Article title	Historical Context of Primary Education (Guatemala)
Author 1	Brien K. Ashdown
Author 1 blurb	Brien K. Ashdown is Associate Professor of Psychology at American University of Sharjah, Sharjah, UAE
Regional Editor	Thomas DeVere Wolsey
Editor in Chief	Maria Teresa Tatto
DATE LAST MODIFIED	January 8, 2021 July 12, 2021 TDW

https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350934399.001

Keywords

1. indigenous Maya
2. Colonialism
3. prímaria
4. básico
5. escuelas normales

Glossary terms

1. *Primária*: The primary education school in Guatemala. Equivalent to pre-kindergarten throught 6th grade in the USA. It is compulsory and technically free for all children in Guatemala.
2. *Escuela Normal*: The type of upper secondary school that was first established in Guatemala in the late nineteenth century in order to train and certify primary education teachers.
3. *Indigenous Maya*: A general term to describe the 7-10 million people living in southern Mexico, Belize, El Salvador, western Honduras, and Guatemala who claim heritage from the Maya peoples who were living in these areas at the time of the Spanish conquest. There are more than 30 unique Maya cultural and heritage groups today, many of them with native languages that are not mutually intelligible.
4. *Básico*: lower-secondary school in Guatemala. Equivalent to 7th – 9th grades in the USA and similar to ICSED Level 2. This education is compulsory and focuses on general education.

Text of the article

Historical and conceptual evolution of primary education

Pre-Conquest Education in Guatemala

Before the Spanish *conquistadores* arrived in Guatemala in 1524 and began nearly 300 years of colonialism and cultural genocide, education was important to the original indigenous Maya inhabitants. At the time colonialists invaded the area, Guatemala was not the modern nation it is now; instead, a system of Mayan city-states spread across Central America and southern Mexico. It was not until 1821 that this area established itself as an independent political entity (called the Captaincy General of Guatemala, and included all of Central America, except for Panama, plus Chiapas). This initial independence from Spain was followed up by a more permanent situation when Guatemala declared independence in 1847 (Woodward, 2005). When Pedro de Alvarado began the conquest of Guatemala, the education system among the Maya was mostly informal. Education was under the direction of local religious leaders, reserved for the children of the wealthy and powerful, and focused on issues of war and politics. Children of the non-elite received an education from their parents and other adults in their lives,

focused on mainly on learning the skills of their parents to support their own future livelihoods (Woodward, 2005).

More modern evidence suggests that Maya families have greatly valued education for a long time. For example, during the civil war that ravaged Guatemala for more than 30 years (1960-1996), many indigenous families were chased from their homes and took secret refuge in the highland jungles and forests. Even while living in hiding and managing such dangerous circumstances, they founded classrooms where young people could continue their educations (Communities of Population in Resistance of the Sierra, 1990). Valuing education during a dangerous and armed conflict – which was later described as a genocide (Higonnet, 2009) – suggests a long history and tradition of education among indigenous Maya groups.

Beginning with the Spanish conquest in 1524 and continuing until 1821, Guatemala was a part of the Spanish empire and directly governed by the Viceroyalty of New Spain. During these centuries of colonialism, indigenous people (the vast majority of whom were and continue to be of Maya ancestry; Elías, 2020) suffered and survived under the severe policies and government practices of the Spanish crown. Many of these policies and practices were supported, both directly and indirectly, by the colonial Catholic Church. Multiple religious orders of nuns, friars, priests, and monks (such as the Franciscans and Capuchins) took a governing role in local communities.

As was common in other places in Latin America (Newson, 2020), the Jesuits were predominantly involved in education during this time (de Santa María, 1978; Woodward, 2005) and had an impact on both private and public education in Guatemala that is still evident today. Many primary schools, as well as secondary schools and universities, carry the name of religious orders or figures (e.g., the Universidad Francisco Marroquín, which was named after the first Bishop of Guatemala who also founded the School of Saint Thomas to educate indigenous Maya peoples; that school developed into the main public university in Guatemala, now called the Universidad de San Carlos).

After the first step toward Guatemalan independence in 1821 (which is when modern-day Guatemala became a part of the newly-independent United Provinces of Central America), public education became a serious public policy issue (Woodward, 2005). During the 1830s, various political figures and governmental leaders advocated education reform that would include various types of free and universal primary education. These discussions did not come to fruition because of other political issues of the time, such as the movement toward full Guatemalan independence in 1847 (Woodward, 2005).

