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"The Internal Conflict:" Navigating Transitional Education in Postwar Guatemala

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from The College of William and Mary

by

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Introduction

Guatemala is a nation of contradictions. The same country that entrances visitors with its natural beauty has been the site of unimaginable atrocities. The legacy of these atrocities still lingers over Guatemala today, despite a nearly twenty-year long “peace.” This peacetime, officially beginning in 1996 with the signing of the Peace Accords between the Guatemalan national government and a unified guerrilla group, has been defined in large part by a struggle between the will to remember and the demand to forget. The Guatemalan government continues to paint itself as the savior of a nation in a war where state forces committed an overwhelming majority of violence and human rights violations directed at civilians. The national government willfully disputes the United Nations’ truth commission’s determination that the state committed acts of genocide during the civil war, and urges a look towards the future. At the same time, many in Guatemala are actively fighting for the right to acknowledge and know more about the recent traumatic history, pushing against limits set by the government.

Guatemala’s schools have become an essential site of this contestation. The educational curriculum that all Guatemalan schools must use is built by the national government, thus reflecting the ideals and objectives of the state. While the national government remains reluctant to acknowledge its role in unleashing counterinsurgency violence, it simultaneously determines the history that is taught to the next generation of citizens. Perhaps not surprisingly, the curriculum contains limited discussion of Guatemala’s turbulent modern history. It does, however, embrace new ideals of multiculturalism and a “culture of peace,” both in the name of creating a better Guatemala.
This thesis examines how curricular changes have unfolded as part of a long and fraught peace process, and the extent to which they have paved the way for more in-depth discussion of the internal armed conflict. This work argues that the important additions of a multicultural approach to education and the “culture of peace” framework – limited as they are – do bring new topics of discussion into being. In some circumstances, they have created a system allowing educators to incorporate the recent history of Guatemala into their lessons. Due to educational reforms advanced as part of the peace process, including key concessions to indigenous interests, the state has inadvertently opened up opportunities for educators to encourage meaningful discussion of the past. The government cannot easily foreclose these opportunities because of the very framework it helped put in place. Educators, especially those with access to the resources provided by NGOs, are pushing against the limits of the curriculum to include instruction about the recent traumatic history of their country. Schools in this way not only represent a larger societal struggle, but also become their own sites of contestation and negotiation. The interaction between the purposeful closing of the door to the past and efforts to force the door open is the focus of this work.

**Historical Background**

For nearly four decades, from 1960 to 1996, a civil war raged in Guatemala. Guerrilla groups largely made up of rural peasantry took up arms to fight against structural inequality rooted deeply in Guatemalan society, and faced a state-led brutal counter-insurgency campaign. The army’s response to the guerrilla violence was excessive and the human impact of the conflict is undeniable: estimates of those killed or disappeared exceed 200,000, and from 1981 to 1983, the most intense period of the
conflict, half a million to a million people were forced to seek refuge within Guatemala or abroad.¹ 93% of the violence was attributed to military and police forces.² The state counter-insurgency campaign targeted community bonds and strategically turned neighbor against neighbor, brother against brother, as the mere accusation of being “subversive” could serve as a death sentence. One whisper of “subversive” activities or ideas could, and frequently did, serve as a basis for the army to murder or arrange the mysterious “disappearance” of a community member.

Adding to the complex layers of the conflict is the role of ethnicity in it. This conflict was not an ethnic conflict per se. During the war, though, it could look and feel like one. While Maya people made up just fifty percent of the population, they represented eighty-three percent of identified victims of the conflict.³ As part of counter-insurgency efforts, military forces engaged in campaigns meant to wipe out potential sources of support for the guerrillas, and the state defined specific Maya-populated regions as bedrocks of that support. As a result, state counterinsurgency forces targeted these particular communities of Mayas precisely because of their ethnicity. This ethnically based violence, within the context of the larger war, led the UN truth commission to find the state (in the roles of soldiers, police, and civil patrols) responsible for committing genocidal acts. This groundbreaking decision was fundamentally ignored and systematically denied by the Guatemalan government at the time of its release in 1999. It remains rejected by the Guatemalan national government to this day.

² CEH, “Memory of Silence,” 20, para. 15.
³ CEH, “Memory of Silence,” 17, para 1.
It was in the shadow of this multifaceted and violent war that Peace Accords were eventually signed in 1996, but they unfolded in an environment of continual uncertainty and violence. The accords were previously unimaginable, as they required the national government to recognize the guerrillas as a valid party worthy of signing such an agreement. The guerrilla representative URNG (*Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca*, Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity) and the government signed accords that included the “Comprehensive Accord on Human Rights” (March 1994), the “Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples” (March 1995) and “Social and Economic Aspects and Agrarian Situation” (May 1996).⁴ Through this process, a wide range of civil society spokespersons and URNG representatives saw a real chance to address the structural issues of inequality that plagued the nation and had inspired opposition movements.

Yet government engagement was less than enthusiastic. The government had begun peace talks in 1990 only after years of intense international pressure, as actors such as the UN were increasingly alarmed at the continuous disregard for human rights in the country. The same year talks began, a military intelligence official murdered a prominent anthropologist named Myrna Mack as she left her Guatemala City office. Mack’s work in indigenous communities of Guatemala exposed human rights violations committed by the state and “ultimately proved threatening to the military.”⁵ Her assassination shocked the Guatemalan human rights community, and ironically, “produced results that were in

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many ways the opposite of what her killers intended.”

Mack’s murder drew international attention to the displacement of indigenous peoples and support for displaced communities.

Despite – or perhaps because of – the unstable context, human rights advocates pushed for the creation of two complementary truth commissions, one under the aegis of the United Nations, and the other established by the human rights office of the Catholic Church. The government and URNG signed an agreement to create the UN body, the Commission for Historical Clarification (known by its Spanish acronym, CEH). The mandate for the commission was circumscribed by the government, which insisted that any report issued could not support judicial proceedings or assign individual responsibility for human rights crimes. The Catholic Church, in an effort to hold the state accountable for its role in the violence, established its own parallel investigations, publishing a lengthy truth report in 1998, Guatemala: Nunca más (Guatemala: Never Again). What happened next demonstrates how little had changed with an official declaration of “peace.” Two days after the release of Nunca más, its architect, Bishop Juan Gerardi, was murdered in Guatemala City. Gerardi’s vicious killing was “an unmistakable reminder of the brutality of Guatemala’s war” that was supposed to be over. The state’s utter lack of concern for finding Gerardi’s killer was a stark reminder that impunity had not ended with the conclusion of the war.

Soon afterward, the CEH released its own shockingly strong truth report, which included the determination that the state had committed acts of genocide. The unexpected

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6 Oglesby, “Myrna Mack,” 256.
8 Jonas, Of Centuars and Doves, 10.
determination was symbolically validating for human rights observers who had been decrying the state’s violence for years. At the same time, the government under President Arzú denied the report, going as far as to have “signed a full-page ad in the Guatemalan press repudiating many of the commission’s recommendations.”

The government’s refusal to accept the report does not mean it disappeared from public view, especially as human rights groups and other NGOs have taken it as their own. These groups have used the report to push for increased space to remember the war and the human rights violations that were a defining part of it. At the same time, the government continues to deny its wrongdoing and insists on looking to the future, not the recent past. This is the fundamental contradiction of the modern era: citizens of the same nation are divided, as some fight for the essential right to remember, while others are equally committed to the purposeful forgetting of the past. What remains significant today is not that the state wants its citizens to forget, but the persistence of citizens who find the spaces within this closure to work towards historical remembrance.

