

Popular Education and Post-War Democratization: The Case of PENNAT, Guatemala

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Introduction

At the start of the 21st Century, Guatemala is emerging from a prolonged period of authoritarian rule and one of the worst experiences of militarization in Latin American history. The thirty-six year Civil War which ended in December of 1996 left over 200,000 people dead or "disappeared," and as many as 1.5 million people displaced from their homes (CEH 1999). These figures belie the deeper psychological and cultural wounds inflicted by the militarization, particularly on Guatemala's majority indigenous population. The Commission for Historical Clarification (Guatemala's Truth Commission), concluded in 1999: "to achieve national harmony and reconciliation, a concerted effort at cultural change is required...this can only be contemplated through an active policy of education for peace" (1999, p.38). It is not uncommon for nations to turn to education as a vehicle for post-war social reconstruction, or to embrace educational reform as a means of cultivating democracy. But in Guatemala, education for democracy must also address the "culture of terror" and the "culture of fear" that war has left behind (Sluka, 2000). What would such an "education for peace" look like? Can education achieve the tall order of facilitating a national transition to democracy, as well as helping individuals and communities recover from the devastating effects of political violence and repression?

This paper explores these questions by examining a non-governmental program of popular education for working children and youth in Guatemala. 'PENNAT,' or Programa Educativo del Niño, Niña y Adolescente Trabajador (Educational Program for Child and Adolescent Workers), is an alternative educational program created for working children who are unable to attend regular school. The focus on working youth is important in Guatemala because this population is possibly the most victimized by the effects of the war and the current social and economic order.

In this paper I will outline aspects of PENNAT's program and philosophy, and explore their meaning and significance in the context of Guatemala's post-war transition. I argue that PENNAT is important both for what it does and for whom it serves--poor indigenous children. Because it is explicitly oriented toward social change, based on a popular education philosophy that aims to empower the most excluded members of society, PENNAT makes a unique contribution to post-war democratization and to building a "culture of mutual respect and peace" in Guatemala (CEH, 1999, p. 39).

The Guatemalan Context

The history of Guatemala is marked by the profound exclusion and marginalization of Mayan indigenous groups, which comprise almost two-thirds of the population, from economic and political participation (Sieder, 1999; CEH 1999). The Commission for Historical Clarification found in this exclusionary history the roots of the armed conflict. According to the CEH report, "the proclamation of independence in 1821...saw the

creation of an authoritarian State which excluded the majority of the population, was racist in its precepts and practices, and served to protect the economic interests of the privileged minority" (CEH 1999, p. 1). When social injustice inevitably led to protest and political instability, the State's response was one of repression. Violence and terror became a means of maintaining social control. Long scapegoated in Guatemala's history, indigenous people were the primary victims of the government's brutal counterinsurgency campaign. When the Guatemalan truth commission released its final report in February 1999, it declared that the Guatemalan State had committed "acts of genocide" against the Mayan people (CEH 1999, p.24). The report also found the State responsible for 93 percent of the documented human rights violations committed during the armed conflict; while only three percent were attributed to the guerilla forces (CEH, 1999, p.18 & 26).

However, while indigenous people gained the status of victims on the official record, the provisions of the peace accords failed to improve the material conditions of indigenous communities most affected by the war (Ross, 2001). Although political violence and terror had come to an end, the structural violence that preceded it, as well as new forms of violence that are its legacies, are very much a part of Guatemalan society (Warren, 2000)¹.

Growing economic inequality is perhaps the most serious threat to the peace process and democratization in Guatemala (Sieder, 1999; Warren, 2000). Guatemala, with the largest economy in Central America, has the worst human development indicators in the region. A UNHDP report released in July 2000 ranked Guatemala 31st of the 32 Latin American and Caribbean nations on indicators including education, literacy and life expectancy². According to the report, 70 percent of Guatemalans, particularly those in rural areas and the indigenous, live in poverty. Adult illiteracy is 32.7 percent. Illiteracy rates are higher among women (51%), and in rural areas, reaching as high as 76percent in Ixil and northern Alta Verapaz and el Quiché, regions with majority indigenous populations (PENNAT, 2000; UNESCO, 1997).

