DISSERTATION

WEIGHTED ASPIRATIONS:

BECOMING A TEENAGE DROPOUT IN EL SALVADOR

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

WEIGHTED ASPIRATIONS:

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The vast majority of poor and low-income students in El Salvador drop out during middle school or early high school. This dissertation is dedicated to describing their experiences and understanding the reasons why so many of them abandon their education as teenagers. Because of the high rates of urban violence in the nation, it focuses specifically on urban youth.

The findings are based on three years of qualitative fieldwork in two urban schools—La Laguna and Cerro Verde—in a densely populated city in the metropolitan region near San Salvador. I conducted over 200 days of ethnographic observations, student focus groups, teacher interviews, and a student survey at the schools. In addition, I interviewed in-depth 54 dropouts, 28 high school graduates, and 19 mothers or grandmothers.

This dissertation has shown the roots of dropout as deeply entangled in family poverty, community instability, and school failure. The students at La Laguna and Cerro Verde came from very poor backgrounds, but, despite their daily hardships, they and their families had faith in education and very high aspirations to graduate high school. Most wanted to go to college and believed strongly they would achieve their dreams.

The contexts of their lives, however, weighed heavily against these aspirations. The lack of living-wage jobs meant parents had very low or unstable incomes and few material resources to invest in their children's education. The informal or blue collar work that parents did was also so stressful, tiresome, and physically degrading that it took a toll on parent-child relationships,

adults' relationships with one another, and health and wellbeing. Family economies were highly vulnerable to shocks. A parents' illness, a broken marriage, or a loan coming due could deeply disrupt their ability to put food on the table. When youth saw their parents showing signs of distress many felt compelled to help out by working. Youth knew the outsized value their poor families could derive from even meager earnings and dropped of school to become wage earners of last resort.

Household and community violence intensified the insecurity in poor youth's lives. Children living in violent households suffered physically, emotionally, and educationally. Families living in violent neighborhoods limited their children's contact with neighbors and friends. But some families experienced violence directly. Homicide, assault, threats, and police brutality devastated them, causing significant emotional and economic harm. Youth left school behind to help their families cope through what were sometimes extended crises stemming from the violence swirling all around.

Schools in El Salvador have been idealized as an ameliorative for these worst aspects of poverty and tasked with the mission of providing poor children the knowledge and skills they need for gainful employment. But the situation at La Laguna and Cerro Verde showed the faulty foundations of this ideal. These schools lacked critical infrastructure, textbooks, and learning materials. Their overworked and under-trained teachers relied on outdated teaching methods and had no support systems for addressing students' remedial issues or emotional and behavioral problems. As a result, students received very little quality instruction and learned much less than they should. A legacy of learning deficits trailed them as they passed from grade to grade.

By middle school, many students lacked the basic skills they need to keep up with the curriculum. Low grades and frustration eroded their motivation to make an effort in the

classroom. Some students became deeply disillusioned and frustrated with their lack of comprehension and dropped out of school to avoid these emotions. Others noted they could not pass and left before being flunked.

A hostile school climate worsened conditions. Students could feel rebuffed and alienated by their teachers' harsh talk and authoritarian approaches to discipline. Classmates often treated each other aggressively and fights were common. A significant number of students were threatened, harassed, or bullied by peers. Some youth experienced conflicts with teachers or peers over extended periods and, perceiving the abuse would continue or more harm could come to them, opted to drop out.

In the end, the students' and their families' commitment to schooling was undermined by the compounding hazards of poverty. Families, schools, and communities did not have the resources needed to sustain these young people's aspirations. This dissertation brings to life their voices and stories, displaying how a vicious circle of deeply structured inequalities batters against the dreams of poor and vulnerable children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of many people. The person at the top of that list, to whom I owe the most gratitude, is my dissertation advisor, Lori Peek. She inspired this project's focus on children and taught me qualitative methods. She became my chair even though I wasn't proposing to do work in her area of specialization and she already had a full roster of graduate students to support as well as the incredible responsibility of leading a research center. Even with all those competing demands on her time, her support for me has been more than I could have ever asked for. She read countless proposals, memos, and long emails, spent hours with me on the phone, and revised numerous drafts of the chapters that follow. I am so deeply grateful for her sacrifice for me, but most of all I am grateful for her example. Lori, you have taught me so much more than Sociology. Your unwavering enthusiasm and compassion, your relentless drive to inspire and help the people around you, and the joyful way you take on the challenge of making this world a better place–I am inspired and uplifted by you every day. Thank you for letting me be a part of your life.

I would also like to thank each the members of my committee for their participation in this project and for their advice and support. Lynn Hempel, your classes in social stratification and sociological theory were the most difficult and also the best courses I took at CSU. I had never taken a sociology class the day I first stepped into Clark B252 and had to admit I didn't know how to say Weber. Thanks to you I learned how to think like a sociologist.

Pete Taylor, your classes in classical theory and political and economic sociology shaped what I know about development and global inequality. Thank you for joining my committee towards the end of this project and for all the positive support and steady guidance you give to

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Amalia, I was five months pregnant with you when I finished fieldwork and you informed the ideas in this project as much as anyone. Six months after you were born we came to live in El Salvador again and spent a big chunk of the next 1.5 years there. Many of the girls I had known in my fieldwork had also become mothers around the time I did and we met up and brought our babies to meet each other. The differences between you and your future peers were stark. You were bigger and chubbier and healthier and more precocious. When we were in the United States, you rarely had more than a sniffle. In El Salvador, you were sick all the time with diarrhea, vomiting, and very high fevers. I spent weeks rocking and nursing you through illnesses. I was vigilant about washing your hands but you got sick. My friends' babies lived with this struggle constantly and their health suffered even more. One died.

This dissertation is dedicated to the unnamed children, youth, parents, caregivers, and teachers who I met in El Salvador and whose stories fill the pages that follow. To the adults, I am so deeply thankful for your kindness, hospitality, graciousness, and concern for my wellbeing. Thank you for sharing your lives and your stories with me.

To the teenagers I met in the three schools, communities, and marketplaces, thank you for making me part of your world. Your friendships brought joy and meaning to my life. Although the work that follows dwells on the multiple injustices that impede your progress towards your dreams, I never got the sense you felt defeated. You strived with good humor and kindness each day to learn and be better. And you have shown me that your potential is truly enormous. You will change the world for the better, if we just give you the chance to do it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS v
LIST OF TABLES x
LIST OF FIGURES xi
1. Introduction 1
2. Background and Literature Review 13
3. Setting and Methods 48
Part I: Weighted Aspirations 83
4. Sustaining Hope 84
5. A Flawed Refuge 114
Part II: Conflicting Signals 139
6. Adrift At School 140
7. The Baby Has No Blame 165
8. Conclusion 193
References 219
Appendix A. Observations and Interviews in Rural Site 248
Appendix B. Project Timeline 249
Appendix C. Youth Interview Guide 250
Appendix D. Focus Group Interview Guide 256
Appendix E. Student Survey Questionnaire 258
Appendix F. Teacher Interview Guide 268
Appendix G. Interviewee Memo Topics 269

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1: Student-Level Risks for Dropout 19
Table 2.2: Contextual Factors Increasing Dropout Risk 29
Table 3.1: School Observations 55
Table 3.2: Youth Interview Sample 60
Table 3.3: Interview Recruitment Method 63
Table 3.4: Select Characteristics of Interview Sample 68
Table 3.5: Interviewees with Dropout and Drop-in Events 68
Table 3.6: Number of Dropout and Drop-in Events 69
Table 3.7: Focus Group Participants by Grade and Gender 70
Table 3.8: Survey Respondents by Grade and Gender 71
Table 3.9: Parent-Guardian Interviews 72
Table 3.10: Primary Reason for Dropout 79
Table 5.2: Daily Time on Instruction and Other Activities at La Laguna and Cerro Verde 124
Table A.1: Participant Observation at Rural School 248
Table A.2: Rural Youth Interview Sample 248
Table B.1: Research Trips to El Salvador 249
Table B.2: Timeline of Research Activities 249

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Net School Enrollment Rates, 2000-2016, El Salvador 2
Figure 1.2: Number and Rate of Out-of-School Children and Youth, El Salvador, 2000-2017 8
Figure 2.2: Educational Exclusion Rate, Youth Ages 16-18, El Salvador 17
Figure 2.3: Contexts Shaping Student-Level Outcomes 26
Figure 2.4: Reasons Youth Are Out of School, Urban 13-18 year-olds, El Salvador, 2016 42
Figure 3.1: Data Collection Methods 54
Figure 8.1: Dissertation's Guiding Research Questions 195
Figure 8.2: Model of the Dropout Process in El Salvador 207

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1995, El Salvador embarked on a mission to educate every child within its borders. The nation's brutal 12-year civil war, a conflict that took 75,000 civilian lives and displaced one million people from their homes, had ended just three years earlier (Chávez, 2015). The conflict had upended the economy, leaving up to 80% of the rural population unemployed, and left broad swaths of public infrastructure in ruins alongside thousands of private homes and businesses. During that period, spending on the military drained resources away from social services and gains in poverty reduction made over previous decades were turned back (Calvo-Gonzalez and Lopez, 2015). In the field of education, many schools were destroyed or closed during the fighting and the rate of children enrolling in elementary and middle school declined over much of the 1980s (Reimers, 1990). The public school system, after more than a decade of neglect and harm, was littered with needs (Gómez Arévalo, 2011).

Despite the looming challenges of reconstruction, an investigative commission, chaired by influential international experts and the country's leading scholars, determined that education was critical to the postwar transition to democracy (Reimers, 1995). The government took up the cause and declared that public schools would lead the "social renovation of El Salvador" (MINED, 1995: 2). The plan was to expand education across the nation, enroll every child in school, and teach them "the values, attitudes, and behaviors fundamental for peace" (MINED, 1995: 2). International donors, encouraged by the country's plan, poured money into school reform. Public spending on education rose from 1.5% of GDP in the early 1990s to an average of 3% of GDP by the early 2000s (Calvo-Gonzalez and Lopez, 2015; Reimers, 2005). The government and aid organizations built or remodeled thousands of schools, trained teachers,

decentralized management, formed parent committees, updated the curriculum, drafted textbooks, and established national testing standards to measure progress (Reimers, 2005).

The 1995 reform logged some important successes. As Figure 1.1 shows, the percentage of school-age children attending primary school recovered and hit 92% by the turn of the century.[1] Just five years later, in 2005, it reached 97%, putting El Salvador only points away from accomplishing its goal of education for all, at least at the primary level. Most impressively, children entering elementary school were staying in and completing its six grades at higher rates than ever before (Schiefelbein et al., 2008). The primary school completion rate amongst 15-16 year-olds soared from 24% in 2000 to 87% in 2014 (SITEAL, 2015).

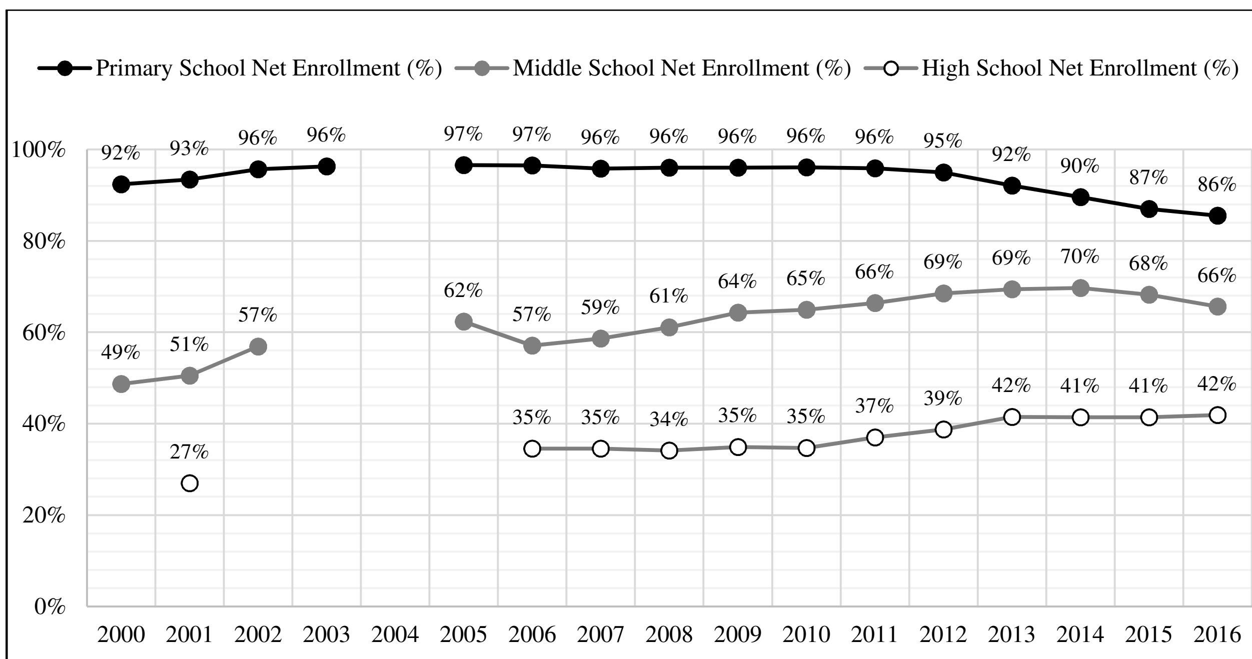


Figure 1.1: Net School Enrollment Rates, 2000-2016, El Salvador

[1] I configured this from data collected by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics and published by the World Bank. See World Bank (2018b). The primary school net enrollment rate measures the percent of seven to 12-year-olds enrolled in primary school or higher. The middle school net enrollment rate measures the percent of 13 to 15-year-olds enrolled in middle school or higher. The high school net enrollment rate measures the percent of 16 to 18-year-olds enrolled in high school or higher. Interruptions in the graph are the result of missing data for that year.

In 2005, a new Salvadoran president received the news about the country's impressive gains in primary schooling and issued an extremely ambitious new goal: *Within 16 years,* he proclaimed, *every child will graduate high school* (MINED, 2005). The 2021 deadline the president had selected coincided with El Salvador's 200th national anniversary. Of all the goals the administration could have picked to mark that momentous occasion, it chose achieving universal high school education (MINED, 2005).

The reasons why were clear. During the decade following the 1995 reform, a high school degree had become essential to gaining access to higher-paying jobs in the formal labor market (Reimers, 2005). Absent a diploma, young people were mostly stuck working informally without benefits, pay guarantees, or worker protections. They suffered frequent bouts of unemployment, lacked healthcare, and lived more often in violent communities (Adelman and Székely, 2016; FLASCO et al., 2010; Vegas and Petrow, 2008). With nearly half of Salvadoran children living below the poverty line (World Bank, 2018d), reducing the national scourge of poverty had become unthinkable without also increasing graduation rates. Experts also insisted that El Salvador's efforts to grow its economy, curb violence, and strengthen the rule-of-law depended as well on more of its citizens earning diplomas (Calvo-Gonzalez and Lopez, 2015; Marín et al., 2010; Reimers, 2005).

When the "high school for all" campaign was launched in 2005, however, less than one-third of Salvadoran teens were even enrolled at the secondary level. Getting all children a diploma would require a herculean effort. The government responded to the challenge with various initiatives: Secondary school fees were prohibited. Night school and weekend classes were offered to accommodate students who worked or had to travel long-distances. New vocational and technical programs were expanded to motivate students and ensure them a job would be

waiting after high school. Teachers were given training and new incentives to improve student learning (MINED, 2005). Beginning in 2009, the subsequent administration continued the effort to improve schooling outcomes by providing free uniforms and school supplies, expanding meal programs, adding recreational programs, and reforming the curriculum (MINED, 2009).

Progress, however, has been middling. Today, most Salvadoran students make it into middle school, but, once there, they struggle to cross the high school finish line. Dropout rates begin to rise in seventh grade and reach their peak during the first year of high school (Adelman and Székely, 2016). Before high school is over, a large majority of students have abandoned their education. In 2014, with only seven years to go before the deadline, only 35% of Salvadoran young adults had earned a diploma (UNESCO, 2018c).

More alarming than the slow progress, however, is the persistently wide achievement gaps between poor and wealthy youth. Only 9% of the poorest Salvadorans graduated high school in 2014 compared to 71% of their peers from the richest households. Even more troubling, the gap has been growing: Wealthy youth actually increased their advantage in educational attainment over the poor by 6% between 1990 and 2010 (Bassi et al., 2013: 28).[2] So not only are poor children very far behind their wealthy peers at school, they are falling further behind.

This all means that two decades of educational reforms and programs, each touted as the bearer of a more equal, just, and peaceful nation, have neglected the very children whose lives they promised to transform. The consequences of widening educational inequality are ominous. The same experts who said universal high school education would be the worthiest goal for El

[2] Bassi et al. (2013) measure the gap in educational attainment between youth in the poorest and wealthiest income quintiles. Income quintiles were constructed based on primary and secondary activity household wages. D'Alesandre (2014: 33) showed similar results using a different measure of household wealth, educational capital. Youth from the families with high educational capital increased their high school attainment by 8 points between 2000 and 2010. Meanwhile, youth from households with low educational capital had no change in achievement.

Salvador's bicentennial also warned that leaving the poor behind would, as one put it bluntly, "contribute to an increase in crime and violence" (Reimers, 2005: 9).

Rising Violence and Eroding Progress

Over the dozen years since the "high school for all" goal was announced, El Salvador has become one of the world's most murderous places. Its homicide rate of 64 murders per 100,000 inhabitants is more than *six* times the rate the United Nations uses to identify a national bloodletting epidemic.[3] The toll of the violence on the nation's youth is far-reaching. More children and teens are murdered per capita in El Salvador than anywhere on the globe (UNICEF, 2014b). Homicide is the leading cause of death for adolescent boys (UNICEF, 2014b). And the country leads the world in murdering women and girls per capita (Geneva Declaration, 2015). The violence takes most of its victims from the blighted urban neighborhoods and sprawling slums along the highways connecting cities and towns (Savenije and Andrade-Eekhoff, 2003).

Street gangs are responsible for an estimated 50% of the murders (Dudley et al., 2018).[4] Gang members are also guilty of committing rapes, assaults, robberies, kidnapping, and torture (IDMC, 2017). They intimidate the local population, occupying parks and street corners, selling drugs, brandishing weapons, and drinking, smoking, and partying late into the night. Small businesses and workers are charged "protection" fees that they must pay to avoid harm (Dudley et al., 2018). Community members are expected to abide by a code of silence, known as "see, hear, shut up" (Martínez d'Aubuisson, 2013). Those suspected of talking to authorities or of

[3] Between 2005 and 2017, El Salvador had the highest homicide rate in the world four times. It ranked second six times, third once, and fourth twice. The United Nations declares violence to be at epidemic levels in nations with 10 or more homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. El Salvador's average homicide rate and international ranking for 2005-2017 were calculated from UNODC, 2013 (for the years 2005-2012); World Bank, 2018b (for the years 2013-16); and Clavel, 2018 (for 2017).

[4] There is little empirical evidence available about what proportion of murders are committed by gangs. The estimate of 50% is the most widely cited. See Dudley, 2018 for a brief discussion.

having relationships with people living in rival gang territories are threatened, beaten, driven out, or murdered (Savenije and van der Borgh, 2015).

By 2017, an estimated 300,000 people had fled their homes and become internally displaced persons, or IDPs. This put El Salvador second behind only Syria in terms of people displaced per capita (IDMC, 2017). Thousands more have gone to neighboring countries or have sought refuge as far away as the United States, Canada, or countries in Europe (MSF, 2017; UNHCR, 2018a). Since 2010, the number of Salvadoran refugees seeking asylum in other countries has increased 15-fold (UNHCR, 2018b). An unprecedented number of those abandoning their country are women and children as well as unaccompanied minors (Clemens, 2017; UNHCR, 2014; UNHCR, 2015).

The government's response to the gangs has been to crack down repressively (Cruz, 2010). In 2003, then-president Francisco Flores won approval from the legislature for his signature "Iron Fist" laws against the gangs and enacted them with widespread public acclaim (Holland, 2013). The new laws made membership in gangs illegal, allowed for the detention of minors as young as 12, deployed the military into the streets, and gave police the legal authority to stop, search, and arrest people solely because of their appearance. In a show of force, 20,000 suspected gang members were thrown into prison in the first year (Jütersonke et al., 2009).

The effects on violence, however, were the opposite of what the government had promised: The homicide rate spiked, nearly doubling between 2003 and 2005 (Valencia, 2015). The failure of the crackdown didn't register much comment from the press or the public. Fear of the gangs continued to spread, fanned by sensational media coverage and politicians who exploited the crisis for electoral gains (Wolf, 2017). Subsequent administrations implemented their own

crackdowns, including the “Super Iron Fist” in 2006 and “Extraordinary Measures” in 2015. Like their predecessor, these, too, provoked a spike in murders (Valencia, 2017).

Most experts agree that repression has backfired (Cruz, 2012; International Crisis Group, 2017; Jütersonke et al., 2009; Wolf, 2017). Sending thousands of young people to jail cements their personal and economic ties to the gang and also exposes them to extreme deprivation and abuse, traumas they later bring home (Martínez, 2016; Seelke, 2016). Back in their communities, militarization of the streets has made life more perilous for everyone, even those with little or no connection to the gangs (Savenije, 2009). Thousands of teenage boys and young men have been stopped and frisked, and often roughed up and robbed, by officers without cause (Beltrán and Savenije, 2014). Nighttime raids regularly force families onto the streets as the police overturn their every possession searching for suspects, often with guns blazing (Valencia et al., 2016).

The police and military are now credibly accused of multiple human rights abuses, including illegal detentions, torture, and the extrajudicial murders of many hundreds of suspected gang members and innocent civilian bystanders (Avelar and Martínez d'Aubuisson, 2017; U.S. Department of State, 2015; Valencia, 2016). With the police’s ever-expanding powers to surveil, search, and detain anyone they care to, many people in poor communities now feel the authorities are a graver threat than the gangs and some have turned to the maligned groups for protection (Cruz et al., 2017; Dudley, 2010; Valencia, 2017).

The violence has contributed to a swift reversal in the educational gains made since 1995. Figure 1.1 showed attendance rates rising throughout the 2000s, but in 2013 elementary enrollment started a steep descent. By 2016, it had fallen to 86%, 11% below its peak a decade earlier. Enrollment in middle and high school have not dropped off, but their declines may only be a matter of time. The wave of elementary enrollees in the mid-2000s is likely buoying

secondary enrollment, but as primary attendance falls, the future pool of applicants to middle and high schools will shrink as well. The decline in enrollment has been accompanied by a sharp increase in out-of-school children and adolescents over the last five years.

As Figure 1.2 depicts, the rate of seven to 12-year-olds out of school increased from 5% in 2012 to 19% in 2017.[5] The number of 13-15 year-olds abandoning their studies jumped from 4% in 2014 to 17% three years later. The trend amongst older teens, ages 16-18, is not yet clear, but recently ticked up.

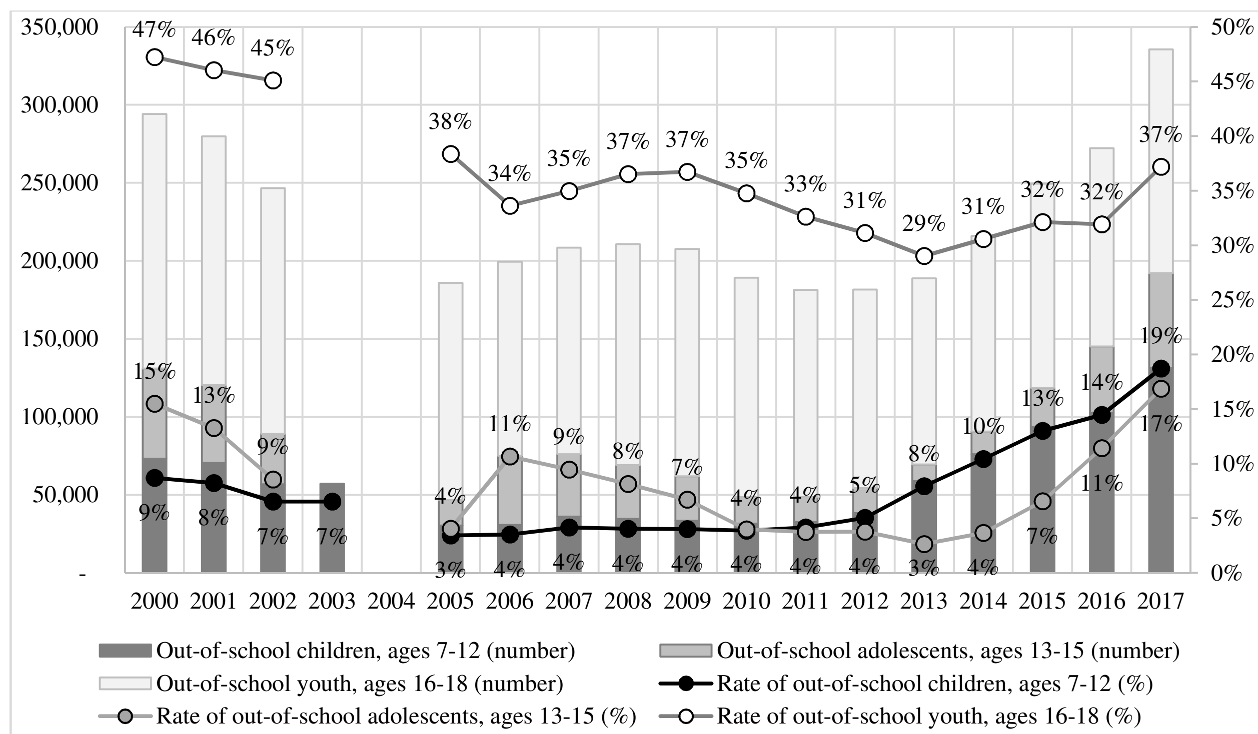


Figure 1.2: Number and Rate of Out-of-School Children and Youth, El Salvador, 2000-2017

There is rampant speculation in the press that fear of violence is driving the rising exodus of Salvadoran students from school (e.g., El Mundo, 2015b; Griffin, 2016; Joma, 2017; La Prensa Gráfica, 2015; Tjaden and LaSusa, 2016). Although initially slow to acknowledge the problem, the Ministry of Education recently released data showing the number of students leaving school

[5] I configured this graph with data from UNESCO's e-Atlas of Out-of-School Children (UIS, 2018).

after threats of violence had doubled between 2009 and 2014 (Alvarado, 2015) and continued to rise in subsequent years (Espinoza, 2017; López, 2016; Montes, 2018; USAID, 2016).[6]

During this same time period, reports portraying public schools riven by violence have been regularly featured in the media and propagated by politicians, heads of government agencies, and civil society leaders (e.g., Ayala, 2012; Flores, 2014; Joma, 2013; Sosa, 2013; USAID, 2016). In 2012, for example, the government's Minister of Security called public schools "breeding grounds for gang recruitment" (quoted in Segura, 2012: online edition). According to published accounts, gang-affiliated students bully and harass classmates, charge extortion fees, sell drugs, and recruit peers to join their ranks (Ayala and Quintanilla, 2012; Gavin et al., 2017; MINED, 2012). Teachers say these same students brazenly threaten and provoke them, upending their authority in the classroom and their ability to enforce rules or assign grades fairly (Joma, 2013; PNUD, 2013).

The government has responded by stepping up police patrols in and around schools. Officers now monitor students in the classrooms and hallways and routinely stop and frisk them or look through their belongings on campus (Cuéllar-Marchelli and Góchez, 2017). Armed soldiers guard school entryways and make patrols around nearby streets (Flores and Peñate, 2014). Even with heightened security, hundreds of students and dozens of teachers have been murdered, tragic events that are often accompanied by days of sensationalized media coverage (Aleman, 2012; Cuéllar-Marchelli and Góchez, 2017; Gavin et al., 2017).

Signs suggest that many of the young people fleeing school are poor youth from gang-affected communities (International Crisis Group, 2017). It is uncertain when or whether these

[6] Journalists, teachers' unions, and organizations working in the educational sector, however, claim that even these figures underestimate the true gravity of the situation. They have identified several problems with how the Ministry collects data and argue that as a result the Ministry undercounts the overall number of dropouts as well as the number leaving because of violence (Alvarado, 2015; El Mundo, 2015a; Gavin, 2017; Joma, 2017; Montes, 2018).

children will restart their education. If they do, they will have missed out on months if not years of schooling, the mere act of which lowers substantially the odds they will ever complete high school (Rumberger, 2011). The long-term consequences of their interrupted schooling are clear: Educational inequality will grow at an even faster pace, seeding more ground for the violence to establish a bloody place in the nation's future.

Preventing Dropout to Prevent Crime

In 2014, the Salvadoran government appointed a blue-ribbon commission of experts and civil society representatives and charged them with developing a response to the violence. A year later the committee published a comprehensive set of 124 recommended actions called the "Safe El Salvador Plan" (CNSCC, 2015). Preventing dropout ranked high on the committee's list of priorities and was earmarked nearly 30% of the plan's entire $2.1 billion budget, more than any other objective (CNSCC, 2015: 7).

The notion that preventing dropout can prevent crime is based on empirical research. Studies show that countries with large proportions of their young people enrolled in high school have lower national crime and homicide rates (Chioda, 2017; Education Commission, 2016). Other research on education in the Global South finds that men who obtain high school degrees are less likely to commit crimes, use violence, abuse their intimate partners, or be incarcerated than men from similar backgrounds with only primary schooling (Barker et al., 2012; Levtov et al., 2014). One study from Latin America has shown that completing high school is the most robust factor protecting individuals from participating in criminal activity during their lifetimes (Chioda, 2014). And a long line of investigations has arrived at similar conclusions that dropping out is associated with higher rates of violent or delinquent behavior (Chioda, 2017; de Hoyos et al., 2016; Rumberger, 2011).

This type of empirical evidence is what encouraged Salvadoran policymakers and their international donors to embrace education in the Safe El Salvador Plan and other related crime prevention programs (e.g., Savenije and Beltrán, 2012; World Bank, 2011). The enthusiasm public officials have for this approach is regularly display. In 2013, the United States ambassador to El Salvador, Mari Carmen Aponte, said of an anti-violence school program backed by U.S. funds: "I'm not exaggerating when I say that investing in education means the difference between life and death for many young Salvadorans because so many young people in this country live under the threat of gang violence" (quoted in La Prensa Gráfica, 2013: online edition). That same year, then president Mauricio Funes said of another school-based program, "We are convinced that we are challenging the gangs for territory when our young people are able to spend their free time at school doing sports or other recreational activities" (quoted in La Prensa Gráfica, 2013: online edition).

There are very high expectations about what Salvadoran public schools can accomplish for a generation of children growing up amid gang violence. Just like they were in the aftermath of the civil war, schools are once again being called upon to enter the fray and, in the words of a 2016 government plan, be "a central actor in reconstructing the fabric of society and transforming the conflict" (CONED, 2016: 22). No existing research, however, has documented the factors pushing urban dropouts out of school in El Salvador (Calvo-Gonzalez and Lopez, 2015). A fact which means these plans are operating in the dark about the young lives they want to transform.

Focus and Organization of Dissertation

The epidemic of violence in El Salvador has focused new attention, and anxieties, on poor urban dropouts. This dissertation is dedicated to describing their experiences and understanding the reasons why so many of them abandon their education as teenagers.

The next two chapters provide background and context for the study: Chapter two provides additional detail on schooling outcomes in El Salvador and reviews the scholarly literature on dropout that inspired and framed the empirical chapters. Chapter three describes the setting of this project and qualitative research methods used to carry it out.

The four empirical chapters that follow are divided into two parts. The first, titled “Weighted Aspirations,” consists of two chapters which contrast the deep and compounding hardships that shape children’s lives with their faith–and that of their parents and teachers–that an education will lead them out of poverty. Chapter four, “Sustaining Hope,” outlines the material and personal hardships that shape youth’s family lives and their struggle for schooling. The next chapter, “A Flawed Refuge,” depicts the severe institutional constraints that limit schools’ ability to fulfill their core missions to teach and guide poor students toward better futures.

The second set of empirical chapters is called “Conflicting Signals.” Here I place youth’s decision to drop out in context. Chapter six, “Adrift at School,” describes how schools themselves send signals to that they should leave. Chapter seven, “The Baby Has No Blame,” depicts how teenage moms, whose childhoods were marred by hardship and violence, sought out the stability that idealized men provide.

The conclusion pulls these threads together and builds a comprehensive model of the dropout process among poor urban youth in El Salvador. It also addresses the question of whether the public education system is capable of offering solutions to the crisis unfolding in El Salvador given the broader social, economic, and political inequalities shaping the nation. And closes by using the Salvadoran case to shed light on the future of international education campaigns.

2. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter describes the academic studies and organizational reports that informed this project's research design and approach to data analysis. The review begins by outlining the different ways that dropout is measured and the challenges and limitations in each approach. Next, in the three subsequent sections which form the bulk of the chapter, it delves into the voluminous research on individual and societal variables which research has linked to higher rates of drop out. The penultimate section narrows the focus to studies of dropout by researchers and policy analysts in El Salvador and Latin America and summarizes the major explanations that these authors have developed about why so many young people leave school early in the region. The final section brings the major threads of the review together and identifies a set of research questions that guide the remainder of the dissertation.

Before I begin the review, however, I must address a serious limitation in what follows: Most of the research described below is from industrialized countries including the United States, Canada, and Europe. I made the choice to include such a lengthy discussion of dropout from wealthier nations, because, there is very limited research on dropout in the Global South (Hunt, 2008). Moreover, the scholarship on dropout in the Global North that I review below includes many groundbreaking studies of the phenomenon and their pioneering empirical and theoretical work have influenced research and policy about educational attainment all over the world.

Defining and Measuring Dropout

Measuring the number of youth who have dropped out of school has long been a challenge for researchers, administrators, and bureaucracies tracking educational trends. (For an overview, see Campbell, 2015: 620-1; Rumberger, 2011: 47-78). This section describes three different

statistical approaches to measuring the dropout problem: (1) the dropout rate, (2) the out-of-school rate, and (3) the educational exclusion rate. The final section addresses the understudied topic of "dropping in," or returning to school after dropping out.

The Dropout Rate

The dropout rate is an annual measure which captures how many students exit the school system over the course of one academic year. The Ministry of Education in El Salvador, for example, defines dropouts as those students who were enrolled at the beginning of the school year who had withdrawn or been removed from attendance rolls by year's end. This definition accounts for students who leave during the academic year, but it misses those students who complete one school year but do not continue with their education the subsequent year. For this reason, the dropout rate undercounts the number of youth outside of the school system.

The dropout rate is also limited in what it can tell us about students who have left school, because it is derived from school enrollment censuses which only collect basic information about their students. Usually, the dropout rate is only disaggregated by age, gender, grade, urban/rural location, and/or school type (e.g., public or private).

The Out-of-School Rate

The out-of-school rate identifies the total extent of children and youth not receiving an education. This rate tends to be much larger than the annual dropout rate because it includes two additional groups of out-of-school children and youth–(1) those who left school for longer than one academic year and (2) youth who have never enrolled in school. The latter group is now a small percentage compared to previous generations since most children now enroll in school, but it is still relevant, especially among children in disadvantaged racial or ethnic groups, isolated rural areas, or in regions affected by conflict or natural disasters (Hunt, 2008; UNESCO, 2015).

The out-of-school rate portrays a much starker portrait of the number of young people outside the education system. In El Salvador, for example, the dropout rate for middle schoolers was 9% in 2014 (MINEDUCYT, 2019). But that same year the out-of-school rate for 13-15 year-olds–the age when youth should be in middle school–was nearly twice as high at 16% (UNESCO, 2018). The disparity is much larger for high school students. In 2014, the dropout rate was 11% of high schoolers (MINEDUCYT, 2019). Meanwhile, the out-of-school rate for 16-18 year-olds–the age corresponding with high school enrollment–was 43%.

The out-of-school rate is also based on household surveys which allows it to provide more information on dropouts' background. For example, Figure 2.1 below, which portrays the out-of-school rate among urban youth in El Salvador by household wealth, demonstrates the stark disparity in the out-of-school rate between wealthy and poor youth.

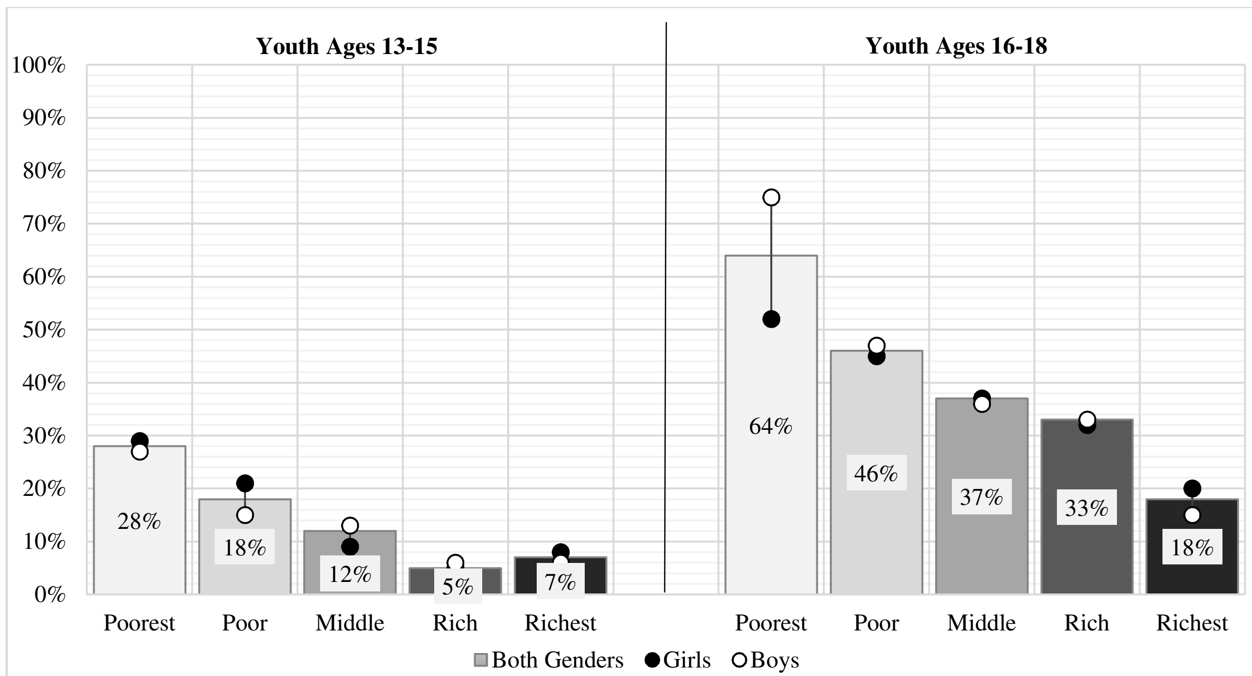


Figure 2.1: Out-of-School Urban Youth by Wealth, Age, and Gender, El Salvador, 2014[7]

[7] I constructed Figure 2.1 using data published on UNESCO's World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) website (see UNESCO, 2018). The rural out-of-school rates were not included due to this dissertation's urban focus.

Nearly two-thirds of the poorest urban 16-18 year-olds are out of school. Amongst the younger 13-15 year-olds, an age when being in school is legally required in El Salvador, 28% of the poorest teens have dropped out. In the next quintile up, where households are slightly better off but still considered poor, young Salvadorans are also struggling: Nearly one-half of older teens and one-fifth of younger teens have abandoned their studies. The out-of-school rates amongst youth in the bottom two quintiles are 2.5 to four times higher than those of young people from the richest households.

Figure 2.1 also depicts the gender disparities in the out-of-school rates for each wealth quintile. (These are represented by the black and white circles connected by a black line at the top of the gray box showing the average out-of-school rate.) For every group but one, the disparity between boys and girls is small or nonexistent. But amongst the poorest 16-18 year-olds, the gap is alarmingly large: Seventy-five percent of the boys in the lowermost quintile are out of school compared to 52% of the girls, a disparity of 23 percentage points. Clearly, the intersection of class and gender is putting additional pressures on these marginalized boys.

The Educational Exclusion Rate

Even as the out-of-school rate hews closer to reality, it also likely underestimates the true scope of youth who will end their education without high school degrees in countries like El Salvador. The educational exclusion rate, developed by UNICEF and UNESCO in their joint global initiative for out-of-school youth, is an effort to measure the extent of students who are doing so poorly in school that they are likely to become dropouts in the near future (UNICEF, 2015; UNICEF and UNESCO, 2012). The measure is based on research identifying grade repetition as a prominent risk factor for dropout (Rumberger, 2011). Students are classified as "educationally excluded" when they are over-age for their grade (UNICEF, 2014b).

In El Salvador, the rate of over-age students is high, especially among older teens. Figure 2.2 demonstrates the findings from one study which showed one-quarter of 16-18 year-old Salvadoran students–an age when they should have been in high school–were enrolled in middle school (24%) or elementary school (2%) (Adelman and Székely, 2016). These young people may be in school, but their educational trajectories do not look bright. When their trajectories are taken into account, the scope of the dropout problem looks much larger than the 38% of youth already out of school, growing to encompass 64% of 16-18 year-old Salvadorans.

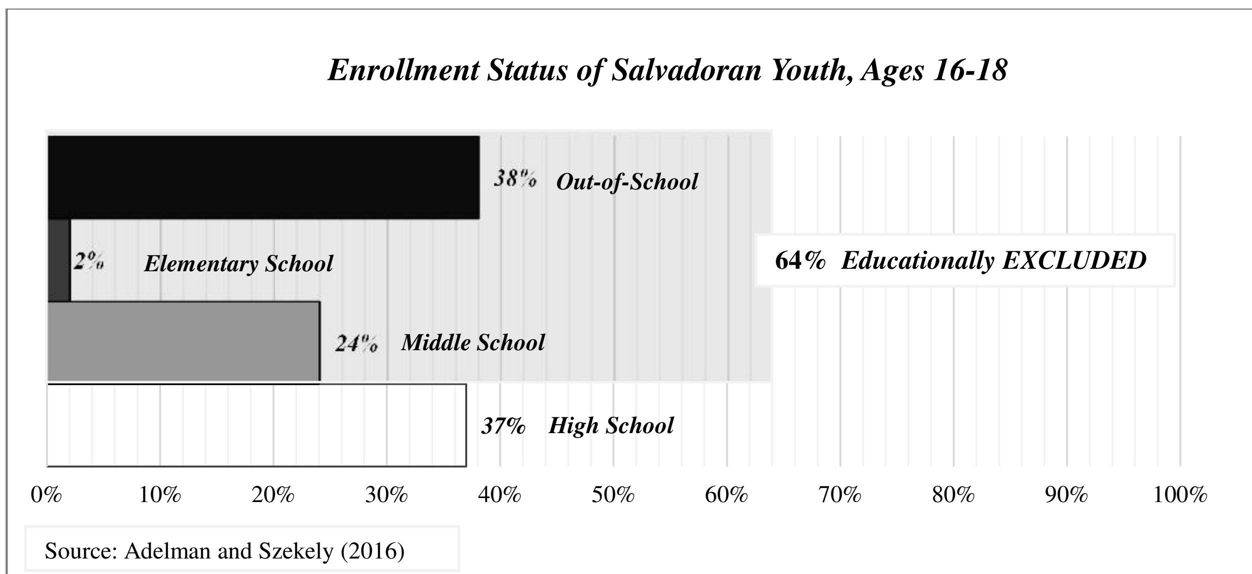


Figure 2.2: Educational Exclusion Rate, Youth Ages 16-18, El Salvador

Dropping In

In contrast to popular conceptions, many youth who drop out end up returning to their studies after a short period out of school. Several longitudinal investigations from the United States, for example, have found that more than half, and, in some cases, up to two-thirds, of former dropouts return to school and eventually earn diplomas or alternative credentials like a GED (Entwisle et al., 2004; Hurst et al., 2004; Rumberger and Rotermund, 2008). That means, especially for teens and young adults, it is better to think of dropout as a temporary status rather

than a type of person (Rumberger, 2011: 59). At some point, that status can become a permanent one, but, it may take years or decades to determine.[8]

In subsequent chapters, I will discuss the repeated efforts by dropouts who I interviewed to return to school. There were also programs, such as night school and weekend school, which the Salvadoran government had initiated in part to help youth who had left school to come back into the education system. There were, however, no statistical measures of how many students in El Salvador are dropping in.

The Dropout Process

Dropouts do not simply decide one day to abandon their studies. For most young people, the decision to leave school is the endpoint of a complex process, the seeds of which are often found in early childhood. As toddlers and preschoolers, children begin forming the attitudes, behaviors, and skills that will shape their performance in school from first grade on (Alexander et al., 1997). Research shows that dropouts are more likely to experience academic or behavioral struggles early in elementary school and, as they enter middle and high school, to have established patterns of low achievement or disciplinary problems (Dynarski et al., 2008; Entwisle et al., 2005a).

But while early outcomes are influential, they are not determinative (Alexander et al., 2001; Dupéré et al., 2015). As an example, an elementary student may be far behind grade-level in reading and math and struggle to pay attention in class–all risk factors associated with dropout. By middle school, this same student may benefit from a change in conditions at home or school, an intervention program, or personal growth that allows her to catch up academically and meet behavioral expectations. Dropout is a process because no one factor determines whether a

[8] Several recent investigations have examined what factors make dropouts more likely to stay out permanently versus those which facilitate a return to school. See Entwisle et al., 2004; Barrat et al., 2012; or McDermott et al., 2017.

student will abandon her studies (De Witte et al., 2013). Instead, dropping out involves multiple interrelated factors, some working together to increase youth's vulnerability over time, while others diminish it (De Witte et al., 2013; Rumberger and Lim, 2008). As one of the most frequently cited passages on the subject describes it, dropout is "the final stage in a dynamic and cumulative process of disengagement from school" (Rumberger, 1995: 588).

Students are more likely to graduate when they have been–over the long trajectory of their academic careers–(1) physically and mentally healthy, (2) consistently enrolled and attending school, (3) engaged and learning in the classroom, and (4) relating well to peers and teachers (Rumberger, 2011). Table 2.1 summarizes the major factors that undermine students being able to achieve these conditions.