**Labors of Memory**

Historical memory and national identities are not natural, but rather constructed. They underpin daily life, as we learn in the work of Elizabeth Jelin: “‘[i]dentities and memories are not things we think about but think with.’” History education is so crucial in part because of its role in helping to build these concepts. The period following the

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10 Mack’s sister pushed for a murder trial for her sister’s killer, and the CEH Report provided crucial evidence for Mack’s killer’s conviction. The 2002 trial marked a victory for human rights work in Guatemala and a blow against historic impunity.
signing of the Peace Accords has been a time of contestation in Guatemala, as both sides of negotiations care deeply about the narrative of the past. The diplomatic end of a war, especially one so deeply embedded in the fabric of society as the conflict was in parts of Guatemala, did not and does not mean the end of trauma, as suffering is re-lived through the memories of those who survived it. In interpreting this history, I have drawn upon the theoretical foundation of what Jelin calls the “labors of memory.” The theory of the labors of memory is that memories do not simply appear but are a part of the present social context, that is, memory is “the activity that generates and transforms the social world.” Memories are not something that live statically in the past, but are constantly shaped by, and serve as a shaping force for, the present.

Social context is crucial to the labors of memory. Jelin, the preeminent scholar of memory studies in Latin America, writes that even what seem to be the most personal of recollections “are immersed in collective narratives… Insofar as the frameworks of memory are historical and subject to change, all memories are more reconstructions than recollections.” The way a person remembers the past is influenced by their networks, education, and understanding of the broader world in the present. This explains how two people can interpret the same period of time in contrasting ways. Michelle Bellino, an education scholar, gives us useful tools to bring the theoretical discussion to the practical level in Guatemala. She describes an interesting demonstration of competing interpretations and lessons from the past, through the children of former guerilla members. For example, she recounts an interview with one teenager whose parents were

involved in a guerrilla movement who now “adamantly forbid their son’s involvement in transgressive political acts” as part of civic engagement. In contrast, another teenager involved in the same student demonstrations “views her mother as her ‘partner’ in the [current] struggle.” Bellino shows that these teenagers and their parents view societal conflict differently: the first perceived the war as a fight for peace, now concluded; the second sees important connections between current and past violence and the means to oppose injustices. In both scenarios the facts of history (and its connections to the present) remain the same, yet the lessons taken from that experience vary widely.

Determining the “truth” of what happened historically is not simple either. One of the most important symbolic operations of state formation, writes Jelin, is the creation of the “master narrative” of a nation: “one version of history that… could serve as a central node for identification and for anchoring national identity.” This master narrative is used as the basis for education of the state’s citizens, as an important mechanism of state formation. According to Mario Carretero, a scholar who studies the psychology of history education, this education “usually produces a particularly deformed or biased understanding of academic contents, an understanding we may label as anecdotal, individualistic, myth-sustaining and prone to nation-state glorification.” States tend to encourage the teaching of stories that glorify and empower the nation-state itself. These efforts are meant to create a sense of belonging among the citizens of a nation. This

17 Jelin, Labors of Memory, 27.
includes citizens in the national “us,” and places those not included in this national narrative in the category of “other.” In the case of Guatemala, the process of peace building was one meant to unify a divided nation. An important tenet of the peace building comes through the creation and spreading of a convincing master narrative. Guatemala’s master narrative was defined by “explicit societal aims to shape multicultural, harmonious, and unified identities.”

Given schools’ important place in establishing this narrative, this master narrative is reflected in the educational curriculum.

By their very nature, schools come to be sites of contestation. As Bellino writes, “because the master national narrative tends to be the story of the victors, there will be others who… will offer alternative narratives and meanings of the past.” In the time following a traumatic conflict, such as the Guatemalan civil war, fighting for the right to remember events in a way contradictory to the master narrative becomes central to a larger struggle, as “memory, truth and justice blend into each other, because the meaning of the past that is being fought about is, in fact, part and parcel for demand for justice in the present.”

Just as schools are a site for the explanation of the master narrative, so too can they serve as a site for dissention. Memories themselves are not static; the social context affects the master narrative as well. Schools do not just reflect the larger imposed narrative, but, as education scholar Noah Sobe reiterates, they are also “sites of contestation, negotiation and cultural production” themselves.

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20 Bellino, “So That We Do Not Fall Again,” 27.
master narratives and their contestation through history education is particularly significant as this history education helps to create social context for the next generation. Even if students learn the more complicated academic history later, what Carretero calls “the ‘first errors,’ persist, strongly anchored in the mind and remaining residually in adult consciousness.”

While schools are but one of many sites where the labors of memory are taking place, the unique place of education as both a reflection and creation of narrative and memory makes them an excellent place to study a period of transition. As Bellino puts it, “[e]ducating about historical injustice has been conceptualized as both a product and reflection of a society’s readiness to face the past.” While the Guatemalan Ministry of Education has shown an inclination to avoid inquiry into Guatemala’s recent history and is committed to looking forward, individual teachers, human rights groups, and other NGOs have found ways to voice publicly the dissention from the master narrative on a public scale. The presence of such alternative narratives is incredibly important, as it helps establish the social context within which the next generation of Guatemalans will remember its nation’s traumatic past. The dissention within schools shows the important place education holds within the larger transition to peace. Contestation of narratives in schools is not only representative of broader changes in Guatemalan society but also a crucial part of helping to cause and sustain them.

The Peace Accords & Educational Reform

The importance of education was recognized during the peace process, and educational reforms were specifically included as part of the Peace Accords. The most

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24 Bellino, “So That We Do Not Fall Again,” 67.
important directives for the field of education came first through the “Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples” signed in March 1995, and then in the “Agreement on Social and Economic Aspects and Agrarian Situation,” signed a year later. The first agreement established a commission made up of indigenous and governmental representatives to design a reformed education system,

“responsive to the cultural and linguistic diversity of Guatemala, recognizing and strengthening the cultural identity of indigenous peoples, the values and educational systems of the Maya and other indigenous peoples, and the need to afford access to formal and non-formal education and to include the educational concepts of indigenous peoples in national school curricula.”\textsuperscript{25}

The second agreement on “Social and Economic Aspects” established another advisory commission meant to work in conjunction with the first, with the goal of facilitating “[r]eform of the educational system and of its administration… [and] the implementation of coherent and forceful State policies in the field of education.”\textsuperscript{26}

While these dual committees seem redundant, they show us that the educational reforms were not negotiated and implemented by a monolithic state alone, but reflected struggles among a variety of interests. Certain sectors – especially indigenous reformers –


wanted a total overhaul of the educational system. Others were obviously reluctant. Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, a prominent Maya leader who actually served as a civil society delegate for both commissions (and would later become the Vice Ministry of Education), argues that the national government “was forced to accept indigenous demands because of its need to demonstrate results of the negotiating process” to international monitors, especially in the “Indigenous Rights” Accord. In a nation where indigenous peoples had historically been virtually shut out of government decisions, this was an enormous step. Yet the Arzú administration, in power at the time, was concerned about what they perceived as excessive indigenous influence, and feared what Cojtí terms an “indigenization” of the education system. As a result, the state sought to steer the conversation through its influence on the second agreement; the government’s fears over the “indigenization” of the system meant that their delegates were not just fighting for the agenda set out in the peace accords but also to protect government interests. This meant that educational reforms were not as sweeping as has been envisioned in the Indigenous Rights accord.

In the narrower conception of reform, the Consultative Commission for Educational Reform (CCRE) outlined three main themes, which would “have a fundamental role in the country's economic, cultural, social and political development.” The first was “To affirm and disseminate the moral and cultural values and the concepts

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31 “Agreement on Social and Economic Aspects and Agrarian Situation,” para. 21.
and behavior patterns... which constitute the basis of a culture of peace.”32 The second main objective was to “avoid the perpetuation of poverty and of social, ethnic, sexual and geographical forms of discrimination.”33 Following a conflict whose root causes can be tied to structural inequality and discrimination, this goal is admirable and understandable. The final objective related to economic development was increased scientific and technical education for “the application of technical and scientific progress... and beneficial integration into the world economy.”34 The ideals of forming a culture of peace, ending discrimination, and incorporating Guatemala into the global economy are all focused towards creating a better, more peaceful Guatemala in the wake of the internal armed conflict, not revisiting the time itself.