Related to growing inequality are rising rates of criminal violence, or *delincuencia*, after the war. Scholars have called attention to a "surge in violence with demobilization" (Warren, 2000, p. 238). This is a common pattern in Latin American countries making the transition to democracy³. With few new job opportunities after the war, many have found in violent crime a way of life. Stories of violent assaults and kidnappings are commonplace in Guatemala. The continuing danger of streets and public places leads to high levels of fear, mistrust, and scapegoating, particularly of street and working youth, as we shall see.

Street and Working Children

The children who are served by PENNAT's program are part of a growing population of working children and youth in Guatemala. They work for survival. The majority of these children are indigenous. In the city, the majority of them are migrants from the rural areas, whose families came to the city fleeing the armed conflict or rural poverty. Settling in urban slum settlements (*asentamientos*) on the outskirts of the city, they find work in the informal economy: vending in markets, parks, bus terminals, or on the streets, shining shoes or guarding cars. A smaller number of the youth work in the

manufacturing and service sectors: in factories, restaurants, or in construction. In the rural areas, the majority of working children and youth work in agriculture, for substandard wages or no wages at all (PENNAT, 2000). In Guatemala City, many of the youth PENNAT serves have no parents, and are responsible for the care of younger siblings. Many, but by no means all, of the young workers find their homes in the streets⁴.

PENNAT is concerned with working children and youth, wherever they may live. These are children who are involved in child labor as defined by the Guatemalan Constitution: "all economic activity that boys and girls younger than 18 carry out independently, for their families, domestically, or any other form of income generation that impedes the child's normal physical and intellectual development" (PENNAT, 2000, p. 3)⁵. PENNAT emphasizes that child labor is a structural phenomenon, whose origins lie in a complex host of socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors, such as extreme poverty, low levels of education and employment among the parents, repetitive and "passive" education that encourages absenteeism and dropping out, lack of a coherent social policy framework to address the needs of youth, and the absence of equitable social development in Guatemala (Ibid). While the Ministry of Education has undertaken major educational reforms in the transition from war to peace, it has not included working children among those who are in need of greater educational access. Reforms undertaken since the peace accords include an expansion of bilingual education (with Spanish and Mayan languages), and a decentralization program aimed at increasing coverage and improving educational quality in underserved rural areas (Dyrness, 1998)⁶. But no effort has been made to serve urban working youth, many of whom, ironically, left rural areas in search of better opportunities in the city.

Hence, the population of working youth in the city is possibly the most victimized as well as the most invisible in the new social order in Guatemala. They are not seen as legitimate victims of wartime injustices who deserve special treatment in postwar reconstruction. Rather, where they are visible, working and street youth are seen as "delinquents" or threats to social stability, who should be punished, corrected, or eliminated (Sluka, 2000; Klees, Rizzini & Dewees, 2000; Huggins & Mesquita 2000). In effect, they have become the new scapegoat, the new threat to "national security."

Jeffrey Sluka argues that street children have become the "new face of death squad terror in Latin America" (2000, p. 5). Citing reports from Guatemala as well as other Latin American nations, Sluka writes that street children, along with other "undesirables," have been added to the list of "terrorists" and "subversives," and have suffered torture, disappearance, and murder at the hands of security forces (2000, p. 5-6). In August 2000, the San Francisco Chronicle called attention to "a dirty war against street children" in Central America, reporting a "string of slayings" on the streets of Honduras, where there was a complete lack of investigation of the murders⁷. Huggins and Mesquita (2000) have documented the rise of youth murders in Brazil during the transition from military rule to democracy (1985 to the present), and estimate that in the majority of cases the perpetrator is a police-linked extermination group. Street and working children, then, are living witness to the "continuum of violence in war and peace" (Bourgois 2001).

The evidence from these reports suggests that the lives of street and working youth are the terrain in which new battles over democratization are fought. The PENNAT program asserts that the education of these children and youth must take priority in national efforts for postwar reconstruction and democratic social change.