Table 2.1: Student-Level Risks for Dropout

Physical and mental health	Enrollment and attendance	Learning and engagement	Social behaviors and relationships
• Malnutrtion or hunger • Exposure to stressful events or traumas • Depression or other mental health problems • Chronic or acute illnesses or injuries • Work or domestic labor, when hours are excessive or conditions harmful • Teen pregnancy • Drug or alcohol abuse	• Limited access to quality early childhood education • Late entry into elementary school • Extended or frequent absences • Grade retention • Over-age for grade • Suspension or explusions • School mobility • Temporarily dropping out	• Behind grade-level in literacy or math • Low grades in academic courses • Failing courses • Not participating in classroom activities • Not doing homework • Disruptive classroom behavior • Boredom or loss of interest	• Aggressive or anti-social behaviors • Feeling unwelcome at school • Being bullied • Disciplinary problems • Conflict with teachers • Friendship with delinquent peers or other dropouts • Delinquent behavior

One can see how these spheres of academic success are deeply interdependent on each other. A boy, for example, who is physically unwell for a sustained period will be unable to maintain

his attendance and learning. A girl with behavioral problems who struggles to relate to her peers may be miss out on learning while she is disciplined. In the text that follows I describe research on these individual factors and how they contribute to the dropout process.

Early Success and the Graduation Boost

Learning accumulates one day, month, and year at a time, with each new set of acquired skills laying and strengthening the foundation for the next (Bloom, 1976). The cumulative nature of learning means that students who master what is taught their first year have an advantage when it comes to learning what is expected in year two–and so on. That advantage accumulates from year to year. In fact, research shows that a successful start in first grade boosts the odds that children will stay in school regardless of their socio-economic status (Alexander et al., 1997; Duncan et al., 2007). For low-income and poor children, early success can be critical to their chances for graduation (Alexander et al., 1997; Duncan and Magnuson, 2011; Entwisle et al., 2005a; Magnuson et al., 2016).

Insights like these have fueled international efforts to increase access to preschool so that children across the globe start first grade “ready to learn” (Duncan and Magnuson, 2013; UNICEF, 2014a; Vegas and Santibanez, 2010). Prominent and decades-long studies on preschool have shown that poor children who participate in quality programs do better in first grade and, as time goes on, are much more likely to graduate high school (Reynolds et al., 2001; Schweinhart et al., 2005). Researchers are still debating which skills (e.g., non-cognitive versus cognitive skills) are most important for children to master early, but the consensus is that being ready to start makes a difference (Entwisle et al., 2005a; Magnuson et al., 2016).

Adverse outcomes early on in school, on the other side, set some students on a course for dropout which they never get off (Entwisle et al., 2005a). Research shows that students who have

academic or behavior problems in early elementary grades are much more likely to experience subsequent events which are highly associated with not completing high school, such as being held back or placed in low ability groups or special education programs (Alexander et al., 1997; Rumberger, 2011). Other studies find that is an established pattern of behavior and academic problems over the entire course of middle childhood that matters more than young children's school readiness or performance at any one point in time. Students who have persistent records low proficiency in math and reading or long histories of discipline problems are more likely to leave school (Duncan and Magnuson, 2011; Magnuson et al., 2016).

But even while the evidence clearly shows early school experiences shape the odds that young people will stay in school or leave, their overall effect is moderate, tipping the scale in one direction or the other, rather than sealing a student's fate (Dupéré et al., 2015; Magnuson et al., 2016; Rumberger, 2011). Many students who struggle initially overcome these early setbacks and go on to graduate; while some who do well at the outset can take a turn for the worse in middle or high school and drop out (Gleason and Dynarski, 2002; Roderick et al., 2014).

Disengagement in Middle and High School

Other research on dropping out has focused on what happens during middle and high school to push youth out of school. There is a broad-base of evidence showing that adolescent students who are engaged in the academic and social routines of their school are less likely to drop out (Balfanz et al., 2007; Dynarski et al., 2008). Engagement means students attend regularly, take part in classroom activities, do homework assignments, and get involved in social activities or extra-curricular programs (Archambault et al., 2009; Janosz et al., 2008; Rumberger, 2011; Wang and Fredricks, 2014).

There is extensive debate about just what student engagement is and how to measure it, but most scholars agree that it is multidimensional and includes a behavioral, cognitive, and emotional component (Fredricks et al., 2004). The behavioral component measures whether students comply with rules and make an effort to meet teachers' expectations for schoolwork and participation. The cognitive dimension, on the other hand, measures how much learning students have acquired using skills assessments and their grades. Meanwhile, the emotional aspect weighs students' feelings of belonging in school and the quality of their relationships with teachers and peers. The three dimensions are interrelated and together they reinforce each other in a virtuous cycle that pays larger dividend over time (Carter, 2005; Fredricks et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 2001). For example, students who complete assignments and spend classroom time on task are more likely to have passing grades, form supportive relationships with teachers, feel like they belong in school, and want to participate in sports or other social activities.

For some students, the engagement feedback loop never takes off or it breaks down after a series of negative experiences (Alexander et al., 2001). Consider for example how aggressive behavior in early elementary school may set students down the path of disengagement. Research shows that teachers are highly reactive to children with aggressive tendencies and may reprimand them frequently, which, in turn, erodes these children's ability to form bonds with the teachers and other adults at their school (Sampson and Laub, 1997). Early tension with teachers can put these students on the radar of administrators and earn them extra scrutiny from subsequent teachers, conditions which up the odds they will have long records of misbehavior (Ferguson, 2001). Multiple studies have shown that youth with disciplinary infractions for fighting, conflict with teachers, and other misbehavior in middle and high school are more likely to drop out (Rumberger and Lim, 2008).

Whether academic or behavioral, early problems in elementary and middle school can cascade into students feeling unwelcome in the classroom, losing motivation to focus on learning, and acting out more frequently. As a result, these students learn less and receive lower grades, which sets in motion a reinforcing snowball of behavior and achievement problems tumbles forward year after year (Alexander et al., 1997). Numerous studies have shown that disengagement manifests itself in different ways as students reach adolescence. In general, disengaged students tend to miss school frequently, have low grades, and expend little effort to do their assignments. Some have records of disciplinary infractions (Balfanz et al., 2007; Dynarski et al., 2008; Rumberger, 2011) These factors coalesce into a vicious cycle that eventually pushes some disengaged students from school (Finn, 1989; Flores-González, 2002).

The strong link between disengagement and dropout has motivated some scholars and practitioners to look for ways to use this knowledge to identify students disengaging from school before they get stuck in the vicious cycle (Balfanz et al., 2009; Dynarski et al., 2008). Early warning systems are one example of this effort. These systems are based on what is called the "ABCs of dropout," for Attendance, Behavior, or Course completion. Using schools' administrative data, computerized tracking systems flag students that meet established risk thresholds (e.g., a student who was absent for 10 or more days in 6th grade or failed algebra in 9th grade) (Balfanz et al., 2009). Trained staff then provide these students with services targeted to support their academic, behavioral, or personal needs (Dynarski et al., 2008; Neild et al., 2007).

Evaluations of early warning systems have shown them to be modestly effective as a first step in preventing dropout, when and if flagged students receive well-designed interventions (Dynarski et al., 2008). They have now been adopted by over half of U.S. high schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) and are also being piloted in developing countries including

Guatemala, Honduras, India, Cambodia, and Uganda (Adelman et al., 2017; USAID, 2015; World Vision, 2017).

Acute Stress and Mental Health Risks in Adolescence

Other researchers have cautioned that dropout is only partially explained by prior student achievement and behavior (Bowers et al., 2012; De Witte et al., 2013; Gleason and Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger, 2011). Multiple studies have demonstrated, for example, that around 40% of high school dropouts show none of the critical disengagement warning signs–low grades, chronic absences, discipline problems, failing courses, retention, etc.–prior to leaving school (Bowers and Sprott, 2012; Dupéré et al., 2015; Fortin et al., 2006; Janosz et al., 2000). These unexpected school leavers are sometimes called "Quiet" or "Life Events" dropouts because they are flying under the radar seemingly on-track until something changes and forces them out of school (Balfanz et al., 2009; Lessard et al., 2008). On the opposite side of the equation are the students who demonstrate many or most of the warning signs but nonetheless stay in school and graduate (Feinstein and Peck, 2008; Pagani et al., 2008). Evidence suggests that 50% or more of so-called "at-risk" students beat the odds and earn their diplomas (without any specialized interventions) (Gleason and Dynarski, 2002).

These two groups–the unexpected leavers and stayers–have prompted debate about the blind spots in the disengagement model of the dropout process (Bowers et al., 2012; Dupéré et al., 2015). One theory is that mental health issues play an underappreciated role in student outcomes. Several studies, for example, have found students suffering from depression are at elevated risk for dropout (Fortin et al., 2006; Porche et al., 2011; Rumberger, 2011: 185).

In a recent appraisal, Dupéré et al. (2015) argue that the model of dropout as disengagement, while yielding important insights into the long-term risk factors associated with school leaving,

has discouraged investigation of the immediate situations that prompt students to suspend their education. The authors (2015: 592) posit that dropout may be triggered by one or more stressful events in the months immediately prior and that acute stress could explain why "quiet dropouts" with no established risks suddenly leave school or, conversely, why already "at-risk" youth are pushed over the edge. In a follow-up study, Dupéré et al. (2017) found evidence supporting their hypotheses. Dropouts were much more likely than both at-risk and average students to experience a moderate or extremely stressful event during the three month period before their exit. Stressors included random events like a car accident or hospitalization as well as those arising from longer-developing issues in homes, schools, and communities. The latter included conflicts at home, parent losing a job, being bullied, problems with a teacher, witnessing a crime, a fight with a romantic partner, or becoming a parent (Dupéré et al., 2017: 11-12).

Contexts Influencing Dropout

The studies reviewed so far have focused on patterns in individual girls' and boys' achievement, behavior, and health that are linked to an increased risk for dropout. Critics have frequently pointed out, however, that these studies are too narrowly focused on student-level variables. They have demanded that researchers broaden their focus, zooming out to examine the conditions in families, communities, and schools which generate and amplify individual risks (De Witte et al., 2013; Fine, 1991; Flores-González, 2002; National Research Council, 1995; Rumberger, 2011). For example, it is impossible to understand why a teenage boy is struggling academically if you do not assess the quality of education he received at school. Or, to know why a young girl is prone to bullying without understanding her socialization at home.

Figure 2.3 is a representation of bio-ecological model of child development which I have adapted to show how these contexts shape the dropout process. The bio-ecological model is

based in child development studies and posits that children's development is a dynamic and recurring interaction between the child and her environment over time (Ambert, 1997; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; Jessor, 1993; Tudge and Hogan, 2005).[9]

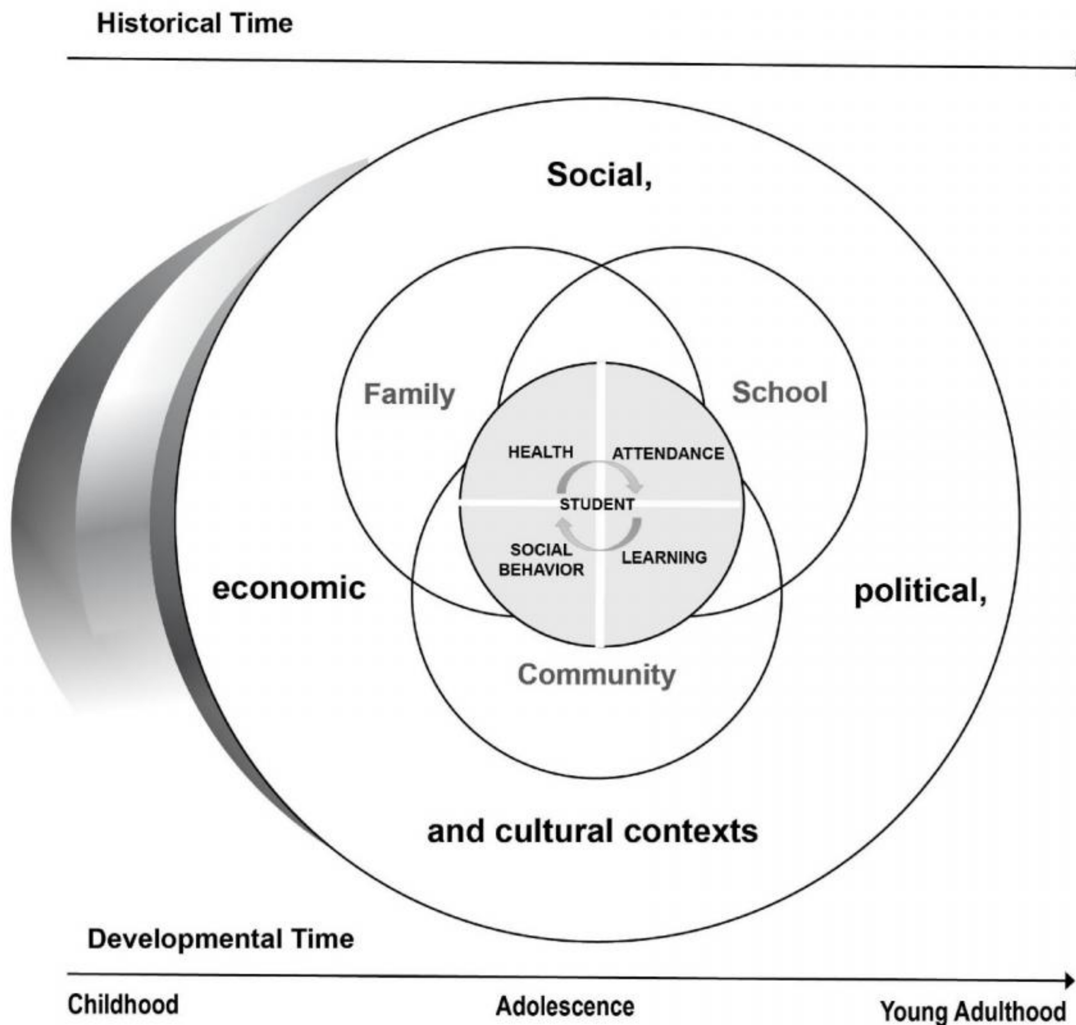


Figure 2.3: Contexts Shaping Student-Level Outcomes

At the center of Figure 2.3, I have placed a circle showing the interdependent relationship between student health, attendance, learning, and social behavior. The circle is meant to reflect

[9] Figure 2.3 is adapted directly from Jessor's (1993) article, "Successful Adolescent Development among Youth in High Risk Settings," *American Psychologist* 48: Figure 2. I have added the circle at the center with student health, attendance, learning, and behavior and the arrow "historical time."

the findings discussed in the previous section. Immediately outside the student circle are larger overlapping spheres representing the family, community, and school contexts in which students are embedded. These spheres, in turn, are inside a larger one which represents broader social, economic, political, and cultural conditions. An arrow for developmental time depicts how children's development occurs in cumulative fashion with each developmental event laying the foundation for the next. Lastly, an arrow for historical time is included to show how historical events can shape the contexts of children's lives and change their life course trajectories (Elder et al., 2003). It is important to note as well that children co-create their development in interaction with their environment through their own agency. Said differently, children are not just passive receivers of socializing forces—they also shape their social worlds.

To better illustrate Figure 2.3, I will use the example of *nutrition.* Adequate nutrition is critical to student health and hunger is a risk factor for dropout. Students' access to food is determined most immediately by their family's ability to purchase or produce it. But other factors play a role in determining which families are vulnerable to hunger. For example, a local drought may push food prices up. If the child's family has economic resources, they may be able to find adequate food and experience little change in their daily lives. Children in poor families, however, might go hungry, affecting their ability to attend or perform in school. We can imagine political or cultural factors playing a role as well. A government whose leaders have social ties to a community may prioritize that place over others in providing relief from drought.

A drought is also an example of an historical event that can reverberate through a child's life, setting one child on different trajectory than a similar one living a few years earlier when no drought occurred (Elder et al., 2003). Developmental time matters in the same way, because–if we continue with the drought example–being an infant or an adolescent shapes the nature and

size of the drought's developmental effects (Elder et al., 2003). In the case of babies, hunger may affect their cognitive development in ways that persist throughout the life course (Shonkoff et al., 2012). Alternatively, adolescents may choose not to pursue more schooling and instead help their families earn more income during a crisis (Torche, 2010).

The review that follows examines some of these contextual factors. This remainder of this section summarizes research on how students' most immediate contexts– their families, communities, and schools–contribute to their risk for dropout. These are summarized in Table 2.2 and discussed at more length below. The next section zooms out even further and discusses how broader social and historical conditions structure and shape the resources and practices in families, communities, and schools. Because the literature on this topic is very large, I have chosen to briefly describe only those previous findings which my fieldwork suggest are relevant to understanding dropout in El Salvador.

Table 2.2: Contextual Factors Increasing Dropout Risk

Family factors	School factors	Community factors
• Low socio-economic status • Single-parent or no biological parent household • Child abuse or neglect • Stressful or chaotic home environment • Separation from parent • Parent imprisoned • Domestic violence • Parent suffers from untreated mental illness or addiction • Parent uninvolved in child's schooling or social life • Authoritarian parenting styles	• Low teaching quality • Low teacher salaries • Low spending per pupil • School population composed of mostly low-SES students • Negative school climate, students feel unsafe, peers are disruptive or antisocial • Bullying • Authoritarian discipline approach, including "zero tolerance policies" • Discharging unwanted students • Unsupportive teacher relationships • Teachers shunning students	• High poverty neighborhood • Neighborhood violence • Lack of safe public parks and recreational spaces • Lack of quality childcare centers and schools • Lack of trusting relationships with neighbors • High unemployment • Numerous older youth who are dropouts or involved in crime • Environmental hazards, air and water pollution • Substandard housing and infrastructure

Family Factors

In 1966, James Coleman published his seminal *Equality of Educational Opportunity Report* with a surprising headline finding–family background mattered more in determining how much education children achieved than the quality of their schools. The report ignited a contentious debate which continues still today (Alexander and Morgan, 2016; Evitts Dickinson, 2016). But while its conclusions have been refined and deepened by decades of research, its central premise still holds. Family background has been recognized as the most influential factor shaping student outcomes (Baker et al., 2002; Fuller and Clarke, 1994; Jencks, 1972; Lockheed and Longford, 1991; Morgan and Jung, 2016; Mosteller and Moynihan, 1972).

Families matter in a variety of ways for educational outcomes (Hamilton et al., 2011). One of the clearest ways are the resources that families have available to invest in their children. Resources include families' income and wealth as well as parents' educational and occupational ties and credentials. Socio-economic status (SES) is often used to measure these resources and has proven a powerful predictor of dropout. Research in the United States, for example, has found that children with lower SES are three to five times more likely to drop out than their high SES classmates (Alexander et al., 2001; Dalton et al., 2009; Duncan et al., 1998; Ratcliffe and McKernan, 2010).[10]

Other aspects of family life beyond SES also shape children's educational outcomes (Buchmann, 2002b). For example, parental involvement in children's schooling and social lives has been identified in multiple studies as important to academic success. Influential parent-child activities include regularly discussing school expectations, reading together, providing books and encouraging independent reading, and working together on homework (Buchmann, 2002a; Lareau, 2000). Students' perception that parents' support and encourage their educational endeavors has also been shown to improve youth's motivation and engagement (Buchmann and Dalton, 2002). Beyond schooling, parents who are involved in their children's social lives, also may help prevent dropout. For example, research suggests that adolescents are more like to stay in school when their parents monitor their activities, set limits on their interactions with peers, communicate with them in respectful ways, and use an authoritative parenting style (Romo and Falbo, 1996; Rumberger, 2011: 191-2).

[10] Dalton et al. (2009) found that 12.4% of high school sophomores from the bottom SES quartile dropped out compared to only 1.8% from the upper SES quartile–a fivefold difference. Alexander et al. (2001) found that 60% of Baltimore students who had low SES in first grade went on to drop out whereas only 15% with high SES did so–a fourfold difference. Ratcliffe and McKernan (2010) looked at poverty status at time of birth, rather than SES. The authors found that 22% of young adults who were born poor dropped out compared to 7% who were not poor at birth–a threefold difference.

Another aspect of the family that affects educational attainment is its structure. In the case of dropout, multiple studies have shown that children living in single-parent homes are at higher risk for dropping out (Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger, 2011). Children who experience changes in family structure–such as separation from a parent, parental divorce, the entrance or exit parent's partners from the household, or a parent going to prison–suffer cognitive delays and other mental health consequences linked to dropout (Alexander et al., 1997; Cooper et al., 2011; Garnier et al., 1997; Seltzer, 1994; Wakefield and Wildeman, 2014).

Mounting evidence shows that growing up in stressful or chaotic environments impair children's development in ways that have consequences that reach far into adulthood, including reducing educational attainment (CDC, 2016; Center on the Developing Child, 2018; Felitti et al., 1998; Shonkoff et al., 2012). Prominent studies have shown, for example, that children who are abused or who live in homes where their caregivers are abused, suffering from untreated mental illness, or addicted to drugs or alcohol so-called–situations which are often "adverse childhood experiences" or ACEs–experience a damaging cascade of developmental effects, many of which are risk factors for dropout (Giovanelli et al., 2016; Morrow and Villodas, 2017). For example, ACEs have been shown to impair children's cognitive, socio-emotional, and linguistic skills and weaken their impulse control and ability to manage aggression (Evans and Kim, 2013; McEwen and McEwen, 2017; Shonkoff et al., 2012). Other studies have demonstrated how ACEs are linked to adolescent behaviors and conditions associated with dropping out, including: alcohol and drug abuse, violent or criminal conduct, membership in gangs, and teenage pregnancy (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Anda et al., 2006; Morrow and Villodas, 2017; Rothman et al., 2008; Shonkoff et al., 2012). And there is evidence that

childhood traumas increase depression and other mental and behavioral disorders in teens (Porche et al., 2011).

School Factors

Schools also powerfully shape student achievement (Alexander, 2016). But, just like families, schools are complex institutions with different resources, compositions, and practices. We might call these differences in what schools have (resources), the populations they serve (compositions), and what they do (practices). Each of these shape how much education students attain, independent of their family backgrounds.

To begin, all schools need resources to build and maintain their infrastructure, hire teachers and staff, purchase textbooks and other learning aids, and so on. Recent studies using advanced statistical methods have shown that schools with more resources, especially those with higher quality teachers, have lower dropout rates (Koedel, 2008). Students are also more likely to graduate when they attend schools which spend more per pupil and pay teachers higher salaries (Rumberger, 2011: 193-9).

Student composition refers to the average level of family background characteristics in the student body. Studies have examined multiple aspects of student composition (e.g., proportion of students from single-family homes), but the most common is socio-economic status (SES). Recent studies have shown that school composition is a very powerful predictor of student achievement (Alexander, 2016). Two recent studies, for example, have found that the SES-composition of schools had an equal or greater effect on student outcomes as their own SES (Borman and Dowling, 2010; Rumberger and Palardy, 2005).

Research from Latin America has also shown school composition to have strong effects. Low-SES students were found to have lower math and reading scores when they attended

schools where most of their peers were also low-SES (Cox, 2010; Delprato et al., 2015; Duarte et al., 2010). Student composition may be especially important in a context like Latin America where schools are more highly segregated by social class than countries in the Global North.

School climate and peer relationships also affect dropout rates. Multiple studies have found that students in schools they describe as having a negative school climate–meaning they feel unsafe and complain about their peers' disruptive in the classrooms–are more likely to drop out (Bryk and Thum, 1989; Rumberger and Palardy, 2005; Rumberger, 1995).

One component of negative school climates are hostile peer interactions, including physical, verbal, or online bullying. Research shows that bullied students and bullies themselves suffer academically in numerous ways, including being more frequently absent, less engaged and committed to their school work, and more likely to develop depression or other psychosocial disorders (Thapa et al., 2012). Research from Latin America found bullied and bullying students performed worse on academic assessments (Delprato et al., 2017). In addition, students who are not perpetrators or victims, but witness their peers being harmed, report higher rates of mental health disorders like depression and anxiety (Rivers et al., 2009).

Another component of negative school climates are their disciplinary approaches. Research has documented that students performed worse on a number of measures in schools with authoritarian discipline procedures, such as "zero-tolerance policies." Such policies have been shown to lower achievement of students subjected to them, while doing little to change their behavior (Arcia, 2007; Morris and Perry, 2016). Moreover, these policies, because of their effects on school climate, also "spill over" and lower the achievement of those students who are *not* subjected to them (Perry and Morris, 2014).

Ethnographic studies have revealed how school policies and administrative procedures discriminate against certain students—especially racial and ethnic minorities and low-income students—and push them out of school. There are multiple accounts, for example, showing school officials using administrative and disciplinary rules to “discharge” unwanted students with low grades, long truancy records, or behavior problems (Fine, 1986; Flores-González, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). At times school personnel use misinformation or calculated indifference to encourage these students to voluntarily withdraw (Fine, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999). Other times they use suspensions and other disciplinary measures to force them out (Bowditch, 1993).

In contrast, research shows that students who report feeling supported and guided by teachers and school staff toward their goals are less likely to drop out (Rumberger and Palardy, 2005). Among students with high risk backgrounds, positive teacher relationships appear to be a critical source of support boosting their chances of graduation (Croninger and Lee, 2001). Students who do not receive this type of caring support from their teachers feel more alienated and struggle to learn at school (Flores-González, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999).

A recent study by Margaret Frye (2017) of dropping out in Malawi provides an illustrative example from a developing country of how teachers can unknowingly push students out of school. This mixed-methods study (2017) showed teachers who suspected female students of dating pre-emptively shunned them with embarrassing lectures in front of their peers and sometimes suspended them from school. Teachers believed they were acting in these girls’ best interest by protecting them from the threats of a sexual relationship. But Frye (2017) demonstrated that it was the teachers’ ostracizing behaviors, rather than the girls’ relationships with boys, that made them feel embarrassed and frustrated and prompted them to drop out.

Community Factors

Researchers have long posited that where children live shapes their educational attainment (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993). Recent studies have shown that children who spend a sustained period of their childhoods in poor and disadvantaged neighborhoods graduate high school at much lower rates than their peers (Wodtke et al., 2011). The effect of neighborhood disadvantage is strongest for the children in those communities who already have family background risks, such as those living in single-parent or low-income families (Crowder and South, 2003). Living in poor neighborhoods, in other words, compounds and multiplies these children's individual family hardships (Desmond, 2015; Wilson, 1987).

Research suggests neighborhoods affect educational attainment through various mechanisms. One example is children's health. Children in poor neighborhoods are exposed to more air and water pollution and contaminants from substandard housing, which, in turn, puts them at higher risk for chronic health and behavioral problems including asthma, gastrointestinal disorders, and aggression (Evans, 2004). Another example is resources. Poor neighborhoods are less likely to have safe parks, recreational centers, and certified daycares. This compounds children's health problems and also reduces the likelihood they will receive quality early education (Blair and Raver, 2016; Ungar et al., 2013).

Residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods, due to numerous factors, also tend to lack trust with their neighbors. As a result, adolescents in these places are more often unsupervised and there is no network of friendly adults monitoring their behavior (Sampson, 2001). In turn, teens in these places engage in more risky behaviors, such as delinquency or unprotected sex (Harding, 2003). In addition, poor neighborhoods have higher numbers of older youth and young adults who are high school dropouts or involved in criminal behavior. As a result, children in these

places are more likely to form relationships with older peers with these backgrounds (Harding, 2010). Youth with such friendships are more likely to drop out (Rumberger, 2011: 176).

Finally, neighborhood violence also strongly influences the children living amid it. Multiple studies have shown that children exposed to community violence suffer cognitive and behavioral effects (Aizer, 2008; Evans and Wachs, 2010; Margolin and Gordis, 2000; Shonkoff et al., 2012). Recent research has also demonstrated that students living in these conditions perform more poorly on standardized tests (Burdick-Will, 2016; Laurito et al., 2019; Sharkey et al., 2014). Lastly, multiple studies have also found that children exposed to neighborhood violence are more likely to drop out (Fagan and Pabon, 1990; Grogger, 1997; Harding, 2010; Rendón, 2014). In fact, one recent study found that nearly half of the neighborhood effect on dropout is attributable to their violence (Harding, 2009).

A recent study has also found that students who have been exposed to neighborhood violence can affect their peers, even when those peers themselves have not experienced violence (Burdick-Will, 2018). The study documented how the peers' exposure to neighborhood violence "spilled over" and lowered the reading and math achievement of all students. In addition, the "spill over" shaped how all students perceived their schools, increasing their concerns about safety and discipline problems and decreasing their trust in teachers (Burdick-Will, 2018: 219). The high rates of violence in El Salvador suggest this effect may be relevant in this case.

Broader Contexts and Structured Inequalities

As was evident from the example of the drought given above, families, communities, and schools are shaped by their position in the larger social, political, economic, and cultural contexts and the historical events going on around them. These broader forces determine what resources,

opportunities, risks, and threats children experience over the course of their development (Neckerman and Torche, 2007; Torche, 2010).

These forces are also deeply structured by the inequalities in society. Take gender as an example. Across the world, girls are catching up with or surpassing boys in completing primary and secondary school and, in many places, college (Buchmann et al., 2008). Boys are more often held back, over-age for their grade, or struggling academically (Grant and Behrman, 2010). But many girls from marginalized backgrounds are still blocked from accessing school by barriers in their homes, communities, and schools (UNESCO, 2010; UNESCO, 2015). Families in developing countries may keep girls home, for example, because they need them to help with household chores and caretaking (Stromquist, 2006). Others do so because they fear girls cannot safely travel to schools which are too far away or surrounded by violent streets (Glick, 2008). In other places, schools themselves are too dangerous for girls because their male peers and teachers are allowed to get away with sexual harassment and assault with impunity (Kim and Bailey, 2003). Gender matters a great deal in these contexts, but less so in others.

For that reason, demographic factors pertaining to race, ethnicity, and gender are not listed in Table 2.2–the one listing individual risks for dropout. There are certainly very large gender, racial, and ethnic gaps in achievement across the world. Indigenous children and children who speak non-dominant language, for example, drop out much more frequently than children from the majority ethnic and language groups (UNESCO, 2018). And race, ethnicity, and gender are traits which pertain to individuals. Their meaning and effects, however, are socially determined. Statistical studies have shown that these factors don’t have consistent independent effects on dropout (De Witte et al., 2013; Rumberger, 2011: 181-205). What makes gender, ethnicity, and

race matter, instead, are the inequalities that shape homes, communities, and schools (Fernandez et al., 1989; Mayer, 1991; Rumberger, 1983; Rumberger, 1995; Velez, 1989)

Decades of research on educational attainment warns about the danger these deep structural inequalities pose to the vision that schools can provide poor children with the resources and opportunities they need to overcome their origins and catch up with their better off peers (Hannum and Buchmann, 2005). Indeed, research has shown that schools are usually feeble mechanisms for such a feat. The only countries where that finding doesn't hold are those countries with a constellation of social-welfare institutions and a political culture that prizes "equality of conditions" outside the school as well as within (Brint, 2006; Erikson and Jonsson, 1996; Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Torche, 2010; Walters, 2006). In other words, nations that have made a commitment to reduce inequality through various social welfare mechanisms, not just education. History has shown repeatedly that in places where such a commitment does not exist, programs to increase educational access tend to benefit middle and upper class children more than poor youth (Attewell and Newman, 2010; Lucas, 2001; Raftery and Hout, 1993; Walters, 2006).

Why Students Drop Out in El Salvador: Existing Evidence and Explanations

In this section, I review the available research on dropout in El Salvador and Latin America. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, there are very few studies on the topic in the Global South, but after an exhaustive internet search I identified 35 reports mentioning dropout in El Salvador or, because many of the reports take a regional approach, Central or Latin America in general. Of the documents I reviewed, however, only six were exclusively on the topic of dropout (Adelman and Székely, 2016; Bassi et al., 2013; D'Alessandre and Mattioli, 2015; Montes, 2018; Rovira, 2017; Schiefelbein, 1997). The rest addressed the topic only briefly

as part of broader discussions of education and development indicators. Moreover, in contrast to the previous section which focused on peer-reviewed academic studies, most of these documents were produced by government agencies, nonprofit organizations, or international institutions such as UNICEF or the World Bank.

These reports were also limited by another major constraint: The type of survey data they had available to them for analysis. None of the reports I mention below was based on surveys designed specifically for the study of educational attainment, as was the case for the studies from the U.S., Canada, or Europe which I summarized above. Rather, the Latin American reports relied largely on multipurpose household survey, which have a limited set of questions on educational issues and several other weaknesses (Adelman and Székely, 2016; Hannum et al., 2017; Hunt, 2008).

That caveat aside, scholars in Latin America have used these surveys, together with interviews, fieldwork, school censuses, academic assessment tests, and their intimate knowledge of schools in the region, to develop explanations of what is causing youth to drop out. Below I describe three of the major explanations these scholars have put forward. The first explanation involves what has been called a "learning crisis" in the Global South and how the fact that so few students are mastering basic skills has put them at high risk for dropping out. The second explanation links low learning levels to the high number of out-of-school youth saying that they stopped going to school because "lost interest" in it. And the third explains the evolving debate on how child labor affects schooling outcomes related to dropout.

The Learning Crisis and the Prevalence of Dropout Risks

Organizations dedicated to supporting education in the Global South have noted with alarm the very low levels of learning in the region (Education Commission, 2016; UNESCO, 2004;

World Bank, 2011; World Bank, 2018). Academic assessment regularly show that students, especially the poorest ones in low and middle income countries, are far behind grade level in reading and math. Some assessments have even shown fourth and fifth graders barely able to read and write at all. Indeed, the lack of learning among poor youth in the Global South is so severe that it is now commonly referred to as a crisis (UNICEF, 2020; World Bank, 2018).

El Salvador is not an exception. One study found that only 7% of children from low-income and poor households[11] were able to accurately answer reading comprehension questions on the 2005 National Learning Assessment. In contrast, 82% of children from middle-class and wealthy homes answered these questions correctly (Schiefelbein et al., 2008: 11-13, 31).[12] Poor students were doing just as bad in math. On the regional Latin America assessment conducted by UNESCO in 2006 (UNESCO-LLECE, 2006), only 6% of Salvadoran third graders from households in the bottom quintile earned satisfactory math scores (Duarte et al., 2010).[13]

Low learning is often associated with grade repetition and evidence suggests that high numbers of students are held back each year in El Salvador. One report found, for example, that 30% of first graders were retained in 2005. The analysis showed, however, that the repetition rate was much higher in schools serving poor urban and rural students–between 50 and 70% of these students were held back compared to just 4-5% in schools whose study bodies were made up of predominantly middle-class and wealthy children (Schiefelbein et al., 2008: 19-20).

[11] The authors defined low-income students as belonging to the bottom two income quintiles and wealthy and middle-class children as from the upper two income quintiles.

[12] The authors used a technique to estimate the percent of third graders who not only chose the correct answers, but also *knew them,* meaning they eliminated those who answered correctly because they simply guessed right. (See Schiefelbein et al., 2008: 11-13, 31.)

[13] Duarte et al. (2010) also reported that only 27% of the third graders from the top income quintile earned satisfactory scores or higher. While this achievement rate was more than four times better than the poorest students, it was also very low. Overall the UNESCO assessment indicated that Salvadoran third graders had low levels of basic mastery across all wealth groups. As Duarte et al. (2010) argue, nations in this situation have a doubly difficult task because they have to improve the quality of all schools and address the causes of large achievement gaps.

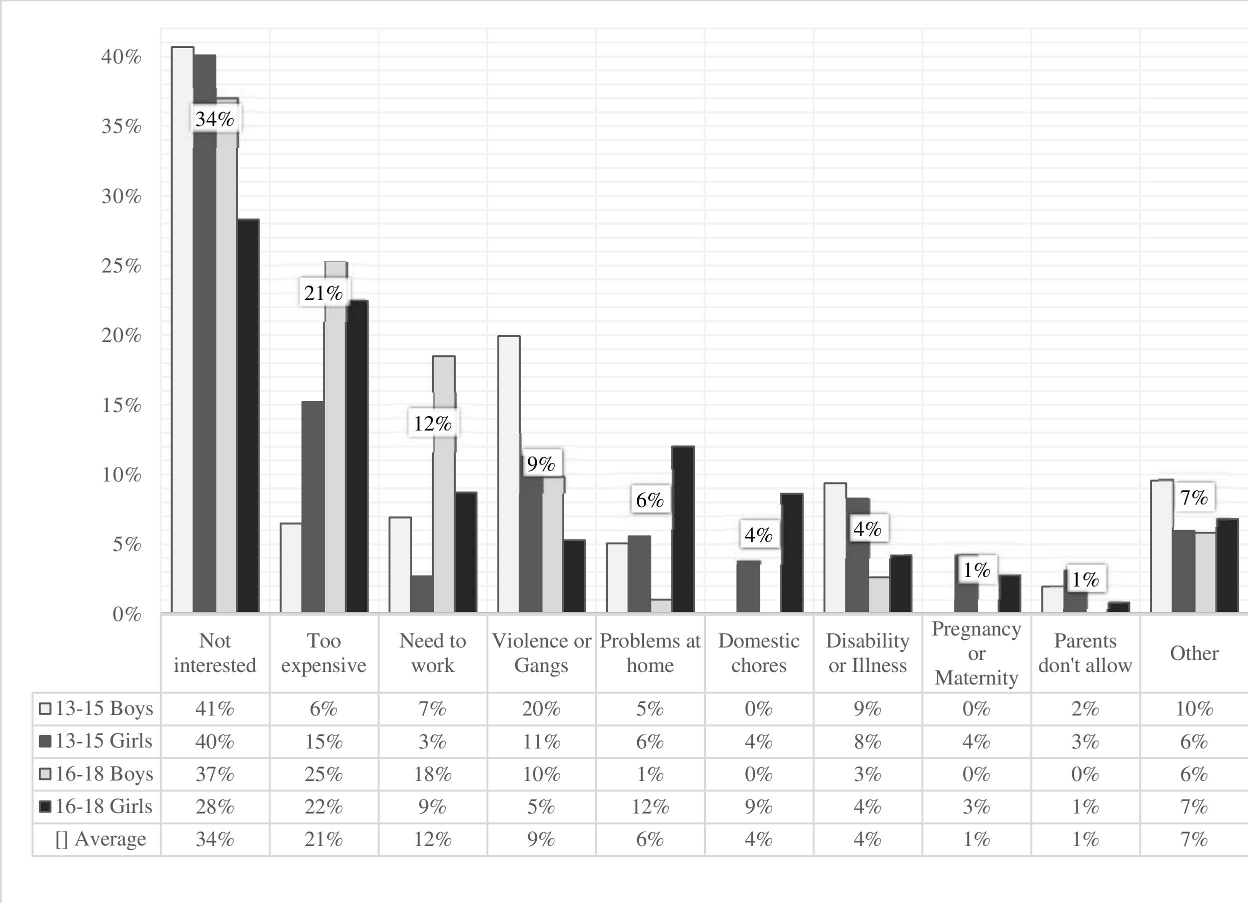
The links between low learning, grade repetition, and dropout have been clearly established. Research shows that children who are not reading proficiently by third grade are much more likely to drop out and never complete their education (Hernandez, 2011; Reimers, 2005).[14] Robust evidence suggests that early math skills may be even more important to academic achievement and graduation (Duncan and Magnuson, 2011; Magnuson et al., 2016). And grade repetition is commonly regarded as a predictor of dropout (Alexander et al., 1997; Reimers, 2005; Rumberger, 2011). With so many poor children failing to meet minimum standards in reading and math and repeating grades, the risk for dropout in the population are very high.

Explaining Lack of Interest: The Links between School Quality and Aspirations

Almost universally, the Latin American studies which I reviewed for this section featured analysis of the major reason out-of-school children gave for leaving school on the household surveys mentioned above.[15] In Figure 2.4, I have constructed a similar chart of the responses for urban youth in El Salvador using the country's 2016 Multi-Purpose Household Survey (DIGESTYC, 2016).

[14] A nationwide study in the U.S., for example, found that children who were not proficient readers in third grade were four times more likely to drop out than their classmates who were reading proficiently (Hernandez, 2011)..

[15] The household surveys are usually administered to one adult in the household who gives responses for all members. It is likely that a parent or another adult answered the questions about children's educational attainment, including the reasons out-of-school youth were no longer studying. The reason the adult gives for his or her child being out of school may vary from the response the child would have given. In addition, responses are limited by the multiple choice format (Adelman and Székely 2016). These are examples of the weaknesses of the survey data mentioned above. Others are discussed by the authors cited in the text.



	Not interested	Too expensive	Need to work	Violence or Gangs	Problems at home	Domestic chores	Disability or Illness	Pregnancy or Maternity	Parents don't allow	Other
13-15 Boys	41%	6%	7%	20%	5%	0%	9%	0%	2%	10%
13-15 Girls	40%	15%	3%	11%	6%	4%	8%	4%	3%	6%
16-18 Boys	37%	25%	18%	10%	1%	0%	3%	0%	0%	6%
16-18 Girls	28%	22%	9%	5%	12%	9%	4%	3%	1%	7%
[] Average	34%	21%	12%	9%	6%	4%	4%	1%	1%	7%

Figure 2.4: Reasons Youth Are Out of School, Urban 13-18 year-olds, El Salvador, 2016[16]

Figure 2.4 shows that the most frequent explanation for dropping out given by urban youth in El Salvador was "I'm not interested in school." More than one-third of all respondents gave this answer, a level equivalent to that found in household surveys throughout Latin America. The and has generated extensive debate in the region about what dropouts mean when they say this and what causes them to lose motivation (D'Alessandre and Mattioli, 2015; IADB, 2012).

The Latin American reports I reviewed, citing the research on disengagement that I summarize above, largely argued that this survey data reflects how students in the region grow

[16] I created Figure 2.4 using data from the 2016 El Salvador Multipurpose Household Survey (DIGESTYC 2016). Because the focus of this study is on urban youth, I have only depicted their responses.

disillusioned as a result of the poor quality of education they receive and their own low learning levels. Their arguments were shaped by two different theoretical perspectives: rational-choice and identify formation.

Scholars using a rational-choice perspective describe how parents and youth decide whether to invest more time in schooling based on their perceptions of its benefits and costs (Becker, 1994; Behrman et al., 2015). Even when education is nominally free, it involves some expenses (such as bus fare or meals) and, crucially for poor families, opportunity costs. Opportunity costs are the loss to family incomes caused by children not working or supporting the household in other ways. These tend to increase with age as older children can do more economically rewarding tasks.

In theory, families perceive a long-term benefit to schooling their children which is higher than the cost of sending them (Adelman and Székely, 2016). But, the Latin American scholars argued that students' low learning had strong negative effects on their perception of its benefits (Adelman and Székely, 2016; Näslund-Hadley and Binstock, 2010; Schiefelbein, 1997; Vegas and Petrow, 2008; World Bank, 2006). Theoretically, students with poor report cards or who had been held back multiple times would have less reason to believe that they would graduate high school or earn other beneficial credentials. When the perceived benefits of schooling fell below the costs, students would drop out or their parents would remove them from school.

Scholars using identity theory have also been interested in understanding how schooling experiences shape youth's aspirations and views about the value of an education and, in turn, their decisions about whether to stay in school or drop out. In their reports, these scholars describe dropouts' "lack of interest" as a product of their disillusion with their schools. After being educated in dilapidated buildings by poorly trained teachers with few resources and

learning very little, dropouts leave school because they no longer believe that an education will produce something of value for their lives. As Vanesa D'Alesandre (2014: 19) put it: "Isn't 'lack of interest' one of the ways that children, adolescents, and their families express… that the educational system has not given them [an education] which they view as a worthwhile pursuit?"

Similarly, others have argued that the institutional poverty of schools contributes to poor youth having very low aspirations and motivation for schooling (Rovira, 2017). This explanation acknowledges that poor children often contribute to their own low learning by being absent, not doing assignments, or choosing to work. But the sources of these counterproductive behaviors lies in schools, not poor families and their children. Schools have an obligation to teach poor youth about the opportunities an education can open up to them and inspire them to work hard towards it. But they are too institutionally broken to do so, and, as a result, they reproduce the isolation caused by family poverty and rob poor children of the ability to aspire and imagine themselves in different lives (Rovira, 2017). As Carolina Rovira (2017: 27) has written: "Isolation and marginalization limit the vision of the world to which a person can aspire, and little by little they favor the construction of a wall of resignation and the assumption of fatal roles: those of child-worker, child-mother, and dropouts."

These explanations differ in the theoretical approaches and language, but their arguments share the idea that negative school experiences have deformed youth's aspirations and impressed upon them that an education is not something of value to them.

Poverty, Child Labor, and Balancing Work and School

Student work which has generated much interest in studies of dropout. Research from industrialized countries has produced one area of general consensus: High school-aged students working *fewer* than 20 hours per week typically do not suffer serious academic costs. Some

studies even find that this level of work may be beneficial and actually help students to graduate (Entwisle et al., 2005b). Working more than 20 hours per week, however, has repeatedly been shown to hamper academic performance and undermine the chances working students stay in school (Entwisle et al., 2005b; Monahan et al., 2011; Rumberger, 2011).

Studies from the Global South, however, reflect a more mixed view of the educational risks of working as children and teenagers. It has been widely reported that poor families in these settings prefer strategies that enable children to work part time while attending school (Boyden et al., 1998; Buchmann, 2000; Woodhead, 2005). Child workers say that they want to pursue both school and work together because doing so allows them to meet the social obligations they feel owed their family and to cover, at least partially, their own school costs (Ames and Rojas, 2010; Hannum and Adams, 2007; Hecht, 1998; Woodhead, 2005). Some research supports their preference, and finds that dropout is not triggered by the need to work, but rather by low grades (Buchmann, 2000). Other research from Latin America on child work suggests, however, that working may lead to dropout over the long term by worsening students' academic performance. Studies show that child labor effects how much students learn at school, lowering substantially their scores on reading and math assessments (Delprato and Akyeampong, 2019; Post, 2001; Sánchez et al., 2009).

The context of work in poor countries is very different than the jobs worked by high schoolers in the Global North. Children in less developed countries may start working at younger ages and become involved in very tiresome or dangerous labor (Nieuwenhuys, 1994; Orazem et al., 2009). These physically and mentally straining conditions may also pertain to the chores that children, usually girls, do at home. Many girls spend long hours cooking, cleaning, gathering firewood, and caring for siblings or the elderly. One study found that girls who did more than 28

hours of domestic chores each week were much more likely to be out of school than girls who did 14 hours (International Labour Organization, 2009). More research is needed on child work and chores that controls for confounding effects and outlines the amount, type, and age when labor is detrimental. But we must assume in the meantime that work in these settings is more harmful to educational performance, especially when children start working at a young age, work long hours, or work in unsafe or physically exhausting conditions.

Implications and Research Questions

This literature review has shown that dropout is a long-term process shaped by children's contexts and experiences. There are very few studies, however, which explain children's educational outcomes in the Global South in this comprehensive way (Buchmann and Hannum, 2001). This dissertation aims to provide a holistic portrait of the dropout process among poor Salvadoran youth by bringing together detailed assessments of school, family, and community contexts and how these interrelate. The following research questions, inspired by this review, will serve to guide the subsequent chapters and the final analysis in the conclusion. The questions are:

1. ***Academic Trajectory:*** How do youth's family, community, and school contexts shape their academic trajectories? What academic resources and risks do they accumulate? How do dropouts' academic trajectories influence their decision to leave school?
2. ***Adolescent Stressors:*** What new pressures do young people encounter during adolescence? How do youth interpret their role and priorities during this period and how do their views influence their schooling? Do dropouts have views or risks that are distinct from youth who stay in school?