In contrast, the CEH report pushed for more ambitious educational recommendations, advocating an understanding of the conflict rooted in a long national history. The UN Truth Commission report prepared explicit educational suggestions regarding teaching about history; the commission was in fact created with “the purpose of contributing to national reconciliation through the clarification of history,” and saw education as an important part of this reconciliation.35 The CEH report recommended “the curricula of primary, secondary and university level education include instruction on the causes, development and consequences of the armed confrontation and likewise of the content of the Peace Accords with the depth and method relevant to the particular level.”36 This would mean that through each step of education, students would be

32 “Agreement on Social and Economic Aspects and Agrarian Situation,” para. 21.
33 “Agreement on Social and Economic Aspects and Agrarian Situation,” para. 21.
34 “Agreement on Social and Economic Aspects and Agrarian Situation,” para. 21.
36 CEH, “Memory of Silence,” 55, para. 36.
exposed to learning about the conflict in a way that is appropriate for their ages and learning abilities. The suggestion of increased attention to the causes, development, and consequences would make the conflict an integral part of national understanding and the creation of social context. The ideas of the CEH report would mean that the internal armed conflict would be analyzed in classrooms in its historical context.

In the curriculum used in Guatemala today, analysis of the conflict is limited and paints the war as an anomaly in the path to democracy and peace. The CEH report shows the conflict as a “devastating stage of [Guatemala’s] history,” but not separate from the rest of its national history, and advocates its understanding in the proper context. The reformed curriculum used today has sections devoted to Citizenship Formation and Social Sciences, but no specific history area until the university level. This is not in itself particularly unusual; however, it is noteworthy given the direct recommendations of the CEH Report, and goes against the express wishes of some of those who survived the violence.

The CEH report shows the ideas of creating a culture of peace though education connected with knowledge of Guatemala’s history. The truth commission suggested that “the State, along with the national human rights non-governmental organisations, cofinance an educational campaign to promote a culture of mutual respect and peace.”

In the recommendations of the CEH Report, the foundations for a culture of peace include a necessary discussion of the internal conflict. The curriculum used today includes the culture of peace as a significant framing device, an important convergence with CEH recommendations. However, the curriculum’s lack of attention to the history of

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37 CEH, “Memory of Silence,” 17, para. 1.
38 CEH, “Memory of Silence,” 56, para. 37.
the conflict means that the culture of peace education is out of context. The CEH report’s recommendation that a “particular emphasis on the content of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and on the fundamental principle of peace” in the culture of peace should be understood as part of their overall recommendations emphasizing historical prominence.39 Thus students would understand that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is important for them to learn precisely because of past human rights violations in their country.

These connections between the past and present are not a part of the reformed Guatemalan curriculum. However, that is not to say there have not been efforts to change this. Bellino has shown that “[s]everal textbooks designed by both the ministry and nongovernmental agencies to critically engage with the Conflicto Armado [Armed Conflict] were rejected by Congress and nonstate actors.”40 The Peace Accords, the commissions it created, and the Ministry of Education controlled the creation of the reformed curriculum. However, the realities of the complicated time following the signing of the Peace Accords means the vision of reformed education envisioned in the Peace Accords has not been met. The time of the creation of the reformed curriculum was a time of optimism, confusion, and negotiation, and these traits are reflected in the educational system of Guatemala today. The educational reform that took place following the internal conflict was meant to bring a nation together, and even the most cynical observer must concede the seemingly well intentioned measures undertaken by the accords. The realities of implementing these measures in a nation recovering from an internal conflict, however, spell a limiting framework for teachers and students.

40 Bellino, “So That We Do Not Fall Again,” 67.
Teaching About the Internal Armed Conflict

During the summer of 2015, I spent five weeks based in Antigua, Guatemala to conduct my field research for this work. The bedrock of my research came from interviews I conducted with area teachers. The interviews were conducted with the help of the founders of the NGO Avivara, who graciously connected me with teachers with whom they had established relationships. During the week of July 13th, 2015, I conducted interviews with a variety of teachers in three different sites. The first was with three primary school teachers in Don Pancho, a community that had been resettled near Antigua as a part of the Peace Accords. Don Pancho is a cooperative community, meaning that the residents built the school together, and the majority of teachers come from the community itself. The second round of interviews was conducted in Antigua, with four primary school teachers, all of who are college-educated and teach in surrounding rural areas near Antigua. The final round of interviews was carried out at a teacher development workshop in Chimaltenango, the capital of the department of the same name.

It is important to examine if and how teachers are pushing the limits of the curriculum with regards to its inadequate treatment of the most significant event of twentieth-century Guatemalan history: the internal armed conflict. The curriculum does address the conflict in a limited way, which given the sociopolitical climate in Guatemala, is in itself somewhat surprising. But what is presented is narrow in its scope and potentially dangerous in its misrepresentation of history. Educators are addressing these problems in creative ways. They are expanding the boundaries of the curriculum to
start a meaningful conversation with their students, and help facilitate the transmission of a national historical memory that includes the civil war.

**Textbooks & the Internal Armed Conflict**

In an effort to boil down the conflict into an easily understood short lesson, the curriculum dangerously oversimplifies the history of the conflict. One tactic used in classrooms and textbooks, as Elizabeth Oglesby notes, “is known in Latin America as the theory of the ‘two devils,’ or the ‘two fires,’ or simply the ‘theory of the sandwich,’” where a conflict is presented as having two equally matched sides, with the majority of the population caught passively between.\(^41\) This approach shows the Guatemalan conflict as a war between two equal actors, the guerrillas and the state. Each side is presented as representing its own interests, and the army is shown as saving the nation by fighting for democracy. This explanation runs directly counter to the findings of the CEH report that specified, “a full explanation of the Guatemalan confrontation cannot be reduced to the sole logic of the two armed parties.”\(^42\)

The complicated conception of victimhood, especially in the Guatemalan context, makes simplified explanations of the conflict especially problematic. Oglesby points out that the choice to present the war as an equal two-sided conflict obscures “not only the fact that other social actors were involved in the conflict but also that people have an identity as historical actors beyond their identity as victims of human rights violations.”\(^43\) Jelin similarly argues that there is a certain image victims are meant to project, of “a passive being, harmed by the actions of others. The victim is never an agent, never

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\(^{41}\) Oglesby, “Educating Citizens,” 81.  
\(^{42}\) CEH, “Memory of Silence,” 21, para. 23.  
\(^{43}\) Oglesby, “Educating Citizens,” 81.
productive. He or she receives blows but is construed as incapable of provoking or responding.”

In the Guatemalan context, there certainly were victims that fit this description. However, there also were many victims of human rights abuses that were targeted specifically for their political, community, or revolutionary activities. This blurred line of victimhood is part of what makes the war so difficult to analyze in the classroom. The perception remains in some sectors of Guatemala that those killed or disappeared must have somehow “deserved it” because of their activity. Due to the complicated nature of victimhood in the Guatemalan civil war, the sustained idea that victims were responsible for the acts of violence committed against them adds another element of confusion to understanding.

Oglesby describes typical textbooks following the Peace Accords as formulaic, noting that historical accounts are brief, and tend to focus more on abstract human rights themes than their actual violation. Sociedad y yo: Ciencias Sociales y Formación Ciudadana (Society and I: Social Sciences and Citizenship Formation) is a textbook published in 2010 meant for sixth graders, the final year of primary school. A short chapter entitled “Conflicto armado interno y acuerdos de Paz en Guatemala” (Internal Armed Conflict and Peace Accords in Guatemala) provides an example of representative treatment of the war. In Sociedad y yo, the chapter begins by providing a short definition of what an armed conflict is, and then situates the Guatemalan conflict as not entirely unique, explaining, “like in other countries of the world, there are problems in the

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44 Jelin, Labors of Memory, 54.
population that originate between their citizens.” Significantly, the textbook does list seven problems that led to the internal armed conflict, including: “extreme poverty… illiteracy and lack of education, housing shortage, deficient health services, antidemocratic governments, discrimination and marginalization of the 23 indigenous ethnicities, and the Cold War between the United States and Russia.”