PENNAT: Programa Educativo del Niño, Niña y Adolescente Trabajador

PENNAT, or Educational Program for Child and Adolescent Workers, was created in 1995 to provide a model of alternative education for working children and teenagers in Guatemala. Through the program's innovative and flexible methods, working children and teenagers can complete the equivalent of ninth grade and receive a government-recognized diploma. The goal of PENNAT is to provide an educational program that both respects the unique circumstances of working youth and empowers them to become agents of their own development. It represents both an expansion of educational access--bringing education to children who are not able to attend regular school--and educational reform, in that its methods are radically different from those of the traditional education system and aim to empower students to take a much greater role in shaping their destinies. PENNAT currently serves some 2,500 working children and adolescents in a total of 54 "sectors" in the departments of Guatemala, Chimaltenango, and Quetzaltenango. ("Sectors" refers to the number of sites or areas of service that PENNAT has set up within these departments; it can be considered the equivalent of "schools" in PENNAT's program.). The students range in age from 7 to 17. Ninety percent of the children and adolescents work in the informal sector of the economy; 10 percent work in the formal sector, primarily in food industries and construction.

The genius of PENNAT lies in bringing school to the children wherever they are working: in the markets, where the program has negotiated with market administrators to set up classrooms (salones); in parks, bus terminals, or on the street. In so doing, PENNAT redefines what school is, making the children's work experience the center of their education:

[The educational program] always starts with the context of the working child; this means that the curricular framework, in addition to meeting the standards of the Ministry of Education, [is] based on the conditions of existence in which the children live and work; their history, their cultural inheritance, the risks to which they are exposed, what they think and what they say" (PENNAT, 1998, p. 23)⁸.

PENNAT's program is entirely open and flexible: students can enroll at any time, show up for class whenever they can, and otherwise work at their own pace to complete the three stages (etapas) that comprise the educational program (through the sixth grade). Teaching schedules are flexible to allow teachers to go in search of students who cannot come to the meeting place. PENNAT also offers a Saturday program for grades 7-9 (educación básica), as well as a vocational training program, and a medical clinic that provides free medical care to working children and their families, vaccination and vitamin campaigns, and health education training to PENNAT's teachers.

Popular Education Philosophy

PENNAT's expressed goal is to develop in its young students a "critical and historical conscience" (PENNAT, 2000). The philosophy, inspired by the ideas of Paulo Freire, is

based on the principles of democracy, participation, solidarity, creativity, and social conscience. Solidarity means respecting the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the students, which have not traditionally been respected in Guatemalan society, and respecting the circumstances in which the children work.

Bringing school to their workplace is one way of doing this. But the principal way in which PENNAT offers an education that is relevant and empowering to working youth is by a specialized and adaptable curriculum that meets them where they are.

PENNAT's hallmark accomplishment is the development of its own curriculum based on the needs of working youth, which was approved by the Ministry of Education. Developed by PENNAT's own educators, the curriculum spans the full spectrum of subjects--math, history/social studies, communication (language), environment/natural science--and includes a number of "adaptable areas" such as mental health, drug education, health and hygiene, and children's rights. PENNAT teachers emphasize that the program should be competitive with what is offered in the national schools at the same time that is relevant to the needs of working youth. PENNAT's highly coveted curriculum was published in July of 1998, and beginning in September 1999 the Ministry of Education committed funds to publish PENNAT's curricular materials.

PENNAT educators use the methodology of popular education, based on the full participation of students in the educational process. The goal is for the children to become agents of their own learning: activities are geared at promoting participation, provoking reflection, and teaching kids to analyze. The teacher's role is that of a facilitator. Teachers describe a variety of pedagogical strategies, including discussion circles, (comunidades de indagación), brainstorms (lluvia de ideas), games, icebreakers, and group-work. In the discussion circles, the simplest story or topic can become the basis for a discussion that asks students to express their opinions, to reason, and to listen and respond to the opinions of their classmates.

PENNAT educators take seriously the principle of dialogue, at the heart of popular education (Freire, 1970). Dialogue depends on egalitarian relationships between teacher and student, who are both learners and teachers. This entails a radical departure from traditional hierarchical and authoritarian relationships found in public schools. Through dialogue, PENNAT educators establish a culture of trust that will encourage students to take on new roles.