3. ***Demand and Aspirations for Schooling***: How do young people perceive the value of an education to their future and what educational aspirations do they have? How do they rate the quality of the teaching and the relevance of what they are learning at school? Do dropouts have specific views that influence their decision to leave school?

3. SETTING AND METHODS

This study took place in a city I am calling Grecia,[17] a sprawling suburb of El Salvador's capital, San Salvador. Grecia's population has grown rapidly in recent decades, in part due to the urbanization that is transforming the entire nation but also because during the civil war in the 1980s it was a refuge for rural people expelled by fighting from the countryside. Today the squatter towns that those refugees built still house some of the city's 100,000 residents.

Grecia is a hub for commerce and business and its streets swell each day with working people, especially the town center which is home to a large urban market. Decades ago the city built an indoor marketplace, akin to a huge auditorium with no seating, to house the thousands of street vendors who had, at least in the eyes of the municipality, become a public nuisance. For a monthly fee, vendors could have a small stall to show off their merchandise and a place to lock it up at night. Plus this gave them access to public restrooms and a chapel.

Vendors use the building to sell almost everything imaginable. The most abundant item is food–fruit, vegetables, grains, cheese, meats, fish, poultry, it's all there. Plus clothes, shoes, purses, toys, pots, pans, knives, machetes, buckets, that's there too. Then there are the repair shops, pharmacies, hair salons, shoe shiners. The building is constantly bustling. But its dimly lit maze-like passages and its stifling heat have proved unappealing to costumers and many vendors determined they did better selling things on the street where people could see them.

Packed alongside these established vendors outside on the streets is a more itinerant group of hawkers. These are the less well-off of the street merchant class, either too poor to pay the market fee, just starting out, or fleeing from another city which has tired of their kind and pushed

[17] I have used pseudonyms for the city and two schools where this study took place to protect the names and identities of research participants.

them out. Whatever their reason for not paying, this itinerant group is in violation of the municipal ordinance outlawing street vending, and, for that reason constantly being harassed by municipal police. Some go to great lengths to avoid their harassers. Women and girls wear dozens of blouses, skirts, and pants around their waists on elaborate hoop skirts as they walk the streets. Boys run from place to place with bagged vegetables offering a cheap price to passersby. Old ladies haul baskets of fruit on their heads.

The police make daily rounds through the market, telling the itinerant vendors to move on, and sometimes confiscating their merchandise if they catch them putting it on the ground. Officers can be abusive and are known to use tear gas or rubber bullets on anyone who challenges them, including young children. Vendors have on occasion grown so frustrated with the repression that they have marched through the streets in protest, only to be violently attacked by the police.

Here, just a few blocks from the busy and contentious market, are the two schools, La Laguna and Cerro Verde, where I did the fieldwork for this study. The schools draw a large segment of their populations from street vending families. According to the student survey I conducted, at least one-third of middle school students had one or more parents working in the market. Many of these children helped their families in the business before class and made the short trek to school each afternoon.

La Laguna and Cerro Verde are neighboring schools on the same city block in downtown Grecia. They were originally built in the 1930s to provide complementary single sex education to the local population: La Laguna serving the girls and Cerro Verde the boys. Today only La

Laguna has maintained its original role, although historical precedent seems to still hold sway at Cerro Verde since over 60% of the students are male.[18]

With the exception of La Laguna's all female student body, both schools were typical in size and structure to other Salvadoran urban schools. La Laguna had only as many classrooms as it did grades –nine in total. Cerro Verde was slightly larger and, in addition to six classrooms for each elementary grade, also had six for the middle school. Both schools ran on a double-shift system which allowed them to serve two times as many students. Half of La Laguna's 600 students received class in the morning and the other half in the afternoon. The same was the case for the 800 students next door. Only the 200 or so high schoolers at Cerro Verde were on campus most of the day.

Physically, the buildings have been modified and additions made over the last 80 years, but, like most public schools, they offer few amenities and are in need of repair. The windows in the middle school classrooms at Cerro Verde were missing most of their panes. When storms hit, as they often did during the May to October rainy season, rain sprayed into the room and students had to move their desks to stay dry. During heavy downpours, the classrooms and nearby hallways would flood. Most of the light fixtures had also shorted out, leaving students in the dark on cloudy days.

Next door, at La Laguna the middle school classrooms were so hot that the teachers didn't turn on the lights for fear it would make them hotter. Teachers often took breaks to escape the heat, leaving their students behind to sweat it out. The classrooms were also right next to the courtyard where PE was held, so when it was in session, as it was for an hour or two each day, it got so loud that no one could hear the teacher.

[18] My calculation from the 2014 school census.

Both schools offered elementary and middle school, or first through ninth grades, which together compose El Salvador's basic education program.[19] Cerro Verde also had a two-year high school program. At both schools, first graders as young as six and seven shared the school with much older teens, some pushing 20. At recess and snack young children mixed with their older peers, but rarely got their way. Small cement courtyards were the only play areas at both schools and they were almost exclusively the domain of older students (and, at Cerro Verde, the boys). The younger ones played tag in the hallways and on the stairs, bumping wildly into other students trying to walk or chat and escaping from the teachers yelling at them to stop running. The courtyards were not big enough for the play of the older students either and many days they hosted multiple games of basketball or soccer simultaneously.

Inside the classrooms, desks and tables had mostly seen better days, their wooden tops splintered and metal legs rusted and uneven. Some desks had metal bins which were meant for storing books, but since books were scarce, these bins became handy garbage cans that students filled with pop cans, plastic bags, Styrofoam plates, and all the sticky juices they leave behind.

Outside a four-lane highway passed by both schools. Students huddled on the street corners with other pedestrians as smoky buses, trucks, and cars sped down the highway at full speed calculating the best moment to rush across the street without getting run over. There were no pedestrian crossing signs or lights and the sidewalks were uneven and missing in some areas.

Some students found their homes nearby the schools in the decrepit tenements and old apartment buildings near the city center. Their neighbors were the market and the small factories,

[19] Elementary school consisted of grades 1-6 whereas middle school incorporates grades 7-9. In El Salvador, grades 7-9 are called "tercer ciclo" or, in English, "third cycle." To help the reader familiar with the U.S. system, I use the term "middle school" since "tercer ciclo" consists of roughly the same grades and is given in similar style. International groups like UNESCO use the standardized term "lower secondary" to distinguish these grades from primary school.

carpentries, and mechanic shops in this part of town, spilling oil, fumes, and dirty water out onto the street. Other students lived a little farther out in the grey working class neighborhoods. Their homes were anonymous, small, and tightly packed together, but a big step up from the nearby slums and squatter towns. In these places, the housing was usually dilapidated, sometimes consisting of just aluminum siding and plastic sheets. Public services like sanitation and water are irregular. And gangs were prominent, their signs decorating the walls.

At least half of the middle school students didn't live in Grecia at all. They boarded standing room buses and traveled up to an hour each day out into El Salvador's urbanizing frontier. Here are the sugar cane and coffee plantations that no longer drive the economy, but still break the bodies of their laborers, alongside the *fabricas,* the heavily-fortified factories of multinational corporations. In between are the sprawling residential neighborhoods and the disorderly slums sprouting homes made of sheet metal, bamboo, and plastic. The students of La Laguna and Cerro Verde found their homes in one of these two types of neighborhoods, both of which often numbered among the most violent places in the country.

Gaining Access

The first thing I did to gain access to La Laguna and Cerro Verde was to contact a friend working at a Salvadoran nonprofit and ask her for contacts at the Ministry of Education (MINED) in El Salvador. She emailed people she knew on my behalf and representatives at MINED responded and expressed interest in my project shortly thereafter. About a month later I traveled to El Salvador to meet in person with MINED officials at the Department of Planning and Research and over the course of two days of meetings, I described my project in detail and they agreed to grant my request for permission to do research in public schools. The officials

were also hopeful I could explain an uptick in dropout in urban areas that they had seen over the previous year and believed was due to the high levels of violence.

The director of the planning department wrote letters for me to present to the regional school directors (akin to our superintendents) in the two municipalities where I wanted to do my research. The letters expressed MINED's support for my project and asked the regional directors to help me gain access to schools in their districts. I took these letters to the two regional offices and set up meetings with their leaders. After another set of long meetings (and waiting around in offices), the regional directors gave me letters to present to principals at their local schools. I then set about knocking on school doors and requesting meetings with principals in Grecia and the rural site. It took a bit of time (and several unanswered doors and phone calls), but I eventually was able to track down the principals at La Laguna and Cerro Verde. Both principals agreed on the spot to my participation. They introduced me to the teachers of the grades where I wanted to observe and after meeting with each of them to explain the project and get their approval and input on what I wanted to do, I began collecting data.

Data Collection Methods

Figure 3.1 shows the data collection methods, roughly organized in the chronological order they were carried out.[20] I started the project as a participant observer. Then I added focus groups, a student survey, and interviews with teachers. Later I did in-depth interviews with youth who had dropped out of school or recently graduated high school and their parents.

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[20] As mentioned above, in addition to the research activities listed in Figure 3.1, I also completed fieldwork in a third rural school. The number of school observation days, student surveys, and youth and parent interviews I did in the rural site are listed in Appendix A.

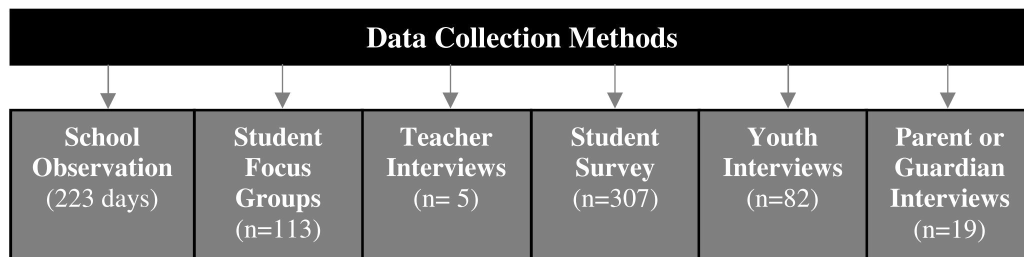

Figure 3.1: Data Collection Methods

I carried out most research activities between September 2011 and January 2015, but I did do some interviews and follow up visits during 2016 and 2017. Over the multiple years in that time span, I spent 29 months in El Salvador gathering data for this study. A full timeline of the research trips and activities out is available in Appendix B. The following sections describe each of this project's research methods, with the most attention given to the two methods, participant observation and the youth interviews, that required the most time and produced the largest corpus of data.

Participant Observation in Schools

I began observing in the fifth, sixth, and seventh grade classrooms at La Laguna. Six months later I added Cerro Verde and, at that same point, narrowed the focus of my observation to the seventh and eighth grades. I had learned over the previous months that those grades represented a critical period when dropout increased at both schools. Table 3.1 shows the number of days and hours I spent doing participant observation at La Laguna and Cerro Verde. On average, each field visit lasted around 3.5 hours. In addition to observing normal school activities in the classroom and at recess, I also observed multiple schoolwide assemblies and events, the annual student enrollment, and some parent-teacher meetings.

Table 3.1: School Observations

School	Days and Hours per Grade (hours in parentheses)						Total Days (Hours)
	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	Other[21]	
La Laguna	5 days (23h)	20 days (82h)	26 days (101h)	14 days (55h)	4 days (12h)	35 days (106h)	104 days (379h)
Cerro Verde	0	0	33 days (135h)	18 days (75h)	6 days (17h)	62 days (169h)	119 days (395h)
TOTAL	**5 days (23h)**	**20 days (82h)**	**59 days (236h)**	**32 days (130h)**	**10 days (28h)**	**97 days (275h)**	**223 days (773h)**

On my first day as a participant observer, I introduced myself to the students as someone interested in learning what it was like to be a student in El Salvador. I emphasized that I was there to learn from them and asked to be treated like one of their classmates. From there, I did several things to build trust and rapport with the students and teachers (Lofland et al., 2006).

I had the advantage of being a good Spanish speaker and I hoped my ability to manage lengthy conversations with youth would help them learn about me and feel less intimidated by my presence.[22] I believe this played out in the field as I was largely able to learn about my informants' lives in a natural way, something which would have been impossible with a translator or only through observation. Ironically, my limitations as a non-native speaker also helped me build relationships with my informants (Corsaro, 2005). I often misunderstood what young people were saying and had to ask for clarification. I also had a hard time understanding slang, nicknames, or any youngster that had the habit, as so many do, of speaking really fast. I found jokes and sarcasm to be the hardest to comprehend, which made research with adolescents who enjoyed teasing me a humbling experience. As William Corsaro (2005) also experienced, my shortcomings in Spanish were humorous to young people, sometimes becoming a funny story

[21] Other refers to days where I observed students from different grades and included: (1) all-day school events such as dances or celebrations, (2) annual school enrollment, or (3) sessions where I observed multiple classrooms.
[22] I am not fluent in Spanish. Although I have spent the better part of a decade living with Spanish speakers, I have not studied the language formally and I am often aware of my shortcomings.

they shared with classmates or teachers, and other times evoking their compassion and desire to help me learn.

I also did what students did: I sat with them in their desks, (even when they were too small for me to fit my legs under). I lined up with them in "formation" to hear announcements and recite a prayer. When class was in session, I copied down what the teacher was dictating and worked with them in small groups on assignments. During recess, I joined games of basketball, soccer, or tag or simply hung out with groups of students chatting. And after the final bell rang, I helped those who had been assigned to clean up the classroom. (My efforts to fit in may have worked too well for one fifth grade boy: One day as we worked together on a math assignment he asked me why I had flunked so many times!)

As a novice in the school setting, I frequently had to ask students what I was supposed to be doing (Lofland et al., 2006). Invariably, they welcomed my questions and kindly tried to help me. They taught me, for example, what color pens to use during dictation, how to sweep the classroom quickly and wash the mop, and when to bring my notebook up to the front of the classroom to get my notebook graded by the teacher. Soon enough many students grew comfortable enough with me to correct my behavior even when I didn't ask for help. And several enjoyed teasing me about my confusion and mistakes.

At the outset, I strived to learn every students' name as quickly as possible. On the first day, I created a seating chart with their names and memorized it. I then made sure to say their names when I greeted them at the beginning of each school day. Students often expressed surprise and appreciation when I said their names. I also asked students to call me by my first name, and not "Seño," as they referred to their teachers. After a few weeks most students did so and many

began to greet me as they greeted their peers, with a kiss on the cheek, something they did not do with their teachers.

Initially the focus of my observations was very broad. I was unfamiliar with the Salvadoran school day so I started out curious about what students were expected to be learning and doing at school. My fieldnotes during this early stage included many descriptions of the content of lessons and how teachers provided instruction as well as how students approached their assignments, their strategies for getting work done, and what tasks they struggled to do. I was also interested in how teachers, students, and peers related with each other.

Later, as I formed relationships with students, the focus of my observations shifted more to learning about their personal lives and how their situation at home and in their neighborhoods affected their schooling. I also had many conversations with them about problems they had with peers and friends and their plans and aspirations for the future. Plus they also often asked about me and I was open with them about my life and my project.

Jotted Notes and Fieldnotes

During each observation session I carried a notebook similar to the ones students used for their own class assignments. On the front-facing pages of the notebook I completed assignments as they did, while on the backsides I scribbled notes in small handwriting about what was going on inside and outside the classroom. In these jotted notes, I tried to capture direct quotes, summarize conversations with teachers and students, and outline the sequence of key events or interactions. I also noted the amount of time spent on classroom instruction, recess or snack time, waiting around for teachers, and attending assemblies or other non-academic activities.

Students were often curious about my notebook and also asked to borrow it to copy assignments that they had missed. I felt it was best for trust-building to share it, so I often wrote

sensitive information in English (for example, what a teacher said about a student) and used initials or other codes to obscure the names of individuals. When students asked what my scribbles said, I tried to be as honest as possible about what I was writing down, while leaving out details that might embarrass them or others.

Once I got home from the field, I typed up my jottings into complete fieldnote during the night and next morning. At first, I usually started by retyping the assignment students had been given. In retrospect, this was a misuse of my time and I should have used a scanner or photo for this type of data. Later, I learned that the most important thing to get down in fieldnotes were the conversations and interactions that I had observed hours earlier but which I had only partially captured in jotted notes. In addition to my observations, I also included in my fieldnotes a table noting how students had spent each minute of the day. From this I calculated the time they spent at school receiving instruction, at recess or snack, or doing other activities. I also recorded the percent of the day dedicated to instruction and learning. I provided details on the interactions between peers, the relationships between students and teachers, and the conversations I had with individuals.

I tried to describe what I observed in concrete detail and with vivid imagery by focusing on what people were doing and saying and what it felt like to be there. I bracketed my commentaries, opinions, and ideas about what I was seeing in parenthetical remarks and used a personal diary entry to express my feelings and frustrations (Emerson et al., 1995). On occasion, I wrote a longer analysis of a scene or day when I felt something important had happened that furthered or changed my understanding of what was going on at school to explain such low achievement levels (Lareau, 1996).

Initially, when I was solely doing participant observation, I dedicated a long time each day to fieldnotes. On average, I spent three hours writing up one hour of observation, or roughly 12-15 hours to record the events of one school day. Later, as I added other research activities and the focus of my observations shifted to students' lives and relationships, I spent less time doing fieldnotes. It still took me three or more hours to write up an hour of observation, but I stopped writing up the parts of the day where teachers were giving lectures or students were doing assignments. Instead, I focused on writing up my conversations with students and teachers and my observations of their interactions with each other.

I was not always able to write up a complete set of fieldnotes. Because I was juggling multiple sites and methods as well as other professional commitments, I sometimes was unable to dedicate time to fieldnotes. However, I was able to complete full or partial fieldnotes for 85% of the days I spent at school and these notes totaled over 1,300 single-spaced pages.

Youth Interviews

Interview Sample

From the outset of this study, my central purpose was to learn about dropout. But participant observation at the schools only gave me a partial view of what was happening to the youth leaving their education behind. I decided that if I was going to understand more about their family and community experiences, I needed to interview the dropouts themselves and get their perspective on what had happened. I also wanted to know why some students with family and community backgrounds similar to those of dropouts were able to succeed academically. So I added a matched comparison group of young people who successfully made it through high school. These young people were in their last trimester of high school or had recently graduated.

I envisioned their experiences serving as *disconfirming* cases that would allow me to identify the most salient factors in the dropout process (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002).

Lastly, I included a third group in the interview sample: "drop-in" students. I had learned that dropouts often view their exits from school as temporary and many, if not most, try to return. In my participant observation classrooms there were many youth that had recently "dropped in" and this group was a convenient sample for me to recruit. I believed learning about their "drop in" experience would give me a fuller portrait of what dropouts go through following their school departure as well as the challenges that school returners face. Table 3.2 shows the number of youth interviewees belonging to each category, divided by their gender.

Table 3.2: Youth Interview Sample

Interview Type	Girls	Boys	TOTAL
Dropouts	21	15	**36**
Drop-in Students	11	7	**18**
High School Graduates	14	14	**28**
TOTAL	**46**	**36**	**82**

Recruiting Interviewees

I used multiple strategies to recruit interviewees. First, I drafted a one-page letter explaining that I was interviewing youth about their dropout or high school experience. The letter described what I would ask about in the interview and the interviewee's rights (including the right to decline to participate). I also explained that I would need to meet with parents or guardians prior to the interview if they were a minor. I included my phone number and encouraged them to call if they had any questions. The letter ended with a cut-off section for the potential interviewee to fill out with name and phone number, if they wanted to participate.

Next I created three lists of young people that I wanted to target for interviews: (1) Dropouts whom I had met during participant observation, (2) current students at La Laguna or Cerro Verde

that had previously dropped out and returned to school, and (3) students whom I knew had older siblings or close friends in their lest trimester of high school or who were recent graduates.

Dropouts were the most difficult group to track down. Their lives were in a state of flux and many of their peers and teachers had lost contact with them. I spent a lot of time trying to find these young people. Recruiting was complicated by the fact that most of the youth I wanted to interview lived in places I felt unsafe visiting.[23] Instead, I searched for them at the markets, shops, and street vending locations where I had been told they worked. I also tried to get their phone numbers and social media information to call them or send Facebook messages, but many times the phone numbers and Facebook accounts their friends gave me were no longer active. When I couldn't get them to answer me, I asked their friends, siblings, or parents to reach out on my behalf. I often had to pester these third parties multiple times to get a response.

Making contact, however, was only half of the challenge: On several occasions, I was able to contact the interviewee target and set up a meeting, only for that person not to show up. At one point I felt that I had spent more time waiting for no-shows than actually doing interviews. Over time I came to understand that some dropouts were difficult to recruit because their lives were very chaotic: what made it difficult for them to come to school, also made it difficult for them to meet up for interviews. Sometimes they didn't have money for bus fare or to buy a phone card to call me. Sometimes they just forgot. Others may have been embarrassed or uncomfortable talking about why they had left school and skipped the interview.

High school youth also posed a challenge: I had not been an observer in high school classrooms so I did not know these youth as well as the middle school students. Initially, I identified high schoolers by asking students in my participant observation classrooms if they had

[23] I did visit homes in the rural site and it made this part of the project a much simpler task. But it had its drawbacks because interviewing at home often meant we had little privacy.

siblings or friends who had recently graduated. This landed me several interviews and I then used the snowball method, asking these interviewees to give letters to their high school classmates. I was also able to interview students in their final year of Cerro Verde's high school program who I recruited in person during recess or at school events.

Drop-in students were the easiest to recruit because they were attending La Laguna or Cerro Verde. Initially, I asked teachers to help me identify any of their students that had previously dropped out. I then asked these interviewees if they knew of any peers that had also left school. I was able to quickly identify students and give them the letter in person, answer any questions they had, and set up a meeting with their parent or guardian to request consent.

At the outset of the project, I wanted to recruit interviewees from the pool of students that I had made personal contact with during participant observation or, in the case of high school students, who were siblings or close friends of those students. I also wanted interviewees to have dropped out or graduated from high school within the last 12 months. While in the field, however, I sometimes found it hard to meet these conditions because of the challenges I encountered in recruiting interview targets. So I decided to relax my sampling criteria and relied more on snowballing. Also, as people became aware I was interviewing, I began to get volunteers that did not fit my criteria and felt uncomfortable turning them away. Forced to make a decision on the spot, I decided to interview these volunteers because I didn't want to disappoint them and I felt obligated to respect the effort they had made to find me. Table 3.3 shows the breakdown of how youth were recruited for interviews. It shows that I had met two-thirds of the sample multiple times prior to the interview in participant observation.

Table 3.3: Interview Recruitment Method

Recruitment Method	Dropouts	Drop-in Students	HS Graduates	TOTAL	% Sample
Personal contact during observation	27	18	13	**58**	**71%**
Targeted sibling or close friend	0	0	13	**13**	**16%**
Unsolicited volunteer	9	0	2	**11**	**13%**

Consent and Assent

My project was approved by Colorado State University's IRB and I strived to meet the ethical obligations that approval requires. I was transparent with participants about the project's purpose and how the information they provided would be used, I stressed to them that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to end participation at any time, and I took care to respect their privacy and keep information they shared confidential (Sieber, 2009). In addition, because this project involved minors, I also was required to get consent from parents or guardians before children could participate and to inform youth of their rights formally in an assent process prior to the interview (Sieber, 2009).

While I was committed to realizing these ethical practices, the consent and assent processes were sometimes challenging. Of the 82 young people I interviewed, 49 were under age 18. Initially, I followed IRB protocol and created a long parental consent form that numbered more than five single-spaced pages. The IRB asked that I read the parents the consent form and have them initial each page and sign at the end. When I first started using this form, I found that parents were intimidated by it. The adults questioned what signing the form obligated them or their child to do. Some parents were illiterate and could not initial or sign the pages, causing embarrassment to the parent, child, and myself when we tried to figure out what to do as an alternative. After struggling with the process for several interviews, I decided to request permission from the IRB to use verbal consent with parents and to waive written documentation of consent. Fortunately, the IRB approved my request following a review process.

One unexpected challenge I encountered were the 14 minors I interviewed who had no or limited relationships with their biological parents: These young people lived with aunts, grandparents, friends, or siblings. Their parents had died, migrated to the U.S., or left them as small children to be raised by other relatives. Other youth had run away from or been kicked out of their homes. I decided to ask permission of the adult with whom the young person was living, even though this person was not their biological parent.

In addition to parental consent, I also used a formal process with youth interviewees to get their permission for the interview. The CSU IRB provided me with a template for the youth assent/consent form,[24] which, once I populated it with information from my study, was also five single-spaced pages. When I used it, however, I found that it took a long time to read, explain, and initial and sign and the young interviewees seemed uncomfortable with its formality. I requested and the IRB granted me permission to replace it with a simplified one-page form which summarized the main points of the consent process.

I found that the consent and assent procedures provided me an opportunity to remember my ethical obligations as a researcher. Most of my young interviewees, however, didn't seem to treat them very seriously. Their body language often suggested disinterest or confusion. The most common response I got when I read the form is "it's no problem" or "ask what you need to ask." Some youth even wanted me to use their real names.

Interview Topics and Approach

The goal of the interview was to understand how the decision to drop out was shaped by youth's family, school, and community contexts. Or, in the case of high school graduates, how

[24] The IRB suggests that older minors (ages 14-17) be given the same long consent form used with adults (or, in my project, youth ages 18 and older). The form used with older minors is called an "assent" form since legally minors cannot provide consent.

those settings shaped their decision to go to high school. I began the interview by asking the participants to describe their childhood, who they lived with and in what places, and what their families and communities were like as they grew up. Next, I asked about their schooling experience as young children and middle schoolers.

The second part of the interview was focused on providing more depth on the main topics of interest. If the participants had dropped out, one or more times, I asked them to describe each drop out event in detail, probing for what was going in the young person's life prior to leaving school, who they consulted when making the decision to leave, and what happened in the aftermath. For high school graduates, I asked about how they made the decision to go to high school and what high school was like. In the last part of the interview, I asked youth about their plans for the future and to give me their opinion about the value of a high school degree in El Salvador. The full interview guide is available in Appendix C.

In designing the interview guide and asking questions, I aimed to make the interview feel as much like a conversation as possible (Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Weiss, 1994). To achieve that end, I used open-ended questions and allowed young people to talk freely without my interrupting them. I also avoided making critical statements or using a negative tone that might make them feel judged. When interviewees mentioned a sensitive topic in passing I asked if they wanted to talk about it before asking for more information. If they avoided answering a question directly, I did not badger them. And lastly, although I was not as good at this as I would like to be, I found that more than anything being able to listen closely and ask questions that followed directly from what youth were saying in a conversational way was the best way to elicit clear and compelling explanations and make the interview more natural and comfortable (Weiss, 1994).

The interviews took place in a variety of settings, including youth's homes, workplaces, schools as well as restaurants, cafés, and public parks. Prior to the interview, I always offered to take the young person out to eat. Most interviewees accepted my offer and I let them choose a restaurant or café to go to and bought them whatever they wanted to eat.[25] For those interviewees who weren't hungry, I purchased them a snack at the end of the interview. On most occasions I bought pizza, ice cream, or cakes for youth to take home and share with family. At the end of the interview, I also gave each participant an envelope with $10 inside. I explained that the money was to compensate them for their time and a small token of my thanks. Many interviewees tried to give me the money back, but I insisted that it came from a project funded by the U.S. government and that I wasn't allowed to keep it for myself.

The interviews lasted 89 minutes on average, with the shortest being 32 minutes and the longest stretching over 3.5 hours. I asked for permission to record interviews at the outset and recorded all but one interview with an Olympus digital recorder. (The young man I was unable to record was leaving for the United States the next day and I did not have my tape recorder with me when I ran into him on the street. I asked for an interview on the spot and typed up my notes that evening.) I completed four interviews in groups. In one instance, I was interviewing a drop-in girl at the park when her classmate joined us and, because she was also a drop-in student, became part of the interview. On three occasions I interviewed pairs of relatives (two sisters, a brother and a sister, and two cousins) when the targeted interviewee expressed that they wanted

[25] Eating during interviews created some discomfort at times because interviewees had a lot to say and their food often got cold while they were talking or they had to awkwardly pause to chew and ask me to wait before answering my question. I tried to turn the digital recorder off when this happened and let them eat while I talked more about myself. Eating a lot also made interviewees get sleepy at times, especially after long days. So I tried to buy coffee at the end of the interview.

one of their relatives to come along. I re-interviewed two girls to get additional details on their cases. In total, the youth interviews resulted in 79 transcripts.

Following each interview, I wrote a fieldnote describing how I recruited the interviewee, interactions with parents or guardians who provided consent, the interview setting, unrecorded conversations, the interviewee's non-verbal cues, and a personal diary entry. I also noted questions that I had failed to ask and wanted to pose as follow up questions if the opportunity arose. After many interviews, I visited the interviewees in their workplaces or homes to check on how they were doing (some interviews were very emotional and I felt compelled to do this) or provide information that they had requested from me about schooling, work, or other opportunities for public assistance. I recorded what happened in these visits as an addendum to the original interview fieldnote. Sometimes the conversations I had with young people and their families before or after the interviews provided important insights into their lives and these fieldnotes stretched over several pages and took hours to write. Sometimes, however, I lacked the time to write up a full interview fieldnote and only noted some details about the interview setting, the interviewee's dress and attitude, and the consent process.

Select Characteristics of Interview Sample

Table 3.4 provides a summary of select characteristics of the interview sample, including their age, family structure and income, presence of gangs in their community, and work experience prior to age 13. Much of the emphasis in the empirical chapters that follow is a discussion of the family and community backgrounds of the interviewees and these aspects emerged from the interviews as important to understanding their educational trajectories.

Table 3.4: Select Characteristics of Interview Sample

Select Characteristics	Dropouts	Drop-in Students	HS Graduates	All
Number of interviewees (n)	36	18	28	82
Average Age (years)	16.9	16.6	18.6	17.4
Single-parent or no parent household (%)	72	67	68	70
Breadwinner employed in informal economy[26] (%)	94	94	86	91
Gang present in community (%)	83	67	61	72
Worked prior to age 13 (%)	75	72	50	66

In terms of family structure and income, there was little variation in the backgrounds of dropouts and high school graduates. But dropouts were more likely to have worked prior to age 13 and to live in communities with gangs. The interview sample is too small and the variation not large enough to draw strong conclusions, but I will address the relationships between these two topics and dropout in depth in Chapters four and eight.

Another theme which emerged from the interviews, as mentioned above, was how students dropped out and then returned to school. Table 3.5 describes how many interviewees in the sample had dropped out or dropped in at least one time. In addition to the 58 participants who had dropped out, 40 young people had "dropped in" to school. This large number of young people in my sample who had attempted to return or successfully returned to school allowed me to explore what happened to students during this period.

Table 3.5: Interviewees with Dropout and Drop-in Events

Interview Type	One or more dropout events			One or more drop-in event		
	Girls	Boys	Total	Girls	Boys	Total
Current Dropout	21	15	36	10	8	18
Drop-in	11	7	18	11	7	18
HS Graduate	4	0	4	4	0	4
TOTAL	**36**	**22**	**58**	**25**	**15**	**40**

[26] Informal economy refers to those individuals employed without a formal contract or who are self-employed. Parents or guardians of the interviewees employed informally worked mostly as street vendors, domestic servants, restaurant staff, bakers, construction workers, mechanics, agricultural laborers, or small subsistence farmers.

Table 3.6 provides an additional detail on the number of times youth dropped out or in. Nearly half of the dropout or drop-in youth had left school more than one time. This is reflective of a theme which emerged from the interviews showing how youth, once they had dropped out, tended to spend a period cycling in and out again. Sometimes multiple times. Table 3.6 does provide clear evidence of this phenomenon, however, since the participants in this sample, especially the dropouts, were young and most had not ended their academic endeavors. This is evidenced by how 29 of the 36 current dropouts planned on returning to school the next year.

Table 3.6: Number of Dropout and Drop-in Events

	Dropout		Drop-in	
	# of Individuals	# of Events	# of Individuals	# of Events
1 time	30	30	27	27
2 times	21	42	8	16
3 times	6	18	5	15
4 times	1	4	0	0
TOTAL	**58**	**94**	**40**	**58**

Student Focus Groups

While I was a participant observer, I conducted 24 focus groups with 113 sixth through ninth grade students. Table 3.7 shows the number of students who participated by grade and gender. The purpose of the focus groups was to learn more about what students thought about their educational experience and opportunities. Specifically, the questions I asked pertained to finding out more about the following: (1) What do students like and dislike about school? (2) What things in their daily lives make going to school and doing their schoolwork difficult? (3) What things help them go to school and do well there? (4) What are young people's aspirations and plans for the future? (5) How many youth have close friends, siblings, and other same-age relatives who have dropped out of school? The full interview guide is in Appendix D.

Table 3.7: Focus Group Participants by Grade and Gender

Grade	Girls	Boys	TOTAL
6th Grade	31	0	**31**
7th Grade	27	9	**36**
8th Grade	33	6	**39**
9th Grade	2	5	**7**
TOTAL	**93**	**20**	**113**

At La Laguna, I invited all students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade classrooms where I was a participant observer at the time to participate on a volunteer basis. Teachers allowed me to remove small groups of students during class time and, in exchange, I promised to help students review any material they missed during the interview. The principal gave me access to her office so we could conduct the focus groups in private and out of earshot of teachers and other students. Cerro Verde presented more difficulties. No room was available so I held the focus groups in the hallway or courtyard with teachers and students passing by. Teachers also did not want me to use class time so I had to do them during recess or PE, but students, especially boys, were reluctant to give up the only time they had to play soccer, get snacks, or catch up on homework assignments. Given the lack of teacher and staff support and the difficulty recruiting boys to participate, I decided to suspend the focus groups in 2013. I had hoped to interview at least 40 boys, but only reached 20.

On average, the focus groups lasted just over 80 minutes, with the shortest one taking 40 minutes and the longest going over 2 hours. The number of participants ranged from two to six, with most groups consisting of 4-5 students. Students were between the ages of 11 and 18, and on average were just over 14 years old.

Student Survey

In late 2013 and early 2014, I surveyed sixth through ninth graders at La Laguna and Cerro Verde. Teachers in each grade gave me permission to administer the survey in the classroom

during school hours. I invited all students in attendance that day to participate on a volunteer basis. Only one student declined to participate and another did not fill anything out as he used the time to complete a homework assignment. I eliminated two other incomplete surveys because more than half of the questions were left unanswered. Table 3.8 shows the number of completed surveys by grade and gender.

Table 3.8: Survey Respondents by Grade and Gender

Grade / Gender	Girls	Boys	TOTAL
6th Grade	39	19	**58**
7th Grade	77	35	**112**
8th Grade	51	36	**87**
9th Grade	36	14	**50**
TOTAL	**203**	**104**	**307**

The purpose of the survey was to gain insight into students' family and community backgrounds as well as their views about their schools and teachers, their educational and career aspirations, and their experience working outside the home. I made it anonymous, hoping that anonymity would allow students to feel more comfortable answering questions about their backgrounds, especially since some issues, such as working or living with no biological parents, are stigmatized and can cause discomfort and embarrassment. A copy of the English version is available in Appendix E.

Parent Interviews

I interviewed 18 mothers and 1 grandmother of the youth participants in this study.[27] Table 3.9 shows the number of adults interviewed by their child's gender and educational status. The goal of these interviews was to learn about how family members influenced whether youth dropped out or stayed in school. During the interview, I asked the parent-interviewee to provide

[27] On two occasions, I was unable to interview the targeted youth: One dropout girl migrated to the United States shortly before I interviewed her mom. The other at-risk boy agreed to an interview but then did not show up on agreed-upon days.

a life history, including childhood experiences, becoming a mother, and what she did to make a living and provide for her children. I focused in particular on her own and her children's educational experience. For the mothers of dropouts, I probed for what precipitated the young person leaving school, what the parent did in response to the situation and how she felt about it, and what she believed the consequences of dropping out would be for her child. I ended all of the interviews by asking the parent to discuss her educational goals for her children and her opinion about the value of a high school degree.

Table 3.9: Parent-Guardian Interviews

Interview Type	Girls	Boys	TOTAL
Parents of Dropouts	6	2	**8**
Parents of Drop-in Students	3	0	**3**
Parents of High School Graduates	3	5	**8**
TOTAL	**12**	**7**	**19**

Initially I planned on interviewing the parent or guardian of each young person that participated in the project.[28] Unfortunately, I was unable to realize that goal. This failure occurred for three primary reasons: First, I decided not to interview parents-guardians who lived in high crime areas and were unable to meet me in safer locations due to work or family commitments. Second, most of the parents and guardians of the youth I interviewed work very long days. Women who worked in the market worked almost every day. Domestic workers only received a day off every two weeks or once a month. It was often difficult to find a time to do an interview that did not interfere with their work schedules and I was uncomfortable pestering such busy people to make time for me. Lastly, several parents declined my request for an interview. Some said they had no time. Others provided no specific reason but seemed embarrassed or intimidated by the prospect of answering questions.

[28] In my research design, I planned on interviewing 48 youth and 48 parent-guardians, totaling 96 interviews in the urban research site. Instead, I interviewed 83 youth and 19 parents, a total of 102 urban interviews.

Teacher Interviews

Early in my fieldwork I interviewed five teachers, two employed at La Laguna and three employed at Cerro Verde. The purpose of these interviews was to gain insight into teachers' perceptions of their jobs (its challenges and joys), their expectations for students' academic performance and behavior, their views on parental involvement and support for children's schooling, and their opinions about the impact of community problems on students. I also requested information about students who had dropped out in their classrooms, asking how many students had left school and why and what teachers did in response, including if they did anything to prevent students they feared were at risk of dropping out or to encourage students who had left to return.

At the outset of the project, I wanted to interview 15 teachers, but two issues led me to stop at five: First, teachers are very busy. They are given no breaks during the school day other than recess. Most work both the morning and afternoon shifts at two different schools (or 10+ hour days) and also commute to work from outside Grecia. The interviews I conducted were often interrupted by students, parents, or administrators asking the teachers for something. Second, I was able to ask teachers many of my questions during informal interviews in participant observation. I felt that the data generated by formal interviews was rich and sometimes teachers said things I didn't expect, but, in many ways, the data was also redundant. That said, the interviews provided an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their jobs that wasn't always possible during our short talks during recess or other breaks in the action of a hectic school day. Under more ideal circumstances, I would have interviewed more teachers. A copy of the interview guide is available in Appendix F.

Data Management

Before analysis could start I had to convert data into an analyzable form– for me, this meant transcribing interviews and focus groups and entering survey data into a spreadsheet. This section describes what I did to accomplish these tasks.[29]

Transcription

As is standard procedure in qualitative research, I decided to produce verbatim transcripts of the interviews and focus groups I recorded. I found verbatim transcripts to provide several advantages over notes summarizing an interview: First, there were often moments when I misunderstood or didn't hear what a person said. Most of the time, I realized during the interview that I hadn't understood and asked for clarification, but there were times where the transcript changed my understanding of what the person had said. Transcripts also provided a check against my assumptions and bias. In interview fieldnotes, I summarized the elements of the interview that stood out to me. Transcripts helped me see when my initial impressions were incomplete or wrong. Lastly, I also found that transcription helped me to improve my interviewing skills.

The major downside of transcribing, as anyone who has done it can tell you, is that it is such a labor-intensive task. On average, I needed four to five hours to transcribe a one hour recording. Transcribing was also very emotionally taxing for me. I had become close to many of my interviewees and some of them had incredibly sad stories to tell. Hearing their voices brought back all my regret at not being able to offer more to them than $10 at the end of the interview.

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[29] In my research design, I scheduled several breaks from the field which I wanted to use for doing data analysis. Unfortunately, I was not prepared for how much time it takes to do these less-glorious "making data analyzable steps" and spent most of my breaks from the field doing these tasks as well as other professional responsibilities. Even after leaving the field more definitively in 2015, I was still transcribing.

After completing 61 transcripts (mostly of youth interviews), I decided to hire a transcriptionist to transcribe the remaining 64 recordings. The transcriptionist, however, was not a professional and the transcripts he provided to me were rough and missing several parts. I listened to the recordings again after receiving these documents and revised the parts he had skipped over. Together we produced 125 verbatim transcripts.

Survey Data Entry

Entering the survey data into a spreadsheet was more straight forward, although also time consuming. To begin, I developed a codebook using a numbered system (e.g., 0 for male, 1 for female) for each response. I coded the surveys by hand, writing the number of the student's answer in the margin of the questionnaire. Next, I recorded the responses in an Excel workbook, using the numbered system or typing up the open-answered questions exactly as students had responded to them, including spelling and grammatical errors. After entering the data into Excel, I asked a family member to help me check for mistakes by reading back to me the numbered answers as well as the handwritten responses.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this project involved four major processes: Coding, memos, survey analysis, and comparing and contrasting cases. This section describes each of these in turn.

Coding of transcripts and fieldnotes

I uploaded my transcripts and fieldnotes into a qualitative data analysis software program MaxQDA. This program allows researchers to code segments of their data with a word or phrase that captures its meaning (Saldaña, 2009). I decided to begin coding without establishing pre-set codes, although I had some categories, such as teacher-student interactions, peer relations, and school practices, amongst others, in mind (Marshall and Rossman, 2006).

As I read through the fieldnotes and transcripts the first time, I tried to create descriptive codes that captured the type of observation or statement the text segment represented. For example, I coded descriptions of teachers trying to motivate students with the code "teacher-to-student-talk motivate." The text segments that I coded ranged in length from a short phrase to nearly a page long. Most often, I coded each text segment with multiple codes. One of the most important things I did was to write a "code memo" each time I created a new code (Lofland et al., 2006). In the memos, I defined what the code meant and gave instructions for how it should be used. These memos helped me to remember why I had created the codes and to use them more effectively. (Without the memo, I often didn't know what a code meant.)

For me, coding was iterative process. I began coding some fieldnotes early in fieldwork with very detailed codes. Later, as my focus shifted to the interviews and transcription, I left off coding the fieldnotes with so much detail. I then shifted to a second coding stage during which I did a focused coding of the transcripts. Later, after producing the memos described below, I returned to the fieldnotes and coded these in a less intensive fashion, pulling out those scenes and conversations which resonated with what I had learned from the interviews.

Person-Centered Memos and Quasi-Statistics

After coding each youth interview, I drafted a memo that summarized that interviewee's background and schooling experience (Harding, 2010). In addition to the transcript, I also pulled observations from my fieldnotes that I had taken about the interviewee at school and, if available, read through their parent interview or notes.

I called these memos "Person-centered memos" and their purpose was threefold: First, I wanted to describe each young person's family and community backgrounds so that I could identify salient factors that helped explain their educational outcomes. Second, I wanted to

understand young people's dispositions toward schooling and their relationships at school in order to examine how school conditions interact with youth's dispositions and shape their chances for success. Third, and most important, I wanted to develop the propositions I had about the dropout process and the factors that I believed contributed to youth leaving school. Alternatively, for those young people who graduated high school, I wanted to develop propositions about what led to their staying in school. To make sure I accomplished these goals, I created a template memo with headings and subheadings which instructed me on what to write.

In addition to the memos, I also created an Excel spreadsheet that allowed me to keep a quantitative record of several of the factors in the interviewees' backgrounds and educational experiences. For example, for the case of dropouts, the spreadsheet included columns for each dropout event, which gathered in quantitative form the age, grade, and reason for dropout. I also tracked youth's work history, family structure, parental education, parent employment, family adversities, housing, community violence, and grade repetition. This spreadsheet allowed me to keep a quasi-statistical count of how many interviewees were dealing with these issues (Becker and Geer, 1957). A list of the topics described in the person-centered memos are available in Appendix G.

Survey Analysis

I uploaded the survey data into STATA, a quantitative data analysis program. I used STATA to produce simple descriptive statistics, such as frequency tables, often by gender. For example, I generated frequencies of girls' and boys' educational aspirations, employment, domestic responsibilities, grade repetition. I also identified the number of students living in single-parent or no-parent families and those whose homes were in communities with gangs. I gathered these descriptive statistics in a memo. The relevant findings are in the text of the dissertation.

Comparing and Contrasting Cases

The interviewees gave a wide variety of reasons to explain why they decided to drop out of school, as evidenced by Table 3.10. As a next step in analysis, I grouped the participants by their primary reason for leaving school, much as I have done in the table, and re-read their interview transcripts and person-centered memos. During this re-rereading stage I attempted to draw out key similarities across the grouped cases. I also contrasted the dropout and drop-in experiences to high school graduates with similar background characteristics. My purpose in comparing and contrasting cases was to develop some hypotheses about the underlying factors pushing youth out of school (Charmaz, 2006; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

This part of analysis was more frustrating than I anticipated. I tried and threw out several analytical frameworks and discarded most of my "hypotheses." At one point, for example, I planned to create a "dropout typology" based on the different reasons or "triggers" youth gave for leaving school. But I abandoned this because the triggers themselves often seemed more like a last straw, rather than root causes, something which other studies of dropping out have often mentioned (Rumberger, 1983).

Next I speculated that the key might be what happens at school and hypothesized that critical support from teachers or peers may make the difference for graduates. But, here, too, I could not identify clear patterns that helped the high school graduates succeed. I found them to have broadly similar educational dispositions and peer and teacher relationships as the dropout and drop-in students. There were a handful of graduates who were ideal students. But most were muddling by with low grades and some seemed to have passed only because teachers were reluctant to fail them. There were others who graduated who struggled with substance abuse. Then there were dropouts who prior to leaving school were doing well academically and loved

their teachers and peers but got caught up in a family problem or became pregnant. Chance seemed to play a large role.

