From Settler Colonialism to Social Justice: Transforming US Schools through Guerrilla Pedagogy

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From Settler Colonialism to Social Justice: Transforming US Schools through Guerrilla Pedagogy

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Abstract

This case examines the pressing need for systemic equity and social justice in educational structures in the society of the United States (US). The case critiques the inadequate responses to racial justice and highlights the challenges faced in enacting meaningful educational reform amidst declining patriotism and cultural schisms. Introducing guerrilla pedagogy as a theoretical framework, the case seeks to contextualize the importance of enfranchising educators and students to act as agents of change. By examining the historical roots of settler colonialism and its impact on education, the scholarly foundation leading to the case emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and addressing historical injustices to prevent their perpetuation. The transformative potential of guerrilla pedagogy is demonstrated in its ability to dismantle oppressive structures and foster a more just and inclusive educational system. Overall, this manuscript aims to provoke a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between guerrilla pedagogy and settler colonialism, offering strategic insights to challenge oppressive power dynamics in education as part of the ongoing development of a culturally responsive instructional supervision framework.

Keywords

guerrilla pedagogy; racial justice; educational reform; culturally responsive instructional supervision

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Structure of the Manuscript

This manuscript is structured to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationship between guerrilla pedagogy and settler colonialism, recognizing educational settings as a contested space. The next section will delve into the background, exploring the roots of settler colonialism and the foundational principles of guerrilla pedagogy. This exploration will highlight the historical context that has shaped the current educational landscape and the persistent inequities faced by disenfranchised and racialized communities. Subsequently, the case presents a contextualization in its intent to situate both guerrilla pedagogy and settler colonialism within the historical context of colonization and its impact on schooling, offering a critical examination of how colonial practices have influenced educational systems and perpetuated systemic oppression. The historical analysis sets the stage for a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities for transformative educational reform. Following the historical overview, the case moves into a theorization of guerrilla pedagogy, anchoring its principles and practices in the existing literature. By engaging with key theoretical frameworks and scholarly works, the school community will develop a robust conceptualization of settler colonialism and guerrilla pedagogy, emphasizing its potential to disrupt traditional power dynamics and foster an inclusive, equitable educational environment. Through this analysis, this case aims to provide a holistic view of the potential of guerrilla pedagogy to challenge and dismantle oppressive structures, ultimately promoting a more enfranchising and inclusive educational system.

Introduction

In the evolving landscape of the US education system, the imperative to address structural inequities and foster social justice has never been more critical, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the deeply embedded racial injustices experienced by marginalized communities as highlighted in the death of George Floyd (Toure et al., 2021). These events have exposed the deep-seated inequalities that racialized communities have endured since the onset of colonization. Today's generation is uniquely positioned to lead the way in designing a path toward a better and more equitable world, beginning with education reform and school design as theorized by Sayeed (2022). Following George Floyd's public murder, companies from Silicon Valley to Wall Street donated millions of dollars to demonstrate their unprecedented commitment to racial justice and to remediate structural and systemic problems in US society (Hoyer, 2021). Confronting systemic racism and its causes has been a collective effort involving private, public, and global initiatives (White et al., 2021). However, this significant and fundamental effort to recognize communities marginalized by settler colonialism is insufficient to transform the educational system without eradicating structural inequities that hold education reform, and instructional practices in general, hostage.

The work of transforming US schools into spaces that encompass aspects of culture, well-being, and the sovereignty of all representations of the US society is under attack. The *National Review*, in an article published in July of 2024, highlights that the conservative platform identifies a problem: A perceived decline in patriotism among young audiences (Buck, 2024). The blame for the declining sense of 'US exceptionalism' can be attributed to the reluctance to address the truth about the troublesome influence of white supremacist logic under settler colonialism and the impact this has on US society. A core aspect of this belief reifies the idea that being 'an

American' means perpetuating the disenfranchisement of People of Color and viewing them as lesser humans (Constitutional Accountability Center, 2021). Regardless, there is little to be done about the reality that US history – whether in geography, literature, or civics – can no longer hide the truth about the national identity of the US and the current and ongoing conscious revolution that rejects whiteness as the norm.