Democratic structure

PENNAT educators describe their organization as a democracy, and they say this is in sharp contrast to their previous teaching jobs in public schools. They point to the fact that the Director and Assistant Director were themselves educators of street children for several years, so "they are our *compañeros* (partners)"; they respect and support the teachers' work. The majority of PENNAT educators are indigenous and speak a Mayan language in addition to Spanish, which is essential in order for them to relate to their students. All PENNAT educators have Guatemalan teacher certification for primary school and several are pursuing further studies at the University. They say they were drawn to PENNAT for the chance to serve an important need--educating working kids--and for the program's unconventional approach⁹. Ongoing professional development

and time for teachers to reflect together on their work is integrated into the regular schedule of the program. According to PENNAT's director, to depart from the traditional ("salir de lo tradicional") is at the heart of PENNAT's approach, and this is only possible through regular trainings that encourage teachers to reflect on different approaches to teaching. Educators are continually involved in curriculum development, and in developing new pedagogical methods that are flexible and adapted to the circumstances of the children they work with. PENNAT views its work--including the articulation of values--as a democratic enterprise that all staff must engage in, driven by the common goal of better serving working children and youth. The culture of reflection and collaboration among the staff makes it possible for the teachers to embody these values to the students.

Community involvement

Finally, PENNAT's program would not be possible without organic connections to the families and communities the program serves. PENNAT places priority on involving parents and families and working in solidarity with them. A full-time staff person is dedicated to family outreach and organizes family activities throughout the year. Through the family outreach program, PENNAT educators work with families on communication, conflict resolution, and children's rights. Educators are in constant communication with the parents and make home visits frequently. The fact that the teachers come to the students' place of work, and that most of the teachers are of Mayan origin, helps to build solidarity and establish trusting relationships with the parents, who are primarily indigenous.

Such fusion of interests between teachers and poor indigenous communities would be hard to achieve in the public schools. While Guatemalan public schools, especially in the rural areas, suffer high dropout rates, PENNAT's director says dropping out isn't a problem for their program. If a student doesn't show up, the teacher finds him. Together they will work out a schedule that works for the student¹⁰.

Popular Education, Violence, and Social Change

While PENNAT's personalized model can go far in terms of changing individual students' lives, there is also a recognition that in order to fully restore the rights of working children and youth, Guatemalan society would have to go through radical structural changes. PENNAT's ultimate goal is not merely to improve the immediate conditions of these young people's lives, but to contribute to the struggle for larger structural changes that will liberate all working youth from the conditions that oppress them. PENNAT aims for its students to become agents of social change who will contribute to the progressive eradication of child labor and the development of a culture of peace and democracy in Guatemala (PENNAT, 2000). It is in this aspect that it differs from most other programs for street and working children, and makes a unique contribution to post-war democratization in Guatemala.

Klees, Rizzini, and Dewees (2000), writing from a Brazilian context, argue that most programs designed to solve the problems of street and working youth fail. They fail because they do not address the underlying structures of inequality that produce street and working children, and instead tinker with "technical solutions" that address one or more problems facing street and working youth, such as drug addiction, poor health, or

illiteracy. Successive "innovations" produce no changes in the overall plight of poor children because, in fact, they are not intended to. Klees, Rizzini, and Dewees maintain that "the endless technical responses [to the problems of poverty] have actually provided a way to avoid committing sufficient resources and making necessary structural changes" (p.92).

As Roslyn Mickelson writes, "Even the most carefully designed and comprehensively delivered programs potentially affect the lives of only a few homeless and street children, while the conditions that produced their plight remain untouched" (2000, p. 274). It therefore becomes extremely important for programs seeking to improve the lives of poor children and youth to be explicitly oriented towards social change.