Table 3.10: Primary Reason for Dropout

Primary reason for dropout	# of dropout events	% of dropout events	
Family-based reasons			**46%**
Family economic issues			
Work	12	13%	
Caring for/ assuming responsibilities of sick family member	5	5%	
School expenses too high	3	3%	
Family member jailed/ imprisoned	1	1%	
Death of family member	1	1%	
Residential move	1	1%	
Family violence or conflict			
Runs away after conflict with/ abuse by family member	6	6%	
Victim of child abuse or neglect	5	5%	
Parent/ guardian removes from school/ prevents enrollment as punishment	3	3%	
Parents' separation or divorce / witness domestic violence	2	2%	
Community violence			
Family or youth displaced after being threatened or fearing danger in community	3	3%	
Youth migrates to US due to violence	1	1%	
School-based reasons			**34%**
Low achievement or lost interest			
Grades too low, going to flunk	7	7%	
Unmotivated to do assignments or come to school	6	6%	
Extended absence due to hospitalization/ injury/ illness	4	4%	
Problem with Peer			
Conflict with/ bullying by peer	4	4%	
Fear or threatened by gang-associated peer at school	5	5%	
Problem with teacher or administrator			
Problem with teacher	3	3%	
Problem with disciplinary procedure	1	1%	
Expelled	1	1%	
School administrative problem/ error	1	1%	
Personal reasons			**20%**
Teen pregnancy or early marriage			
Pregnancy	9	10%	
Caring for baby	4	4%	
Moved in with significant other	2	2%	
Substance Abuse or Addiction			
Struggles with substance abuse	3	3%	
Gang association			
Joining gang	1	1%	
Total dropout events	**94**	**100%**	

Eventually I settled on the descriptive analysis that follows and focused on the family, school, and community conditions that shaped youth's lives. I found a compounding set of adversities that eroded children's opportunity to learn and achieve at school. I focused most intently on the youth's perceptions of the opportunities and barriers related to their schooling while also trying to disentangle the social forces that surrounded them and shaped their educational outcomes.

Personal Background

Prior to starting my Ph.D. program, I was a Peace Corps volunteer in El Salvador for two years. My role was to train community groups in small rural villages regarding how to solicit projects for water, roads, electricity, and agricultural assistance. In this position I was able to spend a lot of time talking with parents and community leaders. This was when I first learned that most Salvadoran families are very committed to education. The adults I spoke with wanted their children to go to school, they told me, so that they could find jobs and a better life outside of the village. These parents had helped build the local schools and they marveled at the access their children had to an education, opportunities that had been impossible for their generation.

I too was moved to see young girls and boys happily bustle down dusty paths every morning in their school uniforms. They were symbols of hope. But older children and adolescents were a rarer site on those paths. And I saw very few village teens making the long trek to the nearest town's high school several miles away.

As a graduate student I continued to pursue my interests in international development and was also inspired by the Sociology of Childhood and its emphasis on learning about the lives of children from their level, hearing their voices and seeing the world from their vantage points (Qvortrup, 1994; Thorne, 1987). I decided to do my dissertation work on children and youth in

Central America. The topic of dropout emerged as I looked over the educational statistics for the region and saw, as noted in the introduction, that large majorities of poor and rural youth never made it to high school. I read economists from the World Bank (2006) that argued that dropout was caused, in part, by the lack of parental and youth "demand" for more education in Latin America, a finding which did not square with what I had learned from parents in El Salvador. I was curious to understand what young people themselves believed and did.

These motivations led me to start this project and arrived in El Salvador hoping that by listening closely to children's voices I would be able to gain some insight into what young Salvadorans needed to do better in school. I was not yet aware of how deep a challenge my project would be for me on both a personal and intellectual level. Listening to children's voices was an incredibly moving, inspiring, and often soul-crushing endeavor. I have made many friends and my communication with many of the people I met in the field continues still today. I miss them dearly and am always anxious to see them and know how they are.

On an intellectual level, the project has been a continuous struggle. I have not been able to find from what these young people told me any straightforward solutions to their problems. I can remember very bad days in the field (and struggling with the data) when I wondered whether the entire premise that an education is a solution to poverty is an insidious idea inspiring millions of vulnerable children to waste their time in bad schools. But that is a level of cynicism that I never want to embrace.

There are other days when I feel like the only way to improve education outcomes in a place like El Salvador is to do it all. These children need better schools, jobs, housing, social-welfare systems, policing, governments, etc. This is, in fact, the conclusion to this dissertation in a

nutshell. But doing any one of these things is incredibly complicated. And “doing it all better” is so vague it is tantamount to saying nothing.

I am still searching for a middle ground–a way to describe for others the deeply complex problems that observed while, at the same time, shining at least some dim light on the way forward. I am not yet at this intellectual place, but I am hopeful I can get there for two reasons. First, I hope that what I share in this document helps me start a dialogue with others that will show me some key points, arguments, and possible solutions that I have missed (Christensen and Prout, 2002). And, second, I hope the voices and stories of the young people that I share inspire others to work toward solutions. They certainly inspired me.

PART I: WEIGHTED ASPIRATIONS

4. SUSTAINING HOPE

Nora sat on the sidewalk in her school uniform in front of a couple dozen sneakers that she had laid out in neat rows on the street hoping to sell that day. Behind her was the crumbling wall of an old mansion that looked as if Miss Havisham from *Great Expectations* might be wandering inside. The once opulent house had been built by an aristocratic family, but the heirs abandoned it as the plantation economy that gave them their fortune collapsed into the bloody civil war of the 1980s. The garden's leafy ornamental trees had escaped through the roof to cast their boughs over Nora, hunched over a Language Arts textbook copying what she read into a notebook, on the sidewalk outside.

Loud music boomed from a promotional event nearby and screeching cars and buses honked at flustered pedestrians in the crowded street. I stood trying to get Nora's attention in front of the shoes she was selling but she had zoned out the noisy chaos and it took me jostling her shoulder to break her concentration. Nora, startled, stood up and gave me a hug me. It had been nearly six months since we had last seen each other and she greeted me warmly. She was eager to know what I had been up to.

Nora had dropped out of seventh grade the year before. Family problems was the reason her teacher gave me. But she wasn't sure. I had been away from the field when Nora left and none of the teachers could remember what had happened. When I finally tracked Nora down it was already the new school year and she had re-enrolled at La Laguna. Now she was once again trying to balance being both a student and a worker as she had for most of her life.

Last year marked the third time that Nora had been unable to make the balance work and dropped out. The first time came after the implosion of her parents' violent marriage. Her father

beat her mother so brutally that Nora remembered her mom praying for him to leave. When he finally did so, her mom was on her own to raise four children–Julio, age 11, Nora, nine, Arturo, two, and Amalia, just three months – on what she could make as a street vendor.

The family had little to eat and Nora and Julio, the two oldest, felt compelled to act. “My mom was really, really skinny,” Nora explained. “So my brother, what he did was leave school, because [my siblings and I] were still very little, he decided to leave school and work on a bus.” Not long after that, Nora, then in third grade, dropped out as well. “I saw how much my brother was working, and I felt it was my turn to leave [school], too. So I went to work in a restaurant.” Nora worked for a year cleaning tables and dishes. She was paid a couple dollars each day, but the real benefit of the job was the food her boss gave her. “She gave me breakfast and lunch, but, instead of eating it, what I did was take it to my mom,” she said, “so that she and my younger brother and sister could eat.”

Lenora, unable to pay rent, moved the family to the squatter community where she had grown up in Grecia. They lived for a time with her mom before putting up their own “*champita,”* the Salvadoran expression for a makeshift shack of whatever you can scrounge together for a roof and walls–plastic, sheet metal, bamboo, cardboard. Lenora, with Julio and Nora’s help, took out some loans and began building up a street vending business on a busy street near Grecia’s central market. Like others who had found their way there, they built a stall out of wood and plastic tarp to set out her merchandise.

Nora and Julio helped their mom part of each day, but, Lenora was doing well enough for them to return to school. Over the next two years, Nora completed third and fourth grade. But then, just before she was set to enter fifth grade, Grecia’s mayor decided the street vendors on the street where they worked had become a hazard to pedestrians and passing cars. His

government tore down their makeshift stalls and evicted them. “They took away our stalls in the market,” Nora explained. “So we had to walk around on foot with our merchandise in our hands. My mom, that day, she cried a lot and it fell to me to help her as much as I could, to find a way to overcome [what had happened] so that we could keep working.”

The family was in crisis so Nora dropped out again. She was just twelve-years-old, but she had to do something to help. “Seeing the situation that my mom was in, what I did was go to work with a woman [as a domestic servant]. I worked all day there and when the end of the month came and it was time for me to be paid, what I did was I would go to the supermarket with [my employer] and buy food and she would give me the bags and I would go home. That’s how we were for a time.” Nora missed a full year of school to help put food on the table. Julio stayed by Lenora’s side helping with the street vending business they had left.

Eventually, they found the spot on the narrow sidewalk behind the old, rotting mansion. “We came with only a few things,” Nora recounted. “We didn’t have anything, just a plastic bin, and we started working with that, and from there we started building up [the business] again.” This time they didn’t put up a stall. Rather, like most everyone else, they placed their merchandise inside or on top of something portable so they could gather it up quickly when the municipal police made their daily rounds in the market.

A stretch of good fortune followed. Lenora met the man who would become her children’s stepfather. “He started to help us,” Nora said of how the new couple pooled resources and began working together. “We started with a few shoes and thank God with his help we have been doing a bit better.” The national government, needing the patch of land that they and their neighbors were squatting on for a highway, built them a new place to live in. Their old squatter town had been overrun with gang members and since the government moved most everyone together into

this new neighborhood, so was this one. But at least they had solid walls and corrugated tin roof. A place secure enough to close out the problems on the street.

Nora returned to school for fifth and sixth grade. She still helped with the shoe business before going to class each morning and on weekends, but, with the addition of her stepfather, her mom needed her less. There were even days when Nora skipped work and went to an educational-support club that a nonprofit had put up in the market for children whose parents worked there. One day, I noted in my fieldnotes, how she and her sister came to school wearing bright orange t-shirts that the club had given them. They were emblazoned with the words: "If I work and don't go to school… El Salvador will not grow." The same warning adorned billboards on the highway near their home and coloring book pages on the walls of their school. The family, for a time, seemed finally able to abide by it.

Nora did her best at school to overcome the disadvantages that her family life had caused her. She attended the educational club frequently and became close with a teacher who explained the lessons she didn't understand and bought materials she needed for assignments. She also bonded with a group of studious girls at school who helped and encouraged her. "When I came [to La Laguna] I hadn't been to school for a year," Nora explained. "[My friends] taught me math. Thanks to them I can do a little bit." Of another, Nora added: "Sometimes when I haven't done an assignment she tells me 'look, that goes here like this, but you're going to do it, not me.'"

But before Nora's efforts at school could bear much fruit, a series of setbacks left her enmeshed again in family problems. The worries had multiple sources. First, Lenora began suffering from bouts of what she called asthma and diabetes (although she was too frightened to go to a doctor for diagnosis or treatment). Nora didn't let her come to the market on days she was ill. Next her stepdad started drinking more heavily and when he was drunk he and her mom

fought. Sometimes he left the house for days on end and didn't work. Lenora became more distressed as she struggled to keep up with the loans that they had taken out to buy shoes.

On top of all that the mayor renewed his campaign to clean the streets of the merchants and their wares. "He doesn't want street vendors selling here anymore," Nora explained. Municipal police were sent to enforce the city's prohibition against them putting any items on the ground. "They make us pick up what we are selling," she said of how the officers, clad in heavy boots and with batons swinging at their hips, walked the street each day scrutinizing them. The vendors, alerted by the hush in the crowd, had learned to quickly gather up their things to avoid trouble. If they were too slow or too proud doing so, a spiteful officer could confiscate their stuff.

As Nora's family's problems grew she spent less and less time at school. By the end of sixth grade she was missing two or three days of class each week. Her teacher was sympathetic and passed her despite her low test scores and slump in attendance. Seventh grade was more challenging. The teachers gave more assignments and were less tolerant of her missing class. Nora had a hard time keeping up. "It was really very difficult," she said, "because I didn't have time, I had to stay up all night to try to finish my homework."

School was no longer a refuge from the stress of home. And her mother's ill health was not getting any better. She felt compelled to drop out again, but her feelings were mixed. "I decided to leave because I saw how [my mom] was working for us," she explained, "but, at the same time, I didn't like wanting to drop out, because I knew I would have to leave my friends and no longer come [to school]." When she broached the subject with Lenora, her mom objected. "She scolded me because she said that I had to keep going to school." Julio, who had been out of school for two full years, also warned her against leaving. "He told me to keep studying, that I

shouldn't end up like him… [H]e said, even if it's just finishing ninth grade, [an education] is going to be useful to you."

But Nora felt Lenora was doing too much and needed her help. To convince her mom, she lied, and claimed to have lost interest in her classes. "I told her I didn't want to go [to school], but it wasn't because I didn't want to go, but rather because I didn't want her to keep working so hard for us, that's why I left." To soothe her mom's feelings, she offered a compromise: "So what I did was make her a promise that I would go back to school the [next] year."

A few months after Nora dropped out a foster home nearby advertised a job opening. It was a solid opportunity for someone like her but the announcement said applicants needed to have completed at least ninth grade. "There was a job," Nora said, "but you needed a ninth grade certificate, that's when my mom told me that it was necessary for me to keep studying." Her stepfather, too, pounced on the idea of her going back. "My stepfather convinced me," she claimed. The tide of problems had ebbed enough for Nora and her family to start thinking about the future. She, too, wanted to try again. Even Julio, already 18, decided he wanted to go back and enrolled in seventh grade along with his sister.

Nora was thrilled to be back again at La Laguna. She enjoyed her friends and she wanted to learn. "I want to study, I want to study everything," she told me. "My dream has always, always, always been to go to college, not just high school." Her aspirations were not only for herself, but her mom, too. "What I've always wanted to do is for me to be working and that my mom doesn't work anymore, that she just stays home taking care of my little brother and sister… [and] I work for them," she went on. "That's what I've always wanted because, my mom… at five years old she started to work… I want my mom to stop working, for it to be my turn to do what I can to get her ahead."

Competing Aspirations

Nearly all of Nora's classmates shared her belief in the power of school. On the survey, 99% said that going to school was important to their future.[30] That same 99% wanted to graduate high school, *at a minimum*, and, 90% of students were aiming even higher: They wanted to go to college.[31] Boys and girls had equally high aspirations. As did children being raised in households headed by both biological parents, single parents, and those where neither parent was present. Nearly all of them matched their strong aspirations with a near-certain faith in their ability to graduate: Eight-out-of-ten students said they were very confident they would reach their goals.[32]

The purpose of this chapter is to show how much their family and community contexts weighed against these aspirations. Nora and her siblings are among the 40% percent of urban children in El Salvador living below the poverty line (UNICEF, 2014c: 95). Their families, like hers, earn too little to afford a basic basket of food. Most of their parents and caregivers, like Nora's mom Lenora, form part of the 50% of the urban labor force that works informally without benefits, a minimum wage, or labor protections (Calvo-Gonzalez and Lopez, 2015: 54).

Nora's family situation was representative of urban childhoods in El Salvador in other ways, too. More than 44% of urban children live without one or more of their biological parents, including 35% in single-parent households like her own and another 9% who live with neither parent, as she did for a long stretch (MINSAL-UNICEF, 2015). A situation which likely deepens their degree of economic vulnerability.

Most urban Salvadorans also knew the same deprivations in housing and community security that Nora experienced. Surveys show that upwards of 56% of the urban population lives in so-

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[30] Source: Student Survey. N=307, Missing=7 (2%)
[31] Source: Student Survey. N=307, Missing=7 (2%)
[32] Source: Student Survey. N=307, Missing=15 (5%)

called "precarious urban settlements," or slum-like neighborhoods characterized by substandard housing and lack of access to critical infrastructure such as clean water, sanitation, and recreational spaces (FLASCO et al., 2010: 77). And, like Nora, many Salvadoran children are living in communities with gangs and violence. On a recent survey of sixth and ninth graders in the country, for example, 46% said they live in communities where gangs are present and 28% said they feel unsafe in their neighborhoods (Beneke de Sanfeliú et al., 2016: 27, 70).[33]

La Laguna and Cerro Verde served largely poor and working class families so the rate of material hardship among their students was higher than the urban averages.[34] According to the student survey I conducted, for example, household income came mostly from parents employed in precarious and low-paying informal or blue collar jobs:[35] Students reported 71%[36] of mothers and 79%[37] of fathers being employed in this way. Street vending was the most common economic pursuit, employing 36% of mothers and 22% of fathers. The next most frequent jobs for mothers were in restaurants, bakeries, domestic service, or factories. Fathers worked as mechanics, janitors, construction workers, taxi or bus drivers, factory workers, or agricultural laborers. Only 8% of mothers and 14% of fathers worked as supervisors, managers, or professional positions such as nurse, social worker, or engineer.[38]

Three-fifths of students at La Laguna and Cerro Verde also lived in households without one or both biological parents, including 41% being raised by single-mothers, 6% by single-fathers,

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[33] The published results of the nationally representative survey (Beneke de Sanfeliú et al., 2016) did not disaggregate by urban/ rural location. It is probable that urban students experience even higher rates of living in gang-affected or unsafe communities. Those living in "precarious urban settlements" may be even more affected.
[34] I did not ask students to report family income on the student survey.
[35] I restricted the analysis to only those students who were living with their mother and/or fathers because these children were more likely to know their parents' jobs. Even so the results should be regarded with some skepticism due to the high missing rates described in the following footnotes. Also assessments of student surveys have found that students frequently misreport their parental employment (Hannum, Liu, and Alvarado-Urbina, 2017).
[36] Source: Student Survey. Mothers' Employment N=245, Missing=27 (11%)
[37] Source: Student Survey. Fathers' Employment N=138, Missing=25 (18%)
[38] In addition, 23% of mothers and 3% of fathers were unemployed.

and 14% who had neither parent at home.[39] Students reported that most of their noncustodial parents–three-fourths of noncustodial fathers and two-thirds of noncustodial mothers–did not provide economic support.[40] Lastly, economic deprivation had pushed many families to find housing in more dangerous communities: More than 55% of students said they lived in neighborhoods with gangs.[41]

The remainder of this chapter shows how these vulnerable conditions pushed youth into dropping out. Nearly all young people aspired to better their lives with an education. One of their core motivations for studying was the idea that they would get jobs that allowed them to care for their parents in the future. But this chapter shows how for poor youth this underlying motivation was also a competing aspiration. When economic vulnerability and community violence threatened their families' wellbeing, these youth pressed pause on their futures. They turned inward to do what they could to alleviate their loved ones' distress.

First I show how families' extreme economic vulnerability caused youth to be pulled deeper and deeper into work. Many families were getting by with such small margins that any added hardship, even small ones like a loan coming due or a parent's illness, could be very destabilizing. Parents often came down with health or other ailments while trying to cope. When situations like these occurred, many transferred their aspiration to help their parents in the future to the present and suspended their education to work more.

The second focus of the chapter is on community violence. The interviews showed many families struggling in the aftermath of murder, threats, and police abuse. The violence and intimidation in their neighborhoods made these already vulnerable families even more desperate.

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[39] Source: Student Survey. N=307, Missing=2 (<1%)
[40] Source: Student Survey. N=307, Missing=3 (<1%)
[41] Source: Student Survey. N=307, Missing=20 (7%)

Many had to flee their homes. Parents' health suffered from the shock. Youth tried to help their families cope with the trauma by taking on even more adult responsibilities. As they turned inward to care for themselves and their families, they abandoned school.

Most youth I interviewed treasured their families and held them in deep regard. The concluding section of this chapter shows how much their aspirations for an education were motivated by a desire to get their parents and grandparents out of poverty. Young people felt their own lives, while difficult, were much better than what their parents had at their age. By many indicators they were right: They were more likely to survive childhood, were healthier and less likely to be stunted, spent more years in elementary school, worked less frequently as child laborers, and were less often disciplined them with violence (PNUD, 2013). These generational improvements created the sense that these young people were the benefactors of a wave of progress. As one girl said memorably, "My grandma says we are living in heaven, because we are dressed, we eat, and everything. [Her daughters] didn't even have shoes."

No change gave the sensation of momentum as much as going to school. It promised them what seemed like a real opportunity to break the cycle of poverty. These young people, even those who dropped out, wanted to take advantage of it. Despite all the forces pushing against them, most dropouts wanted to return to school and pursue the dream of "becoming somebody in life," the shorthand the expression Salvadorans used to refer to people with professional jobs, but which also said a lot about the social standing of the youth in these pages. They knew what it was to be nobodies and wanted something better.

"You Have to See What Your Mom Does:" Leaving School to Help Families

Franklin entered his old classroom wearing jeans and a baggy brown t-shirt that swallowed up his bony body. He looked out-of-place among the sea of teenagers in identical white and

navy-blue uniforms but his classmates still recognized him as one of their own. A stream of well-wishers greeted him with gleeful fist bumps and hugs as he came through the door. Mr. Santos boomed “Franklin!” over the happy clamor and limbered up from behind his teetering metal desk to embrace him. Then he shooed the other students away and motioned for Franklin and me to come sit by him at his desk. He wanted me to hear Franklin’ story.

Despite being just fifteen, Franklin was self-assured, gregarious, and attentive and we talked for the rest of the class period. Later we met for a long interview and I visited him several times over the next two years while he worked as a street vendor. Mr. Santos believed Franklin was one of his more talented students–intelligent, articulate, and hardworking–and wanted to see him back at school. He was hoping my influence would convince him. Franklin didn’t need my convincing, though. He wanted to return as well. “I’m someone who dreams really high, who wants to make something of myself,” he told me. “My mission … is to keep studying, to at least get my high school degree, and provide for [my mom].” But later, after a long discussion of the challenge of balancing school and working in the market, he remarked offhand: “Sometimes an education gets complicated on the journey.”

Franklin’ journey got complicated very early in life. When I asked him during our first conversation about his father he leaned perilously back in the broken chair he was sitting in and let out a hearty laugh. “I don’t even know his name!” he chortled. Later he admitted this wasn’t technically true but might as well have been. His father was a soldier and much older than his mom when she left her rural village to live with him in San Salvador. Franklin’ sister was born shortly thereafter and he followed two years later. Meanwhile his father descended into alcoholism and couldn’t hold down a job. “The memories I have of him are only abuse, with my mom, with me,” Franklin said. “I don’t have beautiful memories of him, because, with his

character, since he was a soldier, he treated us pretty hard."

His father abandoned them for good when he was eight and they were living in a *"champita"* made of plastic, sheet metal, bamboo, and cardboard that they had scrounged together for a roof and walls. Franklin' mom got a job working in a factory, and they were able to rent a better house, but during the long hours away from home she agonized about leaving her children alone in a gang-run neighborhood. A friend promised to teach her how to make a living selling belts as a street vendor in Grecia and she decided it would be better than the constant worrying. At least she could watch over her children in the market while she worked. She took them out of their neighborhood school and enrolled them at Cerro Verde. Franklin was nine and in third grade.

After that Franklin and his sister got up each morning before dawn with their mom so they could ride two buses for over an hour and get to the market by 6am. They watched as she stacked dozens of belts on her shoulders and walked the sidewalks teetering under their weight and yelling out to passersby. In the afternoons, they went to Cerro Verde where they quickly found a refuge. "Practically, we lived in the market, our house was just for sleeping… [School] was a second family for us," Franklin said, naming his many friends and recounting some of their adventures together. "We were like siblings."

For the first couple of years, Franklin didn't do much in the market other than accompany his mom. He didn't like the idea of street vending. "For me, I never liked the market, I never liked to sell. Since I was little, my mom would bring me and I [would say] no," he recalled. As time passed, however, his mom needed help. When she took a break to use the restroom or get something to eat, he would take over for a few minutes. Then she started having back pain and other health problems and Franklin did more. "Seeing later that it was the only option we had to get by, I had to take it on. I started getting accustomed to it, but it wasn't easy," he remembered.

By the end of fifth grade, at age 11, he was working most mornings alongside his mom, his shoulders weighed down with belts, on the street.

His dropout came about three years later when Franklin was 14 and in eighth grade and a new crisis emerged–his sixteen year-old sister's unexpected pregnancy. His mom, overcome by stress, came home most nights in tears. She was struggling to keep up with a bank loan and had taken out money from loan sharks to keep above water. They came around every day rattling coins (and her nerves) asking if she had her daily payment. Now she would have another mouth to feed. Franklin felt an obligation to help. "I admire my mom, because my mom, *puya,* she's the only one with us. All our school expenses–notebooks, bus fare, food, all that–she's given us," Franklin explained. "You have to see what your mom does for you. That's the reason why I left school, you know, I was trying to alleviate some of her problems, all the debts and everything, trying to help her, even if it was just a little, to help her."

Franklin' mom didn't want him to drop out nor was she demanding his help. She counseled him to stay in school, but he didn't want to. Franklin remembered the conversation: "She said to me…'Look, go to school, it is good for you, you're going to end up in the market.' I told her that it didn't matter to me as long as I was helping her… and that's true, I don't care about dropping out as long as I am helping her." Even so he acknowledged she was right about the long term value of a degree and promised her he would return: "I'm going to need [an education]," he recalled telling her, "So, I'm going to keep studying... Next year, I'm going to study."

Franklin witnessed his mother's distress and decided school was a lesser priority, even a luxury, he could put off for now while he dedicated himself to helping her full time. Nora had done the same. Although their parents discouraged them from quitting school, they felt compelled to act because letting their parents suffer while they did nothing was emotionally

intolerable. The interviews showed that their decision to prioritize their families' needs and drop out, even when their families asked them not to, was one that youth made often.

Consuelo and her younger brother were raised by their grandparents after their single-mother disappeared while trying to migrate to the United States. Even with that tragedy marring her middle childhood, Consuelo was a good student and made it to high school. Then, just two months into her first year, her grandfather suddenly abandoned the family and went to live with another woman, leaving them to get by on what their grandmother could bring in selling straw mats. Her grandma took a new job at a restaurant to stem the crisis, but Consuelo was worried about how it would affect her health.

"The owner [of the restaurant] needed another girl and [my grandma] told me she was going to tell a friend. But I told her that I wasn't going to go to school [anymore] and I would work there," Consuelo explained. "I told her that it was better that she didn't go [to work], because she has heart problems. She didn't go anymore and we got by just with what I earned." Consuelo, only 16, had chosen to quit school and take over as the family's breadwinner to protect her grandma. Her grandma tried to stop her at first. "I told her no at once, because I couldn't be demanding [money] from her knowing that she only made $5 a day." Consuelo explained that just the bus fare to school would consume a good portion of what her grandma earned at the restaurant and her other school costs and meals would take the rest. Her grandma accepted her reasoning, but made her promise she would go back the next year.

Arturo's mom had spent nearly a decade selling candies from her cart on a street corner near the market when the municipality started enforcing its ordinances against people like her. "[The police] say they want this area free of street vendors, that the mayor doesn't want to see any vendors," Arturo explained. "The police come bother her and [my mom] has to move to another

part [of town.] And then in a little while, they're there again and she has to move again… The customers don't know where she is and that's why the sales are going really bad for her." Arturo's mom was struggling to pay rent and his alcoholic father, who never provided much, was on a three-week bender when he decided to leave school. "I quit school because of [these] problems. I prefer to work, because right now my mom is having a tough time. The police are bothering her a lot. It's not going well for her." His mom didn't want him to sacrifice for her. "She told me to keep going with my studies. I said, 'No *mama,* I am going to leave school to help you.'" His mom pleaded with him for a while, but Arturo had already convinced himself that dropping out was the right thing to do. "I felt like I had to it," he said.

Three months before Elena dropped out of seventh grade at age 16 she told me about how the landlord of the tenement where they lived had raised their rent and her single-mom couldn't afford to pay it. "Yesterday I started crying because my mom said '*Ay hija,* who knows where we will end up,'" Elena explained in an interview. "I told my mom, so she wouldn't be so discouraged, because my mom gets down a lot… 'Look,' I said to her, 'you don't worry. I'm going to be working and we are going to be bringing in enough so that we have those $100 for the rent." Elena explained that her mom became overwrought at the idea of her daughter leaving school. "*'Ay no, hija,'* [my mom] said and started crying. So I told her that I was going to help just a little bit with the rent." Elena was already an employee at a poultry stall in the market earning $5 for two shifts before and after school. To earn more, she bought some vegetables to hawk to customers looking to buy chicken. Initially, she tried to stay in school, but her frequent absences affected her grades and relationships with peers. Soon Elena was bringing home bad report cards and news of problems with her classmates. Her disappointments at school quieted her mother's opposition and Elena quit.

In each of these cases, added hardships–a parent's illness, a sister's unexpected pregnancy, the municipal police enforcing ordinances, a broken marriage, raised rent–tipped vulnerable families into heightened distress. These young people, knowing that their parents had no one else to turn to, came to their aid. They were the only available stopgap.

Franklin and the other dropouts quoted here shifted rather seamlessly into working full time because, prior to leaving school, they had all been child workers. In that they were not much different than many other students at La Laguna and Cerro Verde. According to the student survey, 41% of girls and 59% of boys did at least some work[42] either as hired laborers, helping their parents in their jobs, or in subsistence agriculture.[43] Many, if not most student workers, like Franklin initially and Nora when her mom was earning more, did not feel like their work required much effort. Manuel, who worked every day with his dad wheeling a cart of CDs to sell on the street, said: "It's like a hobby helping him!" Lesly said of her job in a sewing shop: "It doesn't feel too difficult, because all I do is keep things orderly, sweep, mop, it's just a bit."

Several student workers even claimed that they got bored and anxious when they stayed home and didn't work. Luis, who worked in the mornings at a mechanic shop, said: "It's like a distraction for me to work, that's how I feel, because, being home, I get bored, I start to feel desperate. So I prefer to work, I like working, I want to work more." Lisette, a street vendor, concurred: "Sometimes I'd like to be like other girls, just messing around… but when we're at home, I feel bored, I get desperate. I'm used to having a really active environment. Being alone just sitting watching TV, I get desperate."

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[42] I define work as both paid jobs and unpaid work assisting family members in productive or subsistence activities. *Domestic chores are not included in this definition of child work.* This definition of work is the same one used by the International Labour Organization (e.g., UCW, 2013) and UNICEF for its *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (e.g., MINSAL, 2015).*

[43] Source: Student Survey. Boys: N=104, Missing=0. Girls: N=203, Missing=1

Student workers also gained a sense of pride and felt their experience gave them wisdom about what the real world of employment was like that motivated them to stay focused on their education. Marco, who worked in the market selling vegetables, said: “I have learned so much [from work]. You know, it gives you dignity. And it also helps you in your studies. It has helped me a lot in my studies. It teaches you morals. People who don’t work, they don’t see that [earning] money is hard, they think it is easy to earn money, and the truth is it’s really difficult.” This view that students could work and go to school simultaneously–and that doing so was also beneficial to them–was repeated frequently by youth. On the survey[44] nearly nine-in-ten student workers agreed with the statements “it is good to work” and “it is possible to be a good student and work at the same time.”[45]

These positive views of working are consistent with the studies I mentioned in the literature review which showed students in developing countries wanting to work because it allowed them to meet deeply felt family obligations (Woodhead, 2005). But the interviews and my observations also showed that these social and psychological benefits quickly eroded when work took too heavy a toll on youth’s time and health. Students who worked long hours, while proud of their contribution, were much more critical of the effect their labor had on their studies.

Celia, who sold vegetables as a street vendor every day before and after school alongside her single-mom, said: “I come to school tired, my head hurts, I feel drained, lethargic. It’s because I spend all day under the sun. I come [to school] feeling bad, and I say to myself, ‘School isn’t too blame, my teachers aren’t to blame for me working.’” Esperanza woke every morning at 4 a.m. to work in a bakery so she could pay her way through high school. She recalled how her math

[44] These results should be regarded with some skepticism due to the high number of missing responses reported below. This was due to poor survey design on my part – I put the detailed questions about work at the end of the survey and many students missed the extra page or ran out of time to finish it.
[45] Source: Student Survey. Restricted to student workers. N=143, Missing =28 (20%) and 33 (23%), respectively.

teacher would pound the desk after she had fallen asleep in class. “She would tell me, ‘What are you doing coming here to sleep in my class? I congratulate you, child, [for working], but on the other hand,’ she would say, ‘this is affecting you.’ All year long I would come [to school] like that.” Antonio worked as mechanic’s assistant every morning and frequently skipped school because his boss got angry if he left when the shop was busy. He felt his job and school were two competing “pressures” on his wellbeing: “It’s really difficult… because it affects me psychologically. Sometimes, you come to school angry, because of a problem at work, and you act badly, you’re impulsive at school.”

Feeling ill, exhausted, and angry at school because of work were difficult emotions to manage. When a loved one’s distress was added to the mix the urge to drop out was often too hard to resist. Dropping out allowed youth to suspend the pressure of school and focus all their time and energy on their families. They knew that the menial jobs they could get would mean only a marginal increase in family income, but they also knew that even that small contribution could restore some peace to stressed parents. As Franklin said: “Since I dropped out, I have provided for myself… I don’t put any more responsibilities on [my mom], like asking her for food or clothes, because all of that I pay for with my work… It’s a huge help for her, because now she has one less care to worry about.”

National surveys show child work in El Salvador to be less frequent than what I saw at La Laguna and Cerro Verde. One study, for example, found just 15% of urban 14-17 year-olds in El Salvador were working. Only half of these adolescent workers, 7%, were also going to school (UCW, 2013: 14). The survey did not disaggregate by socio-economic status so the proportion of poor and low-income urban youth working is likely higher. Other research has also shown that household surveys used to measure child labor can undercount the number of youth working by a

factor of two to three because they move so frequently in and out of jobs over the course of a year (Orazem et al., 2009). The extent to which children and youth are really working is important to establish. The interviews showed, however, that what mattered even more than the experience of working, was how unstable these families were economically. Youth will be pulled into more work as long as there is no other safety net that can help poor and working class families weather the constant crises on their shores.

"We Close Ourselves Inside:" Leaving School to Find Safety

Yanira's teacher pulled her aside to give her a lecture about not missing any more class. The girl hadn't come to La Laguna in weeks and the teacher said this would be her last chance to make up the time she had missed. Yanira stood nervously looking at her shoes, lifting her head only long enough to softly say "yes, Miss" and check her teacher's concerned face for signs that she had no more to say. The teacher soon sighed and sent her to recess. The perfunctory sermon was over and Yanira hurried off to be absorbed into a huddle of her girlfriends. When the bell rang she was pulled, arm-in-arm, to class by a friend recounting something hilarious. She was laughing with delight and, for a moment, looked the image of a happy schoolgirl. It was a rare moment for Yanira.

The next day Yanira didn't come to school. A month later in an interview I asked what caused her not to come that day. "It's difficult to decide between working and going to school, it's very hard," she told me. "I felt anxious because I had to choose between stopping school or stopping to help my mom." Yanira choose to stay by her mom's side and the decision about the rest of the school year was made for her. It was never much of a choice to begin with.

A little over a year before a policeman knocked on their door and asked to speak to her father. Her older sister had been missing for four days and Yanira's family had been asking

everyone they knew if they had seen her. The policeman had horrible news. Her sister's body had been found dumped in a field not far from their house. A murder victim. When Yanira recounted the story to me in an interview this last detail was the only one that betrayed her emotion. "Close to my house! Close to my house!" she exclaimed painfully, her eyes wide with terror for a moment. Then she looked down at her plate and became very quiet, poking at the lunch I had bought her and she hadn't touched.

I asked Yanira if she wanted to talk about how she was feeling and she shook her head no. She went on to explain in a detached manner that her sister had made friends with some men in the gang and liked to party with them sometimes. Her parents had warned her to be careful and her mom had tried to convince her to leave El Salvador, even going so far as to ask family members if they could help her come up with money to send her to the U.S. But her sister told them not to worry and kept them in the dark about what she was doing.

"It was because she liked to go out drinking," Yanira said of her murder. Her family didn't know who had killed her and didn't do anything to find out. Some "scary men" showed up at her sister's wake just to look at her body and then left. The family felt not only aggrieved but also threatened. "The policeman asked my mom if she wanted him to investigate and my mom said no, she didn't," Yanira explained. "'It's better,' [my mom] told him, 'to not know than to know, because what are we going to do if we know?'" Knowing which of the violent men in the neighborhood murdered her daughter could bring more risk than relief. They were stuck living there. "My mom wants to leave because of what happened to my sister," Yanira explained, "we feel unsafe… but we don't have enough money."

Yanira was in sixth grade when her sister was murdered and she immediately stopped going to school. The shock was part of the reason why. But so, too, were the memories she had of her

sister at La Laguna. “[My sister] would come drop me off at school,” Yanira said, “It made me anxious knowing that she wouldn’t go [with me] anymore.” Yanira re-enrolled the next year and a kind teacher took pity on her and allowed her to enroll in seventh grade even though she hadn’t finished sixth. But Yanira wasn’t able to take advantage of this act of kindness. Her mom, dealing with the trauma of her sister’s death, was often too ill to work. “She got very sick, her blood sugar went up, her blood pressure, she got really bad. At times it was like she had fainted and she wouldn’t say anything, it was like she was dead, she just stared at us [blankly].” Her mom’s health declined further as time passed. This is why she it was so hard for Yanira to choose between school and work. Her mom was suffering.

Yanira, only 14, took over doing most of the work in her mom’s small restaurant in the market. “I make the salad, the rice, I brown the chicken, wash the dishes, clean the tables, make the juice.” You do all this by yourself? I asked. “Yes,” she answered perfunctorily. If her mom was feeling well enough, she would drop her off at school after they had delivered the meals to their clients, but she never let Yanira go by herself. “My mom doesn’t like us to go out alone, since it is dangerous, everyplace is dangerous,” Yanira explained. “She is a mom who cares for us.” Her mom was rarely well and Yanira wasn’t one to beg her take her to school. The absences piled up. Dropping out chose her.

Anita also dropped out after homicide traumatized her family. Anita’s mother died when she was a toddler and her aunt became her guardian. She grew up on her family’s ancestral farm in the wooded hillsides outside Grecia in a household full of extended family members. Her village had been mostly an unpopulated rural backwater until, as Anita explained, “some boys came that weren’t from there and we were scared of them.” The family avoided their new neighbors. But

one day her uncle was kidnapped and murdered while driving home. His assailants had robbed his truck and strangled him.

A few days later Anita's cousin, a disabled young man in a wheel chair, was shot dead outside their home. She surmised her crippled cousin was shot simply because "they just wanted to hurt him." Her family could think of no reason why he would be targeted other than to cause them fear. "[My aunt] was traumatized, my [other] aunts and uncles as well, they didn't want me to go to school anymore." Anita's aunt pulled her and her two other school-age children out of school and moved the family to live with another relative in a safer neighborhood. They abandoned their ancestral home. Afterwards, her aunt brought them to work with her in her small restaurant near a tourist center each day. She didn't let them return to school for two years.

Yanira and Anita were among the 18 youth I interviewed, 22% of the interview sample, whose inner family circles were traumatized by homicide. They lost siblings, cousins, uncles, fathers, stepfathers, and brothers-in-law who had formed part of their households. Many were like Yanira and suspected that their family members were involved with people they shouldn't be. Some acknowledged that their lost loved ones were gang members. Others, as in Anita's case, the murder was completely senseless. No matter the motive, homicide destabilized the lives of these youth and their families. While it didn't always trigger youth to drop out, it did cause these young people to experience emotional, physical, and economic consequences similar to those Yanira and Anita reported.

Murder was the most extreme form of community violence that the interviewees reported. But there were other ways as well that it disrupted family life and pushed youth out of school. Fifteen interviewees, 18% of the sample, reported, for example, fleeing their communities after being threatened. This happened to Celia after her single-mom refused the sexual advances of a

gang member pursuing her. “The gang threatened us, they told us to leave there, and if we didn’t they were going to kill us… My mom said [to us], ‘Let’s go tomorrow.’ That night we got our things together, and we left the next day.” Lesly fled her community after her uncle, with whom she lived, was threatened: “My uncle had to sell the house because his sons had a fight with our neighbor, and that boy [had a relative] who was a gang member, and he told [my uncle] that he shouldn’t take his eye off his sons. He threatened him. That’s why he sold the house.” Both girls ended up in *champas* in squatter towns and dropped out of school as their families struggled to re-create their homes and economic livelihoods.

The repressive policing of poor neighborhoods also youth and their families was another disruptive force in youth’s lives. As mentioned in the Introduction, El Salvador imprisons more people than any other country other than the United States (World Prison Brief, 2019). Fourteen of the interviewees reported a member of their household had been in jail during at least part of their childhood or adolescence. These were often traumatic events that deprived youth of a caregiver or sibling. Sometimes they led directly to youth dropping out of school.

Cristina was raised by her single-father and stepmom and they were getting by on what he earned as a night guard. When she was 17 and in eighth grade at Cerro Verde, he was arrested and charged with murder. Cristina, believed the accusation was false and quit school so she could help support her stepmom and newborn half-sister and pay her dad’s lawyer. “My father said no, don’t do it *hija*, do what you can to stay in, but the little money we had was gone and come [to school] every day and spend $1 [on bus fare] wasn’t worth it,” she said. Paola’s older sister was arrested for having illegally associated with a gang. Paola cared for her sister’s infant daughter afterwards and helped her mom bring food to the jail for her sister to eat and pay legal fees. She missed two months of class and flunked.

Police abuse was also an increasingly prominent risk in students' lives. Xiomara depicted a common view of the police among the interviewees: "The problem [in my neighborhood] is the police, more than anything, not delinquency. There are gang members and all that, but the police are the problem. They killed a boy for no reason a little while ago… They're corrupt and they don't care for us." She went on to describe how on one of the many raids that police made through in her neighborhood, officers forcefully entered her family's home, overturned their possessions, broke all of their windows, and pointed weapons at her. No one in her family was accused of any wrongdoing. This type of treatment by police was a frequent complaint I heard in interviews and during fieldwork.

Students, especially boys, also had to contend with being stopped, frisked, and harassed regularly by police or military officers in their neighborhoods and outside school. These were often violent and intimidating encounters. Toño's description represented how many youth described feeling about their treatment by the authorities: "I don't go out when the police are around. I'm afraid of them. Just for fun they confuse you [with gang members]. Just because I'm from [that neighborhood], they say that I am [a gang member], when I'm not anything. They stop and frisk you for no reason."

Ten interviewees described examples of extreme police abuse during which they were beaten or robbed. Some boys feared the officers so much that they chose to not come to school on days when students were allowed to wear street clothes because they felt that wearing a school uniform was the only thing that protected them from police harassment. Josue, however, was abused by a police officer despite his uniform. He had been burned as a child and wore a straight-billed and oversized baseball cap to cover his scars. Josue wore it high on his head to avoid hurting his scars, which was a style often associated by some with gang members. One day

a policeman noticed him outside school and pulled the hat down on roughly on Josue's head, ripping at his scars. After that the police officer, who was stationed nearby the school and charged with watching the perimeter, waited for Josue before and after class and would hit him hard in the chest. "In front of all of my classmates… he would hit me like this [banging his chest]. 'Get out of here,' he would say. 'Get out of here.' He did that every day." Josue told his mom and she became concerned. "I told my mom and she said it was better for me not to go [to school] anymore," he explained angrily. "I'm not doing anything, not involved in anything, and they screw me. I don't do anything and now I can't go to school!"

Community violence encroached directly into these students' lives pushed them out of school. There were many more students at La Laguna and Cerro Verde who were exposed to similar risks. As mentioned above, 55% reported on the survey that gangs were active in their neighborhoods.[46] That number rose to 67% among the one-half of the student population living outside of Grecia proper.[47] Families in gang neighborhoods had to find ways to coexist with threats in their settings. Most youth reported rarely leaving their homes except for work or school. Lucia's description of how her family got by in her dangerous neighborhood was typical: "We don't talk with anyone. We stay to ourselves. We leave early and arrive late. We close ourselves inside [our home]." Martin said similarly: "We leave home, we arrive home, we leave home, we arrive home. No hanging out, no going to the park, none of that."

The expression "we close ourselves inside our home" frequented youth's description of their neighborhoods. Many said their families were too frightened to socialize with their neighbors and didn't let children go out to play or talk with friends on the street. Gloria explained, for example, how neighborhood violence shaped her childhood: "Sometimes there are gunfights…

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[46] Source: Student Survey. N=307, Missing=20 (7%)
[47] Source: Student Survey. Restricted to students living outside Grecia N=150 Missing=13 (8%)

One time when we were little, some [members] of the *Dieciocho* [gang] arrived and did a huge shootout with the [members] of the *MS* [gang]… [My cousin] was going outside to play and a stray bullet almost hit her. Since that time [my aunt and uncle] don't let us go out." Magdalena said of her neighborhood: "It feels like complete silence. You don't hear any children playing. The children cannot come out because their moms are scared a stray bullet could hit them. No one goes to the park to play. [My parents] don't let me go out."

Families walled themselves off from their neighbors and limited their children's contact with other youth as much as they could in order to stay safe. Many youth viewed the hypervigilance somewhat warily. They wanted more freedom to move about and have friends in their neighborhoods and believed they could stay safe by avoiding forming relationships with gang members. Youth said the gang left them alone as long as they treated them with cordiality and obeyed rules against associating with rival gang members and the police. They made this strategy staying safe in gang members into a mantra: "If you don't get involved with them, they won't get involved with you," was the basic sentiment that dozens of interviewees repeated. Gustavo is one example: "If you don't get involved with them, they don't do anything to you," he said, "but, if you look for problems with one of them, then they all get together." Gerardo described similarly: "The [gang members] are there, but they just half look at you. Let's just say, if you don't get involved with them, they won't get involved with you." The mantra gave youth a sense of control and safety in an environment where they had little. They believed they had the power to choose whether or not to associate with gangs and that they would avoid harm by making the right choice.

But for some youth and their families the mantra proved to be an illusion. Murder, threats, and police abuse breached their families' protective walls and destroyed any feeling of security

they may have had.[48] They did what they could to help re-establish those walls, closing themselves inside with their families, limiting their contact with the outside world, working to rebuild homes and incomes, and leaving behind their aspirations for an education until they and their loved ones felt that semblance of safety again.

"All I'm Going to Leave Them:" Aspiring to Heal Generational Pain

Again and again in focus groups and interviews, young people grounded their desire for an education directly in their personal experiences of being poor. These children knew well the suffering that had afflicted their parents and grandparents. They had suffered, too, and wanted that generational struggle to end with them. Selena expressed a common sentiment in a focus group: "I don't want to be like my mom, who only made it to third grade and today has to go around cleaning houses. I don't want to have to go around like that. I want to go to college."

Maria explained during another focus group: "We want a future that is different from what our parents have had. Sometimes, our parents, our mothers, have suffered a lot. They have had to work for their moms, they've had to help with their younger siblings." Catalina reflected on how her mom never attended school, because her grandmother kept her home doing household chores: "My [grandma] made [my mom] do many things… she had to go pick oranges, she helped her father, her grandparents… [My mom] didn't enjoy her childhood, so, that's why she says to me that I have to study, to become somebody in life, and have a better future, since her mom never sent her to school."