While this was an attempt at describing the causes of the war, it is a list rather than an analysis. In a book that is hundreds of pages long, the discussion of the events of the conflict itself is limited to one paragraph. Adhering to the “two devils” theory, it describes the conflict as “between two opposite forces: the army and the guerilla. The army defended the ideas of capitalism and the interests of the minority affluent population. The guerilla defended the ideas of socialism and the interests of the majority of the population who lived in poverty.” Oglesby describes how “most recent textbooks include references to the report of the truth commission, although the references are brief and limited to the basic data of how many deaths and disappearances the CEH tabulated.” Sociedad y yo makes no mention of the report, but includes a box that includes the CEH’s facts and figures, including the number killed, disappeared, and displaced. These are bulleted, and are followed by a short sentence describing the Peace Accords. This quick move from a brief discussion of the conflict immediately to a mention of the Peace Accords is indicative of the treatment of the conflict in the curriculum.

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46 Leonor R. De Avendaño et al., Sociedad y Yo: Ciencias Sociales y Formación Ciudadana trans. by author (Guatemala: Piedra Santa, 2010), 220.
47 De Avendaño et al., Sociedad y Yo, 221.
48 De Avendaño et al., Sociedad y Yo, 221.
50 De Avendaño et al., Sociedad y Yo, 221.
There are a few aspects of the textbook chapter that are surprising. It includes a paragraph discussing the importance of historical memory, saying, “we should not forget the pain that existed during the conflict… to not forget this is called historical memory.” This is a bit of a departure from the average textbook, and may be the result of the leanings of the private editorial house that produced it, which also published a novel about the armed conflict in 2005. The chapter continues to describe the Peace Accords, outlining the different agreements and where they were signed. Finally, the chapter closes by describing the internal armed conflicts that occurred in El Salvador and Nicaragua, showing the connections between the three Central American conflicts. Adding description of the importance of the Cold War and other internal conflicts is an important part of placing the Guatemalan case in context, but also diminishes the magnitude of the Guatemalan civil war in its national history. The chapter immediately following “Internal Armed Conflict and Peace Accords in Guatemala,” addresses the culture of peace, demonstrating a typical narrative: short discussion of the conflict, followed by an immediate discussion of the culture of peace. This framing itself is not damaging, but can become harmful to historical understanding when the conflict is used as a “hook” to move from what Oglesby calls an exposé of brutality to the triumph of democracy.

**Teachers & the Internal Armed Conflict**

Individual agency plays a large role in teachers’ decisions regarding how to teach about Guatemala’s recent traumatic past. A teacher I interviewed in Chimaltenango

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51 De Avendaño et al., *Sociedad y Yo*, 221.
52 De Avendaño et al., *Sociedad y Yo*, 221.
explained to me that what students learn about the conflict “depends more on the teacher than the student.”54 Another teacher echoed this sentiment, saying she had been shown a video detailing the violence of the conflict in her own education and she “could never forget” it, but acknowledged that this experience was far from universal.55 The decision to address the conflict in an alternate way than that presented in the curriculum is ultimately left up to the individual teacher in each classroom. This is not an easy decision for teachers to make. Even those who expressed concern over the lack of education about Guatemala’s recent history admitted they did not spend as much time covering the conflict as they felt they should. One college educated teacher interviewed in Antigua expressed how difficult it was to feel as though he was “breaking the image of Guatemala” for his students when he first told them about the conflict.56

Due to the individual nature of the decision to teach about the conflict, teachers themselves take on a risk when they decide to push the boundaries of the curriculum. The reformed educational system encourages a greater involvement from parents and civil society, but many parents are opposed to their children learning about the conflict at all. Some teachers explained that their students’ parents had experienced a “psychological trauma” that has not eased with time.57 In the words of one of the teachers I spoke to in Antigua, “the walls listened, the walls listened” during the conflict, and people are not quick to forget this ingrained fear.58 Bellino has argued that some parents, seeking to protect their children, do not want them to know about the conflict for fear “that painful

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54 Interview by author, trans. by author, Chimaltenango, Guatemala, July 14, 2015.
55 Interview by author, trans. by author, Chimaltenango, Guatemala, July 14, 2015.
56 Interview by author, trans. by author, Antigua, Guatemala, July 13, 2015.
57 Interview by author, trans. by author, Chimaltenango, Guatemala, July 14, 2015.
58 Interview by author, trans. by author, Antigua, Guatemala, July 13, 2015.
memories would become their children’s vicarious ‘postmemories.’”  

Additionally, the counterinsurgency strategy of destroying community bonds was effective, meaning that in some communities, “the fault lines of the conflict [are] still discernible.” Teachers cannot know the fault lines they may cross when engaging in a meaningful dialogue about the conflict.

For those teachers who do want to push the limits of the curriculum by teaching about the internal conflict, their task is further complicated by the role of ethnicity. Bellino explains that there is a perceived “link between ethnicity and authenticity” surrounding the civil war within Guatemalan society as a whole, and especially among educators. Bellino found that “both indigenous and ladino teachers and principals commented that indigenous people ‘know’ more [about the conflict] because they ‘lived it.’” I saw this idea in action during my interview in the town of Don Pancho. Of the three primary school teachers I talked to there, one was a Maya man. When I asked questions concerning the civil war, the two other teachers turned to their indigenous colleague to provide the answer, which they did not do for more general questions.

The perceived link between ethnicity and knowledge can be helpful in transmitting information if students have an indigenous teacher, as they tend to see and be perceived as “authorities.” In rural areas with largely indigenous populations, in particular, the conflict seems to be a much more prevalent focus of education. For

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60 Oglesby, “Educating Citizens,” 86.
example, in Bellino’s case study of Tzolok Ochoch, a boarding school located in a rural area of Guatemala started by indigenous and international actors, “details of the conflict percolate into formal and informal interactions at the school.”63 The school is a private school, and while it is meant to follow the national curriculum, its increased access to educational resources gives the school more flexibility than public schools. The indigenous faculty at the school provided students with an optional film to watch covering the civil war in El Salvador, hoping to spark analysis about the country’s own war, as “they selected this subject precisely because of its frequent silencing in schools, worrying that the ‘youth generation’ did not have a chance to learn about the war.”64 For the students and faculty at Tzolok Ochoch, the history of the conflict is a significant part of their social context in general, and this is reflected in their school.

Bellino has shown that educators at Tzolok Ochoch are “encouraging students to use historical memory as a guide toward achieving justice as their civic responsibility to both their forbears and future generations.”65 Yet this seems to be limited, and not the case more broadly. Despite the emphasis on civic responsibility, the curriculum does not draw an explicit connection between historical memory and civic lessons. Due to the individual agency involved in teaching about the conflict, the versions of history and historical memory presented to students can vary greatly. Bellino also examined a private urban school that caters to the children of nonindigenous elites, where teachers draw “on popular discourse employed by the conservative right that ‘history promotes rancor,’

63 Bellino, “So That We Do Not Fall Again,” 70.
64 Bellino, “So That We Do Not Fall Again,” 71.
65 Bellino, “So That We Do Not Fall Again,” 72-73.
rather than national unity.” In contrast to Tzolok Ochoch, investigating history is seen as a negative, a way to be drawn away from the more important goals of the future. Rather than connecting the ills of the past with the problems of the present, historical memory is perceived as dividing society, and as an obstacle to a more peaceful future. The teaching of history as simple sequential steps, paired with a disregard for historical memory, means that the connections between past and present are ignored.