Part of this ongoing shift within US society is the acknowledgement that the education system imposed over the last 500 years in the New World, and the last 250 years as a nation, have repeated failed US society in developing more democratic outcomes. Klimek (2023) reminds us that restrictions on what kids in school can read is a longstanding practice in this country that started with Puritans, 140 years before the United States was founded, and has been a norm as such under settler colonialism rhetoric. It also demonstrates that a much greater effort must be made to educate US citizens that educational reform relies on enfranchising all families within the US school system, which requires educators to acknowledge the rich cultural, racial, and sexual orientation plurality of all families – to name a few – that are part of the democratic exercise that distinguishes us as a nation.

Teaching Notes

When discussing the formation of nations and their political, economic, and educational systems in the West, historically referred to as the New World, it is essential to consider the role of education as a technology in the process of settler colonialism. Wolfe (2006) argues that this form of colonialism, where the colonizers attempt to establish societal rule, displaces and attempts to erase existing populations, primarily resulting in the exploitation of the colony's resources and people while maintaining a distinct separation from the colonized population. The process typically includes three phases: dispossession, elimination, and replacement. Dispossession means that Indigenous peoples are forcibly removed from their lands, often through violence, treaties that are rarely honored, and legislative measures that favor the settlers. Elimination is the process of physical extermination, but more commonly involves cultural genocide, such as the suppression of Indigenous languages, religions, and traditions, where public and formal education plays a crucial role. Replacement refers to when settlers establish their own governance, legal systems, and societal norms, often completely replacing the Indigenous social structures.

The work of Glenn (2015), Smith (2012), and Tuck and Yang (2012), synthesizes the tenets of settler colonialism as a theoretical framework that unveils how the logics of white supremacy are embedded in the fabric of US education as a way to modernize and bring progress, law, and order to objectified civilizations perceived as lesser. These include:

- **Logic of Elimination:** Education worked as the technology of erasing history to legitimize settler claims to land and resources, so the aim is not only to dominate but to replace.
- **Logic of Possession Through Whiteness:** Education positions whiteness and Eurocentric education at the top to rationalize dispossession and violence against People of Color. Whiteness is constructed as the standard of humanity and civility, which justifies colonization as the enslavement of People of Color, the elimination of

Indigenous people, and the seizing of Indigenous lands. White supremacy logic understands racialization, where white supremacy underpins the perpetuation of colonization by disfranchisement of People of Color under the ideal of US exceptionalism.

- **Schooling as a Technology of Oppression:** Settler colonialism uses educational systems and structures to force People of Color to assimilate and adapt to the culture, customs, and languages considered white, erasing cultural heritage and traditions. The dominating historical narrative is from the settler colonizer standpoint. Norms and values are based on settler norms, devaluing Indigenous ways of knowing and Indigenous knowledge, often teaching Students of Color to reject their own identities and histories.

- **Settler Colonial Extremism:** Extremism has allowed settlers to maintain their supremacy through violence and legal mechanisms enacted to protect whiteness. This highlights how settler colonial extremism manifests in policies and practices aimed at complete domination and control. Settler societies will often go to great lengths to maintain their power and erase Indigenous resistance, often framing Indigenous activism as extremism.

- **Denial of Indigenous Sovereignty:** Denial of sovereignty emphasizes the refusal to recognize minoritized populations and Indigenous sovereignty as a fundamental aspect of settler colonialism, undermining Indigenous governance and its legal systems. This highlights the continuous assault on Indigenous self-determination and governance as a means to solidify settler control, including the barbaric exploitation of all People of Color. As such, settler colonialism requires the invalidation of Indigenous sovereignty to maintain settler claims and authority.