Students were anxious to qualify for jobs that would provide them the basic economic security that had eluded their families. They perceived diplomas as insurance against lives in

[48] I did not mention other forms of community violence such violent assaults, beatings, shootings, sexual assault, or rape in the above description because these were not mentioned frequently mentioned by interviewees. As described in the Introduction, however, such crimes are reported frequently in gang-affected neighborhoods and likely have effects on family wellbeing and educational outcomes similar to those I have described here.

deep poverty. The following exchange between Lena and Alejandra, for example, brings to the fore the extreme hand-to-mouth scarcity that these students wanted to avoid: "If you don't go to school, you'll be stuck selling tomatoes," Lena said. Alejandra, by way of softening her classmate's comment, explained: "It's not bad to sell tomatoes, it is honorable work, but it doesn't bring with it all the possibilities to help your family, to help you mom, because if someone is sick and you have to buy medicine that costs $100, you won't have that possibility. You might only make enough to buy food and pay the electricity and water bills."

Ximena, in a separate discussion, alluded to the physical toll of precarious work: "We want to learn, we want to become someone in life, so that when we have children, we don't have to kill ourselves working [in something like] washing clothes [or] ironing." Valentina, in another focus group, portrayed failing to graduate even more starkly: "A person without an education can't have a good job or a good life."

Similarly, other young people felt indebted to their parents and wanted to graduate so that they could fully repay the sacrifices they felt had been made on their behalf. Adriana, for example, said: "Most of us live with our moms. I think we all want to work and have a good salary so we are able to take care of them and give them everything that they have given us so we can be where we are today."

For the girls and boys at La Laguna and Cerro Verde going to school was a sustaining hope. It made the poverty they endured in the present seem pliant and time-bound; something that they were destined to overcome and relegate to the past as they walked across the graduation stage. Even dropouts described here who were pushed out of school by poverty and violence still saw in nearby schools a beacon promising a way out of their harsh straits. As the height of their families' distress subsided, these youth began to re-engage their aspirations for the future and

began planning to return to school. "I like going to school, I feel it's better than being here in the market, because you learn more," Yanira said. "Here you might learn to cook, nothing more than that, or sell stuff, but there [at school] you learn more, so that you can get a good job, that's why it's better to study."

Most of them recognized that the dead-end jobs reserved for non-graduates were no way to realize their ultimate goal of helping their families. Franklin said: "[I want] to graduate at least from high school and provide for my mom… so that she doesn't have to work, she just stays at home and only does some chores." Celia stated: "I want to get a high school degree and work to help my mom… Build her a house so that no one can throw her out."

They did not feel their decision to leave school counted against them and believed they had the power within them to graduate. As Cristina said: "I tell my dad, as soon as you get out, next year I'm going to submit my [enrollment] papers again at school, because I'm not going to quit school, like he tells me, 'Don't let this be the reason why you quit studying, keep going, keep moving forward, keep moving forward!' And that is what I want, to keep going and going and advance as far as I can."

Like Nora, nearly all of the youth represented in this chapter attempted to return to school. These returns were difficult because youth were usually still dealing with at least some of the same hardships that pushed them out to begin with. Plus they had to find schools willing to enroll them and then adjust to new classmates, teachers, and the pressures of classroom routines. For many this was too much and they quickly left school again. Others had enough stability in their

family lives and also found enough support at school from their teachers and peers that they were able to stay in school for at least one full year.[49]

Nora was one such example. I visited her multiple times two years after our interview and during that time she managed to stay in school and finished ninth grade. Her mom Lenora walked her down the aisle at the middle school graduation. “It was so beautiful!” Lenora recounted ecstatically. “Thank God, that pride will always remain in my chest, I am so proud, because she achieved what she wanted.” Lenora was hopeful Nora would continue on through high school and was proud, too, of the effort she had made to keep her and her other children in school. “The truth is that right now I feel like I have done something for them, through the good and the bad,” she said. “It has been difficult for me… But, where we were before, I never imagined that God would be so merciful with us.” Reflecting on the small stack of shoes near her, she said, “[T]his is how we’ve gotten out of the worst hardships… But, I tell them to keep going [with their education], because that’s the only thing I’m going to leave them.”

Parents like Lenora could not give their children much. They hoped that sending their children to school would be enough to deliver them into another world. But they could not sustain an education on hope alone. Their lives were as vulnerable as that stack of shoes. Parents and children needed something more to achieve their aspirations. They put their faith on schools and teachers providing it.

[49] This discussion is based on what I learned from dropouts who left school multiple times and also from drop in students. I also was able to follow up with multiple students like I describe doing with Nora and Douglas after I interviewed them and these conversations provided me with more insight into what it was like to go back to school.

5. A FLAWED REFUGE

Principal Delmy and a handful of other teachers were pressed together drinking coffee in the cramped teachers' lounge. It was a very hot day in March, the time of year when extreme humidity makes the midday unbearable, and I sat down with them, seeking, as they had, a caffeinated jolt from my sweaty stupor. The conversation was as slow and uncomfortable as the weather. The teachers soon filtered out. Principal Delmy remained behind, idly dunking a dry pastry into her mug, until I made a remark about how I was hearing so many stories of trauma and abuse from young people in my interviews.

She focused on me warily. "Did you see the girl in the lobby earlier?" she asked. "The one doing her homework?" I had noticed her but not given it a second thought. The principal explained that the week before the girl's teacher had seen bruises all over her legs. Concerned, she alerted the principal and together they called the girl into her office. When Principal Delmy asked about the bruises, the girl lifted her skirt. Her thighs were welted from belt lashings. The principal called the girl's guardian, her aunt, and asked her to come to school for a meeting.

The aunt had come the day before. The principal reported that their meeting lasted a grueling two hours and the woman sobbed at length throughout. Her first comment to me about the aunt, and possibly her explanation for the woman's behavior, was that she found her to be "one of those hysterical types," by which she meant of nervous temperament. The aunt claimed to beat the girl because she didn't do her homework. Principal Delmy didn't buy this explanation. The girl was hyperactive and it was easy to see her setting off the tightly wound woman with any small thing. But, it was hard to fault her for trying to appear in a better light and the principal was disposed toward letting the lie go. She admired her for assuming responsibility of a child

who wasn't hers to begin with and saw little to gain in bringing in the authorities when that would just add more stress to an already deeply troubled family situation.

Instead, the principal wanted a solution. She keyed in on the woman's mention of homework and offered a deal. She would let the girl, a student in the morning shift, stay at school all afternoon doing her homework and keep an eye on her. But she made the aunt promise not to beat her anymore. The aunt agreed. Principal Delmy hoped keeping the child away from home as much as possible would help the high-strung woman honor her word. "I have her there now," the principal said, pointing to the neighboring classroom where the girl was supposedly sitting doing homework. "We'll see how it goes."

This was not the first time Principal Delmy had told me stories about the desperate circumstances of her students. I found each of the stories shocking in their own right. But taken together, it was if they had a sort of numbing quality to them. There was so much sadness and so much heartbreak that some days it felt like we were all drowning in it. For instance, the first time I met Principal Delmy, she described a girl who came to school dazed like a zombie. Perplexed by her behavior, the principal began watching her and noticed how her underwear was always coming down around her knees. When she asked the girl what was going on, Principal Delmy recounted, a look of disgusted shock on her face, how the girl explained to her that she had to stay up all night to get away from her brother who was trying to molest her.

The principal was replete with other horror stories. During one lunchtime conversation I had with her and another teacher, the latter mentioned finding a kindergartener masturbating in the school bathroom. The two women agreed the girl had learned this from watching her mom–a drug-addicted prostitute–at home. Then there were the numerous stories of children losing someone to gang violence. A girl whose mother disappeared when she was five, probably

murdered and buried in some clandestine grave. Another whose sister was killed by a gang-member boyfriend. A pair of sisters left to live alone after their mother was thrown in jail.

Other teachers heard these tragic stories as well. Sometimes their students confided in them. Other times they cropped up unexpectedly in conversation. I found this out early in my fieldwork one day in a moment I still strongly regret. Erica, a very small sixth grader, whose natural shyness was tempered by a no-nonsense commitment to her schoolwork, ran up to give me a hug and share some happy news. It was her birthday and she was going to travel to her native village the next day to celebrate with her family. I knew she was living with her uncle in Grecia, but had never found out why. I asked, without thinking, if she was going to see her mother during her visit home. Her face immediately went from joyful to sullen. "My mom disappeared from us when I was 10," she told me before describing rapidly in hushed embarrassment her mother's disappearance and likely murder two years earlier. That was the start of my education on how much pain can be concealed behind a child's gleeful face and how careful I had to be about the questions that I asked while in the field.

Principal Delmy was the receiver of the stories because she was the person designated at the school to deal with students who came in with too many bruises or who confided to a teacher about a dark problem at home. There was no social worker or psychologist on staff to do this work nor did the Ministry of Education make anyone available to assist them.

And so it fell to her to confront the "hysterical" aunt. The agreement she reached with that woman, at least at this point in the story, seemed like a rare win. Calling parents and guardians was usually more fraught. Some berated her. Others told her to mind her own business and hung up. One mother insinuated that she would have her killed if she meddled in their lives again.

El Salvador was not a place where you could take these threats lightly from parents or from the students themselves. Several teachers told me about two colleagues who had been gunned down at a nearby school after confiscating drugs from students. They had stories, too, about fellow teachers who had narrowly escaped death after concerned students warned them that assailants were waiting for them at school. Most months local newspapers and the nightly news also featured tragic stories about murdered teachers. Between 2014 and 2016, homicide claimed three dozen educators nationwide. Most perpetrated by gangs and just outside the schools' doors (Gavin et al., 2017).

When I talked with Principal Delmy about the traumatic lives of her students our discussions usually ended on the parents and guardians. I got the sense that she was trying to maintain a professional distance and stop herself from caring too much about the girls she had come to know. She excoriated the parents for their abuse and their selfish indifference. She insisted that she and the other teachers could do nothing for these girls if their parents didn't want to change. That put responsibility for helping these children on the very individuals guilty of betraying them, a faultiness in logic that was left unexamined. Better to cauterize the wounds caused by bearing witness to horrific crimes with righteous anger.

On this day, however, the girl with the welted thighs, inspired another thought in Principal Delmy. Instead of the parents, she focused on the children and the refuge the school might offer them. "I beg my teachers to be good to the girls," she said, "because school is where they feel joy. We need to make our school a place of happiness because once these children go out this door they enter hell."

Structured Neglect

Over the last two decades El Salvador has budgeted on average 3% of its GDP for education, a rate much lower than the Latin American average of 5% and far below the 9% in the Global North (Calvo-Gonzalez and Lopez, 2015). Administration after administration has promised to double the budget to 6% but has never done so (Alvarado, 2017). Fiscal neglect is evident in every facet of the nation's public schools. The buildings are grim and deficient (Luna, 2017). The teaching methods are obsolete (Picardo Joao, 2017). The playgrounds, kitchens, and bathrooms are unsafe and unsanitary. Libraries and science labs are mostly nonexistent (Marín et al., 2010). And school psychologists, social workers, remedial specialists, and other support staff are all luxuries most schools never contemplate having (USAID, 2016).

This was Principal Delmy' reality. Struggling families brought her vulnerable children, some of them deeply harmed, every day. They came with great hopes that an education would deliver them from a life of hardship. But her school, vastly under resourced and neglected by the national government, was no match for their adversities. The girl with the welted legs needed more than a few extra hours each day at school and away from her aunt. She needed a safe home and a quality education that would help her to establish a different pathway and new possibilities. La Laguna couldn't give her anything close to that.

This chapter shows what it gave her instead. It consists of three parts: The first depicts the working conditions teachers faced and how, pushed by constraints, they did very little of their core job–teaching. As a result, students were deprived of more than half of the instruction they were supposed to receive during the course of a year. Year after year these deficits in teaching accumulated into a giant mass of lost opportunities for learning. A fact we must assume

contributed mightily to the very low reading and math scores that poor and low-income students earned on national assessments as documented in Chapter two (Picardo Joao, 2017).

The second part focuses on how teachers struggled to deal with the student misbehavior that so often thrives deprived classrooms. Many students brought some form of trauma into the classroom and they were bored, unengaged, and disruptive. Frustrated and overwhelmed, teachers saw their apathetic or rebellious behavior as a personal failing. Some teachers believed it was necessary to scold and punish these students to make them behave. Their threatening demeanor injected a vein of hostility into the school setting. Others disagreed with their colleagues, but had no resources or training to address the root causes of students' misbehavior. As a result, students lacked the critical elements of positive school climate and teacher support that could help keep them stay in school.

The third, and closing section, addresses the larger social structures in which public schools were embedded and shows how the poorest and most vulnerable students were concentrated in schools like La Laguna and Cerro Verde. As the number of vulnerable students inside their walls multiplied, so, too, did the challenges teachers faced. There were more children with violent parents and guardians, more who worked in the market, more whose families had been traumatized by crime. To add to all this, there was only a very weak social welfare system in place to support schools as they strived to help these students.

Seen from this vantage point, Principal Delmy' vision of the school as a temporary refuge from the outside world seems less like a rousing call to action meant to inspire her teachers and more like capitulation. She had to give her students joy because she could not give them much of an education. And she had to return those children to hell each afternoon because she could not protect them from it.

"Pure Lies:" Systemic Shortfalls in Teaching and Learning

One afternoon at Cerro Verde two teachers sat in the hallway leaning back in their chairs as a second grader named Karla shuffled back and forth between them rubbing and pounding their necks and backs. "What a great massage!" Mrs. Marta murmured with her eyes closed, playing along with the girl's game. "Come join us!" Mrs. Corina called out to me. Soon after I sat down for my turn, Mr. Alvaro, one of the coordinators for the high school, pulled over a chair and reached out to hug Karla. "This girl is an excellent student, just like her sister!" he told me as he gave her a congratulatory squeeze.

Mr. Alvaro took the opportunity to tell me about the small rural village where Karla and her family lived and how each day she and her sister traveled up and down a big hill and then up and down another bigger hill just to get to the bus stop where they waited for a crowded, hour-long ride to school. "Up and down, up and down, every day!" he said animatedly. "And they never miss a day of school!" Karla's mom was working in the coffee harvest and Mr. Alvaro asked the girl if she was helping her mom pick coffee berries before school. "Yes," she answered shyly. Despite their incredible hardships, Mr. Alvaro remarked, Karla's parents valued an education and sacrificed so they could come to school every day.

"Are you going to go to high school?" Mr. Alvaro asked her. "Yes!" Karla replied cheerfully. "And college?" he asked. "Yes!" she affirmed with a large smile. "Or at least a technical degree, if you can't do college," Mr. Alvaro amended, referring to the three-year vocational programs which were perceived as more accessible and economical than universities. Karla nodded her head and went back to giving massages. As she turned away, Mr. Alvaro explained to me that he had seen a "big change" in children's and parents' aspirations over the last two decades. Before, he explained, parents only wanted their children to learn the basics–how to read and write and do

sums. “Now they come in,” he said enthusiastically, “and they want their kids to be professionals!”

Mr. Alvaro would know how much things had changed. He was one of several teachers at La Laguna and Cerro Verde–including more than half of those teaching middle school–who had logged upwards of thirty-five years in their profession and was nearing retirement. These teachers were young students when the government enacted its first ambitious educational reform act in 1968. The unprecedented size and scale of that reform had been made possible by donations from the United States and, like many such efforts during the Cold War, it was conceived as a way to bridge the extreme social inequalities that plagued El Salvador and stave off the societal upheaval that was rumbling on the horizon (Lindo-Fuentes and Ching, 2012). The threat in that era, at least for those holding the reins of the military dictatorship, were the working class, rural, and student groups organizing for democratic and social reforms. The military regime feared their influence and believed that expanding education to the country’s poorest citizens would meet some of their demands to modernize the nation and undermine those voices clamoring for a more radical approach (Lindo-Fuentes and Ching, 2012).

Many of the older teachers at La Laguna and Cerro Verde studied at the large, state-of-the-art teaching college that the government built as part of the 1968 reform to train the army of educators it needed to carry out its plan. There they learned progressive teaching methods and were steeped in a deep reverence for educating the poor (Lindo-Fuentes and Ching, 2012). When they arrived at the remote villages and towns to realize their mission, however, they encountered challenges that the reform fell far short of addressing and, in some instances, worsened. These contradictions remain to this day an essential part of its institutional legacy.

Among the more significant flaws that the 1968 reform introduced, almost unintentionally, was the double-shift. During this period, the student population was growing at a speed that outpaced the capacity of schools to hold them. So, in one deft move, the Ministry of Education divided the school day in two sessions and enabled twice as many students to fit in the same number of buildings. The double-shift was going to be phased out as the country, with U.S. funds, built a record number of schools during the 1970s (Lindo-Fuentes and Ching, 2012). But the phase-out never came. El Salvador's descent into chaos and violence during the late1970s and 80s halted school expansion and by the end of the war in 1992, the double-shift was firmly entrenched in the public school bureaucracy.

Part of the reason the double shift has become so intractable is because Salvadoran educators, like teachers almost everywhere, receive a low salary compared to other professionals. Officially they work one five-hour shift per day, a tradition which affords the largely female labor force some prized flexibility, but their status as part-time workers has also made it hard for teachers to win higher pay and to make ends meet. Many have adapted by getting second jobs; a choice which the Ministry of Education has tacitly encouraged. According to government statistics, 26% of Salvadoran public school teachers work the "double shift" and teach both morning and afternoon sessions (Hernández, 2014). But this figure doesn't take into account those teachers, like many I met, who have second jobs outside the public school system. Some teach one shift at a private school. Others have their own businesses or work part-time in other fields. One assessment found the number of teachers nationwide with more than one source of employment was 95% (Gavin et al., 2017: 31).

At La Laguna and Cerro Verde, most teachers–including seven of the ten I observed in middle school–were working two or more jobs. Several did the "double shift" and taught one

five-hour session in the morning and another in the afternoon. Others had their own businesses or worked part-time in non-teaching jobs. Secondary employment allowed teachers to earn a higher income, but their hectic schedules, which frequently stretched beyond 50 hours a week, took a serious toll on their performance.[50]

This context of teachers' schedules is important to understand because of the job that they are expected to do. Neither the 1968 reform, nor any that came after it, contemplated the time that teachers need to help their students learn. Instead, quite to the contrary, they loaded them with duties that took them out of the classroom and away from their students. For as long as teachers had been sent to remote villages and towns to end the scourge of illiteracy, they had been celebrated in El Salvador for their versatility–they were not just pedagogues, but also school managers, community organizers, social workers, cooks, and repairmen. With each passing decade, their responsibilities multiplied. Programs implemented in the 2000s, for example, which required schools to give students regular meals and free uniforms and school supplies, fell largely on teachers to develop and administer.

At Cerro Verde and La Laguna, teachers spent long stretches of their day dealing with the relentless needs of the school, be it helping prepare snacks for the children, filling out paperwork for the Ministry of Education, working on the budget, handing out uniforms, or taking on a maintenance project. They did these things mostly during class time. Class time was, in fact, what they had to steal even to meet personal needs like using the restroom or eating lunch, because, at least officially, their shift included no time for breaks. Nor did it permit any more than 15 minutes a day for lesson planning, grading, or meetings

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[50] I have not commented here about teachers who didn't work multiple jobs, but who did do substantial hours of child or elder care. One teacher, for example, told me that she babysat her grandchildren each morning so that her daughter could work. Another was the full-time caregiver for her severely ill and bedridden mother. These domestic roles are themselves another shift of work which deserve more attention.

Table 5.2 shows how the constant press on teachers' time affected the amount of instruction they gave their students. The table reflects the average time I observed students spent on various instruction and non-instruction activities at La Laguna and Cerro Verde during 90 observation sessions when I spent the entire session with just one group of students. The column titled "Stipulated Time" depicts what the law governing public education in El Salvador prescribed: It stipulated that students were to receive three hours and 45 minutes of instruction in their classrooms each day. One additional hour was reserved for recess, snack, assemblies, and the like (MINED, 2008).[51]

Table 5.2: Daily Time on Instruction and Other Activities at La Laguna and Cerro Verde

Activity	Stipulated Time	Average Observed Time	Time over / (under) stipulation
Classroom Instruction Time (all subjects)	**3 h, 45m**	**2 h, 13m**	**(-1 h, 32m)**
Core subjects (Math, Language Arts, Social Studies, Science, and English)	3 h, 27m	1 h, 51m	(-1 h, 36m)
Additional subjects (Physical Education and Art)	18m	22 m	+4m
Non-instruction time (total)	**1 h**	**2 h, 32m**	**+1 h, 32m**
Recess and Snack	40m	56m	+16m
Assemblies or other formative activities	20m	22m	+2m
Classroom announcements and attendance	0m	7m	+7m
Waiting for teacher who is late, left class, or is absent	0m	28m	+28m
Late start or early dismissal	0m	39m	+39m

The next column, labeled "Observed Time," shows how I found students and teachers actually spent their day. La Laguna and Cerro Verde were far from meeting the stipulations. Students spent less than two hours a day receiving the core academic subjects from their

[51] According to the Ministry's Institutional Norms (MINED 2008: 17 and 26), the weekly academic calendar should consist of 25 subject periods, each lasting 45 minutes. Middle school students were to receive five periods in Math, Language Arts, Social Studies, and Science; three periods in English, and two periods in Physical Education. Art was not part of the official middle school curriculum but was occasionally given at both schools.

teachers. All told, 1.5 hours of instruction time was lost each day–a striking 40% of the time that had been designated for learning. Rather than being engaged in classroom activities, students spent a lot of time idly waiting around or playing and hanging out at recess. The one-hour reserved for these types of non-instruction activities had ballooned at La Laguna and Cerro Verde to over 2.5 hours–more than half the school day.

Some of the lost instruction time was caused by relatively harmless oversights–recesses or assemblies that ran slightly over or classroom necessities like taking attendance that the Ministry hadn't stipulated in its norms. But most of it, over an hour each day, was lost because teachers were late, absent, or out of the classroom or the principal started school late or dismissed it early. As a sterilized statistic, losing more than an hour this way each day reflects very poorly on teachers and principals. There were certainly instances during my observations when I felt teachers were acting irresponsibly and shirking their duties. But, mostly, I found their excuses for not being in their classrooms legitimate. Principals frequently started school late or dismissed it early because teachers were in planning meetings. When teachers fell ill, there were no substitutes to replace them. The same was true when they had a doctor's appointment, a meeting with a loan officer, or a sick child or parent was home needing care. No one, not even the principal, gave a sideways look at teachers missing class for these reasons.

Sadly, even as stark as this shortfall in teaching and learning is, the gloomy picture Table 5.2 paints is incomplete. It measures the daily loss in instruction time, but does not account for the annual deficit caused by school cancellations. The Salvadoran public school calendar consists of 200 school days. La Laguna and Cerro Verde never had students in their classrooms for that number of days. They were frequently closed for teacher trainings, committee meetings, strikes, maintenance projects, weather events, or problems with the running water. Classes were also

cancelled for the entire day at least one or more times each month for school-sponsored social events, fundraising activities, or field trips. Assessments have found that between one-third and one-half of public school days–66 to 100 days a year–were lost for these diverse reasons (Joma, 2014; Picardo Joao, 2017; Schiefelbein et al., 2008).[52] Put that together with the information from Table 5.2 and students at La Laguna and Cerro Verde received *at best* 300 hours of instruction *each year*–less than 40% of the 750 hours that the curriculum called for.

Advisors and specialists at the Ministry of Education have been concerned about the shortfall in teaching and learning in public schools for decades (Picardo Joao, 2017). This finding adds a little more depth, but is hardly a surprise. A succession of conservative governments in the late 1990s and early 2000s ushered in major reforms to school management, teacher salaries, and training meant to address the problem. But their record of achievement was slim and unconvincing (PNUD, 2013). In 2009, the Salvadoran people elected a leftwing government for the first time. The winning campaign had championed educational reform and the vice president on the ticket, a former public school teacher, was named the Minister of Education–a sign from the new administration that public schools would be a major priority. Less than a year after taking office, the Ministry of Education unveiled an ambitious reform package. Its centerpiece proposal was to eliminate the double-shift and put children in school full-time, eight hours every day (MINED, 2009).

A little over three years later, and a month before Karla sat massaging her shoulders, Mrs. Corina enthusiastically described to me the trainings that she was receiving as part of the reform effort. She had been selected with two of her colleagues to participate in weekend sessions which

[52] Because I was in and out of the schools over the course of the academic year, I was unable to keep a full record of the number of cancellations. I cite here other reliable sources, but my observations of part of four school years confirm a very high number of cancellations for the reasons mentioned above.

were the first steps in informing and preparing teachers for the transition to the full school day. "It is a beautiful idea!" Mrs. Corina gushed. She shared with me how the Ministry wanted students to receive a more holistic education that put children's needs, interests, and development at the center. The trainers were keen to get students outside of the classroom learning in the community and nature. One idea that intrigued her Mrs. Corina was the suggestion that teachers should take advantage of local resources like public parks, museums, or cultural centers as well as local artisans and youth groups. She told me with nervous excitement that she had to start thinking about what she could do on this front and mentioned how one of the trainers recommended taking students to the public pool once a week for swim class.

When I asked how exactly such a scheme would work (Who would give the swimming lessons? Who would pay the admission fee?), Mrs. Corina began to scowl. "They're idealists," she said of the trainers. "They don't know anything about how a project like this is going to work or who is going to pay for it," she said before giving a sober history of her experience of educational reform.

Mrs. Corina had many reasons to scowl. Nearly forty years earlier as a student in teaching college she had received training in constructivist teaching methods and what she had learned then was not very different from the holistic methods the trainers were praising to her now. But decades had passed and she still had no Social Studies textbooks for the nearly 150 middle school students she taught each afternoon. Nor was there a library or a functioning computer lab on campus that students could use to investigate themes rather than copying them down during dictation. She also had no classroom aid to help her organize activities. All Cerro Verde had for support across the entire school were two custodians, a cook, and a secretary. La Laguna was even worse off with just one woman who did the cooking and cleaning. "We should be doing

these things for these children," Mrs. Corina said of the holistic education idealized in her training. "But it takes a lot of resources."

Mrs. Corina's concern about the Ministry's proposal turned into downright cynicism over the subsequent weeks. As she sat receiving her massage from Karla I asked how the training sessions were going. "I'm going to quit if they put in the full-day!" Mr. Alvaro, who was also attending the sessions, interjected. "Me, too!" Mrs. Corina agreed. The pair began a heated critique of the trainers who were forcing them to waste their Saturdays–unpaid–listening to the same pedagogical theories they had been hearing about for decades.

Both teachers supported the plan's noble aim of improving students' learning by increasing the number of hours at school. They were even willing to accept the proposal to increase their workload from 25 to 40 hours per week, effectively eliminating their ability to work two jobs. But the government made no promise of a commensurate increase in teacher salary. Nor was there much prospect for improved school infrastructure or additional support staff. These unresolved issues bewildered the teachers. Mrs. Corina reported in bemused disgust that the trainers recommended they come in on a voluntary basis before or after school to give extra-curricular activities. No one believed teachers had time for more unpaid work.

Over the next two years, I heard other teachers talk about the proposal as if it were a farce. "Pure lies," one teacher said. "A political stunt," another insisted. "Not based in reality," a third reported. The full day program had received multi-million dollar loans from the World Bank and donations from various foreign governments (Marín et al., 2010; World Bank, 2011). It was frequently touted by the country's leaders as a solution to violence and crime and positively featured in the Salvadoran press (e.g., La Prensa Gráfica, 2013).

But, once again, the government's support for its own reform came in words but not deeds. The leftwing administration that introduced it was never able to convince the legislature, at times dominated by its own party, to fund it. Instead, it depended on foreign donations, and when those ran out in 2018, the plan was mostly shelved (Alvarado, 2017). Its demise emblematic of a half-century of reform plans that began with good intentions and lofty goals, but never garnered the public support or political courage needed to challenge the status quo and fund them.

"Get rid of the laziness:" Boredom and the Teacher-Student Relationship

The 300 hours that teachers had to instruct their students, in addition to being quantitatively deficient, were severely deficient in quality as well. With so little time for lesson planning, teachers rarely came to class having prepared a set of activities to engage their students. Many days they did no more than skim over the textbook for a few minutes before starting the lesson. Lessons usually involved a long period of dictating or having students copy a passage of the textbook into their notebooks. All told, students spent a substantial portion of their 300 hours of instruction copying verbatim what they heard or read.

As might be expected, students got incredibly bored under these conditions. They often moaned as teachers began another round of dictation, complaining of how much their hand hurt from so much writing. "How bored I feel!" was a regular lament. Some fell asleep in class. Most got distracted. They chatted with their friends, did other assignments, and played with their phones. A handful tried to inject some mischievous fun into the day. They drummed their pencils on the desk and encouraged others to match their beat. Others poked the sides of their classmates and threw spit balls. A few students were masters at confusing the teacher with word play or steering the loquacious adults into a long off-topic conversations.

Teachers grew annoyed with classrooms full of unengaged and disruptive students who struggled to keep up with assignments. In interviews and conversations, their number one complaint about their job was student "apathy." Mrs. Corina said: "The most difficult part of my job is the lack of motivation [students] have to make something of themselves. It's like they don't understand that it is good for them to go to school… It's like this is recreation for them." Mrs. Caridad seconded that notion: "The difficult part [of my job] is that they come to school, not with the sentiment of wanting to make something of themselves, but rather as an escape." Mrs. Marta added: "The most difficult aspect for me is a negligent student, when for caprice or defiance or something like that… a student doesn't work [in the classroom], nor want to work."

The teachers at La Laguna and Cerro Verde were echoing what their colleagues throughout the country were also saying about their jobs. One local newspaper article during my fieldwork described a survey of teacher opinion which also found student apathy to be a principle concern. The headline blared "Schools in Agony due to Apathy and Violence" (Joma, 2013).

Teachers complained regularly about this issue to each other, but had no real strategy for addressing it. One day Mrs. Caridad and I were sitting in the teachers' lounge reviewing tests her students had taken the day before. Most everyone had done terribly. "They don't do the work. They have no study habits!" the teacher complained loudly to me. "I want to hit them on the head so they take this seriously." I tried to express sympathy for students I believed didn't do the work because they didn't know basic things like how to multiply or write a sentence on their own. Mrs. Caridad agreed and lamented how deficient her students were in these basic skills.

Mrs. Angelina, listening to our discussion from her seat nearby, interjected confidently: "Thanks to the rod[53] I learned the multiplication table!" She went on to describe how as a child

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[53] She used the word "vara" in Spanish, which means a stick used in beatings and can be translated to a rod, stick, cane, or switch.

she was hit by a teacher with a thick wooden stick each time she recited a multiple wrong. "The stick was like this!" she said, making a circle with her thumb and finger to show how big it was. Her family didn't object to her being beaten at school, she added. Instead, when she got home, her grandpa would hit her, too, as punishment for getting hit by the teacher. Mrs. Angelina was convinced that fear of the beatings was what forced her to learn. "Students today don't take school seriously because they don't fear the teacher like we did," she concluded.

Mrs. Caridad turned to me to explain: "It's because of how these kids are treated at home," she said, and then went on to argue that rough talk and threats were the only way to get youth to pay attention in class. Mrs. Angelina concurred: "It's a cultural thing." Mrs. Caridad then joked about how she was going to intimidate her students that afternoon with the same bad words she had heard their moms using with them: "Look *putas!* You better read this bullshit about the existential theater!" she feigned, before laughing so hard her eyes filled with tears.

The argument I had offered about how students needed to learn basic skills so they could keep up and be interested in the middle school curriculum had led to a defense of corporal punishment. Hitting children in school had been outlawed in El Salvador in the early-2000s, but the prohibition was still fodder for debate in the teachers' lounge.[54] Mrs. Angelina and others like her believed you had to scare students to motivate them–and that this need for physical discipline was owed to their "culture."

Mrs. Caridad, as I will describe in the next chapter, was a dedicated and an incredibly giving teacher. But her kind disposition didn't stop her from agreeing with this draconian view: "The laws have removed discipline from the school and from the home. That restricts us, because we can't educate them as we should," she said in an interview. "You can't even give a student a bad

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[54] I never witnessed corporal punishment, but several students told me that they had been hit with a yardstick by a teacher at other schools. One teacher also told me he knew of colleagues in other institutions who still did so.

look, because it's against the law. Much less punish them. That's why I think there are so many social problems, too. Because not even at home can you discipline them, because the children tell their mom they are going to put her prison."

Mrs. Caridad and Mrs. Angelina had made a common error in causal reasoning: Alarmed by the "social problems" affecting youth in El Salvador, they looked back at recent history and reasoned that a cultural shift away from harsh discipline (or what they imagined was one) had caused young people's rebelliousness. These women had very little, if any, knowledge of child psychology. Instead, they relied on their own experience. They had been hit as students and done well. So, it followed that this generation needed some tough love as well.

Other teachers despised the idea of corporal punishment and saw its effects on student motivation very differently. Mr. Santos explained: "Some years ago, when students were abused at school, when teachers kept rods and belts in their classroom… students didn't want to come to school. It was a place that they hated coming… because teachers hit them, they tortured them." Mr. Santos said the solution to students' apathy was to "stimulate them, motivate them, treat them well; treat them in the best way possible so that they feel good at school, so that when vacations come, they don't like to go on vacation."

I saw Mr. Santos' approach to motivation in action several times. One day two months before the end of the school year he stopped class and asked everyone to close their notebooks and listen. Then he warned that many of them were failing and needed to work harder to get their grades up or they would flunk. "Get rid of this laziness that is screwing with us!" he exclaimed, using the same Salvadoran slang his students did. "If you were wealthy children I would tell you, 'Don't study! You already have everything you need. Take it easy.' But for us, who have nothing, for us, the only way out for the poor is an education!"

Then he turned to individual students to ask them about their parents' jobs. "Don't you know the sacrifice your parents are making? Some risk their lives every day to give you the chance to study. Don't you know how hard it is to work in a factory? Ask your mom and dad what it's like to be on their feet all day and they pay them nothing! Sometimes moms come here directly from the market…tired and sweaty from the work, humble people, asking me, 'How did my child do?'… Imagine what they feel when you flunk. I see it in their faces." After touching their conscience, he then appealed to their pride. "We are intelligent people. If you go to the United States or Europe you will find Salvadorans who have arrived with nothing and today they have it all. We are intelligent! Get rid of that laziness! There are only two months to go! Do you think you can do it?!"

I was rapt by the moving speech but no one else seemed to be. The student response to his question was inaudible. Mr. Santos had to ask it again to get the "yes" he wanted to hear. On many other occasions I would watch him try to motivate students one-on-one and was always moved by his compassion and eloquence. But his students just nodded along or stared at the floor and rarely changed their behavior. Two months later, final report cards showed how few students he could reach: Of the 34 who had enrolled at the beginning of the year, six students had dropped out, eight had flunked, and nine had barely passed with an average of 50%, a final grade that was more a reflection of his reluctance to flunk them than their effort. Only 11 students, one-third of the group, were able to do their part to succeed academically.

My point here is not to say Mr. Santos was wrong. The support he gave his students may have been ineffective but it was greatly superior to the authoritarian one advocated by Mrs. Angelina and Mrs. Caridad. The harsh treatment that those teachers believed their students warranted was counterproductive. It eroded trust between teachers and their students and

contributed to a hostile school climate. In the next chapter I will show how such conduct pushed and eventually triggered some students to drop out.

The problem with Mr. Santos' approach was that he had no way to follow up. He had neither the time, training, nor resources that were needed to address the reasons why his students were falling behind, off-task, or disruptive in class. My initial argument that students were acting this way because they needed remedial help was not something he could act on in any sustained or effective fashion. Nor could he address the issues at the root of their mental health and behavioral problems. As the teacher said in an interview, "You try, as best as you can, to give the best of yourself for these children–children that you know are the most deprived in our society–but the limitations that you find yourself in… it is defrauding."

"These types of children:" Normalizing Neglect

Just before the bell was set to ring at La Laguna a distraught first grader ran crying into the teachers' lounge. In a flash she fell into the open arms of her teacher, burying her head in the woman's chest and sobbing loudly. Trailing on her heels was Mr. Hernandez in a panic. Over the loud confusion of the girl's waling and the teachers' concern, he tried to tell everyone what he had just witnessed. Eventually in fits and starts he was able to explain that the young child's mother was dropping her off outside of the school when the woman became angry and suddenly punched the girl hard in the face.

The first grader was too hysterical to add to what Mr. Hernandez had said, but she managed to nod a confirmation of his account. The other female teachers and I searched our bags and purses for candies or cookies that might help settle her down a bit and then congregated out of earshot in the lobby to discuss what had happened and what to do. After confirming who the mother was, one teacher pondered whether she should be reported to social services since she

had been warned before against hitting her child. No one in the group was responsible for such decisions and, the bell ringing, we retreated to our assigned spots for the opening assembly and left the matter to the principal.

When recess came almost an hour later the first grader was still in tears in the lounge being comforted and brought food by her teacher. Everyone else avoided the room. A group of teachers taking their break in the lobby informed me that the principal and the girl's teacher had decided together against contacting child protective services on her behalf. I was told that doing so would have led to the mother's arrest and jail time. Since the girl and her siblings had no one else to care for them, this was deemed unacceptable. They had reasoned that leaving the children alone in a violent neighborhood was more dangerous than leaving them with a violent parent.

Perhaps to soothe my conscious, or their own, one teacher explained to me earnestly that it was normal for parents to hit their children in "these types of families." The others concurred. Mr. Hernandez even added that his mother hit him like that when he was a child and he turned out fine. The memory didn't seem to please him much and he awkwardly walked away.

There were no good options. The systems in El Salvador to prevent child abuse and protect the abused from further harm were extremely weak. As mentioned earlier, La Laguna, like most every public school, had no social worker or psychologist who could take on the case and make an assessment of the mother. The psychologist assigned to the school at the local government office for human services was responsible for dozens of institutions and took weeks to respond to requests for help. Getting her involved could also be risky. The state-run institutions for abused children were widely criticized and recent reports in the press had uncovered numerous cases of children being neglected and abused by staff. One exposé even found a child sex trafficking ring

being run from one institution (La Prensa Gráfica, 2014b). Starting a process that ended with the girl and her siblings in a place like this was the worst outcome imaginable.

The teachers were forced to choose what they felt was least bad for the girl. But returning her to her mother at 5:30 p.m. that evening brought no one any comfort. No teacher presumed to argue that the woman's abusive behavior would stop. Instead, they resorted to normalizing it, making it okay for "these types" of children to be hit. They found comfort in the fictional notion that these children were tougher than other kids, and maybe, because they had suffered so much, had acquired some superpower that made them impervious to more abuse.

Most of them knew these children were no superheroes. Mr. Hernandez walked away displeased by his own words. But indulging in this fiction helped teachers to avert their eyes from what would likely happen to the girl at home. It was part of the same mental architecture that Principal Delmy engaged when she envisioned schools as a joyful refuge from hell. These fanciful notions helped them survive their jobs.

There were other moments, however, when teachers became deeply outraged by how little the broader society cared about public schools and the children inside them. One day I found Mr. Santos in his classroom upset with an interview the Minister of Education, Carlos Canjura, had given in the newspaper that morning. He showed me the paper. "Look what he says, here!" he told me pointing to a part of the interview where the journalist asked the Minister if his children studied in public schools. His response, which so angered Mr. Santos, was as follows: "All my children have studied in private institutions… no reasonable parent of means would put their child into a public school system that is so unstable" (quoted in La Prensa Gráfica, 2014a: online edition). The notion that schools were "unstable" didn't appear anywhere else in the interview,

which instead was about the Minister's plans to improve teaching quality. He almost certainly used it as a euphemism for "bad."

Minister Canjura was doing what nearly all middle-class and wealthy parents living in the metropolitan region around San Salvador did for their children. Even working class families sent their children to private school when they earned enough to afford it, although ones that tended to be much cheaper and of questionable quality.[55] In Grecia, for example, 50% of the student population attended a private institution (MINED, 2014).[56] Essentially, private schools were an escape hatch that allowed better-off families to bypass the public education system. As they fled, schools like Cerro Verde and La Laguna became more concentrated with students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Mr. Santos viewed Minister Canjura's comments as legitimizing this two-class system. "He is saying that only poor parents or crazy parents put their children in public schools," he said to me bitterly. The teacher believed that middle class professionals–the same ones that were the most important segment of the coalition that brought Minister Canjura and his leftwing party to power five years earlier–needed to be rallied to the cause of public education. He saw these professionals as holding the fate of public schools in their hands: If they committed to investing in them, the teacher said, there was hope. Sending their children to public schools would be the clearest sign of that commitment. But instead of inspiring the professional class to do this, the Minister suggested it was crazy. "It hurts, coming from him," Mr. Santos said. He felt abandoned by the political party for which he had fought for decades. "They don't want to send their own

[55] There is more that needs to be investigated here. Private schools promise a higher quality education, but they are not well regulated. Some may also take advantage and prey on vulnerable people. I interviewed several young people, for example, who went into debt to pay private tuition. Some private schools offered them credit which they then had to pay back over multiple years with interest. This situation seems ripe for abuse.

[56] My calculation of the makeup of the student population in Grecia from the national school census.

children to public schools because they don't believe in them. They aren't going to fight for public education. Their plans are just a fiction!"

Mr. Santos and the other teachers at La Laguna and Cerro Verde had reason to feel abandoned. El Salvador had concentrated its poorest and most vulnerable students in the schools least capable of helping them. And the teachers had no one to turn to for help. There was no social welfare system behind them to ameliorate the hardships their students brought inside. Nor was there any no influx of fiscal or moral support from the government and the professional class that determined elections. It felt like a fiction to believe such a system would change. With hope for change expired, believing in superhero children was the only option left for relief.

PART II: CONFLICTING SIGNALS

6. ADRIFT AT SCHOOL

Mrs. Caridad was spending a rare moment zoned out in the teachers' lounge, with no one demanding her attention, when the phone buzzing in her pocket jolted her into the present. As soon as she answered, Deisy, one of her sixth graders, explained in a rush of words that she was being punished by her mom and not allowed to come to school that day because she forgot to pack her little brother's shoes. Mrs. Caridad put the phone back in her pocket and frowned as she considered what to do next. She had already warned Deisy's mother many times about her daughter's absences and threatened to come find her at the market if she missed class again.

The teacher turned to me smiling, and with her characteristic amusement in the face of frustration, asked cheerfully, "Want to go to the market?" I agreed and she hurried off to tell her sixth graders that she was giving them a "free hour" to finish up their homework assignments. As we walked the ten minutes it took to reach the market she filled me in on Deisy's case.

"She is a long-suffering child," she said. "Her mom exploits her, makes her take care of little children, and hits her often." Deisy's family lived nearly an hour from school in a small rural village on the other side of the hills bordering Grecia. Their house had no running water and Deisy rose early to haul water from the stream. Then she ground corn to make tortillas, prepared breakfast, and readied her younger siblings for the bus ride to join their mother, who had arrived in town before dawn, at their vegetable stand in the market. There Deisy hawked tomatoes, onions, and peppers for a few hours before going to school in the afternoon. Deisy's labors didn't stop there. During the planting season from May through August, Deisy spent mornings and weekends working her family's half-acre plot of corn and beans.

Deisy's responsibilities on the farm, in the market, and at home left their mark on the fifteen-year-old. She often showed up at school in dirty clothes and muddy shoes. "We have had to give Deisy at least three uniforms," Mrs. Caridad exclaimed, "so that she can manage to come to school somewhat clean. She is always showing up filthy and wrinkled." Deisy's hair was also greasy and matted and the teacher recalled cringing as she leaned in one day to hug her when she saw her head crawling with lice. Mrs. Caridad taught her to polish her shoes, bought her lice shampoo to wash her hair, and took her to a salon for a haircut so that she could come to school presentable and "no one would notice" the dirty place she came from.

Deisy's appearance was easier to fix than the behavioral challenges she brought with her. The teacher acknowledged that Deisy's peers easily got under her skin. "The other girls make fun of her, they say '*bicha cantonera, bicha campesina',*" Salvadoran slang for country girl, "They call her all types of things," the teacher regretted. Mrs. Caridad constantly had to intervene and reprimand the harassers.

But Deisy's temper sometimes exploded without notice. One day while I was in the sixth grade classroom another student sauntering passed Deisy's desk called her a *"bicha peluda"* (savage). Deisy immediately pushed back her chair, ran after the girl and grabbed her hair, wrenching her backward. She then jumped on her back and pushed her face into the ground. The two scuffled on the floor while the other students egged them on and Mrs. Caridad rushed toward them, pushing aside desks and onlookers and shouting for them to stop. The fight broke up and, Mrs. Caridad, perturbed and flustered, warned the girls not to fight, but neither disciplined nor counseled either one any further. Everyone got back to work as if nothing had happened.

Deisy's academic performance was another sore spot. Her handwriting looked like that of a student in second or third grade and she struggled mightily with math. There were some bright

points in her performance. Deisy was very diligent in the classroom about staying on task and turned in most assignments. When other girls were goofing off and wasting time, Deisy kept to herself and focused on getting things done. But the quality of her work was meager.

“The problem is,” Mrs. Caridad said of Deisy’s academic struggles, “that she is a malnourished child and she lacks affection.” The teacher saw Deisy’s mother at the root of why her daughter had so many academic “deficiencies,” as she termed it. In making Deisy work so much at home and in the market, the mother had caused her to miss out on learning. “What she needs is attention,” the teacher insisted. We were on the way to the market so Mrs. Caridad could give her just that.

We found Deisy hidden among row upon row of wilting vegetables, one arm thrown over a dirty table and her tired head resting atop. A languid baby, naked from the waist down, sat on her lap, sweating. “Let’s go, *niña*!” Mrs. Caridad barked with a chuckle. Deisy shot up in surprise. An amusing scene followed as the harried girl tried to figure out what to do with her wailing, half-naked nephew. “Bring him with you!” Mrs. Caridad declared. “I would be too embarrassed to go to school with him!” Deisy protested. “He doesn’t even have a diaper!”

Eventually she tracked down her sister and we left the baby with her as we made our way out of the market and over to La Laguna. At the school entrance, Deisy bounded off to join her classmates at recess and Mrs. Caridad paused to watch her with a look of pleasure. The rescue mission was successful and for a moment the girl seemed to be where she was supposed to be. But the safe harbor Mrs. Caridad hoped to give Deisy at school would not last long.

Unmoored Rescues

Deisy’s poverty was one strong headwind against her academic development. But, as the last chapter depicted, La Laguna had its own whirlwind of forces battering against students like her.

This chapter follows the next part of the process and describes in three parts how these forces push students out of school.

The first section examines what happens to students deprived of learning. It shows classrooms where students who can't keep up with the curriculum outnumbered those who can. Being "deficient" was not a guarantee failure. Teachers made accommodations so most everyone could pass. But not knowing combined with boredom stifled students' motivation. The "deficient" tended to marginalize themselves even further by not trying or asking for help. As a result, they learned even less and lost confidence in themselves. Some "deficient" students were able to muddle by and pass by copying their peers and taking advantage of teachers' leniency. But others, having lost the motivation to keep up appearances or realizing it was certain they would flunk, escaped embarrassment and left.