Due to the individual agency and complicated nature of analyzing the conflict, many teachers choose to emphasize the “culture of peace” narrative that is a prominent part of the reformed curriculum. UNESCO, a United Nations agency, defines the culture of peace as a “commitment to peace-building, mediation, conflict prevention and resolution, peace education, education for non-violence, tolerance, acceptance, mutual respect, intercultural and interfaith dialogue and reconciliation.” As the reformed curriculum is built upon these principles, the influence of the framework can be seen throughout the curriculum for every grade level. Like many of the ideals surrounding the Peace Accords and transition, international actors imported the ideals of the culture of peace to Guatemala. The regard for the culture of peace framework originates from UNESCO’s “Year of Culture of Peace” that began in 2000, and Oglesby explains that “UNESCO’s culture-of-peace project is working to bring this framework into the educational system and civil society more broadly” in Guatemala.

As a crucial framing device, the culture of peace has a prominent place at the beginning of the educational reform at the beginning of every curriculum document

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66 Bellino, “So That We Do Not Fall Again,” 68.
where the themes of the reform are outlined: “life in democracy and a culture of peace, unity in diversity, sustainable development and science and technology.”\(^{69}\) The themes of democracy and the culture of peace are closely linked in this interpretation, and both are portrayed as the inevitable result of a linear history. This linear history shows events happening sequentially and does not acknowledge the possibility of reversal. Human rights are also closely connected with the culture of peace framework, as one of the “Objectives of Education” for all grades is “[t]o inspire respect and the practice of Human Rights, solidarity, life in democracy and a culture of peace.”\(^{70}\) All of these connections were purposeful, as Oglesby explains that “rights discourse and culture-of-peace lexicon has displaced reconciliation as the buzzword for new projects.”\(^{71}\) Reconciliation carries the problematic associations of having to admit that the nation must be reconciled, which is not a popular sentiment among reluctant officials and citizens.

Teachers have effectively implemented the culture of peace curriculum in their classrooms. Teachers interviewed in Chimaltenango reported starting activities such as “Civics Mondays” in which they review a right and responsibility their students have each week.\(^{72}\) These “civic Mondays” pay particular attention to the “rights of women, rights of children, rights of adult people and also the responsibility of each right.”\(^{73}\) This emphasis on rights is a departure from traditional Guatemalan societal views. However,

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\(^{71}\) Oglesby, “Educating Citizens,” 90.

\(^{72}\) Interview by author, trans. by author, Chimaltenango, Guatemala, July 14, 2015.

\(^{73}\) Interview by author, trans. by author, Chimaltenango, Guatemala, July 14, 2015.
reality does not always match up with what is being taught in the culture of peace framework. Particularly in rural areas, it is still common for girls to be pulled out of school at a young age, as teachers explained to me that the idea remains common that for “a girl to become a woman, she has to stay in the house and attend to all of the domestic tasks.” Teachers interviewed from rural areas at the teacher conference in Chimaltenango reported that “one as a teacher… has a great responsibility in this sense to go and break that” idea that a formal education is less important for girls, and described attempting to convince parents to continue to send their daughters to school (activities certainly beyond their job description). These experiences echo those told by Bellino, who saw “teachers visibly struggle to reconcile democratic civic ideals with the everyday realities they share with their students, and at times, they become complicit in promoting conceptions of good citizens who acquiesce in the face of unjust systems.” The dichotomy between the realities of life in Guatemala and the life hoped for in the curriculum is a continuous theme of the reformed education, and a gap that teachers are left to navigate.

A central issue regarding the culture of peace structure is the question of whether Guatemala is indeed enjoying a culture of peace today. Levels of violence have spiked in Guatemala, as the country is “plagued by a spectrum of violence, including feminicide, social cleansing, delinquency and gang violence, petty crime, organized crime, drug trafficking, vigilante justice movements, and political assassinations.” In Guatemala City, the main urban center of violence, the homicide rate is an astonishing twelve times

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74 Interview by author, trans. by author, Chimaltenango, Guatemala, July 14, 2015.
75 Interview by author, trans. by author, Chimaltenango, Guatemala, July 14, 2015.
76 Bellino, “So That We Do Not Fall Again,” 12.
higher than the worldwide average.\textsuperscript{78} Life in Guatemala today can be just as dangerous, if not more so, than when the country was torn apart by internal conflict, leading some to argue that a “new war” is being fought in Guatemala.\textsuperscript{79} Given these levels of violence, can this really be called a culture of peace? The continued violence and impunity show that Guatemala’s history cannot so easily be divided into a before (violence) and now (peace). These levels of violence especially affect those in urban centers, who usually did not experience the most widespread violence of the civil war. According to Bellino, for some, this has led to “the act of historical distancing verg[ing] on nostalgia for dictatorship control, since ‘at least back then, you knew who would be targeted . . . if you were ‘involved in something.’ Today anyone can be a victim.’”\textsuperscript{80}

Beyond the question of the veracity of a culture of peace, the framework itself is also arguably problematic because it provides educators with a convenient way to divide Guatemala’s recent history. Oglesby has demonstrated the weaknesses and inaccuracies of this division, arguing that “One of the core problems with the culture-of-peace curricula framework is its giving the impression that the cause of the conflict in Guatemala was [a] culture of violence.”\textsuperscript{81} The true causes of the conflict are complicated, controversial and were deeply embedded into the fabric of Guatemalan society. The culture of peace framework allows those reasons to be sidestepped while an abstract culture of violence can be blamed for the conflict.

\textsuperscript{81} Oglesby, “Educating Citizens,” 90.
There are some teachers and schools that are making extraordinary efforts to teach their students about the internal armed conflict. The school in Don Pancho had organized a reenactment of the conflict for their school’s play in 2014, “the children with their weapons and all.” Notably organized by the indigenous teacher discussed above, whose parents had been displaced by the conflict, the reenactment marks a stark move away from the very limited discussion of the war in the curriculum. While there certainly are some questions about children reenacting a violent war, there is no doubt that it opens the door to teach children about the past. This connection between past and present is an integral part of creating the social conditions ripe for the transmission of memories about the war in a productive way. Jelin outlines two necessary steps for intergenerational transmissions of the past: “First, there needs to be a basis for the process of identification, the intergenerational expansion of the ‘we.’ Second, the possibility that those who are on the receiving end will reinterpret and resignify whatever is being left open has to be left open.” The reenactment is one example of teachers opening up the “we” of the memories of the civil war. This inclusion means that the next generation can begin to make their own historically informed interpretations of the past and present.

Despite the efforts of some teachers within the reformed educational system, ignorance of the conflict remains widespread among students. A 2011 article that appeared in the Guatemalan newspaper El Periódico described how students exclaimed “there was war here?!?” when questioned by their teachers about the conflict. One

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82 Interview by author, trans. by author, Don Pancho, Guatemala, July 13, 2015.
83 Jelin, Labors of Memory, 96.
teacher interviewed in Antigua who animatedly expressed his belief that all Guatemalan students should learn about the conflict somewhat reluctantly admitted that he was only able to spend “about half an hour” each year talking about the war.\footnote{Interview by author, trans. by author, Antigua, Guatemala, July 13, 2015.} Even teachers who have the knowledge and will to teach their students about the country’s recent history can be waylaid by obstacles such as inadequate funding and resources. Still, even unintentional avoidance of discussions about the conflict perpetuates the ignorance of the recent past.

Memory scholars tell us that memory is informed not just by remembrances, but also by what is purposefully forgotten. Those fighting against a purposeful silencing face a difficult road. An urban teacher told Bellino, “I have students who don’t know there was a war here… When we talk about it, they think it is a tragic fiction.”\footnote{Interview with urban private school teacher, by Michelle J. Bellino in Bellino, “Whose Past, Whose Present,” 139.} There remains a pervasive and purposeful forgetting within Guatemala. These gaps and silences are a crucial part of understanding the intergenerational transmission of memory. A primary school teacher expressed his frustration with his attempts at teaching about the conflict, explaining that when he described the conflict to his students, one of them remarked, “It would have been fun to live in that time.”\footnote{Interview by author, trans. by author, Antigua, Guatemala, July 13, 2015.} There remains a continued ignorance and misunderstanding broadly among young Guatemalans of their country’s recent past, despite the efforts of some teachers.