Historically, education has often been framed from the perspective of settler colonizers, portraying the discovery of promised lands as a triumph primarily for the Spanish crown, which continued under British rule. This long-standing contention over these territories highlights how education was employed as a means to enforce a white supremacist national consciousness. Spring (2016) depicts that during the colonial era, European missionaries established schools to convert Indigenous populations to Christianity, often at the expense of local beliefs and practices. Colonial administrations implemented education systems designed to serve the colonizers' interests, featuring curricula that were Eurocentric and promoted the language, culture, and values of the colonial powers seeking to eliminate Indigenous people in what is now known as the Americas, as well as enslaving people from Africa. Adams (1995) describes how Indigenous and local populations faced limited or inferior educational opportunities, with segregated schools reinforcing social hierarchies and perpetuating inequalities. Thus, education played a crucial role in both the consolidation and perpetuation of colonial power and the marginalization of Indigenous communities and People of Color.

Theoretical Foundations of Guerrilla Pedagogy

The term *guerrilla* comes from the Spanish word *guerra*, which means 'little war' (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Guerrilla pedagogy is a concept that draws from the historical and metaphorical use of *guerrilla* to describe educational practices that resist oppressive structures. The term was popularized by Spanish General Francisco de Goya and was later adopted into other languages (Warfare History Network, 2023). In the context of warfare, the *guerrillas* were

small, irregular bands of fighters who engaged in unconventional warfare, such as ambushes and raids, rather than traditional battles. Guerrilla pedagogy has been intended to describe the efforts towards emancipatory educational praxis, and while it is not directly attributed to a single academic source, this paradigm is anchored in the seminal work of Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Henry Giroux, and Antonia Darder, among others whose robust essence of the theorization of guerrilla pedagogy have inspired broader discussions about radical or critical pedagogical approaches that operate outside the mainstream or dominant educational paradigms (Álvarez & Rodríguez, 2024).

Guerrilla pedagogy emerges as a radical response to the entrenched injustices perpetuated by settler colonialism within educational systems. Bartolome de Las Casas was one of the first to resist the horrendous genocide enacted on Indigenous people who encountered Christopher Columbus in the Caribbean. De las Casas' writings are still relevant today as a critique of settler colonialism under the logic of white supremacy. The Spanish Crown learned about the horrendous crimes committed against Indigenous peoples and determined it was more important to seize the Indigenous Land than it was to treat the Indigenous of the Caribbean 'tainos' as humans (Clayton & Lantigua, 2020). Las Casas' documented account represents the first academic work as an anti-imperialist counter-narrative against the hegemonic philosophy of settler colonialism.

Lavin (2009) posits guerrilla pedagogy, as a theoretical framework, can be used to challenge traditional educational paradigms by employing unconventional, radical methods to promote critical thinking, social justice, and transformative learning. Lavin's work aims to empower educators to disrupt the status quo and address systemic inequalities within the education system. It highlights how possible school reforms could be inspired by guerrilla warfare tactics, emphasizing adaptability, creativity, and strategic action to achieve educational goals. At its core, guerrilla pedagogy is an emancipatory pedagogical framework that asserts the inherent sovereignty of every individual and their right to cultural knowledge. Long before its formal theorization, guerrilla pedagogy manifested in resistance to oppressive educational practices imposed by colonizers. It embodies a philosophy that counters imperialist ideologies by fostering critical consciousness and autonomy among learners.

Central to guerrilla pedagogy is its commitment to dismantling oppressive structures within education. It challenges traditional power dynamics that perpetuate inequality and cultural erasure. By embracing diverse cultural narratives and histories, guerrilla pedagogy empowers marginalized communities to reclaim their identities and challenge dominant narratives imposed by settler colonialism. Here are a few points from seminal works that imply this characterization:

- **Human Dignity and Ethical Concerns:** Contrary to oppressive educational systems that enforce obedience and loyalty, guerrilla pedagogy is grounded in the ethical treatment of individuals. It seeks to humanize and democratize education by fostering respect and dialogue rather than compliance.
- **Dialogic and Transformative Learning**: Influenced by Paulo Freire and bell hooks, guerrilla pedagogy values dialogue and collective reflection. It promotes a curriculum that engages with the lived experiences of the oppressed, aiming to empower students and educators through mutual understanding and critical examination.