Chronology of changes

The first law making primary education compulsory in Guatemala was instituted after independence in 1847. This law required that all children between the ages of 6 and 14 attend a national school. Unfortunately, because the majority of the population lived in rural areas and dealt with severe poverty, relatively few children received this primary education, and illiteracy remained a significant issue for decades (Adams, 1995). During this time, and at least partially to increase the number of teachers in the country, Guatemala began to establish public *escuelas normales*. While these "normal schools" were secondary, and not primary, schools, they were created for the express purpose of training teachers. By attending and graduating from an *escuela normal*, a person would be certified to teach in a public primary school. This is still the case in Guatemala, as a university degree is not required for a teaching certificate (Batz & Caballeros, 2019).

Primary Education in the Twentieth Century

Public primary education was relatively well-supported during the first half of the twentieth century. During those decades, until the 1954 CIA-backed coup against the government of democratically-elected President Jacobo Arbenz, federal and municipal governments valued and celebrated academic achievements. For example, during the administration of Manual Estrada Cabrera, festivals known as *Minervalías* were used to impress the population with the president's power but also to acknowledge the accomplishments of students and their teachers (Rendón, 2002). This respect for education continued

into the 1940s and 1950s, during the progressive period known as the "Ten Years of Spring" (Grandin et al., 2011). During this time, President Juan José Arévelo marshalled in significant education renovation; unfortunately, these changes (which fortified existing laws and commitment to public education) were brief. With the coup and collapse of Arbenz's government in 1954, Guatemala rapidly fell into violence, despotism, civil war, and genocide.

During the more than three decades of civil war, beginning in 1960 and ending with peace accords in 1996, primary schools in many areas of the country remained open and operational, though struggled to complete the task of educating children – particularly in the areas that experienced most conflict. This disproportionately affected rural and indigenous communities; in fact, Maya children who were school-age during the war received significantly fewer years of schooling than non-Maya children (Chamarbagwala & Morán, 2011).

Peace accords formally ended the war in 1996. The accords and subsequent changes to laws and the Guatemalan constitution enshrined the rights of students to an education, and the rights of indigenous Maya students to receive at least a portion of their education in their native language. This reinforces the already-existing policy (from the nineteenth century) that all primary education is compulsory and free in Guatemala. However, the education system in Guatemala is one of the least equal in Latin America (Batz & Caballeros, 2019; Posner, 2017). This has created a situation where primary students from lower socioeconomic statuses, who tend to live in rural areas and be of indigenous heritage, are not able to access high-quality primary education. This disparity is obvious in numerous ways: the state of the school buildings, lack of supplies, the (lack of) qualifications and aptitude of the teachers, and whether the students can afford to pay to attend a private school (Batz & Caballeros, 2019).

Structural Changes

Currently, the Guatemalan primary education system is structured in ways similar to primary education in many other parts of the world. Children usually enter the system at five- or six-years-old, and the primary education in Guatemala lasts for six years. After completing *primária* (primary school), students enter the lower secondary education program of *básico* (similar to middle/junior high school in the USA and ISCED level 2), which lasts for three years and is also compulsory and free (if students attend a public school). After completing *básico*, students can continue their education in *diversificado* and/or *bachillerato* (similar to high school in the USA and ISCED level 3); however, these higher secondary education programs are not compulsory nor often free.

As noted previously, a university degree is not required to be credentialed as a *primária* teacher in Guatemala – only a *bachillerato* degree (equivalent to three years of higher secondary school) is necessary. This often leaves *primária* schools, particularly in poor, rural, and indigenous towns and areas with well-intentioned but poorly trained and underqualified teachers. In addition, even though *primária* school is compulsory and free by law, there are associated costs (uniforms, supplies, etc.) that make it impossible for many parents to enroll their children in *primária* schools. In some of these same areas, the children's labor is necessary for the family to obtain basic needs (such as food and shelter), and so the children are kept home from school in order to work (Posner, 2017).

Trends and projections

Primary Education in Guatemala Today

These challenges have created a current structure of primary education in Guatemala that is particularly unequal, with fewer than 70% of *primária*-aged children finishing *primária* school, and fewer than 40% of them continuing on to any type of secondary school. In addition to low enrollments, only about half of *primária* students are testing at appropriate grade levels (Posner, 2017). This drastic disparity has led to various outcomes, such as a plethora of churches, mission groups, and other non-profit organizations stepping in to provide the *primária* education that is severely lacking in many areas of Guatemala. These groups have varying levels of success, leaving many young children in Guatemala without access to high-quality primary education.

Role of technology and other innovations

Technology use in education in Guatemala has steadily increased, similar to global trends (Cajas, 1998; Galla, 2016). Financial resources and funding remain an obstacle to the use of technology in Guatemala, particularly in primary schools located in rural and poorer areas. However, scholars and experts continue to call for the use of technology as far as funding permits (Asturias de Barrios & Arellano, 2007).

Further reading and online resources

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