**NGOs and Education**

While some individual teachers have made strides towards implementing a more comprehensive education for students about the internal armed conflict, the evidence of
continued ignorance shows that there are still large gaps within the education system. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are attempting to fill some of those gaps, with a proliferation of NGOs focused on providing basic education to Guatemalan children. One such example is Avivara, an NGO based in Antigua, Guatemala started by two Americans and a Guatemalan. The stated mission of Avivara is “To improve the quality of and access to education in Guatemala, and cultivate interconnectedness between the peoples of Guatemala and the United States.”

Avivara provides scholarships to students to help cover costs of school, uniform, supplies, and transportation, provide schools with much needed resources, and when need be, step into the classroom as teachers themselves.

NGOs such as Avivara occupy an important role in the interaction between the private and public sector in the educational system of Guatemala. These NGOs can operate as a bridge between teachers in the classroom and the ideas of the Ministry of Education, and can push the limits of the state-led curriculum in ways not possible for individual educators on their own. NGOs offer a legitimate way to challenge the boundaries set by the Ministry of Education without the burden being placed on one individual teacher’s shoulders. These organizations come from around the world, and with different missions and methods. Some follow the themes set out by the Ministry of Education. Others push the limits of what is supposed to be taught in Guatemala, providing teachers with key resources that help them bridge gaps and teach their students about the war. Wherever they fall on the spectrum, the NGOs discussed below are a key

89 Avivara was an organization I worked with in Guatemala and its founders, Gary, Ann and Gustavo were integral to this research.
part of understanding if and how Guatemala’s recent traumatic past is being taught to the next generation of Guatemalans.

**NGOs and the Culture of Peace**

NGOs have taken up the banner of the narrative of the culture of peace, perhaps unsurprisingly, given its international origins. One significant NGO that has implemented programs to support this narrative is the Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation. Menchú was a symbol to the international world for her work publicizing and defending the rights of the indigenous peoples of Guatemala during the civil war, winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.\(^9^0\) Despite her widespread international acclaim, Menchú is a controversial figure within and outside of Guatemala. The full story of Menchú is outside of the scope of this work, but it is important to note her great accomplishments and critics. Her international praise, awards and positions have not translated to popularity in Guatemala, but rather distrust owing to her time spent away from Guatemala, a perception of accumulated wealth, and her status as a Maya woman.\(^9^1\)

The Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation, as part of its mission “towards recuperating and enriching inherent human values to create world peace taking as its base the ethnic, political and cultural diversity of the world,” released a series of workbooks

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for Guatemalan primary schools in 2000. The cover of each workbook is filled with colorful illustrations. Titled “Civic Education for a Culture of PEACE,” they portray children of a variety of races playing and learning in a classroom, with, significantly, the girls in traditional Maya traje. The workbooks are the picture of a peaceful, diverse and accepting new Guatemala. There is a workbook for each primary school level, with activities such as creating a doll that reflects the students’ dress, fill-in-the-letter spelling out of the Declaration of Human Rights, and short stories about girls whose parents don’t allow them to go to school. Age-appropriate activities center around the promotion of the culture of peace: individual participation is encouraged, Maya traditions are explained, human rights are outlined, and students are encouraged to look into their own communities to learn new things about their country and culture.

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93 Gabriela Porras, Educación Cívica: por una cultura de paz (Guatemala City: Magna Terres editores), cover page. Accessed via CIRMA.
94 Porras, Educación Cívica.
The “Civic Education” workbooks represent an interesting peek into the work of NGOs in classroom materials, but what makes these workbooks particularly fascinating is their source. Menchú was intimately involved in and a very public representative for the indigenous and revolutionary struggle during the conflict. Precisely because of Menchú’s revolutionary and public past, it is significant that her foundation made the decision to promote the ideals of the culture of peace. On one hand, the decision is logical: Menchú is a controversial figure and the culture of peace narrative, as argued by Oglesby, has relatively few divisive associations. On the other hand, the culture of peace framework does not incorporate the history of the time Menchú helped to publicize as it happened. However, the idea of a culture of peace represents valuable and critical topics that need to be implemented in Guatemalan society, starting with its youngest members.

95 Photo by author, July 2, 2015.
NGOs and Multiculturalism

One of the most important objectives of the revised curriculum, multiculturalism, emphasizes framing Guatemala as a pluricultural, multilingual, and multiethnic nation. The prominence of this theme is significant especially in the Guatemalan context, where Maya citizens historically have been marginalized and subjugated. The inclusion of the ideals of a pluricultural, multilingual, and multiethnic Guatemala as a crucial framing device for the revised curriculum was a marked shift from previous attempts at reform, and perhaps representative of the international pressure forcing the Guatemalan government to make concessions. Regardless of the political circumstances of its inclusion, it marked a significant victory for indigenous actors in Guatemala.

In the “Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” the government vowed to “Expand and promote intercultural bilingual education and place emphasis on the study and knowledge of indigenous languages at all educational levels.”96 The curriculum outlines that students of all grade levels will, as part of the central themes of the reform, have a “unit in diversity” that includes the topic of “multiculturalism and interculturalism.”97 A key tenet of the Social Sciences area of the curriculum, which students begin in the fourth grade, is that students “[d]evelop attitudes of identification and a vision of a united and socially and geographically diverse Guatemala to bring them to locate themselves as part of a pluricultural, multiethnic and multilingual nation.”98 Teachers are instructed to be “working to develop the most elevated processes of

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reasoning and to orient in the internalization of the values that permit the harmonious
coeexistence in a pluricultural society” among their students.\textsuperscript{99} The reformed educational
system is meant to incorporate students into a multicultural conception of Guatemala.

The seemingly positive framing is not without its critics. Cojtí called the concepts
of multiculturalism and interculturalism that appeared in the reformed education
“guatemalanised,” that is to say, inextricably tied to the ideas of race and ethnicity unique
to Guatemala.\textsuperscript{100} The hopes and fears of both indigenous and governmental
representatives that made up the educational reform commissions are reflected in the
versions of multiculturalism and interculturalism that Guatemalan students now learn.
According to Cojtí, for indigenous representatives helping to shape the curriculum, the
rhetoric of multiculturalism “meant the possibility of obtaining positive recognition of
their existence, strengthening their cultures, which had hitherto been discriminated
against by the state, and obtaining effective rights to equality and difference.”\textsuperscript{101} In
contrast, some (but not all) ladino government representatives feared “multiculturalism as
a strategy that would result in indigenous separatism, isolation and even ‘ethnic
cleansing,’” these representatives instead preferred the notion of “interculturalism,”
which simply promoted good relations between the different ethnic groups of
Guatemala.\textsuperscript{102} As a compromise, both concepts were included in the final curriculum.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the experiences have not matched up with the ideals laid
out in the Peace Accords and subsequent plans. The Peace Accords and reformed

\textsuperscript{99} García Salas A et al. “Curriculum Nacional Base: Primer Grado, National Base
Curriculum, First Grade,” 18.
\textsuperscript{100} Cojtí, “Education Reform in Guatemala,” 115.
\textsuperscript{101} Cojtí, “Education Reform in Guatemala,” 115.
\textsuperscript{102} Cojtí, “Education Reform in Guatemala,” 115.
curriculum hoped for a Guatemala in which every language and culture was respected. A key component of that was the development of bilingual education to truly implement the ideals of a multicultural nation. In reality, teachers are offered little incentive or support to teach in a bilingual classroom, and according to education scholar Margriet Poppema, “any progress… remains dependent on individual decisions and abilities of the teacher.”\textsuperscript{103} That is not to say that bilingual education has not grown or is unimportant, but rather that promised institutional support has not materialized. The ideals of cultural pride can also be misconstrued. Bellino has shown that in urban schools with nonindigenous populations, “[d]espite the bulletin boards in their school hallways depicting images of Mayan peoples and culture as sources of national pride, students came to see [Maya] solidarity movements as misguided ploys to access privileges on the basis of ethnic identity.”\textsuperscript{104} Since the end of the conflict, some sectors of Guatemalan society see indigenous attempts to gain more rights as excessive and imprudent, as “they” already have the Peace Accords to provide them with entitlements, even though legislation to enact the changes the Peace Accords outlined has largely failed. Despite that, and the fact that the “large majority of Guatemala’s indigenous population lives in poverty, and these youth are less likely to access postprimary education than their nonindigenous peers,” among certain sectors a skepticism about claims based on ethnicity remains.\textsuperscript{105}


\textsuperscript{104} Bellino, “So That We Do Not Fall Again,” 69.