- **Resistance to Oppressive Narratives:** Guerrilla pedagogy stands in opposition to colonial and militaristic educational practices that suppress critical thought and enforce subordination. It challenges these narratives by promoting educational practices that reflect the voices and stories of marginalized communities.
- **Literary and Sociolinguistic Influences**: The approach draws from Caribbean literary traditions and figures like Bartolome de Las Casas, among many other emancipatory scholars, who use literature and rhetoric to highlight and address social injustices. Guerrilla pedagogy incorporates these influences to create a curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking, social justice, and community engagement.
- **Educational Innovation and Empowerment:** Guerrilla pedagogy is characterized by its innovative approach to education, which includes incorporating new authors and perspectives, and focusing on the empowerment of disenfranchised communities. It aims to transform educational environments into spaces of mutual respect and social justice.

In today's educational landscape, characterized by ongoing cultural debates and societal reckonings, guerrilla pedagogy, particularly through the ongoing development of a culturally responsive instructional supervision framework (Álvarez & Rodríguez, 2024) that offers a transformative approach to reimagining instructional practices. It advocates for inclusive, equitable, and liberatory instructional practices that not only acknowledge historical injustices but actively work to rectify them through instruction offered within the schoolhouse. By engaging students as active agents of change, guerrilla pedagogy cultivates a generation equipped to confront systemic inequities and uphold democratic values.

Moreover, amidst criticisms of declining patriotism and educational reforms that fail to address the root causes of inequality, guerrilla pedagogy stands as a beacon of hope. It proposes a holistic educational design that integrates aspects of cultural awareness, social justice, and democratic participation. Through critical theoretical lenses, guerrilla pedagogy and culturally responsive instructional supervision more broadly demonstrate the potential to reshape educational paradigms and nurture a more just society where all individuals can thrive (Álvarez, 2023; Mette et al., 2023).

In short, the integration of guerrilla pedagogy within US schools represents a vital step towards achieving systemic equity and social justice. By challenging the legacies of settler colonialism and advocating for transformative educational practices, educators implementing guerrilla pedagogies and culturally responsive instructional supervision can foster environments where diversity is celebrated, and historical truths are acknowledged. Thus, this case underscores the urgency of adopting guerrilla pedagogy as a framework for educational reform, ensuring that future generations inherit a more inclusive and equitable world.

Case Narrative

The setting is a high school in a large, metropolitan city. The school is composed of 2,000 students with demographics representing a large Latino/a community that help comprise 50% of the student body. The families of the Latino/a community represent various Latin American countries that come from Mexico, Central America, and South America more broadly. Most students are refugees to the US, and their native language is Spanish. Such students often feel

isolated in 'newcomer' classes because, while they receive academic linguistic support through English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, they did not have opportunities to interact with students outside these classroom environments.

Recently, school leaders, in cooperation with ESL teachers and content area teachers, developed a pilot program for students identified as 'newcomers' to take selected classes with students who did not identify as 'newcomers.' Two of these classes included world geography and world history. The teachers in both of these classes earned their ESL certification prior to beginning the pilot program so that they could both be effectively prepared to meet the academic language needs of all students in their classrooms.

Sophomores in a world geography class are engaged in discussions about the ways in which colonization shaped country boundaries across the globe. The discussions extend into the ways that coloniality influenced language, religion, and customs in said countries. Reasons behind the impact of colonization were also discussed. Several students from the newcomer program shared their experiences in their home countries, and the journeys that they and their families took to arrive in the US.

The world geography teacher understood the importance of connecting the geographical content in her class with content in the students' world history class in order to offer the students a well-rounded understanding. She connected with the history teacher to collaborate on a joint assignment for students to extend their class discussions into group projects that emphasized storytelling through cultural geography. Both teachers also worked to create project rubrics that reflected content covered in each of their classes.