The second section describes consequences of a hostile school climate. Teachers regularly rebuked and humiliated students in front of their peers. Teachers may have believed they were controlling student misbehavior with this conduct, but this section shows how it drove some students to double-down on the actions and attitudes that were getting in them in trouble in the first place. Teachers' contempt contributed to these students losing motivation, skipping class, and becoming more disruptive. And it pushed some students directly to leave.

The third section describes the often hostile and violent interactions between peers. Many students, like Deisy, were easily provoked by insults and some of them got into escalating fights that earned them suspensions or other severe disciplinary procedures. Other students ignored their peers' provocations but ended up being repeatedly harassed and bullied. Students found little relief from teachers who were busy with other issues and reluctant to get involved. When students feared the situation would only get worse, they left school to avoid more harm.

These were the signals students received from their report cards, teachers, and peers that made many feel like school wasn't the place for them. These young people, as shown in Chapter four, were often already dealing with problems from home and their communities. Schools compounded these hardships by making them feel incapable, unwanted, and marginalized. But, as the closing to this chapter shows, even when schools added to their adversities, these youth didn't give up believing that an education could make their lives better. Many who were pushed out of school returned to try again, wary of spending a lifetime as a dropout, and hoping that the problems they had suffered at school were just passing anomalies.

Achievement Signals

News that Mrs. Teresa was going to give the monthly exam as soon as she arrived set off a wave of furious page turning across her seventh grade classroom at La Laguna. Students rifled through their spiral notebooks as fast as they could, counting up the number of assignments their teacher had stamped "revised/ completed." Only a small group was made happy by the search. These girls had found at least three stamps on the homework assignments for that month–a feat which meant they would be excused from the test and given an extra recess. Another group of girls was frantic. They had one or two stamps and, after begging their gleeful peers to lend them their notebooks, were now copying as much as they could. The rest of the students were grimly subdued. They had done almost nothing all month and did nothing now, steeling themselves instead for the test to come.

Mrs. Teresa walked in ten minutes late and announced what everyone already knew: "Today there is an evaluation," she said while striding across the room. "Those of you with three stamps won't take the test." The students on the winning side of this deal let out a cheer and noisily rose

from their seats to line up at Mrs. Teresa's desk and get their notebooks checked. The teacher counted up the stamps of each one, accepting along the way the excuses of a few who fell short of the requirement but who had shown themselves responsible on other occasions and had done (or copied) enough to earn her favor on this day. When the line was finally empty, nine girls had exited and were soon outside chatting, laughing, drinking soda, and playing basketball just feet away from the classroom's open windows. Sixteen sullen students were left behind.

Mrs. Teresa rose from her desk and instructed the test-takers to move into seats as far away from each other as possible so no one could copy. Then she wrote the exam on the board: A set of five exercises adding or subtracting fractions. She gave the students a blank sheet of paper and told them not to use their notebooks nor talk to each other, but she did encourage them to ask her questions. Five girls finished the test in a half-hour or so and went up one-by-one to have Mrs. Teresa check their exams. Each one had made errors, but, when the teacher pointed these out, they were able to follow her prompts and correct what they had done wrong.

The remaining eleven students were more challenged by the exam and less apt to understand Mrs. Teresa's suggestions. The teacher earnestly tried to help them, calling each student up to her desk and patiently coaching them through the steps to resolve the problems. But her efforts to steer the girls toward the answer was halted repeatedly by their inability to do basic math. Sara could not answer "thirty divided by six" and, after several failed attempts, the teacher sent her back to her desk to try on her own. Lucia struggled to do a sum. It took Helen multiple guesses to answer "fifteen divided by five," and, after she finally landed on the right answer, she and Mrs. Teresa shared a happy moment of relief.

Sofia had no such luck. When Mrs. Teresa called her up and asked for her to state the multiples of three, she was silent. "What do you need to multiply three by to get nine?" the

teacher prompted. Sofia mumbled the wrong answer. Another student nearby helped her out, but her confusion worsened from there. “What do you need to multiply three by to get 18?” Mrs. Teresa continued. “Seven,” Sofia said. “What is three times seven?” Sofia didn’t know and after a long pause the teacher gave the answer. This back and forth went on for several minutes with Sofia answering none of the teacher’s questions correctly. Several students had come up and were waiting impatiently around the teacher’s desk. They moaned at Sofia’s wrong answers and interrupted with their own questions. Exasperated by the commotion, Mrs. Teresa sent Sofia off to work on her own.

The teacher had not set out to stump Sofia or the other test-takers. She knew that many of her students couldn’t keep up with her class lectures or do the homework assignments on their own. She structured class time so that most of it was spent working on these assignments and she could go around the room answering their questions and helping them one-on-one. But she had 32 students and very little time for each of them. Plus the girls needing the most help often didn’t ask for it. They preferred to hide their ignorance rather than reveal it by asking questions. With no remedial specialist on staff, there was no one to draw these students out and work with them patiently to master these basic skills. Mrs. Teresa had neither the expertise nor the time to do it. So they hid, and the teacher let them do almost nothing, until test day.

The monthly exam was Mrs. Teresa’s way of giving these “deficient” students an opportunity to erase a month’s worth of zeros and earn a passing grade with their dignity intact. The five questions that she put on the board that day were much, much simpler than the exercises she had assigned as homework. She would tell me later they were equivalent to fifth grade-level math. But her attempt to build an off-ramp from failure ran up against their ignorance of the

multiplication table–a skill so basic that they should have mastered it years before. No matter how many hints and nudges Mrs. Teresa gave them, they couldn't get over this last hurdle.

After one hour and 19 minutes–two class periods and a recess–the time Mrs. Teresa had to give them for the test ran out and she was forced to collect the exams from nine girls who still hadn't finished. One-third of her classroom had failed this simple test.

The tally of incompletes would grow even larger a month later when the teacher discovered that three students who had been absent on test day had never taken it. She kept these girls behind to take the test while the rest of the class went to PE. They sat in seats right in front of her desk and wrote down the problems. But they did nothing but scribble and fidget from there. Eva, extremely agitated, violently swung her crossed legs under the table. None of them tried to resolve the problems nor did they ask the teacher a question.

After nearly one hour of uncomfortable silence, Mrs. Teresa looked at their papers and noted that they had done nothing. "We have gone through an entire trimester and it cannot be possible that you don't know anything!" the teacher despaired. "This is your job," she lectured. "You have to treat it seriously." She told them to go to their backpacks, bring back their notebooks, and look through them for examples of how to resolve the exam.

The girls retrieved their notebooks and, after several minutes aimlessly flipping the pages, Mrs. Teresa called them up one by one to her desk. Each girl stood there with slumped shoulders unable to answer basic questions. "What is the denominator?" the teacher asked. Head shake no. "Do you know what a numerator is?" No. "Are you going to multiply, add, or subtract here?" The wrong answer. After looking through the disorderly scribblings in their notebooks: "Why haven't you written down the examples I gave in class?" Shifting feet.

Eva began to cry as she stood next to the teacher. "You might think that I like failing people," Mrs. Teresa said to her softly as she turned over the pages in the girl's notebook. "But that is not the case, I don't like failing people, it makes me feel bad." Eva tried to wipe the fat tears streaming down her cheeks away, but they kept coming. "What can I do?" the teacher asked pitifully. "You haven't done any of the homework. This exam is so easy, but you can't do it. What am I supposed to do?" Eva sobbed, unable to control her emotion. "I know you and I have had our problems," Mrs. Teresa continued, referring to Eva's frequent infractions of the dress code. "But it won't make me happy to fail you."

The teacher stopped her lecture and looked at the distraught girl. "Do you have a textbook?" she asked. Eva shook her head no. "I am going to lend you my textbook. I want you to spend the rest of the period and recess copying down all the homework assignments that you have not done and by Friday, I want you to bring me that homework so that I can give you a grade." Mrs. Teresa showed Eva the exercises in the textbook to copy and the girl went back to her seat and started writing them down. But when Friday came she was not there. She didn't do the homework and sometime in the coming weeks she dropped out.

She would not be the only one to leave because her grades were too low to pass. Sofia, after a few more failed exams, realized the chances that she would earn a promotion to eighth grade were slim and stopped coming. "I was always in problems [at school]," she explained in an interview. "I didn't do the work, I was getting zeros, and I was behind in every subject. I didn't like that, so that's why I left."

Elena was a case in point. She remembered her sixth grade teacher asking her and a group of others in front of the whole class why they bothered coming since they were doing so poorly. Afterward she thought to herself: "Why should I go? [I won't] any longer. Better for me to quit

and go to work." Saul had a similar experience. "When I saw how badly I was doing [with my grades], I didn't want to come anymore… I said to myself, I'm not going to pass, it's better for me to get a job instead." A report card instigated Steven's decision to leave. "In math, I started to get failing grades. In social studies, I wasn't keeping up. Later, my grades dropped in everything… I remember in the second trimester… my highest grade was a six, and I started thinking about not going anymore, that it was better not to." He, too, left school and went to work full time.

The students quoted here have scrubbed their decision of its emotion and painted it as rational calculation to spend their time more wisely at work. But Eva's tears showed failing was not just a reason to embrace logic. It was emotional. Sofia, for example, was in despair after her decision: "At the beginning of each week, I would feel this huge desire to go to school. I would go put on my uniform and then take it off again and again! It was a huge problem for me, I couldn't decide if I should go or not go, until a month had gone by, and [my mom and I] went to ask if I could come back to receive class, and [the principal] said no."

But the final act of leaving wasn't the only emotional part. For weeks, months, and in many cases, years, students had felt embarrassed and frustrated in the classroom. Pablo articulated this in his interview: "I felt like I didn't understand anything [at school] and when I would look for help it was like everyone had agreed that they weren't going to help me," he said. "Even the teacher, I started to feel like she didn't like me, that she didn't want to explain things to me." Pablo went through eighth grade feeling like this and ended up flunking. He decided to try again, but his academic problems deepened the next year and he quit. "I felt frustrated, I didn't feel capable, like I wasn't good enough to get ahead [at school]. I was disillusioned with myself, so I opted for leaving."

Report cards, issued every three to four months, often brought this type of reckoning. Students with failing grades often did a rough calculation of what grades they needed to earn in the subsequent trimesters to pass.[57] If passing was mathematically impossible, they usually dropped out. If there was a chance to pass, they had to decide if they were willing or able to work hard enough to get their grades up. Most teachers gave their students plenty of extra chances. (Case in point, Mrs. Teresa promoted ten of the twelve girls who didn't finish that exam meant for fifth graders to eighth grade.) But they had to put in a show of effort and swallow the embarrassment, frustration, and injured pride that comes with failing grades.

Being a low achiever was no fun–these students felt teachers criticizing them, they sensed peers looking down on them, they feared the backlog of unfinished assignments. Giving up and dropping out brought relief from these emotions. And it also freed them to pursue work–or other endeavors that their families valued like household chores or caring for siblings–that could restore some of their self-regard. Sometimes, even when low achievers could pass, they opted for these emotional rewards and quit school.

Teacher Signals

Thirteen minutes after the bell rang, Mrs. Linda came into her boisterous classroom of seventh grade girls at La Laguna holding a cup of coffee and apologizing for having had no other time to eat lunch. She put down her mug and was fetching the classroom's five textbooks from the bookcase when she realized how the students were seated. They had formed too many groups

[57] Teachers often cajoled students with these calculations. For example, if a student received a three (out of 10) during each of the first two trimesters in math, he would need a nine in the final trimester to pass the class with an average of 5. Teachers didn't discouraged students after doing this calculation unless it was mathematically impossible for them to pass. Rather, they tried to motivate them, sometimes giving them the chance to make up work or do extra credit.

for the number of books she had. So she made the girls move their bodies and tables into larger constellations, a halting effort that left them simmering with annoyance.

After the new arrangements were settled, Mrs. Linda assigned a two-page story from the textbook for the groups to read aloud to each other. The seven girls I was sitting with moaned in unison; they hated reading aloud. One girl, Paloma, begged for me to do it for them, but I had bronchitis and could barely talk. I coughed out a series of excuses, but Paloma kept insisting. Ximena came to my defense. “It’s not fair to ask her to read, let her be,” she told Paloma sternly, before taking on the role of reader herself.

Ximena had dark skin and expressive eyebrows that she arched almost perpetually in disdain. I had met her the year before while observing her sixth grade classroom where she had been made to sit in the front row with a group of three other girls that the teacher called the “troublemakers.”[58] These girls played up to their moniker. One once jumped on her desk to show off her twerking skills to cheering classmates. Another one pretended to grind the teacher as the older woman stood unaware with her back to the class writing on the white board. Ximena was the wit. She gave a running critique of her accomplices’ performances, tossing out vicious barbs with a straight-face that doubled her friends over in laughter. Fearing humiliation, I kept my distance. But on this day I was grateful she was in my group and commanded authority.

The volume in Mrs. Linda’s classroom grew steadily toward earsplitting. Everyone was angry. The unlucky students who had been goaded into reading were lashing out at a text they didn’t understand and words they struggled to pronounce. Their peers ceaselessly complained that they couldn’t make out what they were saying. A chorus of girls yelling “quiet” rang around the classroom as the most annoyed students begged for silence. After several minutes of noisy

[58] The word in Spanish that the teacher used was “pleitistas,” which in legal parlance means litigious, but also is used to describe someone who is aggressive or quarrelsome.

frustration, Mrs. Linda yelled in exasperation, “I know third graders who can read better than this!” She read the story aloud herself, finishing rapidly and with little explanation, before instructing them to recopy and answer the “Reading Comprehension” questions in their notebooks. Then she disappeared into a stack of papers on her desk.

Ximena laid the textbook in the middle of the group and we got to work. As one might imagine, however, sharing one book between the eight of us provoked the girls’ already high frustrations with this activity. Catalina whined incessantly that she couldn’t see and kept taking the book from where Ximena had placed it. This annoyed everyone else and Ximena would scold her and take it back. After several minutes of this back and forth, Ximena looked straight at Catalina and said fiercely: “Don’t screw with me anymore or I’m going to screw you!” Catalina’s eyes widened and she peered at her classmate dumbfounded. Ximena went back to copying and everyone, but Catalina, followed her lead.

Near replicas of this scene played out every time I participated in Mrs. Linda’s class. The following week, after a similar set of events, Ximena screamed at Catalina to “shut up,” provoking Catalina to stand up and yell “market girl!”–an insult meant to embarrass Ximena because she worked as a street vendor. The week after that Ximena got into a beef with another pair of girls in her group who were trying to annoy her by humming a song while she dictated. Ximena endured nearly an hour of their interruptions until she suddenly rose up and slammed the book on the table. “You’re not going to screw with me anymore!” she yelled at the two girls and then walked away, taking the book with her.

Mrs. Linda didn’t notice the particulars of these events. In part that was because they were so normal–similar conflicts were erupting in near every group. But she also wasn’t paying attention. Her lectures were invariably short and followed by assignments which required students to copy

large sections of the textbook together in groups–how these groups worked or the learning experience they fostered were not something the teacher concerned herself about. She was usually busy with paperwork, school projects, or personal errands. What she did concern herself with in the classroom, however, was the noise and Ximena was certainly loud.

One day as the teacher tried in vain to quiet everyone down, she spotted Ximena among the many engaged in conversation and oblivious to her commands. She rose and pointed a finger at the girl. “Demon child!” she yelled. “What is your name?” The entire room grew quiet and Ximena looked at the teacher squarely for a moment before calmly answering her. “If you are one of those special needs children,” Mrs. Linda snarled, “you should have mentioned it to me beforehand!” She then wrote Ximena’s name down in her gradebook and ordered her outside.

The degree of offensiveness in Mrs. Linda’s rebuke that day was unusual. Teachers upbraiding a student in front of the whole class, however, was not. Such moments were regular occurrences at La Laguna and Cerro Verde. Mr. Santos once seethed at a student named Gael who had interrupted him. “You’re a clown. Get your things and get out of my class! I don’t have to put up with you, that’s what your parents are for!” Mrs. Corina, annoyed that students were off-task as she dictated, unleashed on Hugo after asking him a question that he couldn’t answer. “I don’t understand,” Hugo admitted, trying to defuse the situation. “You don’t understand anything!” the teacher barked at him in a tone so laced with disgust that the nonchalant Hugo was taken aback. As she turned away some of Hugo’s friends began ribbing him and as he tried to quiet them, the teacher quickly spun around and exploded again: “Shut up boy! You are so rude! Don’t you know that learning means having culture?”

Ximena, Gael, and Hugo were not the only ones off-task or misbehaving in the classroom when their teachers lashed out at them. A crescendo of students talking out of turn, goofing off,

or roughhousing had been building toward chaos in the moments before Mrs. Linda, Mr. Santos, and Mrs. Corina picked on them to berate. Each of these students, however, had a reputation among their teachers that trailed them: Ximena had long since been labeled a "troublemaker," Gael a "degenerate," and Hugo a "bum."[59] When things went awry in the classroom–as they almost always did because of the systemic problems mentioned in the previous chapter–teachers, like heat-seeking missiles, tended to take out their frustrations on students previously branded as problems.

Students subjected to this harsh treatment often felt they were being singled out unfairly by their teachers. Ximena, for example, described in a focus group her frustration with her sixth grade teacher's prejudice against her. "When she would leave [the classroom], we would all go off the rails. Me too, I would participate, I have to accept that," she explained. "But when I [did it], she would scold me. I would stay quiet [while she punished me], everyone else would be writing all over the whiteboard, and she wouldn't say a thing to them. I didn't like that she would be so strict with me and with everyone else, she wouldn't say anything."

After teachers upbraided them, students did what they could to save face. Some, like Ximena, showed no emotion but steely pride. The brasher students thumped their chests, shot up their middle finger, or gave a gang sign as they walked out the door. The nimblest made a joke of it. Gael, in response to Mr. Santos' reference to his parents putting up with him, quipped: "I don't have any!" A sad reminder of his troubled family life. Hugo answered Mrs. Corina's critique of his rudeness with composed irony: "We are very poorly educated, mam," accepting her premise about his misbehavior, but also shooting blame for it back at educators like her.

[59] The Spanish words the teachers repeatedly used to describe these students were "pleitista," "perverso," and "haragán."

Some students, however, were not pacified by saving face. They found their teachers' rebukes intolerable. This was the case for Lucia who exclaimed in an interview: "I hated the teacher! I couldn't get along with her nor could she with me… It was like she looked down on me… She would scold me for anything I did… It would make me so angry!" Her response, like many others angered by their teachers, was to double down on other troublesome behaviors. For Lucia, that was skipping class: "When I had math class," she said, "I almost never went."

When Lucia was in eighth grade, she was absent for around three weeks after her grandmother became gravely ill and died. Lucia wanted to return to school after the tragedy passed, but the situation with her teacher had soured to such a degree that her mom convinced her not to return. Her mother explained to me in an interview, and Lucia concurred, that she felt it was better for her to drop out and try again the next year with a different teacher.

Gustavo also decided to leave school in sixth grade after nearly two years of problems with his teacher. "I left because I couldn't stand the teacher! She was so strict!" he explained in an interview. "If you didn't do the homework, she wouldn't let you go to recess… If you didn't bring a handkerchief or wear a belt, she would make us sweep the hallway for a month. So I got bored of this and I wanted to leave." But before dropping out, he chose to rebel by not participating in class or doing assignments. "I was terrible that year and did nothing, nothing, nothing! I only half-scribbled [stuff]… She punished me all the time. I almost never got to go to recess." Gustavo quit before the year was out.

Some students weathered their teachers' contempt and stayed in school. But many were pushed by the harsh treatment they received to engage in other behaviors–like skipping, losing motivation to do assignments, acting out, or disrupting class–that snowballed into a reinforcing cycle of problems at school.

Peer Signals

The vice principal took the microphone at the end of the Monday Civics Assembly. The first through ninth graders at Cerro Verde had been lined up for a half hour in the hot sun around the courtyard watching the same presentation they saw every week: the flag marched out by the honor guard, an old stereo playing a scratchy version of the long national anthem, an elementary student garbling the patriotic "Poem for the Pupil." The gruff vice principal was not interested in ceremony. He was annoyed. "I know that most of you have heard about the fight that happened last week," he said. After some rumbling giggles from the crowd, he continued. "I am disappointed, not only in the fighting, but in the reaction of the rest of you!" He described with disgust how the students who were nearby when the fight broke out, instead of trying to stop it, took out their phones to film it. "Like it was a joke!" he exclaimed. He went on to issue a warning about what students did with their videos. "Some of you have posted them to Facebook and YouTube with the title 'Gang bangers at Cerro Verde.' You must take them down," he threatened. "We are in the process of finding out who you are and you will be punished."

A few days before, a ninth grader named Cierra, flanked by a pair of younger girls, waited outside the school gates watching the students streaming from the exit. She was angry because an hour earlier she had come into the classroom after recess and found her backpack missing. Someone accused her classmate Genesis of hiding it and Cierra confronted the girl as she sat waiting for Math class to begin. Genesis was an extremely timid girl of small stature. When I tried to talk to her she would become very anxious and look at the floor, her straw-colored hair covering her cheeks. She had only one close friend at school and the two were teased by their classmates for being "deaf" because they never responded to the taunts thrown at them. This day,

however, Genesis spoke up and denied hiding the backpack. Cierra didn't believe her and the two exchanged words briefly before the teacher quieted them down and started class.

Cierra would exact her revenge outside after the bell. When Genesis stepped out of the gates, Cierra grabbed her hair and encircled her waist with her arms, holding Genesis as her two younger friends began punching her.[60] Genesis fought back grabbing at her assailants' hair and throwing what punches, elbows, and kicks she could. Another friend of Cierra's, seeing that Genesis was not giving in, jumped into the pile and started hitting her. A mother who had been waiting outside for her daughter (who was another student not involved in the fight) saw what was going on and ran to grab Genesis, tugging as hard as she could to pull her away from the girls who were still holding her. The fight broke up soon after and everyone left.

The next day the video was making the rounds. The principal and vice principal stopped Genesis, Cierra, and the other girls who had participated in the fight as they entered school and questioned them separately in the hallway. Genesis, overcome with emotion, broke down in tears as she tried to tell her story. Cierra and the others were stoic. Genesis's mother arrived a little later and the principal spoke with her and Genesis in his office. When Genesis emerged afterwards she was bawling and shaken. Her mother had decided to remove her from school and later told her teacher that she couldn't allow her daughter to be in a place where she was unsafe. Cierra was warned against fighting but faced no other serious consequences.

While the fight Genesis endured was more extreme than most of the peer hostility that I witnessed at Cerro Verde and La Laguna, bullying behavior was common. Taunting, teasing, and crude jokes were part of everyday talk in the classroom. Pushing, hitting, and stealing were regular occurrences as well. Antonio described his experience this way: "There's a group of

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[60] I didn't witness the fight scene. I had left the school a few minutes before this took place. I saw the video and the fight was also described to me by multiple witnesses to the chaos that ensued.

classmates that you must have noticed who are really rude, they go around pushing you and saying [stuff].” Jesus concurred: “There’s always somebody who goes around pushing another, simply because they don’t like them, you know.”

Belen remembered how “the boys bothered [the girls] a lot, they would pull [our] hair, give us nicknames.” Franklin disliked how his peers insulted him because his family worked in the market: “‘Look at the market kid, yuck,’” some of his peers would say to him or his sister. “You feel bad when they look down on you, just because your mom doesn’t have fixed employment or you don’t have a nice house, a good economic condition. It feels horrible. That’s why we had some problems in school.”

Harassers often were looking to provoke their targets. They delighted in getting their victims to strike back. Sometimes, the whole point was to lure the target into getting scolded by the teacher. Other times, when the teacher was out, harassers often would try to incite their victims into matches of hitting, wrestling, or chasing each other around the room. Mr. Santos believed an elaborate version of this devious game is what happened to Cierra and Genesis. He said one of the “scoundrels” in his class had probably hidden Cierra’s backpack and blamed Genesis just to get a laugh over the first girl, known for her hair-trigger temper, taking on the meek one who otherwise never mixed in the high-stakes games of her peers.

Genesis’s refusal to be provoked may have brightened the target on her back. Other students attempting as she did to ignore harassment said that bullies increased the pressure on them. Mateo, for example, said his ninth grade year was “very difficult” because a group of boys targeted him repeatedly. “They picked on me,” he said. “One time, [at] snack, [it was] porridge, and they went and threw it in my backpack with my notebooks… I got so mad that I wanted to cry. And after that they kept bothering me.” Mateo’s friends encouraged him to fight back, but

he ignored them. “[My friends] would always say to me, ‘No, man, you can’t give in!’ But [they didn’t] know how to manage the situation, [they didn’t] know the consequences that your actions can bring. For me, it was better [to say to myself,] ‘Be calm, it’s going to pass…’ than to be fighting with them and getting myself in bigger problems.” Mateo managed to finish ninth grade, but transferred to another school for high school. Like Genesis, his mother reported in an interview that she removed him from Cerro Verde because she feared he was not safe there.

Then there were other students who did react violently to their peers’ harassment. They described a common cycle of events–being provoked, getting in a fight, and being suspended–that repeated over and over again. Luis, for example, recalled what happened to him at the first school he attended: “There were boys who bothered me a lot, and they would get on me in the classroom… and since I’m really impulsive, I would jump on top of them and start beating them up… I was suspended more than 10 times.” Lisette described how she was provoked: “I was enrolled at a school with boys, and they would bother me, since I have always been really developed [for my age], they would start catcalling me, and I didn’t like that, so I would hit them in the mouth. When the teachers saw me, they would always suspend me.”

Physical fights and suspensions were just one way that peer hostility pushed youth out of school. Insults, rumors, and snide remarks also took a hard toll on student persistence. Elena’s classmates in seventh grade had called her “fat” and “ugly.” She tried to ignore these comments, but after a brief absence after a death in her family, she came back to school and found out a peer had told her teacher and the entire class that she had moved in with her boyfriend. This was a lie and Elena was deeply embarrassed. “When I would come to school,” she recounted, “[my peers] would stare at me that way, and in that instant, I would want to come right home, not be there with them.” She described the conversation she had with her mother on the day she decided to

drop out: "I said to her, 'I'm not going to go school." 'Why?' she [asked] me. 'No, I don't want to go,' I said. But that day I really cried, because, I did want to go, you know. But, [it] stopped me, the girls demoralizing me."

Other students dropped out because they feared the rain of insults would provoke them into a fight. Sofia's attempt to repeat eighth grade was cut short when classmates started calling her a "dike.[61]" She had been suspended previously for fighting and was worried what she might do, she said, "because I don't stay quiet." She decided it was better to leave: "I said to my mom that she should remove me [from school] because I had a problem… My mom said to me, 'so the [girls] don't keep bothering you, yes daughter, leave… I don't want them to do something to you nor for you to do something crazy.'" Sofia ended her explanation by repeating a personal maxim, "Better to avoid than to regret." With no one to help her manage her peers and her emotions, the only solution she could find was to stay away from them and from school.

Signals Out, Signals In

Mrs. Caridad helped Deisy make it through sixth grade, but her transition to middle school wasn't a smooth one. Her new teacher, Mrs. Elsa, was more discriminating in her affections and didn't like getting involved in her students' problems. She told me she preferred students who didn't need to be coddled nor told what to do.

By the end of the school year, one-third of the 35 students that Mrs. Caridad had handed off to her had dropped out. When I asked the teacher why the different girls who had left, she struggled to remember who they were. It wasn't that Mrs. Elsa was heartless. She was very warm and giving to students who showed promise and self-direction and focused her attentions on them. She was cold and indifferent toward the rest.

[61] She said the girls called her "marimacha" in Spanish. I translated it to "dike" to show how it was used as a slur.

Deisy only lasted two months in her class. Without Mrs. Caridad running interference, her classmates had freer rein to tease and bully her. “Everyone looked down on me,” Deisy said in an interview about her peers in Mrs. Elsa’s seventh grade. “They teased me and said I stunk, that I didn’t bathe. No one would talk to me or hang out with me at recess.” Deisy was deeply upset and, knowing her own penchant for fighting back, worried she might explode in frustration. “Sometimes I would start crying because I was so sad,” she said. “And at the same time, it gave me an urge to want to grab someone and beat them up.”

Deisy didn’t try to get Mrs. More’s help. “I didn’t say anything to her,” she said of the teacher, “because… I thought she wouldn’t say anything to them… It was better for me to just leave.” Instead, her solution to being bullied was to drop out. “I decided to leave school,” she said, “before something could happen between us, before they could do something bad to me.” Deisy’s peers had pushed her out. But her academic and behavior problems played a part in shaping how her teacher perceived her. Mrs. Elsa, seeing little that boded well for Deisy’s future in school, left her to muddle by on her own.

Deisy’s mom initially opposed her leaving school, but, after her daughter made it clear she didn’t want her to get involved, she stopped complaining. “She didn’t say anything [more] to me about it,” Deisy said. “It was like it was better for her anyway for me to be selling and taking care of the household chores.” But hawking vegetables in the market was no life for Deisy either. As her months out of school tallied up, she started to feel trapped. “The thing is, my mom, if I don’t go to school, my mom would have me here selling in the market,” she explained.

Nine months later Mrs. Caridad was promoted to replace Mrs. Elsa and be the new seventh grade teacher the following year at La Laguna. She soon began recruiting many of her former students. One of the girls she visited and encouraged to return was Deisy. She brightened at the

chance to come back to school. “Nobody had to convince me!” Deisy exclaimed in an interview of her decision to accept Mrs. Caridad’s offer. The market had long been giving her signals that it wasn’t the place for her. She wanted something better for herself. “I went to [my mom] and said, ‘I don’t want to be here, I don’t want to be selling in the market, because here you don’t make any money, instead of making money, you only get tangled up in more problems. I want to go to school.’” Her mom agreed.

Most of the interviewees whose dropout had been triggered by problems at school, experienced something similar to what Deisy did in the months after their departure. They grew disillusioned with the work or chores they were doing and began to fear they were missing out on a better future. Their school problems looked less harsh in retrospect and they began to perceive them as owing to one bad teacher or group of peers or their own lack of effort–issues that could be overcome by changing schools, teachers, or working hard. Even students who initially believed they would never return, changed their minds.

“According to me, I wasn’t going back,” Pablo, who recounted his academic struggles above, told me. “But, one night my mom talked with me and she made me see reason.” Pablo had taken a job with an uncle working on a delivery truck after dropping out. It was physically tiring labor that required early mornings, long hours, and hauling a lot of crates. “I had thought that [it was] better for me to just work already,” Pablo said of his early plans, “but my mom told me that the type of work I was doing wasn’t going to help me much [in the future], that I had to get a degree so that I could [get a job] that helped me.” Over a few months Pablo came to see she was right. “It helped me think a lot, that period I was out of school,” he said of his time as a low-wage laborer. Eight months after leaving school he decided to re-enroll.

Arturo also found work to be no escape from his disappointments at school. He had dropped

out after problems with a teacher caused him to lose interest in his studies. “I saw [school] as boring and thought that to make money, it wasn’t necessary to have an education,” he said. “But, when I dropped out and started working in that restaurant in the market, I didn’t like working there. So, I said [to myself]: ‘No, I’m going to go back to school! I’m not made for the market!’”

Elena, who had dropped out two times over the last three years, was emphatic about her desire to try again. “I cannot get stuck where I am, that would only please the enemy,” she said, alluding to the devil. “Giving up is why problems come [your way], vices come, sadness comes, suffering comes, all of this happens, in distinct forms.” She had worked in the market and seen older girls and boys who ended up working there full time grow depressed or, worse, wayward after dropping out. She didn’t want that to happen to her: “I said it to myself like this, ‘I can’t end up here [in the market], I have to get ahead, and keep fighting for what I want.’”

Sadly, not even half way into the new school year, Elena would drop out again. “The reality is, I don’t know, [school] doesn’t enthuse me that way anymore. There are a lot of factors in why I left,” she said as I pushed her to explain what was behind her sudden exit. Her demeanor during the interview was depressed and resistant, but ultimately she described the same recurring cycle of problems that had combined to cause her exit in prior years had reared up once again –her mother’s ill health, the ongoing fights with relatives who owned the small room where they lived, her low grades, her peers’ caustic comments, and likely, unidentified health issues (she complained of severe headaches and dizzy spells and displayed signs of depression). But even this dropout wouldn’t be her last exit from school. A few months later, Elena’s enthusiasm for an education was renewed and she reached out to me to help her get another opportunity to return to school the following year.

Out, in, out again, in again. The cycle kept going. Throughout their teen years, these young people were batted between perpetual problems at home, recycled illusions that school could provide an escape, and, too often, the hard reality that it was not the refuge they needed.

7. THE BABY HAS NO BLAME

The seventh graders pushed and shoved their way into Science class, making a game of the scramble for seats that landed some against the white board and rubbed off the lesson Mrs. Marta had carefully written there. The teacher shooed them away and went to fetch a yardstick so she could fix it. When she finished, a meticulously drawn calendar of the female ovulation cycle spread across the board with the words “The Rhythm Method” above it in bold letters.

Mrs. Marta turned around and asked a handful of students for their ages. “Thirteen!” “Fourteen!” the answers came back. A brief discussion of adolescence followed and then she came to her point. “When do you want to start a family?” she asked. A few girls started yelling out ages: “25!” “20!” Mrs. Marta scoffed: “You should only start a family when you have a responsible partner and have gotten married! Then you can plan sexual relations.” She added with arm-waving emphasis: “You’re not going to do it *a la loca* (without thinking)!”

Mrs. Marta directed them toward the board. “You can use this chart to plan to have sexual relations during the time that the girl isn’t ovulating–if the girl isn’t ovulating that means she can’t get pregnant.” Despite her insistence that her students wait to have sex until they were in a responsible relationship, and presumably adults, she said “the girl” *(la niña)* each time she referred to the female menstrual cycle. “If the girl is regular and her period comes normally,” she explained, “then you can use this chart, says. If the girl is not regular, then no.”

Mrs. Marta explained how the numbers on the chart represented the days after the girl’s period ended. “For the first eight days–here, days one through eight,” she said pointing to the board, “you can have relations because the girl isn’t fertile. But you absolutely don’t want to have sex during these days,” she continued, drawing their attention to days nine through 17.

Gloria blurted out from her desk in the front row: “What if you’re period comes on day 11?” Mrs. Marta was confused. So were her students. They peppered her with questions. “Listen well,” Mrs. Marta said, trying to quiet them down. She then repeated her explanation again. Confusion still reigned. One boy asked if you could have sex in the days marked off at the end of the diagram. “Relations during menstruation are not hygienic!” the teacher snorted. The classroom broke into laughter.

The students were talking loudly among themselves, many asking their seatmates to explain what the diagram meant. Mrs. Marta interjected: “Listen well!” She waited for the class to come to attention. “This is a natural way to do family planning. And it is the only method that the Catholic Church accepts.” She paused and repeated: “It is the only that the Church accepts. Do you understand?” After they murmured “yes,” she told them to copy the chart in their notebooks.

Moments later the bell rang for recess, but the usual stampede out the door didn’t follow. Instead nearly half the class went up to the board to ask Mrs. Marta more questions. Many of those who stayed behind had never shown any interest in Science before, much less missed recess. A handful had failing grades. Gloria put a hand on Mrs. Marta’s shoulder. “*Bueno, bueno, bueno, seño,*” she said enthusiastically, before pointing to the board and repeating her earlier question without embarrassment. “But what if your period comes on this day?” Mrs. Marta gave the same explanation again. Other students jumped in, excitedly asking questions and listening intently to Mrs. Marta’s response. As recess ended and the teacher steered the still tittering students outside, Tara asked her, “Is this true?” She responded kindly, “Yes, my child.”

After they had all left, she turned around and said to me contentedly, “Did you see how interested they were in this?!” I clinched my teeth and nodded, pondering whether to give my true thoughts. “The young people are always really interested in this lesson!” she exclaimed,

seeming very pleased with herself. Not wanting to alienate her, I kept my thoughts about what was spurring their interest to myself.

Mrs. Marta's presentation of the rhythm method was not part of the official sexual education curriculum designed by the Ministry of Education. In fact, the curriculum warns specifically against teaching it, saying that it is an ineffective method for preventing pregnancies and useless against sexually transmitted diseases (MINED, 2013: 193). But Mrs. Marta could hardly be blamed for not following the Ministry's guidance. Only 7% of teachers had been trained to teach sexual education and there was no budget to train more (Guzmán, 2018). The fact Mrs. Marta was giving any sexual education at all placed Cerro Verde as an outlier in El Salvador, where only 27% of schools reported having a plan to provide it (Guzmán, 2018).

Mrs. Marta also had her fellow teachers to contend with. Teaching the rhythm method put her in a kind of middle ground between opposing views on sexual education at Cerro Verde and La Laguna. Mrs. Marta knew her middle schoolers were entering that stage when the desire and pressure for sex can intensify, if they weren't already fully there. She told me she wanted them to have at least some knowledge of how to protect themselves.

Other teachers were more puritanical and didn't stray from the message that it was best for students to wait for sex until they were married and financially stable. They preached abstinence and supported a strict prohibition against dating among their students. At Cerro Verde the principal often used the PA-system to remind students that they were not allowed to date each other, let alone be hugging and kissing in the hallways. At La Laguna the preferred tactic was public humiliation. When a girl was seen talking with a boy by a teacher in the abstinence camp, that teacher could be certain to report it to her colleagues and to ridicule the girl in front of her peers. Sometimes in front of the whole school at the opening assembly.

In the other camp were teachers who thought that such censure would backfire. They found the rule against dating at Cerro Verde and La Laguna to be counterproductive because it encouraged young people to hide what they were doing from adults. Mr. Santos said middle school youth were “sexually curious” and that they needed to know how to manage their bodies and emotions safely and without shame. He believed parents needed to supervise their children’s relationships and that communication between parents and youth would curtail risky behaviors.

Some teachers worried that relying on parents wasn’t practical because the adults were so often gone from home working that they unaware of what their children were doing. Three teachers at La Laguna, for example, told me that students needed more information about contraception and sexually transmitted diseases. Mrs. Caridad brought in guest speakers to talk about these issues and frequently talked with her students about their former classmates who had gotten pregnant and were struggling. “The pregnancies that are happening at this age …are a big problem. I talk to them very clearly, I earn their trust, so that they don’t fall into that mistake of getting pregnant. But it is really difficult because of the environment that they are in, they are left alone,” she said in an interview. “The fear I have is that [these girls] get involved with whatever man that tells them, ‘you are so beautiful’ and then he starts working them.”

One area of agreement between both camps was the concept of a “life plan.” Most teachers led their students in one version or another of a “life plan” lesson at the beginning of the school year. The activity called for students to think about what they wanted in the future and write these on the white board and their notebooks. Invariably, words like college degrees, professional careers, homes, and cars were yelled out and written down. Then teachers drilled down asking students to name their personal goals, like when they wanted to get married and have children. That sparked discussions of what happened when young people started a family

before achieving their educational and career goals. Students knew a lot of people who had done that and didn't need to be pushed to find bad things to say about this idea. The overall purpose of the activity was to illustrate for students how dating and sex were threats to their educational and professional goals. And that achieving their career goals first was critical to having an ideal family life.

Students were left with a dearth of useful information about what would be some of the most important decisions of their lives: Dating and having sex. Some students received trainings in these topics at church, albeit with a strong abstinence component. A smaller group learned from the handful of nonprofit women's health groups doing this type of work with adolescents. Most relied on what they could learn from parents, friends, or the media. The result was very few were well informed about how to protect themselves from pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases. And even fewer had learned about the emotional, cultural, and gendered aspects of dating and sexual relationships (Guzmán, 2018).

School, Dating, and Sex

Nearly one-in-five Salvadoran girls between the ages of 15 and 19 is a teenage mom (MINSAL-UNICEF, 2015: 185). For girls from low-income and poor backgrounds that rate goes up to one-in four (MINSAL-UNICEF, 2015: 186). Studies show that as many as 40% of teen moms in El Salvador were students at the time that they became pregnant and that most of them–eight in-ten–abandoned their education as a result (UNFPA, 2017: 23-24).[62] This chapter describes the family and community conditions contributing to those teen high birth rates in

[62] In contrast, UNFPA (2017:22-3) found that 60% of these teenage moms had dropped out prior to becoming pregnant. The UNFPA (2017: 23) asserts that the high incidence of teen pregnancy among current dropouts is evidence that staying in school is a protective factor against girls getting pregnant. Similar assertions are made by other national and international organizations (e.g., MINSAL 2015, UNICEF, 2011). Other scholars point out that teen pregnancy and dropout share many of the same root causes (Rumberger, 1987; Shonkoff et al., 2012). If an education can protect these girls from early pregnancy, as the organizations claim, then these shared underlying risks must be addressed. I will return to this point in the conclusion.

urban neighborhoods and why even poor students who are doing well in school are susceptible to becoming teen moms.

The first section illustrates how most girls in middle and high school wanted to apply the "life plan" advice to their own lives and planned on waiting to start a family until they were economically ready. Some advocated for avoiding relationships entirely, but the majority believed it was possible to achieve their career goals and date–as long as you knew how to pick a good partner and, either through abstinence or using protection, avoided pregnancy. It was here in that tricky middle ground that the dearth of sexual education affected them. As did the stress and adversity in their homes and neighborhoods.

The second and third sections take up this latter point and follow the histories of three girls who became teen moms at age 14. As documented in Chapter four, neglect, abuse, violence, economic shocks, and child labor were part of the histories of many of the girls that I interviewed–including those who did not get pregnant. Hardship did not alone cause pregnancy. But, my interviews showed that they were consistent underlying factors. It was not a connection girls harped on. Ten of the 11 insisted that they chose sex of their own accord because they wanted to be with their partners.[63] But these three cases show how it was a choice made under duress. Immersed in unstable families and violent places, these girls saw boys–particularly older boys and, in some cases, much older men–as sources of stability. The second section shows how one girl rapidly, over the course of a short period, abandoned her strong defense of the "life

[63] One of the interviewees was raped and became pregnant as a result. I have not discussed her case in this section. One survey found that 2% of births among teens ages 10-17 were the result of forced sexual relations (UNFPA, 2016: 75). The same study also found that 13% of teen moms had been raped in a prior incident and asserts that prior sexual assault is a contributing factor to girls becoming pregnancy (UNFPA, 2016: 57). Prior assaults were not mentioned by the 11 girls I interviewed so I have not discussed it in this chapter. However, given these findings, it is a subject that deserves more attention.

plan" model and ended up a teen mom. The third section draws out further the connection between past traumas, present-day vulnerabilities, and entrance into sexual relationships.

The final section shows what happened after their babies entered their lives as love for their children amplified their anxieties about the future. The economic struggle that was their lives became more unbearable as their babies became sick and suffered because of it. The solution they lit upon was to return to school and get the degrees they needed for better jobs. But going to school that was undermined by the very babies that motivated their return. "The baby has no blame" was the expression many teen moms used to explain why they put the immediate needs of their children first, dropping out again to put food on the table and care for them when they were sick and putting off the education once again the education they felt they needed.[64]

The reader will note that the explanation in this chapter focuses solely on girls. I have not described boys' views and experiences on the subjects of dating and sex, although this subject clearly warrants more attention. Instead, I focus here on the girls because my interviews did not show boys being affected by pregnancy in the same way. Three boys in the interview sample became fathers as teenagers, two at the age of 13. But, after brief interruptions in their education, they returned to school consistently for several years after. Only one girl described her boyfriend as dropping out because of her pregnancy, but he soon returned and finished his high school degree. She did not. No doubt becoming fathers brought angst or turmoil to these boys' lives. The three boys I mentioned did spend a period of a few months trying to figure out what they

[64] I heard this expression frequently during fieldwork. I don't know its origin, but it seems to have some association with the anti-abortion movement in El Salvador which, with international funding, has been very influential in shaping the public discourse and laws in the nation. Abortion is illegal in El Salvador, with no exceptions, and women found guilty of it can be imprisoned for up to 40 years (Viterna and Guardado, 2017). Some girls, however, told me about how they considered eliminating their pregnancies but were stopped by the belief that "the baby had no blame" (was innocent). I also heard the expression used as I explain in the text to describe putting the interests of the child before one's own. One grandmother, for example, who was caring for her grandson and referred to him multiple times in the interview as "this mistake," said, with memorable irony, "this mistake has no blame."

could do to support their girlfriends. Ultimately, however, when nothing feasible came about, their relationships ended and they left it to the girl and her family to care for the child. In sum, my interviews suggested that the pressures of fatherhood on schooling were nowhere near as intense as those on teen moms.

"Boys Sow Trouble:" Managing Desire to Stay in School

Despite its limitations, many girls agreed with and initially valued the "life plan" lessons they received. They saw teenage motherhood as an anathema to aspirations. Celia recited a common "life plan" refrain when she said that she didn't want children until she was economically established: "Not until I have finished my studies, I have a fixed job, my things, my house, then I can have one," she said. Others felt that becoming pregnant was not just a risk to their future, but also an affront to the sacrifices their parents had made so they could go to school. One seventh grader equated it in a focus group with "throwing in the garbage" all the money her parents had put toward her education. "The [school] isn't going to return it," she said sarcastically.

Several girls worried not only about how a pregnancy would affect their futures, but also about their ability to care for the child they would bring into the world. Elena was a student at La Laguna who had "grown up" in the market working alongside her mother. One day we were playing with the baby of a former classmate who was working nearby. Elena often seemed depressed, but this day she was dancing with the gleeful baby around the market. When I asked if she wanted children some day she scolded me. "Not until I have a good job," she said. "Raising a child in the market is not correct. It's not fair to them. They get sick, they suffer."

Alejandra expanded on this point in an interview. "I should have my family when I have my university degree… when I have my house, I have my car…then, I'm going to have my family. But, on the contrary, no," she said. "That [my] child come into this world and suffer what I

suffered, that's what I don't want. That he lives in poverty, that he feels that, you know, 'what are we going to eat?' No. I want him to be born … when he has what he needs, what is necessary, that he never needs anything."

Other girls were moved to be cautious by what they saw happening to sisters and friends who got pregnant young. Esperanza, for example, felt deeply for her sister who had two children as a teenager with a boyfriend who later left her. "[My sister] comes home late at night from work [as a janitor] and goes to wash [her children's clothes by hand.] I see her and I say, *puchica,* difficult. A man just takes the best of your life. Imagine what's been taken from her: Her childhood, her youth, her adolescence, everything… She doesn't enjoy anything. Nothing, nothing." Esperanza wanted to avoid her sister's fate. "That I would pressure myself to get married. I get married, have kids, then he leaves me! How horrible! …No! I'm not racing to get married!"

