malady, relegated their indigenous co-citizens to a subordinate position, as opposed to understanding violence as both structural and sociohistorical. At El Básico, Profe Pedro operated within a colonial present, attempting to decolonize his educational space and to equip his students with a critical consciousness attentive to the structural suffering and knowledge devaluation built into the colonial project. This reparative work took the form of understanding colonial history as a long-term project of social domination. Although many of the “erroneous and distorted facts and prejudices about Maya history, culture, civilization, art, and sciences” may no longer be part of official curricula, continued compartmentalization of past from present reinforced longstanding differences in Ladino and indigenous interpretations of the national past (Cojtí Cuxil, 1996, p. 41).

These cases help us comprehend how a standardized curriculum can be taken up by teachers and experienced by students in locally unpredictable ways that are mediated by race, ethnicity, and class, and permeated by the coloniality of power. In this study, students formed usable pasts and envisioned themselves in relation to the conquest and colonialism in distinct ways. At the private El Colegio, Profe Díaz cultivated empathy for the past, but left the present largely uninterrogated. There, Ladino students understood the sequence of conquest and colonialism but did not readily connect this history to contemporary issues. Learning colonial history meant largely learning about why indigenous people were different from their Ladino counterparts. In the indigenous El Básico, Profe Pedro emphasized a long view of the conquest, linking its effect among disparate historical time periods that extended into the present. Students there eschewed relativistic views of Spanish colonialism, passing judgment on historical actors while rooting their moral authority in a personally claimed history of oppression. Learning a history of colonialism, their historical proximity to the conquest was close as they felt its lingering effects and framed them in terms of cultural, and personal, loss. In both of these cases, history learning was a profoundly situated phenomenon, challenging the assumption that curricular reform can be easily used to form new national narratives in settings of prolonged conflict and inequality.

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NOTES

1. Pseudonyms are used for the names of all people and places quoted or mentioned in this article.

2. **Ladino** 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 notes, “Ladinos are heterogeneous but generally dominant in relation to the indigenous majority” (2006, p. 3).

3. **Indigenous** (*indigena*) is the term commonly used in Guatemala to refer to people of Mayan ancestry. Between 40% and 60% of Guatemalans consider themselves to be indigenous, many speaking one of the 21 different languages that evolved from a common language spoken about 4,000 years ago (French, 2010).

4. Severo Martínez Peláez’s groundbreaking book *La Patria del Criollo: An Interpretation of Colonial Guatemala*, written in 1970 (and later translated into English), reintepreted colonial Guatemalan history through a Marxist lens and was intended to serve two purposes, according to George Lovell, who wrote the introduction to the English translation: “to convince readers that the country’s colonial past in fact lives on in a colonial present” and to “serve, if not as a call to arms, then at least as a medium for critical thinking” (2009, p. xxii). Martínez Pelaez, himself, wrote in one of his final book chapters, “The Colonial Legacy:” “We do not need to venture far from the Sprawl of Guatemala City to see it everywhere. Colonial reality is our everyday reality” (p. 274). Quijano (2000), also a Marxist scholar working in Latin America, similarly articulated a fascination with the colonial present in his work on coloniality. del Valle Escalante (2009), writing in this tradition and drawing on Louis Althusser’s combination of Marxism and structuralism, embraces Quijano’s framework of coloniality to look at how Guatemalan schools uphold the colonial project.

5. Today, the largest 2.5% of farms use almost 2/3 of all land; 90% of farms use only 1/6 of all agricultural land (USAID, 2010). This exacerbates poverty, especially among indigenous Guatemalans who face barriers to land access and whose livelihoods and opportunities are disproportionately impacted due to the fact that the majority of indigenous Guatemalans live in rural areas; although 51% of the population is considered rural, over 80% of the rural population is indigenous (USAID, 2010, p. 3).

6. A Gini coefficient is a measure of inequality that concerns the income distribution of a country’s population. A score of 1 represents perfect inequality and a score of 0 would represent perfect equality.

7. The images and the accompanying interview protocol were field tested by a Guatemalan academic, revised and piloted with students, and subsequently revised. Focus group sessions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and were audio recorded with the consent of the participants. During data collection, we concluded each focus group by asking students if there were images that they felt were missing, irrelevant, or redundant. Some examples of images include: the country’s current president, a Maya archaeological 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, and the Peace Accords.
8. General Efrain Rios Montt was president of Guatemala from 1982 to 1983, during some of the most brutal years of the armed conflict. The Commission for Historical Clarification documented multiple and horrific human rights violation during his tenure. In May of 2013, Montt was convicted of crimes against humanity and genocide; his sentence was overturned shortly after. A retrial began in January 2015.

9. Profe is an informal term of endearment used to refer to a teacher (e.g., teach).

10. Tecún Umán was one of the last Mayan leaders (of the K’iche people). He was killed resisting conquest by Pedro de Alvarado. Although his existence is not well documented, he has become a symbol of national pride, and was declared Guatemala’s national hero in 1960.

11. CACIF stands for the Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial, and Financial Associations (Comité Coordinador de Asociaciones Agrícolas, Comerciales, Industriales y Financieras). Founded in the late 1950s in response to the perception of communist threat, CACIF supports free market ideologies.

12. The student may have been referring to Santiago de los Caballeros de Guatemala, the colonial capital of Guatemala and what is now Antigua, Guatemala.

REFERENCES