The case of PENNAT is valuable because it demonstrates how an educational program can address the immediate needs of working youth and speak to larger issues of inequality and structural violence that make child labor an inherent feature of the global capitalist system. It begins with a popular education philosophy that views poor, ordinary people as agents of change, and education as a means of critically analyzing the conditions that keep them impoverished (Arnold, 1986; Freire, 1970 & 1973). PENNAT's ideology asserts that, while traditional educational practices in Guatemala have mirrored the repressive and authoritarian practices of the larger society, popular education empowers poor children and adults to participate in public life and lead the way in the creation of a democracy. The difference between this and a paternalistic approach was articulated by Freire: "The important thing is to help people (and nations) help themselves, to place them in consciously critical confrontation with their problems, to make them the agents of their own recuperation" (Freire, 1973, p. 16).

Freire reminds us that "before it becomes a political form, democracy is a form of life" (1973, p. 29). Democracy depends on the critical consciousness of human beings, who, through debate and dialogue, examine common problems and take action to change their world. In Guatemala, emerging from decades of state terror, habits of critical thinking do not come naturally: habits of domination and dependence, fear and apathy, are slow to disappear. Social transformation in Guatemala, as elsewhere, depends on a form of education that will "enable people to reflect on themselves, their responsibilities, and their role in the new cultural climate" (Freire, 1973, p. 16). As Felix Cadena states, this education should "help the people reclaim their collective history so that they can bring about the structural changes that ensure the fulfilling of their needs and wishes, both in their daily lives and on a broader cultural level" (Cadena, cited in Hamilton & Cunningham, 1989, p. 444). It is here that PENNAT makes an invaluable contribution, focusing on the most excluded and vulnerable members of Guatemalan society.

A society that excludes over two million children from the moral realm of "good citizens" and the rights and protections therein, cannot hope for a democratic future. Twenty years from now, these children will be adults. Without the attention of programs like PENNAT, they will be unlikely to participate in a democracy. Without the ability to read or write, or the awareness of their own power as citizens, they will be unlikely to vote, or to send their children to school.

The PENNAT program believes that an alternative vision is possible. PENNAT treats these children as potential future leaders of the country, who, with a deep understanding of the problems of the poor, will push the country toward real democratic social change. As utopian as it seems, this is the vision that PENNAT educators hold up for their students every day. It is a bold vision, but democracy requires nothing less.

Notes

1. See NACLA Report on the Americas Vol. XXXV No. 1 July/August 2001, pages 8-11, for an update on the rise of terror in Guatemala in the aftermath of the Gerardi case.
2. The Siglo News, July 5-11, 2000.
3. See Caldeira, 2000, and Huggins & Mesquita, 2000 for an account of this in Brazil, and Bourgois 2001 for a discussion of El Salvador.
4. Here it is important to draw a distinction between street and working children, who often live in very different circumstances. Street children have often been the subject of an international rhetoric that stigmatizes poor families in the Third World (Rosemberg, 2000). Not all children who work live on the streets, and not all children who live on the streets are abandoned by their families; many maintain ties with their families even as they work and live periodically on the streets (Ibid.). The designation "street children" often encompasses children who use the streets as their place of work but live in homes with their families, children who live and work on the streets, children who live but do not work on the streets, and children who work on the streets sporadically. Though the conditions and experiences of these children vary greatly, the youth share the same stigmatization in the larger society and suffer many of the same abuses.
5. It is very difficult to know exactly how many working children and youth there are in Guatemala. According to PENNAT's director, the official figure is set at 700,000, but non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who work in the field estimate the reality to be closer to two million. Difficulties in pinning down this number include differences in the age groups counted as "working youth," different definitions of what it means to be working, and the invisibility of many working children and youth who are employed in illegal activities.
6. PRONADE, or Programa Nacional de Autogestión para el Desarrollo Educativo, involves rural communities in the creation and operation of new public schools.
7. Begun in 1993 with Inter-American Development Bank funds and later supported by the World Bank, the program served 300,000 children by July 2000.
8. "Endangered Children: Wave of Killings Terrorizes Street Kids, " San Francisco Chronicle, August 24, 2000.
9. My translation from the Spanish.

10. This information is drawn from formal and informal interviews I conducted with PENNAT educators from 1997 to 2000 and from a presentation made by
11. PENNAT educators at a conference at U.C. Berkeley in November 2000.
12. I conducted formal and informal interviews with the director from 1997-2001.

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