\textsuperscript{105} Bellino, “So That We Do Not Fall Again,” 59.
Some scholars, most prominently Charles Hale, have criticized the framework of multiculturalism altogether. Hale ties multiculturalism to critiques of neoliberalism, arguing, “Neoliberal multiculturalism permits indigenous organization, as long as it does not amass enough power to call basic state prerogatives into question.” He illustrates multicultural interactions between the state and indigenous actors by a quote from Cojtí describing negotiations with the Arzú administration: “Before, they just told us ‘no.’ Now, their response is ‘sí, pero’ [‘yes, but’].” This concept of sí, pero, defines the limitations of multiculturalism for Hale. He sees multicultural rhetoric in the neoliberal framework as the latest tool with which the government attempts to reinforce racial hierarchies. Hale maintains that the state makes just enough strategic concessions to indigenous groups, enough to keep them subdued but not enough to truly affect change. In this view, the acceptance of indigenous positions in the Ministry of Education appears a much more cynical act, as the ministry “showcases the multicultural ethic with its programs in bilingual education and interculturalidad (intercultural dialogue). The preposterous idea that an Indian would become Minister of Finance is another matter altogether.”

Following Hale’s theory of the “Indio Permitido,” the lack of quality bilingual education available to Maya students is a tool of the neoliberal idea of multiculturalism that limits the actual rights of indigenous people. The Guatemalan state has made substantive changes in theory for the education of indigenous students, but in reality these students still tend to receive a lesser education than their ladino counterparts. This is

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depriving them of the opportunities for upward mobility that a full education provides, and, Hale would argue, is another tool of the state to keep indigenous peoples in a subordinate position. It is no coincidence that of 43 Peace Agreements signed worldwide between 1989 and 2005, nearly seventy percent included some educational provisions. The concessions made in the “Indigenous Rights” Accord cannot carry their full significance if they are not properly implemented and supported.

The inclusion of multiculturalism in the reformed curriculum, like much of the Peace Accords, is more complicated than it appears at first glance. The vision of a pluricultural, multilingual and multiethnic Guatemala is optimistic and not yet achieved. The use of multiculturalism and interculturalism in the framing of the reformed educational system is an enormous shift from the discriminatory attitudes and practices that were standard fare prior to the signing of the Peace Accords. The idea is a radical departure from the discrimination and oppression of the indigenous population of Guatemala, and an important measure of progress. A more cynical observer, however, could point to the inclusion of multiculturalism in the framing of the educational reform as a reaction to international pressures, and see the transformation of the idea into a new form of subjugation. The reality most likely is somewhere between these ideas, forcing teachers to navigate yet another tricky field.

Given the relative lack of controversy, attractiveness to donors, and genuine need to introduce these concepts, some NGOs have stepped in to help implement the ideas of multiculturalism and interculturalism into the Guatemalan educational system. One example is IBIS, a global NGO based in Denmark whose stated mission in Guatemala is

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NGOs such as IBIS now work to help teachers navigate this multicultural background for education. IBIS has a particularly interesting history in Guatemala. IBIS began to work in Central America to help opposition movements in their struggle against dictatorships. The history of support for popular organizations in Guatemala during a time when such organizations were fighting against the military dictatorship is extremely significant. This context sets it apart from other agencies that entered Guatemala as part of the peace process, or some agencies that worked within the counterinsurgency movement (such as USAID). Today, IBIS’ goals in Guatemalan education are centered on helping some of the same groups of people they supported in the 1980’s, poor rural indigenous populations.

IBIS’ work in Guatemala is based on the promotion of intercultural and bilingual education for Maya children. Their work is largely centered in the department of El Quiché, in the western highlands of Guatemala, where IBIS’ “intention is to improve [Maya students’] educational level and at the same time strengthen their language and culture.” This is very much in line with the goals of teaching interculturalism laid out in the Peace Accords. A key part of IBIS’ mission is to provide teachers, principals, and educational counselors with training in “the methodology of intercultural and bilingual education.” This pedagogical training solves a key problem for the Ministry of Education, which struggles to properly train its teachers, and resources tend to be

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113 IBIS, “Nuestro Trabajo (Our Work).”
especially scarce in the highlands of Guatemala. IBIS is pushing past the limits set by the Ministry of Education to provide a meaningful education to Maya students. Education is a tool of reconciliation and advancement. IBIS is not just trying to support the education of Maya children in the Quiché region, but to empower their futures. By providing teachers with important lessons in interculturalism and bilingual education, they are giving them the necessary tools to teach the beneficial ideas included in the reformed curriculum.

IBIS also provides teachers with resources to use in their classrooms. One such example is a pamphlet promoting multicultural ideas provided to teachers. While IBIS’ main work is in El Quiché, a primary school teacher in Antigua, Guatemala used this pamphlet in her classroom. The large, cheerfully colored guide explains the different *pueblos*, or peoples of Guatemala, and appears to be part of a series. This particular guide focuses on the family, explaining who makes up Xinka, Maya, and Garífuna families, what problems affect each type of family, and the culture of each family. The pamphlet is a concrete example of a way for teachers to give their students an overview of the cultural groups living within Guatemala. This is important particularly in Antigua, an area where many international NGOs are based. Antigua does not have indigenous population levels similar to El Quiché, and was less affected by the internal conflict. Still, a large amount of NGO work takes place in Antigua because it is safe and easy to access for international actors. While students in Antigua largely do not need bilingual education, IBIS is helping to establish a greater national understanding of the

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114 IBIS Pamphlet, published 2000, courtesy of author. The Xinka are non-Maya indigenous people in Guatemala, and Garífuna refers to mixed-race people largely of Afro-Caribbean descent.
marginalized groups it seeks to help. The pamphlet represents another attempt by IBIS to step in where the Ministry of Education has lagged behind in the areas of interculturalism.

**NGOs and the Internal Armed Conflict**

An example of an international organization intervening with regards to spreading information about the civil war is that of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Following the signing of the Peace Accords, USAID put millions of dollars into Guatemala as part of its “peace fund.” Oglesby points out the irony of USAID’s peacetime efforts, given their visible support of the military regimes in Guatemala, remarking that the projects were “from the same folks who helped deliver counterinsurgency . . . now we have human rights and peace projects!” Irony aside, USAID undertook a project meant to educate those living in the areas most affected by the conflict, focusing on the findings of the CEH report. Due to the government’s refusal to accept the CEH report, the public knowledge of the report, especially in rural areas that were affected by the worst of the violence, remains low.

To combat this lack of knowledge, USAID filled a gap left by the state by developing a *radionovela*, or radio soap opera, that told the fictionalized story of a boy named Pablo, whose father disappeared during the violence and whose mother is fighting for exhumation of his remains. The program taught lessons to Pablo and his friends, ranging from lessons on less controversial topics of the rights of children, multiculturalism, and the peace process, to the more polemical, the importance of

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exhumations. Notably missing from the lessons about the war and its consequences, however, was historical context, a key part of the CEH report. As Oglesby notes, “in response to comments, USAID produced a segment that included a brief mention of the structural causes of the war,” and a short textbook to accompany it. Yet it was a strategic and ambiguous history lesson. Oglesby points out that “USAID supervisors in Washington took out any mention of U.S. involvement in overthrowing the [democratically elected] government of Arbenz in 1954,” an event that the CEH report pointed to as a key historical turning point in the history of the conflict.