Jasmin recounted the story of a good friend who became pregnant at fifteen by a man twenty years her senior. "We told her to leave him, [but]… girls are stupid, because they believe the guy… Her mom gave her advice, but the man told her he was going to make her happy, buy her a house, give her everything she wanted. So, she latched onto that. Her mom told her that if she kept going with him, she was going to be the one affected, because she had already gone through the things that were going to happen to her. Now the girl is with the baby and the man is off [who knows where]." The lesson Jasmin took from her friend's example: "When a boy wants to go out with me, I say no. Because being like that, it takes your concentration off your studies. It's better to be alone than with a bad partner, because boys, they sow trouble."

Boys "sowing trouble" was a common refrain that girls repeated again and again in focus groups and interviews when talking about the dangers of relationships and sex. As Lesly said,

"Boyfriends, some of them sow trouble. They tell you they are going to bring you the moon, the stars, but they just leave you with a big belly." Guadalupe put the standard advice this way: "As they say: Boyfriends are for a little while, but your profession and your friends are for forever." Esperanza repeated her mom's warning: "My mom tells me, be careful, because the men of this era, they only see how far they can get with you, and then they leave you." Elsi, an eighth grader, cautioned in a focus group: "Boyfriends don't help you, instead they tell you: 'What are you going to school for? Let's sneak off! I'll take you to a movie,' that's what they say."

Some girls advocated for delaying dating until they had graduated from high school or college. Marisol, an eighth grader, was trying to follow this prescription and had her sister as a role model. "I want to follow my sister's example. She just finished university," Marisol said in a focus group. "I want to follow her example, because she never had a boyfriend or anything. Her education mattered more to her than that. And she paid her own way through school. She's my older sister. She is 26 years old and never had a boyfriend." Paulina, a seventh grader, expressed a similar view in another focus group: "My parents counsel me that I shouldn't have a boyfriend. For me, I would like to have a boyfriend when I am eighteen and get married after I have finished my university degree [and] gotten a secure job."

Staying single and focusing on studies seemed admirable to many girls, but a strict prohibition against dating was not widely supported at La Laguna and Cerro Verde. "It's not bad to have a boyfriend, because nature is that way," Gabriela said. Then she added an important caveat: "But, it depends, because there are limits." Her friend Guadalupe jumped in to explain. "When you have a boyfriend, the boyfriend steers you toward bad things, and that's why you have to focus on to whom [you say] yes."

The caveat was key. If girls wanted to date they had to "take care" of themselves and avoid pregnancy. That meant choosing their suitors wisely and managing the difficult pressures of their relationships. Some girls were able (at least for a time) to manage these weighty responsibilities and deny boys whom they liked what they wanted. Lucia, fifteen and in eighth grade, told me about a boyfriend whom she had recently dumped because all he wanted was "the bed" and she got tired of telling him, "No, I'm not like that." She added: "I don't want to have children until I'm 28… I want to enjoy my youth!"

Belen, fifteen, was also dealing with being asked for sex. "The person who I am dating right now says he wants to be with me, but I tell him, 'if I get into bed with you, I'm not going to end up with what I want'." She made clear to him that she wanted to wait to have sex and was heartened by his respect for her wishes. "What I like about him is that he's not like the rest [of the boys] who are pressuring you to have sex and all that. He is respectful."

Gloria, a recent high school graduate, was in a serious relationship throughout the last three years she was in school. She attributed her success at balancing her education and relationship to her constant focus on professional goals. Gloria acknowledged that many of her friends who were teen moms had troubled childhoods, but she didn't believe this was a sufficient explanation for getting pregnant, because she had had one, too: "Sometimes I think it's because of their parents' carelessness," she said sympathetically, "but, you have to do your part, too, because, I've had neither a father nor a mother, and I am like this [a graduate] with just one boyfriend and nothing to see with him, because that is what I want."

The "life plan" advice worked for some girls. It cast the female student as the cultural ideal for modern teenage femininity. This ideal buttressed their aspirations and motivated them to stay focused on their studies (Frye, 2012). It also gave them a language they could use to ward off

boys who might threaten it and more reason to value those young men who respected and wanted them to achieve their dreams.

But the "life plan" lesson existed largely because this modern cultural ideal had to compete with other signals in girls' lives. Much of what they lived at home and in their neighborhoods clashed with their aspirations to graduate. Boys, especially older ones and, in some cases, much older men, added to this dissonance.

"I Lived All of This:" Warning Signs for Vulnerable Girls

As a twelve year-old at La Laguna, Alicia participated in a focus group. A classmate in her sixth grade class had recently dropped out of school after becoming pregnant and Alicia delighted the other girls around the table with her take on what had happened in this girl's case. "She had permission to date from her mom," Alicia said of her former peer as the others began giggling, "but dating is different than being husband and wife! It's different! Going out as boyfriend and girlfriend is [a time] for getting to know each other, and getting to know each other doesn't mean that you just jump into bed with the boy in one leap. But, the mom let her go around by herself, and the boy took advantage, or maybe she wanted it, who knows." The other girls laughed heartily at Alicia's commentary. Some reproached her for being crude, but everyone agreed she was right.

Alicia went on to state her personal reasons for avoiding pregnancy: "[My mom] is paying for my schooling and if I end up pregnant, that wouldn't be thanking her for the investment that she has made," she said. "I have to thank her for what she has done for me by getting my career and getting her out of the place where she is." Alicia wanted to go to college and study to be a forensic doctor. Her second choice was to be a teacher.

A few months later as a seventh grader, Alicia met Felix, a high school student six years her senior. They lived in the same neighborhood an hour outside of Grecia and it was on the crowded bus rides home that their relationship started. At first, she rebuffed his attempts to talk with her. Then on rides when her mom wasn't riding with them she sat next to him and they started talking. Over the course of a couple of weeks, Felix told her about being cheated on by his former girlfriend and she confessed to him that she had never had a boyfriend. He told her he didn't believe that was true because she was too beautiful for boys not to be after her. (The memory still caused her to blush a year later.)

After this conversation he started appearing at her house with bags of fruit–mangos, pineapples, *jocotes*–to give her family. "He was very considerate," Alicia remembered proudly. On her thirteenth birthday her mom, Maria, surprised her with a cake. Felix showed up uninvited and afterwards asked Maria for permission to date her daughter. Her mom said no, Alicia explained, "because, I was too little."

Alicia ignored Maria's wishes and let Felix come over when her mom was out. Not even a year had passed since she had blamed her classmate's pregnancy on her mother letting her date. When Maria denied Alicia's request, she defied her. Then, just like the girl she laughed at for "jumping into bed" too fast, she did the same.

Two months after the secret rendezvous had begun, her mother suspected something was amiss and confronted her daughter angrily. "She hit me, before she knew that I was pregnant, she hit me," Alicia said in an interview. Shortly after her mom took her to take a pregnancy test. "When I confirmed it [at the clinic], she didn't say anything, she had to accept it. But, then, she cried for me, because I ended up like this," Alicia remembered of that day five months earlier, rubbing her hands over a very pregnant belly.

Maria described her emotions that day like this: “Look, when your child fails–fails in the sense that she didn’t realize her [potential], no matter how much advice I gave her–it is really hard. A disillusionment comes to your life, from seeing how hard you have worked to get [your children] ahead in life… and they cut that short. It feels horrible.” Alicia was just thirteen and Maria, having been a teen mom herself, knew the hard reality that likely awaited her daughter.

Maria had tried to protect Alicia from what she suffered as a child. As a nine year-old girl, Maria’s mother had left her and her sister with an aunt bringing their education to a prompt end. “We were the Cinderellas of the family,” Maria remembered bitterly of the aunt who made her do housework, care for her cousins, and regularly beat her. At 14 she met her future husband and it wasn’t long before she ran off with him. They were together 14 years. He left her at age 28 with five daughters, the youngest was a newborn and the oldest was 12. Alicia was just seven.

After her husband’s tumultuous exit, Maria left her job as a maid and had an old stroller repurposed into a street cart for selling coffee. For eleven hours a day she pushed the cart on a route through the market and nearby streets offering coffee and pastries to the vendors, shoppers, and commuters who crossed her path. “I decided to sell [in the market], because [the girls] were growing up and… I knew that they had to study,” Maria explained of her ambitions for her daughters. “[I didn’t want them] to just go to first grade, but rather, they had to keep going in their studies. That’s why I dedicated myself to working.” She added, “Always, from the time that they started studying, I pushed myself… It’s been really difficult for me.”

Alicia and her older sisters helped their mom before and after school. They kept the coffee pot full and manned the sale of whatever Maria had managed to scramble together to hawk at the market stall they rented–fruit, vegetables, cosmetics. When opportunities for paid part-time work passed their way, they took them. Alicia spent a year working five hours every morning as a

nanny during sixth grade. And she and her sisters alternated weekends laboring for a woman selling plantains in the wholesale market.

At La Laguna, Alicia showed promise. Her blunt humor and cheerful attentiveness had made her a favorite of her teacher, Mrs. Caridad. The teacher also admired her intelligence. Mrs. Caridad told me that Alicia had a natural talent for math and praised her lively participation in classroom discussions and the care she took in completing her homework assignments. Despite her parents' troubled marriage and her status as a child worker, Alicia seemed on good footing as she prepared to start middle school.

Then Felix charmed her. He was starkly different than the other men in her life. Alicia remembered her father for the beatings he gave her mother. One time after Maria had suffered a miscarriage her father falsely accused her mother of aborting the baby on purpose because it wasn't his. Then he beat her savagely. She saw her mother attacked like this again and again. Her father was also unfaithful and abandoned the family for good to go live with another woman. "When he left," Alicia recounted, "he took everything from our home–the television, the furniture, the stove, the pots and pans… The only thing he left us was a bed." A wide-eyed look of horror gripped Alicia's face for a moment at the memory, her father's cruelty still shocked her. "I lived all of this," she repeated, "I lived all of this." She reflected a moment before concluding, "I could never live with a man who beat me."

Alicia's neighborhood was also full of violent men. "In my neighborhood, there are lots of gang members," she exclaimed in the focus group. She went on to describe the brutal murder the year before of two girls who were her neighbors. The victims were sisters not much older than Alicia when they were killed, ages sixteen and thirteen. Although not close friends, Alicia knew

them and their families were on good terms. The older one was doing a summer course at La Laguna and she and Alicia had talked about the school.

Alicia, however, was critical of the way the older girl dressed, flirted with all the gang members, and ignored her mom's advice to be careful. "She didn't listen to her mom, and she went out with somebody from the gang," Alicia explained. The relationship didn't last. "Afterwards, [the gang members] warned her that she wasn't going to live to tell what had happened and she didn't." Alicia recounted how one day the older girl and her sister went to make some photocopies for school and were walking home through a sugar cane field when they were abducted, raped, and hacked up with a pickax. Parts of their bodies were found near a river close to Alicia's house. It took six months to find the rest of their remains.

Alicia considered it a warning to the other girls in the neighborhood. She said her family was fearful of the gang, but "we get along more or less, because, imagine, if we didn't it would be a problem, right." Her way of staying safe was the same one I would hear from many of her peers: "If you know how to get along, if you don't get involved with them, they respect you," she said of the gang. But she looked around her neighborhood and saw most girls her age doing just that. "In my neighborhood there are almost no girls, because all of the girls have gotten together with gang members," she said before naming the small handful who had not. "From there, of the girls like us who are alive… there isn't anyone else, there isn't any other [girl] who doesn't have something to do with a gang member."

Felix was not in the gang. Alicia stayed away from him on the bus at first, she told me, until she confirmed that. Unlike most of the other boys his age in her neighborhood, he was still in school and, even better, months away from completing a vocational degree in accounting at high

school. Plus his mom owned a popular corner store and three different homes in the neighborhood, making his family was better off than most.

At the time Felix entered her life, other factors were weighing on Alicia and her family. Her father, now a peripheral figure in their lives, was sentenced to prison for a violent assault–a source of shame that she quietly admitted to me one day while filling out the student survey. Her two older sisters were also struggling with the transition to high school. In the focus group, Alicia said: “They feel it is really difficult… [The teachers] make them copy the whole book [for homework.]” The eldest one ended up dropping out midyear. “When they gave out grades the first time, [her grades] were low, really low,” Alicia explained in the interview. “[My sister] said, ‘No way, spend money, for nothing, no.’ She didn’t want to keep going for that.” Her other sister dropped out a few months later after becoming pregnant.

Felix entered into this mix of violence, shame, and disappointment. Alicia did not draw a direct line between her background and her decision to have sex with him. She insisted to me that she did it because she wanted to. No one pressured her. But her environment was certainly giving her worrying signals about what the future promised girls like her. Felix–educated, considerate, comparatively wealthy–represented something better.

Her mother was not so sure. About to be a grandmother twice over, she was grieving the dream she had had for her daughters. “It feels horrible,” she said, “because you’re not used to seeing them like that. But, nothing can be done, it is a decision that they made.”

“The Wrong Path:” From Childhood Adversity to Teen Mom

Other teenage moms I interviewed saw a clearer connection between their troubled pasts and their unexpected pregnancies. Elisa was eight years old when her mother was arrested for bringing drugs into a prison. Her parents had been unhappy in their marriage (one, too, that was

formed when they were teenagers) and Elisa's early childhood was rocked by their bitter arguments. Her mom's imprisonment sent her father into the arms of a new girlfriend. He abandoned Elisa and her younger sister and left them with an alcoholic grandmother.

"Things happened with [her] that were not pleasant," Elisa said curtly as she described a grandmother who was too drunk to care for them. She had to learn how to take care of herself and her preschool-age sister at a very early age and on her own: washing clothes, making meals, getting themselves off to school and to bed. It was a place that even at her young age she knew she shouldn't be. So she asked her father to take them with him to live with him and his girlfriend. The stepmother was not pleased. "She would tell him to hit me, and I hadn't done anything," Elisa said. They left and went back and forth between relatives. "We had no house, we were bouncing around." Finally Elisa begged an aunt to take them in. They stayed there "definitively," but her struggling aunt couldn't get by on her own and brought Elisa to help her in the market each morning as a street vendor.

After two years in jail, Elisa's mother was released. The business that she and her ex-husband had built in the market was lost so she relied on her daughter to help her get started again. Elisa helped her mom as she had her aunt before and after school. But even with the struggle to make a living selling vegetables on the street, Elisa was buoyed by her mother's return. They moved into their own home and her mom encouraged her with her studies. The traumas of the previous years had not knocked Elisa out of Cerro Verde. On the contrary, she had done well and formed a bond with her teachers. "The teachers loved me, because I was very well-behaved," Elisa explained, before listing off all the teachers that still came to greet her in the market affectionately. "I got along with all the teachers there…. They really loved me… because I was a good student."

But while she was in sixth grade her mom started dating an alcoholic ex-convict deported from the U.S. Elisa did not like him and after he moved in she decided she had had enough. She moved back to aunt's home and during this time met a boy. A few months later, just thirteen and in sixth grade, she decided to move in with him. "After my parents separated and my father left us and everything after that, from the disillusion, I would get down, you know, and I took the wrong path," Elisa said in an interview two years after this decision. "At the end of so many horrible problems that were around me, after so much, I made a mistake, because you should take care of yourself so you can keep going to school and then afterwards make your life. But, from the disillusion, I didn't want to study anymore. Instead, I moved in with my boyfriend and I made a mistake."

Elisa's mom tried to stop her. "She was upset that I had moved in with him, she was upset," Elisa explained. "She would say to me, 'Come home, keep going to school, stay with me.' But I would say, 'No! No! I can't take being upset like this and with so many problems.'" Elisa's boyfriend, who was only fifteen, had his own troubling family history. "He's like me," Elisa said of him, "but for other distinct problems, worse than my own, because his father would beat up his mother… he has suffered more than I have… sometimes he cries when he talks about it, because he saw everything." Elisa and her boyfriend formed a bond over their shared pain. Her mother, with only dissension to offer her at home, could not convince her to leave him.

Elisa and her boyfriend believed she would be able to continue her schooling while living together. For nearly half a year after moving in with him she stayed in school and managed to finish sixth grade. But they took no precaution to prevent pregnancies and before she started seventh grade she found out she was pregnant. "I didn't think about things, and I ended up pregnant…it all happened by mistake." She didn't return to school.

Alma's story followed a similar arc from trauma to teenage motherhood. She moved in with her boyfriend, a much older man, right after she turned 14. Her childhood before that was brimming with want and violence. Her parents separated when she was little and her mother struggled to feed her and her older brother from what she could earn making *pupusas*. "My dad never was at home, it's always, always been my mom who looked out for us, if we got sick, if we needed something, if we had a toothache, a sore foot, all of that, just my mom," Alma explained.

Her father only came around when he wanted to take out his rage on his ex-wife. Alma remembered two times when her older brother saved their mother from his machete. Once only because he had a cast on his broken arm and as her father brought the weapon down on her mother's head her brother thrust his arm between them and the machete got lodged in it.

The bond between the two siblings was strong. "Practically, for me, my brother was my father," she said in an interview. But her brother ended up in a gang. He often came home bruised and bloody. He survived being shot and being beaten so brutally his spleen ruptured. He was arrested and sent to jail multiple times. The police in the neighborhood had it out for him, beating him up "for fun" whenever they saw him. Alma remembered how two officers harassed him constantly and one time threatened her mother: "One of them said to my mom, 'If you don't find him lying [on the ground] dead or paralyzed one day, you'll find him in some morgue." Her mother, trying to protect her son, moved the family to a town outside Grecia.

But Alma's time with her brother only lasted a few more months. Days after her eleventh birthday, her brother went missing. Her mother didn't report it. They knew he most likely was in some clandestine grave in the nearby hills where the mutilated bodies of people like him were hidden, left to be forgotten by all but their loved ones. "After that everything went bad," Alma

explained. “When he disappeared, I was in third grade, and I was a really good student. But, then he disappeared, and my grades, it was like I went off a cliff.”

Her boyfriend had come into her life a few months before her brother left it. He was the bus driver on her route home and was always giving her candies and making room so she could sit near him. Sometimes he would stop the bus at her stop, which was one of the last on the line, and get out to play soccer with her and her friends. When she turned thirteen his attentions became more serious and his intentions more clear. One time he spotted her out at a restaurant with a group of friends and had several pizzas and big bottles of soda sent over to them. He tricked a friend of hers into giving him her phone number and started calling incessantly to express his affections. Then he asked her mom for permission to date her. She was fourteen and he was twenty-six, but her mom agreed. A few months later Alma was pregnant and moved in with him.

Alma’s relationship with her boyfriend brought a degree of economic comfort to her life that she hadn’t had before. As a bus driver, he had a contracted job that provided a steady income, pension, and quality healthcare. Her mom was just getting by on what she could make from odd jobs as maid and laundress and, with Alma’s help, selling *tamales* and *pasteles* (meat pastries) on the street. She and her mom lived in a decrepit tenement with an agitated landlord who was always ordering Alma around and made it known she wanted them gone. Her boyfriend’s apartment was shabby, but it had its own bathroom and private bedroom. It was a big step up.

Even so, becoming a common-law wife and mother was not the end that Alma had sought for herself. While pregnant she kept going to Cerro Verde and managed to finish her eighth grade, showing up for the final exams just days after giving birth. I met her while she was a ninth grader and was bringing her infant daughter to school every day, nursing the baby at recess and having a friend care for her while she was in class. She was an incredibly attentive and dedicated mother

and her teachers and peers adored the baby. Alma remembered that as a happy time. "Every time the bell rang [for recess] everyone would rush to play with her!"

Just a few months before the end of the school year, however, her daughter was hospitalized for several weeks with an intestinal problem and Alma had to drop out to care for her. The baby's health problems continued off and on into the next year and, worried about leaving her with someone who wouldn't care for her properly, Alma decided against returning to school.

"It's hard. How I would like to keep studying, how I would like to be at school, but it is difficult, it's really difficult. It has been incredibly difficult being a mom," she said of her decision. Materially, she was better off than where she had been. She also had a daughter whom she loved deeply and whose was beauty and liveliness made her a favorite among family and friends. But she was very anxious about her future. "I miss school, I really miss school, because I can't find a job," she explained. Reflexively, she wondered at what might have been had her brother not died. "All this time I've really missed my brother," she said, "because, perhaps if he had been here, maybe my daughter wouldn't be."

"My Thinking Changed:" Love, Anxiety, and an Education after Birth

Three months after giving birth Alicia was back working in the market. I found her standing behind a table stacked with plantains showing a customer with one hand the different types she had and explaining their price. In her other arm was her infant daughter suckling at her breast. The lively baby was squirming and kept kicking out her toes. Alicia, unable to manage her and attend to the shoppers, put her into a dingy baby rocker that no longer had its padded seat cushion under the table. The baby got fussy as more women approached the table to inspect the plantains. Alicia tried rocking her with a foot, shushing and scolding her quietly, "not now, not

now," as she smiled and asked the women how she could help. But soon the baby was wailing and the customers moved on.

Alicia, having lost the chance for a sale, picked up her daughter and lovingly nuzzled and bounced her in her arms until she calmed down. I took the chance to go meet the new addition to her life. Alicia's face beamed with pride as she passed the baby to me to hold. "Isn't she big!" she asked me. "Who do you think she looks like?" Alicia chattered in delight over her baby. "She is so light skinned, neither Felix nor I have light skin!" "Her name is Jasmin Beatriz but I can't decide which name I like better of the two!" "Look at her bottle! Look how much she drinks! She's a big eater!" More customers came up to look at the plantains and I took the baby off on a short walk and then sat down nearby at an empty table to play with her as Alicia finished up the last half-hour or so of her eleven-hour shift.

The market brightened for a moment with orange light as the evening sun passed behind the hills and Alicia came over with a backpack full of the baby's things. It was 6 p.m. The end of her shift and time to wait for the boss to come with her $5 in pay. Alicia pulled out a packet of baby wipes and opened them for me to smell. "Don't they smell beautiful?!" Then she found the bottles of baby shampoo and creams. "I love the smell!" she gushed, holding the bottles in front of my nose. Out came a new headband. "Look at what I bought her today! It's so cute!" We tried it on the baby, but she wasn't inclined to indulge her mother's fashion sense at the moment. She was tired and getting fussy again.

Alicia searched the bag for the baby's sweater but couldn't find it. It was so hot inside the market that the baby was sweating and I asked if she would even need it. Alicia explained that it got chilly on the hour-long bus ride home and she didn't want the baby to catch a cold. She pulled out a long-sleeved onesie and left for a moment. When she came back the onesie was cut

in two and she put the top half for on the baby. “She was getting too big for it anyway!” Alicia laughed. “Now it’s a sweater!” At the tender age of 14, she was already a crafty mom.

As Alicia put a blanket over her shoulder and nursed the baby to sleep I asked how things were going. She had not expected to be working so soon after the baby was born, she explained, but Felix had not been able to find work. He had graduated over six months earlier from high school and submitted dozens of resumes. No matter how many he sent out, no one called him back. Alicia had gotten her boss to hire him to haul and sort crates of plantains, but Felix didn’t like this much and her boss didn’t appreciate his lack of effort. She fired him. “It’s not equivalent to what he has studied,” Alicia explained of her boyfriend’s attitude toward jobs he saw as below him. Now he was mostly off in the fields hunting iguanas to sell.

Alicia was anxious for him to find something. Her boss was frustrated with how much the baby distracted her from the costumers and Alicia was worried the heat and dirt in the market would make her daughter get sick. Plus she wanted to go back to school. Her dreams of becoming a doctor were behind her, but she didn’t want to end up where she was. What she wanted was a job that would let her provide better for her daughter. “Maybe someplace where they need somebody who with a little bit [of training] could learn,” she said ruefully. “Just not here in the market, I want a better job where I earn more and all that.”

Alicia and I would have different versions of this same conversation over the next few months. Her anxiety growing each time. The baby came down with fevers and colds. When the little one wasn’t battling a virus or infection, the heat and boredom made her fussy and lethargic. Plus Alicia’s boss was more and more perturbed with her. Her unkind demands and snide remarks were grating. Eventually Alicia felt it was better to just stay home. They would have to get by on what Felix could scrounge up and her mom and mother-in-law gave them. Not long

after that Felix swallowed his pride and took a job as an agricultural laborer. Alicia found work in a store near their home. The next year she started Saturday school. But with the baby and her job she struggled to keep up with all the homework and dropped out again.

All the teen moms I interviewed shared Alicia's post-birth trajectory. The months and years following their child's birth was a fusion of deep love for their baby, ongoing and entirely new struggles, and extreme anxiety over the future. Xiomara, for example, said: "I feel a lot of despair… I think about my daughter. I don't think any more about hanging out with my friends, I don't go out, when I go out, I go out with her. Now my thinking has changed. I have to give her a better future." Savana said of her mixed feelings: "There are days when I think about everything that has happened and I get very sad, but when I look at my baby and he starts laughing, that helps raise me up. Sometimes, he is my reason for getting up in the morning."

The major source of these girls' anxiety was the economic struggle that came with being a teen mom. There were other sources of stress–including the ever-present tensions and conflicts with their partners and families–but the economic anxiety colored it all. They were living in poverty when they became teen mothers, and their new role as a parent only deepened the economic insecurity.

The only jobs Elisa and her boyfriend could find after their son was born, for example, were so low-paying they couldn't afford childcare. So they rotated who worked and who stayed home to care for him. The work they found was so physically and emotionally draining neither could last long in it. Elisa did two stints working eleven-hour days as a waitress for $4-$6 a shift. "In part, I felt good," she said of these jobs. "I was able to bring my boy a bag of milk, a dollar of diapers, and save a little, but the other part, no, it was too exhausting, I even worked Sundays, and I didn't feel like I was dedicating time to my child."

Xiomara and her boyfriend brought their infant daughter to the market each day while they sold clothes on the street to passersby. But they barely earned anything and were constantly having problems with the police and other vendors. “He tells me we should get other jobs,” Xiomara said of the discussions she and her boyfriend had about the future, “but I tell him, ‘Who is going to take care of our daughter!’ ‘How am I going to, how can you?’ So, we have gotten accustomed to bringing her to the market while we sell, but it doesn’t give us [any income].” They moved to a cheaper and more dangerous neighborhood and sold off their refrigerator to make ends meet.

Savana had broken up with her son’s father shortly after he was born, making her struggle to provide for him more lonely and fraught. She was selling socks in the market while living with her single-mom and two siblings in a tenement. “I only end up with $5 or $6 from all that I sell every day… and I have to buy him milk, I buy him diapers, I buy him cereal, I buy him Gerber, nothing is left over practically.” That meant she didn’t have enough to buy more socks to sell and earned even less the next day. She was desperate to find a better job so she could help her single-mom who was going through similar struggles in the market. “It’s urgent for me to work, to help my mom, because everything is going bad,” she said.

Camila was also on her own to provide for her baby and relying on her single-mother for housing and other material support. Her mom worked selling fruit in the market and Camila had grown up helping her. Now her eighteen month-old daughter was doing the same. “She toddles behind me, and since she likes to yell, she starts yelling [to the shoppers] with me,” Camila said smiling. The work didn’t bring in much money, however, so Camila also took on stints as a maid when the homeowner allowed her to bring her daughter with her. She earned only $3 and a meal

for her and her baby for a full day's work. Her daughter suffered, whining and crying most of the day, which caused Camila problems with her boss and threatened her employment prospects.

A common solution that all of the teen moms I interviewed found for their anxiety was to plan a return to school. All eleven were committed to continuing their education. Elisa set her sights on the modest goal of completing middle school: "I would be okay with just finishing ninth grade," she said, "because sometimes with middle school, you can get a simple job, where you earn just a little, but something that is big for your family."

Xiomara and her boyfriend both wanted to graduate high school. "You need an education to get ahead!" she told me. The couple was planning to go to night school the next year. Xiomara wanted to get a three-year high school degree with a vocational specialty in health and her boyfriend planned on doing the two-year program. They would have to finish middle school first. "My mom is going to take care of the baby at night," Xiomara said of their plans.

Savana was determined to realize the aspirations she had prior to getting pregnant. "First, I want to study to be a nurse, then I want to become a doctor… I haven't lost that dream," she said. She wasn't concerned that it would take her a long time. "There are older people, even elderly people, who end up getting their university degrees."

Camila wanted to finish high school. "I have the idea to keep going [with my education], to have a good future, but for my daughter, so that she doesn't need anything, so that she will be able to go to school," she said. "I want to get my high school degree, at least, this is what I want for my daughter, to get a good job so I can provide for her."

All of the teen moms I interviewed followed through on their plans and attempted to return to school. But most, like Alma and Alicia, were unable to balance the demands of an education and motherhood. Xiomara was blocked at the outset when the school she wanted to attend wouldn't

enroll her because she had a baby. Then her mother was unable to care for her baby after a health problem. Savana and Elisa lasted just a few months in a Saturday school program but then left because they couldn't keep up with the assignments while working and caring for their children. Finding childcare also was a struggle.

Children's illnesses were a frequent problem. Camila explained how she tried and failed twice. "I was a full year studying [in night school], but I flunked because I was absent so much for her, because I had to take her to the clinic, then to the hospital," she explained of her first attempt. "Then, this year, I went back to school, but I left midyear for her, because she had gotten really bad with bronchitis." But even after three consecutive years dropping out of school, Camila wanted to return. "God willing I will go back next year," she said.

Teen motherhood didn't stop these girls from wanting an education. Instead, it renewed their commitment to getting a high school degree. But at the same time, a baby made that mission extremely complicated. Their children's frequent illnesses, the lack of childcare, the need to work to provide for their babies, and, for some, the ongoing tensions with partners: All of this made going back to school nearly impossible to sustain. The cycle in, out, in again, out again continued, but this time, with the added weight of babies needing the care of the young, disappointed, and anxious girls who had become their mothers.

8. CONCLUSION

In 2015, the United Nations made achieving *universal secondary education* by 2030 one of its Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). A year later a special commission at the elite medical journal *Lancet* said raising high school graduation rates was “the single best investment” the world could make in its future (Patton et al., 2016). Then in 2017, UNESCO declared that diplomas were the most effective weapon against global poverty (UNESCO, 2017) and a leading climate advocacy group said they were vital to combatting climate change (Hawken, 2017). Why have these renowned institutions decided high school is so powerful? Because when teens graduate, the benefits of their success cascade beyond them and their families. Nations where young people have more diplomas, also have more economic growth, less inequality, more stable democracies, decreased violence, and less strain on scarce natural resources (Abdullah et al., 2015; Cohen, 2008; Education Commission, 2016; Patton et al., 2016; Sheehan et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2014; UNICEF, 2011).

There are 263 million children and adolescents–one out of every five on the planet–out of school today (UNESCO, 2018a). These are the young people the world needs to get across the graduation stage to realize the high school for all vision, but reaching them will be no easy task. Most are poor and living in urban slums or isolated rural villages of the Global South where their family poverty is compounded by that of their communities and nations (UNESCO, 2015; United Nations, 2013; Watkins, 2014). At least half live in places besieged by chronic or acute crises such as wars, community violence, natural disasters, or political unrest (UNESCO, 2015). Moreover, in contrast to previous generations when most of those out-of-school had never been inside a classroom, the majority in this generation are dropouts who have spent years struggling

to learn at their local schools (Hunt, 2008; UNESCO, 2016). Their educational failure cannot be blamed on an absence of school buildings, but, is instead the result of a complex set of forces inside their schools, homes, and communities.

The out-of-school girls and boys from El Salvador portrayed in the previous chapters share this same background. In documenting their lives, this dissertation has revealed the daunting challenges that stand in the way of achieving universal secondary education. The purpose of this conclusion is to highlight what this dissertation revealed about dropout in the Global South and its implications for the effort to keep the world's children in school. It includes four sections: First, I summarize the project's central findings and answer the dissertation's guiding research questions. Second, I outline the scholarly contribution this dissertation has made to theoretical and empirical discussions of dropout in the Global South in sociology and related fields. Third, I note the limitations of this study and avenues for further investigation. Finally, in the fourth section, I provide some closing remarks.

The Dropout Process in El Salvador

In Chapter two, I described the scholarly consensus that dropout is a long-term process beginning in early childhood (Alexander et al., 2014; Rumberger, 2011). Here, in this section, I use those insights to outline the dropout process that my findings revealed for poor urban youth in El Salvador. The process involves four major parts: It begins in the perilous state of the families, communities, and schools which all children rely upon for nurturing and support. For the children of Cerro Verde and La Laguna, scarcity, stress, fear, and violence pervaded these contexts, and, as the second part emphasizes, imperiled their health, school attendance, learning, and social behavior in enduring ways. From the start of elementary school, they accumulated deficits in cognitive and social skills which caused their academic development to spiral

downward. The onset of adolescence, the third part of the process, introduced a set of new developmental stressors. These compounded their preexisting trajectories and, for many, caused a rupture with school. A strong faith in education among youth and their families, the fourth part, worked against these downward pressures, helping to keep many young people in school through their mid-teens and encouraging those who had previously dropped out to return and try again.

These four parts of the dropout process, each of which I describe in detail below, also serve as answers to this dissertation's guiding research questions, originally outlined in Chapter two and reproduced in Figure 8.1 below. The questions involved the same topics in the dropout process–children's academic trajectories, adolescent experiences, and educational aspirations–and, in addition, the extent to which dropouts' backgrounds and perspectives differed from those of high school graduates. My interview sample, as outlined in the methods chapter, included a comparative sample of young people who had recently or were about to graduate high school. I expected to identify resources or processes that protected this group from academic failure, but the interview data showed that differences between dropouts and graduates were much more subtle and random than I had anticipated.

1. ***Academic Trajectory:*** How do youth's family, community, and school contexts shape their academic trajectories? What academic resources and risks do they accumulate? How do dropouts' academic trajectories influence their decision to leave school?
2. ***Adolescent Stressors:*** What new pressures do young people encounter during adolescence? How do youth interpret their role and priorities during this period and how do their views influence their schooling? Do dropouts have views or risks that are distinct from youth who stay in school?
3. ***Demand and Aspirations for Schooling***: How do young people perceive the value of an education to their future and what educational aspirations do they have? How do they rate the quality of the teaching and the relevance of what they are learning at school? Do dropouts have specific views that influence their decision to leave school?

Figure 8.1: Dissertation's Guiding Research Questions

Overall, high schoolers and drop outs shared very similar backgrounds, aspirations, and beliefs about schooling. Both experienced the perilous conditions in their homes, communities, and schools which I found to be impede their academic development from childhood onward. And both struggled with the heightened pressures of adolescence. I had assumed that high school graduates had stronger academic skill sets or closer relationships with teachers and staff that helped propel them through school, but, while that was true for some graduates, it was not always the case. Indeed, most graduates struggled with the same learning and behavioral problems that dropouts did. And there were more than a handful of dropouts who had good grades and strong ties to teachers and still dropped out.

What can we conclude from the similarities between graduates and dropouts? To put it succinctly, the risks for dropout were almost universally experienced by poor urban youth. With somewhere between 80 and 90% of these students dropping out before graduation, this is hardly a surprising conclusion (UNESCO, 2018b). But, it is an informative one that provides insight on the school reforms and social programs needed to help keep these young people in school–a topic which I will return to in the following section.

Perilous Contexts

This study revealed that the poor urban children of El Salvador were embedded in contexts which were deeply strained and unable to provide critical resources for their academic development. Their families were *vulnerable*, their communities were *dangerous*, and their schools were *broken*. Each of contexts vital to children's wellbeing and growth, in other words, was constrained and disfigured by poverty and the toll it exacts. None had the resources or capabilities to make it strong enough to counteract or prevent the damage done to children by the

others. Instead, poor children's physical and emotional hardships at home were compounded by the violence and repression in their neighborhoods and the deficiencies of their schools.

Vulnerable Families: Parents and caregivers had a deep faith in education and aspired to see their children graduate high school, but, apart from motivation and encouragement, they had very few means to put towards developing their children's academic potential. Poverty stood in their way. Most parents strived to protect their children from having too many economic and household responsibilities and to keep them focused on their studies. But the lack of living-wage jobs meant parents were often unable to realize this goal. Their low and highly unstable incomes left them very vulnerable and families entered in and out of economic crises on a regular basis. Natural disasters or nationwide economic downturns were devastating. Even more frequently, everyday personal crises destabilized families: A parents' illness, a broken marriage, or a loan coming due deeply disrupted families' ability to put food on the table.

As revealed in Chapter four, even elementary-aged children could be called upon to contribute economically by helping a parent in a family business, doing hired work, or managing household chores. The work children did at younger ages was often seasonal or for short periods as their families went in and out of economic distress. Most families also tried to limit their youngest children's exposure to physically harmful roles. Older children and especially adolescents, as will be described below, however, did take on physically and mentally degrading jobs which often consumed large parts of their day.

The overwhelming stress of poverty also took a toll on the emotional health and relationships within families. The high rates of domestic violence reported by the interviewees in this study is one example. Twenty-five of the 82 interviewees–30%– described, without my prompting them, how fathers and stepfathers violently abused their mothers. National surveys also show violence

occurring at high rates in Salvadoran families. One survey reported 47% of married or accompanied Salvadoran women had experienced intimate partner abuse in their lifetimes and 20% had been abused during the previous year (ADS, 2009: xxi). Frequently, abuse caused parents' relationships to end, fathers left behind their families behind, and children became more economically vulnerable.

Child abuse was also not infrequent and was reported by 23% of the interviewees. Representative surveys of child abuse in El Salvador are somewhat dated, but in 2003, 32% of girls and 48% of boys ages 15-19 reported being beaten as a form of punishment (Speizer et al., 2008). The rates of child abuse appear to be decreasing as legal and cultural norms stigmatize it (Speizer et al., 2008), but, even more recently in 2014, 14% of parents reported hitting a child between the ages of 3 and 14 with a belt, stick, or other hard object during the previous 30 days (MINSAL-UNICEF, 2015).[65] Interviewees who experienced child abuse reported feeling severe distress and had what appeared to be lasting mental health problems like extreme aggression, depression, or suicidal thoughts.

Dangerous Communities: Community violence intensified the insecurity in poor children's lives. Families living in violent neighborhoods tried to protect children by limiting their contact with neighbors, keeping them indoors or taking them to work, and forbidding friendships with suspect youth. Children often felt fearful on public streets and buses and few had access to safe parks or recreational spaces. Instead, they learned to keep their distance and avoid the ire of gang members by being cordial and respecting their rules.

Some families, as documented vividly in Chapter four, experienced violence directly. Homicide, assault, threats, and police brutality devastated them, causing significant emotional

[65] My calculation from publically available dataset. See MINSAL-UNICEF, 2015.

and economic harm. These young people left school behind to help their families cope through what were sometimes extended crises stemming from the violence swirling all around.

Weak Schools: Schools in El Salvador have been idealized as an ameliorative for family poverty and community insecurity. But, as Chapter five revealed, the situation at La Laguna and Cerro Verde showed the faulty foundations of this ideal. These schools lacked critical infrastructure, textbooks, and learning materials. Their overworked and under-trained teachers relied on outdated teaching methods and had no support systems for addressing students' multiple needs: There were no remedial specialists to deal with their academic problems nor were there social workers or psychologists to address their emotional and behavioral issues. Overall students received very little quality instruction and learned much less than they should.

Downward Academic Trajectories

In Chapter two, I outlined four conditions that children need to develop successful academic trajectories: good physical and mental health, consistent school attendance, learning and engagement in the classroom, and positive social behaviors. The perilous contexts described above undermined children's chances to achieve any of these conditions. Instead, poor urban students tended to have *fragile* mental and physical health, their attendance was *irregular*, their learning was *incomplete*, and their behaviors were too frequently *antisocial*. These multiple risks combined and compounded each other over time, pushing children's academic development in downward trajectories.

Fragile Health: Children's physical and mental health were threatened by their regular exposure to harm in their environments. In terms of physical health, I observed during fieldwork that many students arrived at school hungry, tired, and wasted by illnesses–diarrhea, asthma, mosquito borne diseases, lice, etc.–that came with not having enough healthy food to eat and

living in homes that were poorly constructed, dirty, overcrowded, and without access to clean water or sewage treatment.

Their mental health was also deeply affected by the violence in their families and communities. Youth remembered these traumatic incidents vividly and several recounted how their feelings of fear, sadness, and anger followed them to school, affecting their ability to concentrate, understand what was being taught, and socialize with their peers.

Irregular Attendance: Many students were absent from school on a regular basis. Their reasons for not attending varied. Some, as documented in Chapter four, helped their parents at work and they missed class when they felt obliged (or were compelled) to help. Being malnourished or sick also caused many students to stay away from school on days when they felt unwell. So did emotional problems brought on by conflict between family members. Other students reported skipping class because they felt fearful of peers, teachers, or gang members or police officers on the street.

Incomplete Learning: Ill-health and absences deprived students of the opportunity to learn. But their learning was even more severely impeded by the deficiencies of their schools. As revealed in Chapter five, students received very few instructional hours each year. What time teachers had for instruction was often ill-spent on dictation or copying from textbooks. A legacy of learning deficits trailed students as they passed from grade to grade, causing most to be far behind grade-level in reading, math, and other basic skills.

Their learning was also hindered by the lack of substantive educational support at home. Many of the interviewees reported, for example, receiving very little direct support from their parents as they learned to read, write, and do their elementary schoolwork. This was not because parents didn't want to help their children to learn, but rather because their own low levels of

education and long hours at work meant they had neither the capacity nor time to do so. The survey also showed only a minority of parents–36%– helped older students with homework.[66] Some students found help with siblings, cousins, or other adults in their households, but there were still a large number– 43%–who said no one at home assisted them.

Anti-Social Behavior: My fieldwork revealed that anti-social behaviors, including aggressive play, bullying, physical fighting, and verbal threats, were common at school. There were no social workers or psychologists on staff to help schools address their students' behavioral health issues. Instead, most teachers used harsh authoritarian approaches to discipline their students. Punishments also usually involved removing students from the classroom for extended periods. Disciplined students were frequently asked to clean the halls during class time and suspensions were commonly used.

Several interviewees described having problems controlling their tempers and reacting violently to taunts or other harassment they received from peers at school. These students often attributed their behavior to experiences at home. One girl, whose father violently abused her mother, said, for example: "Because of the problems my mom was having with my dad… I would get [to school] and fight with all the boys–everything that was going on at my home, I would go do it at school, I fought with all the boys, I disobeyed the teachers, I was really difficult, that is why I flunked [fifth grade]."

Adolescence and Added Stressors

Most dropouts in El Salvador leave school during their middle teenage years (Adelman and Székely, 2016). In this section, I explain why adolescence added a new set of conditions pushing youth out of school. The youth in this study, like all teenagers, experienced the profound

[66] Source: Student Survey. N=307, Missing=6 (2%)

physical, mental, and emotional changes that occur during this developmental stage. But they also encountered new expectations and pressures in their homes, schools, and communities which added extremely heightened levels of stress and conflict into their lives. These emotionally charged situations caused many to drop out.

Early Responsibility: The informal or blue collar work that parents did was so stressful, tiresome, and physically degrading that it took a toll on their health and well-being. Many young people in this study described feeling extreme worry for their overworked parents and a strong sense of responsibility to help ease their burdens. Many felt compelled to help out by working or taking on extra duties in the household. Some took over roles their parents did in family businesses or worked more hours so their parents didn’t have to. Others found hired work and used their earnings to maintain themselves independently or help pay household bills. Some became the primary cooks, cleaners, and childcare providers at home.

Most youth tried to balance work and school, but, as mentioned above, their families experienced chronic economic crises. When their parents showed signs of physical and emotional distress, youth wanted to do whatever was needed to relieve it. Their years of work experience also gave them a sense of being capable of holding down a job and contributing economically. During these periods of heightened work and focus on their families, youth missed school frequently and their grades fell. Many decided to drop out temporarily from school and concentrate their energies on helping their families overcome the problems pressing on them.

Higher Academic Expectations: The middle and high school teachers at Cerro Verde and La Laguna tended to have higher academic expectations for their students than their elementary counterparts. They gave more homework assignments, projects, and tests, and, were also less flexible in assigning passing grades. What teachers wanted their students to do, however, ran up

against what they were actually capable of doing. As Chapter six documented, many students at La Laguna and Cerro Verde did not have the basic skills they needed to keep up with the middle school curriculum. These students often felt frustrated, embarrassed, or incompetent in the classroom and earned very low, often failing, grades. Some students became deeply disillusioned with themselves, and fearing they would flunk, dropped out to avoid these emotions.

School Conflict: A hostile school climate worsened conditions. Students could feel rebuffed and alienated by their teachers' harsh talk and authoritarian approaches to discipline. Classmates often treated each other aggressively and fights were common. A significant number of students were threatened, harassed, or bullied by peers. Some youth experienced conflicts with teachers or peers over extended periods and, perceiving the abuse would continue or more harm could come to them, opted to drop out.

Risky Behavior Exposure: During adolescence, youth search for settings which enable them to realize their developmental needs for autonomy, trusting relationships, and a sense of competence (Eccles and Roeser, 2011). This need for independence and relationships can lead teens to be more focused on earning their peers' approval and can also heighten their clashes with parents (Roeser et al., 2000). Among the youth in this study, this developmental shift coincided with the stress and conflict at home and school outlined above. Their parents also tended to use authoritarian, and sometimes abusive, approaches in disciplining them and, because of their work schedules, had neither the time nor resources to provide quality supervision. As a result of these conditions, youth looked for emotional relief in friends and peers outside their homes.

As documented in Chapter seven, teen pregnancy is a potential consequence of these multiple forces coming together. Immersed in family, community, and school challenges, the girls who

would become teen moms in this study, described seeing the boys or older men who would become their babies' father as sources of stability. Men became a competing aspiration which interfered with their commitment to school and added more conflict to their homes. Lacking sexual education and access to family planning services, these girls were pulled into sexual relationships they were unprepared to handle. Their pregnancies caused most to leave school. Later, after the birth of their children, those teen mothers that attempted to return and restart their education were often forced out again because the responsibilities of childcare were too much to balance with school.

Hope amid Hardship

Despite the strong pressures working against their academic success, the Salvadoran youth in this study still hoped for an education. They believed a high school diploma would transform their lives, they perceived themselves as capable of attaining it, and they made great efforts to go to school and learn. Additionally, they also largely believed that the public education they were receiving was interesting, relevant, and of high quality. On the student survey, for example, over 90% of students said they liked going to school, an education was important to their future, their classes were interesting, and their teachers provided quality instruction.[67]

Their parents, older siblings, and other adult family members also supported their academic motivations and made daily material sacrifices so their children could go get an education. Moreover, inside school buildings, they found teachers who encouraged and inspired them to keep studying and also tried to provide support when they were falling behind or having other problems. And most bonded with peers who warmly shared resources, reassurances, and some of the happiest moments of their childhoods and adolescence. All of these relationships provided

[67] Source: Student Survey. N=307, Missing=9-12 (3-4%)

critical support when they were feeling doubts about their ability to succeed academically or wondered whether the sacrifices their families were making for their education were worth it. There was usually someone, if not multiple people, within their inner circle who intervened and encouraged them to keep the faith and keep trying.