However, the pilot program did face some challenges. A few parents and fellow educators initially voiced concerns that conversations surrounding colonization, migration, and refugee experiences might be too sensitive or politically charged for high school students. Some also feared that these discussions might be viewed as unpatriotic, especially given the role of the US in global history. Despite these concerns, the teachers remained committed to fostering an inclusive and respectful classroom environment. Educators and students addressed the concerns by engaging in open dialogue and emphasizing the importance of historical accuracy within civics and cultural studies.

By using guerrilla pedagogy as a theoretical underpinning, the teachers were able to manage these challenges effectively. Educators worked alongside school administrators to clarify the objectives of the curriculum and ensure that students and their families understood the educational importance of these discussions. The backing of other educators who valued inclusivity and cultural diversity also helped to ease some of the initial resistance. Over time, the program gained support, with many families and community members recognizing the positive impact it had on fostering understanding and empathy among students.

The pilot program's success underscored the transformative nature of integrating culturally responsive teaching into the classroom. By focusing on the lived experiences of their students, the teachers embodied the core ideas of guerrilla pedagogy, and as such were able to use education as a means to promote empowerment, liberation, and social justice. Additionally, the

support of their principals using culturally responsive instructional supervision practices helped to distinguish developmental needs that varied from teacher to teacher (Virella, 2024).

Students embraced the instruction wholeheartedly, specifically to engage in culturally responsive learning with their peers that extended engagement beyond the traditional class setting. Students met afterschool at locations within the community to record their digital stories, and these connections to the community included visiting historical sites, walks of local murals, and related culturally important locations. Students interviewed family members about their reasons for leaving their home countries, and these interviews in turn were incorporated into the digital stories. Perhaps the most empowering aspect of the unit was the creation of a digital map showing the journeys that students who are refugees and their families undertook, which included a timeline. Students learned from one another, and these "real life" activities helped to generate a stronger sense of understanding of the refugee experience.

In these ways, the school was able to capitalize on the assets the student brought with them to the classroom on a daily basis. The students understood the ways that historical events continue to impact current events, and by engaging in dialogue, reflection, and action, students learned from each other and were able to practice values of compassion and empathy in addition to meeting course standards. Teachers demonstrated a spirit of collaboration that helped to bring the classroom to life for their students, and principals were able to provide culturally responsive instructional supervision that helped teachers reflect on how to center the lived experiences of students (Yosso, 2005).

Framework and Analysis

By examining concepts such as ending ongoing colonization and embracing emancipatory paradigms that respect all ways of knowledge, this framework seeks to uncover strategies that challenge traditional power dynamics and empower educators and students to become active agents of change. Through a multifaceted analysis of critical theoretical lenses, the transformative potential of guerrilla pedagogy is a tool to dismantle oppressive settler colonial structures and promote a more just and inclusive educational system.

This case proposes an educational design that invites tolerance, equity, and, above all, an educational reform that first recognizes the history of settler colonialism. This is not done to incite hatred towards the US, but to inspire an awareness that these historical atrocities cannot be hidden, much less ignored, and should not be perpetuated through colonization. Secondly, the concept of guerrilla pedagogy as a theoretical framework seeks a strategy based not on the promises of politicians but on the promises of the hearts of our people who seek a better future. Due to the public and civic education system that often fails to acknowledge historical accuracies, different tactics and strategies must be applied that are relevant to the current world where civics, tolerance, and respect for human beings of all backgrounds are a priority and a lifelong promise.

Discussion Questions

The following questions are intended to help guide conversations about the application of guerrilla pedagogy to improve instructional outcomes for all students. Educators should use these as starting points to unpack the case as well as how the concepts presented could be applied in practice. As such, educators should consider the following:

Historical Context and Impact
- How have the historical roots of settler colonialism influenced the current educational landscape in the US, specifically about what has been historically taught in classrooms?
- How does the case provided in this article support students to understand their historical roots and empower them to see their cultural assets as strengths?

Systemic Inequities and Social Justice
- What are the specific systemic inequities in the US educational system that need to be addressed through instructional practices for meaningful social justice to occur?

Corporate and Institutional Responses
- How effective have corporate and institutional responses been in addressing racial justice in education?
- What are the limitations of these prepackaged curricula in achieving genuine systemic change?