The USAID project presents a few key points. First, it is a significant example of an agency working to provide an alternate narrative to that of the state. The dominant narrative was ignoring the conflict, so the importance of USAID investing funds and time into a project spreading knowledge of the CEH report in affected areas must be stated. The international legitimacy and assets of the organization allowed it to safely occupy this potentially controversial space. Secondly, while representing an alternate narrative, the project still depends on a simplified historical narrative that stated that most of the population was “caught between two armies,” though the “army committed more violations.” It also represents some of the problems faced by international organizations. National interests can trump the interests of the nations that these organizations are meant to help, as shown by the decision to not include a part of

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118 Oglesby, “Educating Citizens,” 89.
Guatemalan history unflattering to the US national narrative. This contradiction of interests is not unique to USAID and is a potential problem for international, particularly US-based, organizations seeking to effect change in Guatemala.

**NGOs & Historical Memory**

The void left by the lack of discussion about the civil war in Guatemalan education has led to some unorthodox methods of educating citizens. One organization that has developed is Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice Against Forgetting and Silence, known by its acronym HIJOS (spelling children in Spanish). As Bellino points out, members of HIJOS fight for remembrance of the conflict in Guatemala. These young activists face obstacles, as a continued taboo on social organizing means “their mission extend[s] beyond educating the public about the civil war and its enduring effects; like many activists, they now have the added burden to educate the public about the legitimacy of collective organizing.”[121] HIJOS largely seeks to educate the public through attention-grabbing, symbolic works. One such method is political graffiti, as seen below:

“We the youth are reclaiming memory, truth and justice.”[122]

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[122] Photo via: https://writingdownthewalls.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/hijos-2.jpg
The lack of open discussion of the conflict means that engaged youth who want to push the societal boundaries find new, sometimes-illegal means of expression. Bellino’s interviews with student members of HIJOS show that some are “less concerned with breaking the law than ‘breaking the silence.’”\(^{123}\) The lack of space within the school system to discuss the parallels between the war and Guatemala’s current ills causes some students to seek other spaces to organize and express their frustration. HIJOS is an important cultural example of organizations fighting to force an alternate to the state’s master narrative. The lack of recognition of the links between past and present violence within the school system (and in Guatemalan society as a whole) means that the methods for communicating this alternate memory is outside the law, placing members in additional danger.

A creative way to help build historical memory (without breaking the law) has emerged through growing Internet resources that personalize the conflict, and offer an alternate history to that provided by the national government. A significant example is the website *When We Were Young/ There Was a War*, which documents the stories of Guatemalan and Salvadoran children who grew up in the time of their countries’ respective civil wars, and follows how these experiences shaped their lives.\(^{124}\) The website showcases the stories of six children, four of whom grew up in Guatemala. The lives of Dora, Diego, Sebastián, and Rosario put a personal face on a war that is at times defined by violence and statistics so dramatic they are difficult to comprehend. Using the

\(^{123}\) Bellino, “Civic Engagement,” 12.
lives of the children (now adults), the website presents a compelling narrative of a variety of experiences during the war and now, years after. The website is available in both English and Spanish and includes a page for “teacher resources,” that provide teachers with “content overview,” which is short summaries of each child’s story, and transcripts of the videos. This reflects the filmmaker’s desire that these stories be told and shared in classrooms.

The stories the website tells are emotional and cover a range of experiences in the civil war. Dora’s family fled from violence and settled in Guatemala City, where present-day Dora remains and speaks about the continued issues of racism in Guatemala (breaking another silence). A civil patrol group killed Diego’s father, and today his children play with the descendants of the men who killed him, as the town continues to live as though the past did not happen. Sebastián was the sole member of his immediate family to survive a massacre, and grew up in a Community of Populations in Resistance (CPR). Today he struggles to provide the basic essentials for his family, and has to pull his children out of school to work, a common plight of poor Guatemalans. Rosario lives in Santiago Atitlan, a town that was able to score a rare success against the state and temporarily expel the army during the height of the war, only to face more violence today. These stories are exemplary of many in Guatemala.

“When We Were Young” demonstrates the increased prevalence of Internet resources as a new frontier for NGOs. Such websites privilege stories that otherwise would not have been told, and allow Guatemalans and international observers to see the realities and the effects of war. These are stories that need to be voiced, and the freedom

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of the Internet provides a legal and less dangerous alternative to share such accounts. This contradiction of the master narrative is incredibly important. A teacher remarked to me during the course of my interviews that I was lucky to be in Guatemala now, rather than a few years ago, as no one would have spoken to me about these sensitive topics then. The way to keep this opening, however slow it comes, is through efforts like When We Were Young/ There Was a War. Providing a narrative that emphasizes the stories of survivors and calls into question the purposeful ignorance of the master narrative is an effective way to move forward towards a more comprehensive education.

**Conclusion**

The end of the war in Guatemala did not mean the end of conflict. The period of transition has been marked both by hope and disappointment, enormous strides forward and stubborn stagnation. While the Peace Accords may have been signed in 1996, the negotiations and contestations did not end there. This contestation is especially evident in Guatemalan schools, a key site of establishing (or preventing the formation of) historical memory surrounding Guatemala’s recent traumatic past. Struggles over historical truth continue to dominate the post-war conscience and conversation. At the same time, the nation must move on to face its new challenges. This dichotomy is one of the defining elements for studying Guatemala today. The division between the limits of a state-led framework and the efforts to do more can be seen in the ways in which teachers and organizations are challenging the purposeful boundaries of the state curriculum.

Nearly twenty years have passed since the signing of the Peace Accords. Many of the hopes that the Peace Accords represented have not been met, yet the realities of daily life in Guatemala have shifted. The focus in civic education was designed to stay on
multiculturalism and the narrative of the culture of peace. These ideals were and remain incredibly important. What some educators are experiencing today, though, is a society that is slowly becoming more open to discussion of the conflict, despite a curriculum that is built to avoid this exact discussion. The framework of multiculturalism and the culture of peace were meant to help usher in a new era in Guatemala. Today, this new era includes growing discussion about Guatemala’s recent traumatic past, and precisely because of the framework implemented in the reformed curriculum, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the state to foreclose such analysis.

The focus of this work on education is purposeful. Education is a powerful tool in any society, but especially in a country recovering from a violent civil war. Schools should serve as sites of negotiation and contestation, and can have the ability to empower generations that have previously been marginalized. What young students learn, particularly in the field of history, can affect their perceptions of themselves, their community, their nation, and their world. Education helps form students’ social context, and by extension, their labors of memory. As such, the negotiations that teachers are conducting in schools today are to be understood as part and parcel of the larger struggles in Guatemalan society. An individual teacher making the decision to push the boundaries of the limited curriculum will not change the whole education system. However, individual efforts are representative of the larger struggle to create and define historical memory in Guatemala, despite a state-led curricular framework that avoids it.

The work of teachers and education-based NGOs in pushing past a superficial discussion of the past is forming an alternate narrative. The state has been able to establish a master narrative that ignores the conflict, or describes it as an equal fight
between two sides. Today, in line with the recommendations of the CEH report, some educators are beginning to analyze the civil war from a more historical perspective. Education is a key part of the larger transition process in Guatemala, and as such, the emergence of alternative narratives within classrooms is an encouraging sign for those actors and observers dissatisfied with what “peace” in Guatemala has come to mean. While teaching about the internal conflict may cause teachers to feel as though they are “breaking the image” of Guatemala for their students, it is part of creating a new understanding of Guatemala’s past, present, and future.126 The implementation of a historically based account of the conflict is groundbreaking for what it may accomplish, and for the labors of memory it allows. As one survivor appealed: “Let the history we lived be taught in the schools, so that it is never forgotten, so our children may know it.”127

126 Interview by author, trans. by author, Antigua, Guatemala, July 13, 2015.
127 Testimony given to CEH.
Works Cited


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