Patriotism and Cultural Debates
- How have cultural debates and the perceived decline in patriotism impacted efforts to reform the US educational system, especially as this relates to the pressures felt or experienced by teachers considering approaches to instruction?
- What role does addressing the truth about the history of the US and of debates in US society more broadly play in how teachers reimagine more historically accurate instruction? In what ways does this case help support students to learn more about the realities of global political structures?

Guerrilla Pedagogy as a Framework
- What are the core principles and strategies of guerrilla pedagogy that can be applied to instructional practices in the classroom? How and in what ways do teachers in this case engage in acts of guerrilla pedagogies?
- How can guerrilla pedagogy empower educators and students to become active agents of change, and what role do instructional leaders play in enacting more culturally responsive instructional supervision?

Transformative Potential and Implementation
- In what ways can guerrilla pedagogy disrupt traditional power dynamics in education?
- How can this framework be practically implemented to foster an inclusive and equitable educational environment?

Future Directions

- How can ongoing colonization be effectively ended within the educational system?
- What strategies can be employed to embrace ecologies of knowledge and promote democratic values in education?

Learning Activities

The learning activities provided below are provided in an attempt to make connections to the concept of guerrilla pedagogy and bridge the gap between theory and practice. Educators who use these activities can produce outcomes and structures that can be used to immediately address and close instructional inequities. The following can be used in coursework with in-service professional development efforts:

Inequity Mapping
- Research and identify systemic and structural barriers or inequities in an identified local, state, US territory, or Tribal Nation (recognized or not by the US government) educational system. Areas should not be limited to funding disparities, discipline rates, curricular representation, access to fundamental education, and/or sovereignty.
- Create visual representations (maps, charts, infographics, etc.) to illustrate these inequities. Consider how and in what ways policies and practices reinforce instructional inequities and how guerrilla pedagogy might begin to combat and resist these structural inequities.

Critical Analysis of Corporate Initiatives
- Research a recent corporate or institutional initiative aiming to address racial injustice in education.
- Ask educators to critically analyze this initiative, looking at its stated objectives, strategies, and outcomes.
- Encourage students to consider the following questions:
  - Who benefits from this initiative?
  - Does it address root causes or merely symptoms?
  - Does it reinforce inequities or existing power structures, and what sort of emancipatory framework does it employ?
- Have students propose alternative approaches based on guerrilla pedagogy that promote systemic and structural changes in education through instructional practices that are more culturally responsive in nature.

Guerrilla Pedagogy Action Plan
- Create a taskforce where each group selects an area to address an injustice or that lacks teacher/student enfranchisement within the school or community.
- Develop a guerrilla pedagogy action plan within the context of emancipatory practices, including the following:
  - Clear goals and objectives.
  - Explore and develop non-traditional tactics.
  - Implement intentional strategies for building alliances among groups.
  - Assess the impact of your action plan and modify accordingly.

Conclusion

Engaging educators in reflective discussions about liberatory practices is necessary to support aspects of diversity and inclusion in classrooms. The direct roles that educators play in working with students enhances the need for these educators to act within inclusive mindsets. Globally, students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds seek educational opportunities. Through liberatory teaching practices like guerrilla pedagogy, educators create a foundational path for students as they learn and lead during their educational journeys and beyond. Motivating students to share their voices, life experiences, and dreams helps to foster self-confidence, empowerment, and compassion for others – all of which have profound impacts on how we think about the evolution of supervision and the important feedback cycles they provide teachers in a rapidly racially and ethnically diversifying US society.

It is important to remember that providing safe spaces for students to learn from each other and from educators creates opportunities for shared understanding. Through such activities, students can grow in and within groups of individuals that extend equity and goodwill. Schools are key places where learning not only takes place, but where learning is cultivated for more equitable futures for all.

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Dr. Mariela A. Rodríguez is a professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at The University of Texas at San Antonio. Dr. Rodríguez currently serves as program coordinator for the master's program and is a cohort coordinator. Her research focuses on the supportive practices of school leaders working with culturally and linguistically diverse

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