This is not to say that youth’s always heeded their words or that their aspirations for themselves and outlooks about school were always positive. As I documented in Chapter six and summarized above, several interviewees did tell me they dropped out because they felt discouraged or unmotivated to keep studying. When I pushed for an explanation they told me about the deep academic struggles or harsh treatment by teachers or peers which caused them to lose confidence in their academic abilities and to feel that their efforts would be better spent on other pursuits. But, as time and the strong emotions that triggered their decision to leave school passed, they began to reassess the value of an education to their futures and feel a strong desire to return to school. Most began again to aspire to a high school degree and made attempts to return to school.

Other dropouts never lost their faith in education or their academic capabilities. Rather, they dropped out because of immediate problems they felt they could not resolve while going to school. They viewed their exit as temporary and planned from the outset of dropping out on returning as soon as possible.

These findings show how youth’s high aspirations, alongside the widespread faith in education that they shared with their families, peers, and teachers, served as resources motivating their academic pursuits and buoying them in times of distress. Even dropouts, despite their multiple challenges, were inspired by the potential an education promised to find ways to get back into school and keep trying for their degrees.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

As mentioned in Chapter two, there are very few studies of dropout in the Global South and most research on the subject tends to focus on one factor or setting–the effects of child labor or classroom practices at the school, for example–rather than on the more complex dropout process which has been the focus of research in industrialized countries (Hunt, 2008). This limited scope of analysis is in following with the overall trend in research on educational attainment in developing countries which has largely failed to draw comprehensive portraits of the family, school, and community contexts shaping youth's educational outcomes (Buchmann and Hannum, 2001). This dissertation was designed to address that gap in knowledge and in this section I describe the theoretical and empirical advances it has contributed.

I do so by building the findings from the previous section into a comprehensive model of the process pushing poor urban youth out of school in El Salvador. The model, depicted in Figure 8.2, also serves to highlight how this dissertation has advanced scholarship on dropout in the Global South. Below I describe the model, its theoretical underpinnings, and its implications for new research and policy efforts addressing the topic. The discussion is organized around the three major segments of the model: The risks, resources, and social structures shaping poor youth's educational attainment.

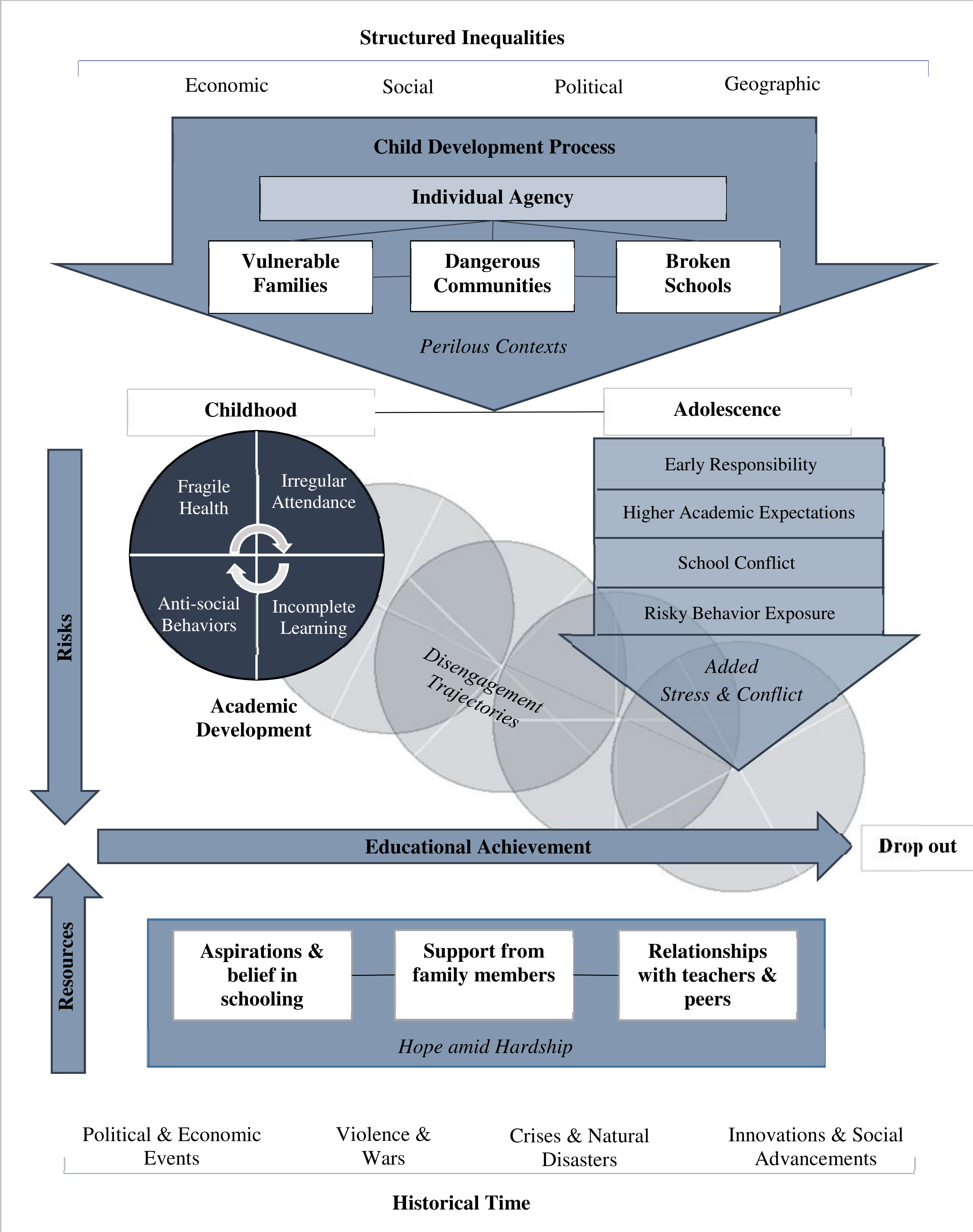

Figure 8.2: Model of the Dropout Process in El Salvador

Model of Dropout Risk in the Global South

Figure 8.2 draws heavily from the bio-ecological and life course theoretical traditions. The large arrow at the top, for example, represents the bio-ecological child development process (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). It shows how children are actively involved in constructing their own developmental outcomes, but, crucially, that their agency is conditioned on the state of their childhood contexts (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; Fothergill and Peek, 2015; Shonkoff, 2010). Children depend on their families, schools, and communities to provide them with the resources and nurturing relationships they need to grow and learn optimally (Tudge et al., 2009). Figure 8.2 shows, as was described above, how these contexts were deeply constrained in El Salvador. Neither families, communities, nor schools were capable of carrying out their roles in support of children's learning. Instead, together they formed a set of perilous contexts that eroded children's ability to realize their developmental potential (Eccles and Roeser, 2010; Fothergill and Peek, 2015; Tudge et al., 2009).

The set of circles in the middle of Figure 8.2 is influenced by the life course model of dropout (Alexander et al., 2001). This research tradition has demonstrated that dropouts tend to have educational problems early on, often beginning early elementary school, that revolve into a vicious circle of negative outcomes, each one increasing their disengagement from school (Alexander et al., 1997; Rumberger, 2011). Conversely, life course research has also shown that poor children also benefit from resources and interventions to enhance their health, school attendance, learning, and social behaviors during childhood, such that, early school success can create a virtuous circle that propels them toward graduation (Duncan and Magnuson, 2011; Entwisle et al., 2005; Schweinhart et al., 2005). Figure 8.2 depicts that most poor urban youth in

El Salvador, however, experienced the former vicious circle, which impeded their academic development and put them on high risk trajectories for dropping out.

The downward arrow intersecting with the circles in Figure 8.2 represents the new pressures youth encountered during adolescence. This part of the model was influenced by Dupéré et al. (2015) and their depiction of dropout as involving both preexisting academic risks and specific triggering events that occur shortly before a student leaves school. I found, as described above, that adolescence increased stress and conflict in the lives of poor urban youth in El Salvador in multiple ways. These new pressures amplified their academic risks, sending them further downward. Many began to feel school was a source of more stress and found relief by dropping out and focusing on helping their families by working or doing domestic chores. Others focused their attention on friends or romantic partners outside of home and dropped out after these relationships had pulled them into situations, such as teen pregnancy, which conflicted with staying in school.

Together these three parts of Figure 8.2 illustrate the multiple, overlapping sources of risk in the lives of poor urban youth. The implications of this part of the model are profound: There is no one way to resolve the dropout problem among this population. Any genuine effort to do so will require multiple investments which extend into and empower each the contexts supporting children's development (Fothergill and Peek, 2015; Reimers, 2000). Moreover, these investments must stretch over their life course, from their early childhoods into their adolescence (Alexander et al., 2014; Reimers, 2000).

The policy challenges entailed in such a view are significant. Families need a basic income, safe housing, quality health care, and an adequate social safety net that protects them. Communities must be free from violence and inhumane policing. Schools must have more

resources to pay teachers, improve instructional quality, and lengthen school days. They also need to be able to identify and support students who have spiraled into the vicious circle of disengagement. Remedial specialists and social workers must become regular members of the staff. Lastly, adolescence introduces multiple new challenges which strain youth, their families, and teachers. Schools can help ease these by providing their students with mental health services as well as quality instruction in life skills, health, and sex education. Families also need to be empowered with information about adolescent development and opportunities for training and support. And communities can provide healthy alternatives for recreation, vocational learning, and other communal events.

High Aspirations and Unmet Demand

In Chapter two, I described studies of dropout from scholars in El Salvador and Latin America that suggested that large numbers of youth dropped out because they had lost interest in their schooling and faith in themselves to achieve an education. The authors of these reports frequently cited survey data from the region in which more than one-third of school leavers said they had abandoned their studies because of a “lack of interest” (IADB, 2012). This data has sometimes been used to paint youth as apathetic or enticed into believing that deviant paths, such as joining a gang, are better options for getting ahead (Joma, 2013; PNUD, 2013). Others have suggested it reflects how poor families do not know the value of an education and have failed to instill high educational aspirations in their children (Rovira, 2017; Schiefelbein, 1997; World Bank, 2006).

Most authors, however, aimed their critique at schools and governments, rather than poor youth and their families. They concluded that the root cause of dropouts’ alienation was the very low quality of education they had received. Dropouts had done the grim calculus that they had

learned too little and their poor academic track records made graduation too unlikely to pursue further, so they decided to leave school and invest their time in other pursuits (Adelman and Székely, 2016; Näslund-Hadley and Binstock, 2010; Schiefelbein, 1997). Or, as other authors said, the deficiencies of their schools–the dilapidated buildings, poor teaching methods, and outdated curriculum–impressed upon their psyches, making an education seem irrelevant to their futures and teaching them not to aspire to better lives (D'Alessandre and Mattioli, 2015; Lopez, 2007; Rovira, 2017).

I certainly found, as I have described throughout this dissertation, that broken schools were a major driver of the dropout process. But my findings on youth's aspirations and how they value an education differed from these authors' accounts. As I mentioned above, youth in this study, including dropouts, had very high educational aspirations and a strong faith that an education would improve their lives. Many did, as the reports suggested, grow at times frustrated and disillusioned with what schools offered them. But I found that these views were temporary and, when their disappointment and embarrassment about their academic problems had passed, they began again to aspire to an education. In fact, as I have repeated throughout this dissertation, nearly all dropouts continued to believe and search for a better future in their schools.

None of the dropouts I interviewed said "an education doesn't interest me" or any other similar expression. I struggled to square this finding with the high number–34%, as I mentioned in Chapter two–who were saying this to survey workers. I suspect the survey result has something to do with limitations in the survey design and its implementation. It is my view that it should be regarded with skepticism.

I draw several implications from this finding. First, there is no basis on which to conclude that youth and their families do not know the value of high school or college degrees or aspire to

achieve them. Nor have they adopted the fatalistic view that schools provide them with no real opportunities and, as such, come to conclude they are not worth their time. Lastly, there is absolutely no widespread acceptance among poor urban youth of the idea that any path other than an education–for example, working as unskilled laborer, entering into an early marriage, or joining a gang–is a more viable and rewarding way of life than earning a high school degree. In fact, such views are widely stigmatized and perceived as immoral.

In contrast, as I the bottom of Figure 8.2 depicts, I found youth and their families' aspirations and beliefs about schooling to be resources that sustained them in school despite hardships and failures. Even with their multiple constraints, parents and children sacrifice to get an education. Viewing youth and families' views and beliefs as resources, rather than weaknesses and threats to their schooling, has several implications.

For example, public relations campaigns meant to increase demand for schooling among the poor in the Global South–like the one I observed on large highway billboards, t-shirts, and coloring books during fieldwork–seem to have already borne fruit and may not be a useful further investment. Moreover, many teachers and principals hold the same views that parents and youth are uninterested in an education that are represented in these publicity campaigns. I observed them frequently expressing these views in their meetings and discussion with youth and parents in ways that were insensitive and often harsh and humiliating. Teachers and staff should be trained that such critiques of youth and their parents are inaccurate and can be harmful to their school attachment, as I reported in Chapter six.

Finally, there are high levels of unmet demand to re-engage in schooling among dropouts. These youth had not lost interest in acquiring an education nor become completely alienated from their schools. Even when their lives were deeply constrained by responsibilities at work and

home, they looked to schools to provide them with a better future. There is a thirst for more educational opportunities among this population and more needs to be done to provide them with viable opportunities to re-engage and turn their incredible energies toward building more productive lives for them and their families.

Structured Inequalities and Growing Achievement Gaps

The two bands along the top and bottom of Figure 8.2 represent the effects of structural inequalities and historical events on the dropout process. Political, social, economic, and geographic inequalities have concentrated educational risks for dropout in the families, schools, and communities of poor children and diluted the resources they have available to them resist it (Watkins, 2014). The historical levels of violence affecting their communities is making their unequal burden worse (Fothergill and Peek, 2015). This section describes how educational inequality is growing as a result and how this dissertation has documented the micro-processes behind this macro-trend.

I opened this dissertation with the story of the 1994 school reform that the Salvadoran legislature enacted in the aftermath of the country's civil war. The law bred high hopes among all sectors of the population that public schools would restore peace by erasing the deep inequities between the country's wealthy and poor children (Gómez Arévalo, 2011). But another set of consequential reforms was adopted during the same period: The neoliberal structural adjustment program which cut government spending, reduced public employment, and slashed social programs, leading to higher poverty levels and material suffering among working-class and poor families (Paris, 2002; Wade, 2016; Wood and Segovia, 1995).

The simultaneous timing of these initiatives was fateful: At the same moment that the Salvadoran government wanted more poor children to stay in school, it was also imposing new

economic hardships on their families and communities. Policymakers in El Salvador had bet that poor children would not be harmed by the shifts in economic and social policy in the long run, because investments in their schools would be enough for them to escape their parents' poverty. They were wrong. This dissertation has shown that destabilizing any one of the contexts that support children's development causes negative outcomes to ripple across other contexts and sends their educational trajectories in negative directions (Fothergill and Peek, 2015).

The investments in education made by the government in the 1990s and 2000s disproportionately benefitted those wealthy and middle class students who were best able to take advantage of them. Poor families attempted to help their children realize the same educational journeys as their better-off classmates, but their plans were impeded by all the risks and challenges I described above. Data on the achievement gap bears out this argument. Educational inequality between the wealthiest and poorest students in El Salvador grew between 1990 and 2010, the same period when the 1994 school reform should have erased it (Bassi et al., 2013; Reimers, 2005).

Today, over 70% of wealthy Salvadorans earn high school diplomas while only 7% of their poor urban peers manage to do so (UNESCO, 2018b). This achievement gap is so large that it is hard to imagine it growing bigger, but there are reasons to believe it will do so (Reimers, 2005; Watkins, 2014). Middle-class and wealthy Salvadoran youth are already completing middle school at high rates and, as such, are well-poised to take advantage of new opportunities that are opening up at the high school level. Nearly one-half of poor and low-income students, on the other hand, do not even complete middle school (UNESCO, 2018b). Those that do enter high school, as this dissertation has documented, face the incredible academic and personal barriers to

graduation. Indeed, many, and possibly most, poor high school students drop out before finishing (Adelman and Székely, 2016).

Another factor will likely push the achievement gap wider in El Salvador: The epidemic levels of violence in the country. Crises take their heaviest toll on those who were vulnerable before the emergency developed, and, in the case of education, can result in a generation of poor youth losing out on schooling opportunities (Fothergill and Peek, 2015; Torche, 2010). The violence in El Salvador is concentrated in poor communities and this dissertation has shown its devastating effects on poor youth's families, communities, and schools. There is little doubt that more poor children are staying home from school today because of it (Alvarado, 2015).

This section has shown that policies and historical events which destabilize poor youth's families, communities, or schools also increase educational inequality in the long term. When policies are being designed, or threatening historical events are developing, the outsized effects on the poor need to be taken into account. Reversing educational inequality will require a progressive policy approach, which increases resources among the poor and reduces risk. The broad and simultaneous investments to stabilize and strengthen youth's families, schools, and communities which I outlined above are examples of such an approach.

Limitations and Next Steps

There are a number of relevant topics which this dissertation did not address and I will mention three as a means to highlight areas of potential future study. The first is the multiple ways in which gangs, violence, and fear are transforming schools. As outlined above, I depicted how direct exposure to violent crime severely harms the mental health of youth and their family members and often ends in their exit from school. I also documented how it is adding a fearful

new dynamic to already conflictive peer relationships. But I did not fully address the effects of the violence on teachers and their relationships with students.

I regularly observed teachers at La Laguna and Cerro Verde being extremely harsh on youth whom they perceived as interested in gangs and I sensed that these disciplinary tactics were meant to push them out of school. I interviewed nine youth who based on my observations had been treated in this manner. But only one said that he had left because of a teacher's threatening behavior. The rest said they enjoyed school and described warm and caring relationships with their peers and, in some cases, teachers. I believe these students had normalized the verbal abuse that I observed the teachers giving them. They reported histories of harsh treatment by other teachers and family members and described the treatment I observed as unexceptional. Some even defended it as necessary for preventing adolescent delinquency. I view the teachers' behavior as part of a larger context of institutionalized violence that had shaped the perceptions of all youth, even those who were clearly its victims. A fuller account of how and why teachers and schools contribute to the reproduction of violence is necessary.

A second issue which needs further exploration is the subject of violence within the household. As I described above, at least one-third of the interviewees witnessed or received abuse from family members. Nearly 10% of them ended up running away from home as a result, a choice which also necessitated they leave school. In addition, household violence was also frequently reported by teen mothers and teenage girls and boys who left home to move in with their romantic partners. More research is needed to reveal the factors which are causing such high levels of household violence in these families and how these harmful relationships are pushing youth out of their homes and schools.

"Dropping in," or how previous dropouts reintegrate back into school, is the third issue I believe requires more investigation. Other studies have also found as I did that a potentially high number of dropouts in the Global South are temporarily leaving school and returning the subsequent year (Ananga, 2011). But I was not able to identify any study that examined their experience in depth. I was able to establish in this dissertation that dropouts are very interested in returning to school and that most make attempts to do so. I also documented the sources of their motivation for continued schooling, the support they received from family members and friends, and the economic and administrative barriers they encountered when they attempted to return. But I was also unable to fully assess the experience of "drop in" students over the course of multiple years. Most of the drop in students whom I interviewed had only recently returned to school, but I did not learn the final outcomes of most of these students (with the exception of those who quickly dropped out again while I was in the field.) As such, I was unable to establish what conditions facilitated a "drop in" student making it to graduation.

A related area which I did not address at all in this dissertation were the alternative "Saturday schools" that the Ministry of Education provided for working students, teen moms, young adults, and other youth who had a valid reason for not attending regular schools. Some youth appreciated the availability of these programs, but many complained that they were very low quality and that teachers did not teach much. School officials, on the other side, said that retention rates in these programs were so low that they weren't worth the expense of putting on. Some schools even stopped offering the program because so few students succeeded in them. The quality of these programs and their ability to address what "drop in" students need to stay in school is an issue that could be valuable to helping youth cycle back into school successfully.

Concluding Remarks: The Fate of Hope

Study after study has confirmed the incredible power of high school to transform the lives of those who make it across the graduation stage (Patton et al., 2016; Sheehan et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2011). These basic institutions in everyday life have the potential to be hubs of individual, national, and global development, giving young people the information and capabilities they need to realize their potential and change the world into a more just and sustainable place.

Making sure all the world's poor children earn high school diplomas within ten years will require unprecedented progress at keeping these vulnerable youth in the classrooms. Sadly, the news over the last decade is discouraging. Since 2012, the size of the out-of-school population has not changed (UNESCO, 2018a). And in some countries, including El Salvador as I described in Chapter one, it actually increased. With no progress in nearly a decade, the standard approach to keeping the world's youth in school has proven itself woefully unprepared to address the needs of the most vulnerable (UNESCO, 2018a).

This dissertation has brought to life the individual lives behind these disappointing statistics. The downward global trend is no fault of their own, but is rather owed to the unfair burden of educational risks they have inherited. Despite their hardships, the young people in this study had a remarkable fortitude and persistence in the face of challenge. Even after failing at school and dropping out, they did not back down, but instead kept looking for new opportunities to improve their lives and help their families and friends. Their incredible energy and optimism has inspired these pages. They want to do what is needed to realize universal secondary education–and all that it promises to for our collective future. Despite all their challenges, their hope is relentless. Ours should be, too.

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APPENDIX A.
OBSERVATIONS AND INTERVIEWS IN RURAL SITE

Table A.1: Participant Observation at Rural School

School	Days and Hours per Grade (hours in parentheses)						Total Days (Hours)
	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	Other[68]	
Sessions	5	3	16	8	0	6	38
Hours	18.75	8.75	57.25	29	0	29.5	143.25

Table A.2: Rural Youth Interview Sample

Interview Type	Girls	Boys	TOTAL
Dropouts	19	14	**33**
High School Graduates	11	13	**24**
TOTAL	**30**	**27**	**57**

[68] Other refers to days where I observed students from different grades and included: (1) all-day school events such as dances or celebrations, (2) annual school enrollment, or (3) sessions where I observed multiple classrooms.

APPENDIX B.
PROJECT TIMELINE

Table B.1: Research Trips to El Salvador

#	Dates	Duration (months)
#1	September–November 2011	2.5
#2	January–March 2012	2.5
#3	May–November 2012	7.0
#4	May–July 2013	3.0
#5	September–November 2013	2.5
#6	February–March 2014	2.0
#7	July 2014–January 2015	6.5
#8	January–February 2016	1.5
#9	January–February 2017	1.5
	Total:	29

Table B.2: Timeline of Research Activities

Research Activities	Research Trip								
	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	#8	#9
Participant Observation in Schools	■	■	■	■	■	■			
Student Focus Groups			■	■					
Teacher Interviews			■						
Student Surveys					■	■			
Youth Interviews						■	■	■	■
Parent Interviews						■	■	■	■
Follow-up Visits								■	■

APPENDIX C.
YOUTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introductory talk (by interviewer): (Following the discussion of the purpose the interview and assent form which outlines interviewee's rights.) Okay, we're going to begin the interview. I have some questions here – my idea is to talk first about your childhood and then being a teenager. Then we will talk about your experience (dropping out, in high school, other risk factor – the interviewee will be aware that this is the purpose of the interview at this stage). At the end of the interview we will talk about your plans for the future and your opinions about what it is like for youth today in El Salvador. Does that sound good? If we start to talk about things out of order – that is okay – you should feel free to talk freely about whatever you think is important. You are the expert here and I'm the learner. I want to hear from you. I'll ask a few general questions and you can talk as much as you like, even if I don't ask about it. Also, Spanish is sometimes hard for me – so if I ask a question that you don't understand or you notice that I'm saying something wrong – tell me you don't understand and go ahead and correct me – don't be embarrassed! It helps me learn the language!

Like I said, I'm going to tape the conversation – this is so I can concentrate on what you are saying and not have to take notes. If there is anything that you want to talk about but that you don't want on tape, just let me know and I will turn it off.

Remember that if there are any questions that you don't want to answer – that is okay, don't answer them – just tell me "let's talk about something else." Also, if you have any questions for me, please ask. If at any time during the interview you want something to eat or drink or to go to

the bathroom – let me know and you can go ahead and go. If you feel you need to leave or want to stop the interview, let me know and we will do that. Does that sound good? Okay, let's get started.

Part 1: Childhood and Youth

Childhood

- Family
  - Let's start with your childhood. Tell me about your family and your home.
  - Who did you live with during your childhood? Tell me about them.
    - Probe for:
      - Number of siblings, other children in home
      - Parent/ guardians' occupations / income sources
      - Quality of relationships: What was your relationship like with ____? (each of named person)
      - Residential changes – did you move often or move between households
      - Migration of family members
    - *Be sure to ask how youth refer to these family members. Some youth do not live with their biological parents, but give their "social parents" the name of mom or dad. Tell youth to use the name they use for their relative when they are talking about him or her.*
  - What did you do to help out? What were your responsibilities?
    - Probe for:
      - Work or assist other in work (where, what age)
      - Chores, agriculture, caring for others
      - Time spent on these activities
- Community
  - Where did you grow up? What is it like there?
    - Who were your friends? What did you do you do together?
    - How much time did you spend with friends?
    - Probe for:
      - Participation in sports, clubs, or other organized activities
      - Church
  - What problems or dangers in the community were you aware of?
    - How did you feel about them?
    - What did you do to stay safe?
    - What did your family do to keep you safe?
- School

- o Tell me about your first years at school. What was school like for you at this time?
  - Probe for feelings about going to school (fear, fun, anticipation)
- o How did you learn to read? Can you tell me about who taught you to read and what it was like to learn?
- o When you were little, who helped you with your homework and to study for exams?
  - How did they help you? How much time did they spend with you?
- o How much schooling do your parents/guardians have? How about your siblings or other family members in your home?
- o What are your strongest memories about school during this time?

Youth/ Adolescence

- Family
  - o Now we are going to talk about youth or adolescence as some people call it. How has your family changed over the last few years?
    - Who are you living with now? (changes in composition of household)
      - ¤ *If someone has left:* Why did ___ leave?
    - Probe for:
      - ¤ Parent/guardians' occupations
      - ¤ Changes in income or economic security
      - ¤ Migration of family members
      - ¤ Changes in residence
      - ¤ Siblings' activities
    - **Key question:** How have your relationships changed with (persons mentioned above)?
      - ¤ Parents, siblings, other guardians
  - o How have your responsibilities changed?
    - Work or assist other in work
    - Chores, agriculture, caring for others
    - Time spent on these activities
- Community
  - o Are you still living in ____?
    - *If still living there:* How has that community changed?
    - *If residence has changed:* Why did you move? What is your new community like?
  - o What do you do now with your friends to have fun?
  - o What problems or dangers in the community are you aware of?
    - How do you feel about them?
    - What do you do to stay safe?
    - How do you feel that the violence in this country affects you?

- School
    - Let's talk about middle school. *(If dropped out prior, ask about last grade.)*
        - How did school change for you once you got to middle school?
        - How did your attitude or feelings about school change?
        - Who helps you with homework or to study for an exam, now? How do they help you?
    - What do you have to do to succeed in middle school?
        - How well do you do these things?
    - How does this school compare with other schools in the area?
        - What do you think of the teaching at this school?
        - What types of problems have you noticed at this school?
        - What are the students that go here like?
        - How do you feel about the expenses one has to pay in middle school? How do you pay them?
    - Have you ever repeated a grade in middle school? What happened? What was that experience like?
    - Dropout prompt: Have you ever left school for a time? OR You said that you have left school, right? …
        - *If youth has left school, use dropout questions below.*
        - *If youth has never left school, follow up with high school or at-risk questions, depending on answers above.*

Part 2: Phenomena of interest (Dropout, High school, Risk)

Dropout

- Tell me about what happened when you decided to leave school.
    - Probe for specific details:
        - Year, age, and grade at time of dropout
        - Time of year that dropout occurred (month or season): How did this time of year impact on decision? (e.g., agricultural season)
    - Do you feel like there were other things that also influenced your decision to leave? *If yes:* What were these?
    - Did you talk to anyone before you decided? What did they tell you?
    - What were you feeling in the days after you left school?
    - What did your family tell you?
    - What did your friends tell you?
    - Did you return to the school to tell your teachers or get your papers? What did the teachers or principal tell you?
- What did you do after you left school?
    - How did you feel during that time?
    - How did others treat you after you left school? (probe for family, friends)

    - What do you think others think about your decision? (probe for family, friends)
- Was this the only time, or have you left school on other occasions? (repeat questions if yes)
- Have you tried to go back to school?
    - If yes: Tell me about that experience.
    - What motivated you to go back?
    - Who supported you when you decided to go back?
    - What was it like to be in school again?

High School

- Let's talk about high school. Tell me about your high school and how you decided to go there.
    - How did you find out about this school? (Probe for networks of friends or relatives providing information about schooling)
    - What were the reasons you chose this school? (Probe for reasons why other schools were not chosen.)
- What was it like to be a high school student?
    - How was Year 1 different than being in middle school?
    - How did things change between years 1 and 2/3?
    - What was your final year like? How was the PAES?
    - How do you feel about the expenses one has to pay in high school? How do you pay them?
- How did your family support you while you were in high school?
- What other types of support did you have while you were in high school?
- Now that you are in high school/ graduate from high school, how do you think others see you?
    - How does your family feel about your accomplishment?
    - How do your friends feel?

At-Risk and High School students

- *If never dropped out:* Was there ever a time that you considered leaving school?
    - *If yes:* Tell me about that time…. What helped you decide to stay in school?
- Many students leave school before finishing 9th grade. Even more students never go on to high school. Do you have friends that have not finished school?
    - *If yes:* Can you tell me about a friend or family member that had to leave school and what happened to him or her?
    - How are you like your friend/family member? How are you different from him/her?

Work/ Chores/ Agriculture

- You mentioned above that you (work/ do chores/ farm work). Tell me about what you do.
  - Who do you work with?
  - Description of responsibilities
  - Supervisors / relationships or problems
  - Days per week/ hours per day/ Seasons
  - What do you like about work? What do you dislike?
  - How do you balance going to school and working?
  - How do you feel that working affects your schooling?

Pregnancy / Becoming a parent

- Getting pregnant
  - Before you got pregnant, had you and the father of the baby talked about having a baby?
    - *If yes:* What plans had you made?
- Finding out
  - When you found out you were pregnant, what went through your mind in that moment?
  - What happened next?
  - Who did you tell and how did they react?
  - Who has supported you while you were pregnant?
- Being a mom/dad
  - Now that you are a mom, what is a typical day like?
  - Who helps you raise your child? What do they do to support you?
- Relationship with father/mother of child
  - How did your relationship with the father of the child change when you told him you were pregnant?
  - How is your relationship with him now?
- Opinions of others
  - How do your friends and family treat you now that you are pregnant/ a mom/ a dad?
- Future of child
  - What type of future do you want for your child?
  - What do you plan to do as a parent to help your child achieve this?

Part 3: Reflections and Future

Present (high school and dropouts)

- Tell me about what you are doing now.
    - How do you feel about ____?
    - Would you like to be doing something else? What would you like to be doing?
    - What is keeping you from doing this?

Future

- What plans do you have for the future?
    - How do you see yourself in two years?
    - In 5 years?
    - In 10 years?
- What worries you about the future?
- Do you want to get married? When do you think it would be an ideal time to get married? Why this age?
    - What about having kids? Do you want to have kids? When would you like to have children?

Reflections

- What does it mean to be a high school graduate in this country?
- What is life like for people who don't get their high school degree?
- What types of support do you think young people need to be able to get through high school?
    - You can use your own experience as an example.

End of Interview

That was the last question I had, but before I end…

- Is there anything you want to talk about that we haven't?
- Do you have any questions for me?
- How do you feel about the interview?
- Is there anything that you think I should be asking that I didn't?

Here is my card with my name and contact information. If there is anything you want to let me know about or any questions you have about the interview or if you just want to call and say hi – please go ahead and call or email me.

APPENDIX D.
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

Question #1: Likes and Dislikes (Use written prompt)

- What do you like about coming to school?
- What do you dislike about coming to school?
    - Probes:
        - Tell me more about what the teachers are like.
        - Tell me about any problems you've had with a teacher.
        - Tell me more about what the students who come here are like.
        - Tell me about any problems you've had with a classmate.
        - If you could change the school, what would you do to make it better?

Question #2: Challenges

- We're going to talk about coming to school every day and getting your homework done. Sometimes it is difficult to do these things.
    - Are there days when it is difficult to come to school? What happens on those days to make it difficult to come to school? How often does this happen?
    - Are there days when it is difficult to get your homework done? What happens on those days? How often does this happen? What do you do when you don't complete an assignment?

Question #3: Resources and Support

- What do your parents think about you coming to school?
- Who helps you with your homework?
- When you have a question about homework assignment or when you are studying for a test, who do you ask?

Question #4: Aspirations and Plans for the Future

- What is the highest grade you would like to complete? Why is this important to you?
- What job would you like to have in the future?
- What do you think you have to do to get this job?

Question #5: Dropout

- Think about your closest friends. Have any of them dropped out of school? Why did they leave?
- Do you have siblings or other family members that are your age and you are close with who have dropped out of school? Why did they leave?

APPENDIX E.
STUDENT SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Schools in El Salvador
Student Survey

Dear Participant,

My name is Meghan Mordy and I am a student at Colorado State University in the United States. I am doing a project on education in El Salvador. This survey is about what students' lives are like and what they think of their schools. It is for students in sixth through ninth grades in El Salvador.

Before we begin, you should know the following:
Your participation is voluntary. If you don't want to participate in this survey, you don't have to. You will not be penalized for not participating. If you do participate and don't want to answer some of the questions, you don't have to. If you want to stop answering questions at any time, you can do so.

All of your responses are completely anonymous and confidential. This survey is anonymous. That mean you won't put your name on it and no one will know what you answered (not even myself). I will not show your response sheet to anyone. When I report the results, I will combine what you have answered with others, so no one will be able to tell who answered what.

Agreeing to be in this project cannot hurt you. It won't help you, either.

The survey takes approximately 20-45 minutes. Your teacher has given permission to use class time for the survey. If you need more time, let me know and I will make arrangements with your teacher.

If you have any questions about this survey, feel free to talk with me at school or call me at 7207-0863. Please take this letter home to your parents/guardians for their information.

Sincerely,

___________________________	___________________________
Lori Peek	Meghan Mordy
Associate Professor	Ph.D. Candidate
Colorado State University	Colorado State University

Instructions

Mark the box that corresponds to the response you have selected. You can use an "x" a checkmark, or color in the box. Here is an example of how to answer a question:

(1) What is your favorite sport?

- ☐ Basketball
- ☒ Soccer
- ☐ Volleyball
- ☐ Running
- ☐ Swimming
- ☐ Skateboarding

(2) For questions that have the following response options: **YES!, yes, no, NO!**

Mark (the BIG) **NO!** if you think the statement is **DEFINITELY NOT TRUE** for you.
Mark (the little) **no** if you think the statement is **MOSTLY NOT TRUE** for you.
Mark (the little) **yes** if you think the statement is **MOSTLY TRUE** for you.
Mark (the BIG) **YES!** if you think the statement is **DEFINITELY TRUE** for you

	YES!	**yes**	**No**	**NO!**
I like ice cream	X			
I like lemons.		X		

(3) There are some questions that ask you to write your response. If you don't know, write "I don't know."

If you have any questions about how to answer or concerns about this survey, please ask me!

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS SURVEY!

(1) What is your gender? ☐ Feminine ☐ Masculine

(2) What grade are you in? ☐ 6th ☐ 7th ☐ 8th ☐ 9th

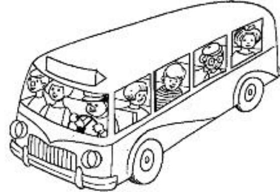
(3) How old are you? Age: ________________

(4) Where do you live? (Write the names of the neighborhood and city where you live):

____

(5) What is the area you live in like? ☐ It is a **rural** area ☐ It is an **urban** area

(6) How do you get to school? Circle your response.

Walking	**By Bus**	**By Car**	**By Paid School Transport**
			

(7) How long does it take you to get to school?
☐ Less than 10 minutes
☐ 10-20 minutes
☐ 21-40 minutes
☐ 41-60 minutes
☐ More than 1 hour

(8) Who do you live with most of the time? Write an X next to ALL of the people who live with you. Write the number of people when the number is more than one.
☐ Mom
☐ Dad
☐ Stepmom
☐ Stepdad
☐ Brother(s): *No.* ____
☐ Sister(s): *No.* ____
☐ Grandma
☐ Great Grandma
☐ Grandpa
☐ Great Grandpa
☐ Aunt(s): *No.* ____
☐ Uncle(s): *No.* ____
☐ Cousin(s): *No.* ____
☐ Niece(s) or Nephew(s): *No.* ____
☐ Other Children: *No.* ____
☐ Other Adults: *No.* ____

(9) How many children or teenagers live in your house (including yourself)? Write an X in the box that corresponds to your response.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 o más

(10) How many years of schooling did your mom complete?

☐ None
☐ 1st to 3rd grade
☐ 1st to 3rd grade
☐ 7th a 9th grade
☐ High School
☐ University
☐ I don't know

(11) How many years of schooling did your dad complete?

☐ None
☐ 1st to 3rd grade
☐ 1st to 3rd grade
☐ 7th a 9th grade
☐ High School
☐ University
☐ I don't know

(12) What is your mom's job?: ____

(13) What is your dad's job?: ____

(14) How do you feel about the following aspects of your home? For each line, mark an X in the box the responds to how you feel.

	YES!	yes	no	NO!
My family's economic situation is good.				
My mom and I get along well.				
My dad and I get along well.				
My brothers and sisters and I get along well.				

(15) Who helps you economically? For example who helps to provide food, housing and clothes? Or pay for school costs? Write an X next to ALL of the people who apply.

☐ No one
☐ Mom
☐ Dad
☐ Aunt or Uncle
☐ Grandma or Grandpa
☐ Brother or Sister
☐ Cousin
☐ Friend
☐ Other person: ________________________

(16) Which of the following activities do you do to help your family? Write an X next to ALL of the responses that apply.
☐ I have a job where I earn money
☐ I help a family member or other person in their job or business
☐ I help with planting and harvesting food, caring for animals, or other agricultural jobs
☐ I care for my little brothers, sisters, cousins, nieces, or nephews while the adults work
☐ I clean the house
☐ I cook
☐ Other activities: ____
☐ None of these activities

(17) In general, how much time do you spend every day doing chores? Chores include helping with cleaning, cooking, caring for your younger brothers and sisters, etc.

☐ Less than 1 hour ☐ 1 to 2 hours ☐ 3 to 5 hours ☐ 6 or more hours

(18) How old were you when you entered first grade? Age: _________________

(19) Have you ever repeated a grade?
☐ Yes
☐ No

If you answered **yes**, please circle the grade or grades that you repeated.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

20) Do you agree with the following statements about your school? Write an X in the box that best represents how you feel.

	YES!	yes	no	NO!
I like being at school.				
I try as hard as I can to do well in my classes.				
What we are learning about in my classes interests me a lot.				
If I try hard, I will do well in school.				
I believe that school is important for my future.				
The quality of teaching at this school is good.				
The school building and classrooms are in good condition.				
I feel safe in this school.				

(21) Do you agree with the following statements about your teachers? Write an X in the box that best represents how you feel.

	YES!	yes	no	NO!
My teachers notice when I am absent.				
My teachers explain when I don't understand something.				

My teachers help me when I have a problem.				
My teachers apply the rules equally to all students.				
My teachers believe I can do well in my studies.				
In general, do you feel it is difficult to complete all the homework assignments you are given?				

(22) About how many days were you absent last month?

☐ 0
☐ 1 - 3 days
☐ 4 - 6 days
☐ 7 - 9 days
☐ 9 or more days

(23) Why were you absent?: ____

____

(24) When you need help with homework or studying for your test, who do you ask? Write an X next to ALL of the people who apply.☐ No one

☐ Mom
☐ Dad
☐ Grandma or Grandpa
☐ Brother or Sister
☐ Aunt or Uncle
☐ Cousin
☐ Teacher
☐ Classmate
☐ Friend
☐ Other person: ____________________

(25) Do you agree with the following statements about your friends? Write an X in the box that best represents how you feel.

	YES!	**yes**	**no**	**NO!**
My friends try to do the best they can at school.				
My friends believe it is important to go to school.				
My friends think it is important to get good grades.				
My friends help me with my homework.				
My friends think it is important to not be absent,				

(26) What job would you like to have in the future?: ______________________________

____

____

(27) What is the highest level of schooling that you want to complete?

☐Middle School ☐High School ☐University

(28) From 1-10, how certain are you that you are going to complete this level of schooling? 1 being "I am very uncertain" and 10 being " I am completely certain"

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

(29) How many years have you studied at this school? *(Do not count this year.)*

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 or more

(30) In how many schools have you studied since first grade?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 or more

If you have studied in more than one school, what are the reasons or reasons that you left your previous school(s)? Write an X next to ALL of the responses that apply.

☐ Moved to new home
☐ I didn't like it
☐ Economic reasons
☐ Low quality school
☐ Problems with teachers
☐ Problems with classmates
☐ For threats
☐ There was no opening
☐ I had to repeat the grade
☐ Expelled
☐ Other(s):____________________________

(32) How many books do you have in your home?

☐ We don't have any books
☐ 1-5 books
☐ 6-10 books
☐ 11-15 books
☐ 16-20 books
☐ More than 20 books

(33) Do you have internet service in your home?

☐ Yes ☐ No

(31) Do you have potable water in your home?

☐ Yes ☐ No

(34) During the last year, have you moved to another home?

☐ Yes ☐ No

(35) Do you agree with the following statements about the neighborhood where you live?
Write an X in the box that best represents how you feel.

	YES!	yes	no	NO!
I like the neighborhood where I live.				
There are safe place to play with my friends.				
I have neighbors that help me.				
I have relatives in the same neighborhood.				
If I had to move, I would miss my neighborhood a lot.				

(36) Are the following things problems in your community? Write an X in the box that best represents how you feel.

	YES!	yes	no	NO!
There is violence.				
There are gangs.				
There are robberies.				
There is extortion.				

(37) Do you feel safe in the following places? Write an X in the box that best represents how you feel.

	YES!	yes	no	NO!
I feel safe on **my way to and from school**				
I feel safe on the **buses and micro-buses**				
I feel safe in **the neighborhood where I live**				
I feel safe in **my home**				
I feel safe in **my work** (if you work)				

(38) For fear of violence, have you stopped going to school for a time?
☐ Yes ☐ No
If you answered yes, for how long?: ____

(39) Have you thought about going to live in another country? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If you answered yes, why have you thought about leaving?: ______________________________
____

To what country would you like to go?: ____
If in this moment you had the means and opportunity to go, would you?
☐ Yes ☐ No

(40) Work:

Do you have a job where you earn money?
☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you help a family member or other person in their job or business?
☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you help your family grow corn or beans, care for livestock, or do other farming activities?
☐ Yes ☐ No

If you answered yes to one of these questions, please continue on with the survey. If you answered no to all three, you can stop with the survey and turn it in.

(41) When do you work?
☐ All year, including the school year
☐ Only during the vacation at the end of the school year

(42) What is your work? ____
____

(43) Where is your work? ____
____

(44) What are your responsibilities at work?:__________________________________
____
____

(45) How often do you work? In the table below, fill in about how many hours per day that you work.

Monday	**Tuesday**	**Wednesday**	**Thursday**	**Friday**	**Saturday**	**Sunday**
_____ hours	_____ hours	_____ hours	_____ hours	_____ hours	_____ hours	_____ hours

(46) What do you do with the money you earn?:_______________________________
____

(47) What do you <u>like</u> about your job?:_____________________________________
____
____

(48) What do you <u>not like</u> about your job?:__________________________________
____
____

(49) In general, how often do you miss school because you are workin? ☐ Never
☐ A few days during the month
☐ One day per week
☐ 2 days per week
☐ 3 days per week

(50) Do you agree with the following statements about your work? Write an X in the box that best represents how you feel.

	YES!	yes	no	NO!
I like working.				
It is difficult to work when you are studying.				
It is good to work.				
It is possible to work and be a good student at the same time.				
I need to work to pay for my schooling.				
If I could, I would like to stop working and dedicate myself only to my studies.				

End.
THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS SURVEY!!!

APPENDIX F.
TEACHER INTERVIEW GUIDE

(1) Perspective on job

- Tell me about your job here. What do you do?
- What do you like about your job? What is difficult?
- Other than teaching and managing the classroom, what other duties do you fulfill for (name of school)? For example, what administrative or maintenance activities are you responsible for?
    - What percent of your workday do you spend on these tasks you just described, for example, [repeat tasks interviewee lists]?

(2) Expectations for Students

- What do you expect out of your students?
- If you were giving advice to the parent of a new student, how would you tell them to prepare their child to do well at (name of school)?
- When you have a student who is really struggling in your class, what do you do to try to help them?
- When a student is doing really well, how do you try to encourage them?

(3) Family Involvement and Support

- What types of support for education do you think it is important for children to receive in their home?
- In your classroom, what kinds of difference does it make for children who receive support at home?
- When children are not receiving support at home, how does it affect their education?

(4) Community Environment

- Can you tell me about the community where (name of school) is located?
- Can you give me some examples of how these community conditions impact students?
- Many students at (name of school) come from outside of Santa Tecla. Do these students face any additional challenges than students coming from nearby?

(5) Dropout

- Have any students dropped out of your class this year? Can you tell me about the reasons why they left school?
- What was going on with these students prior to leaving school? If the teacher noticed a problem or feared the student might drop out: What did you do about this?
- What did you do when the student stopped coming?
- Do you think teachers can do something to prevent drop out? What? What support do teachers need to be able do this?

APPENDIX G.
INTERVIEWEE MEMO TOPICS

Memo Topic	Purpose
Family and Community Background	
Family Background	Describe youth's family history, including family type (single parent, two biological parents, etc.), parental education and employment, housing situation, family's support for youth's education or other goals, problems with parents or siblings, and expectations for how youth will contribute to the household's wellbeing or economy. If youth has left family home, explain why they left and describe new household.
Work Experience	Describe if youth has been employed outside the home or has contributed to a family business, including the type of job, age when employed, job conditions and hours, opinions about and attitude toward working, and how he or she uses earnings.
Community Background	Describe where community where youth lives (or if they have moved multiple times, has lived and reasons for moving). Include descriptions of how youth feels about community, perceptions of community problems such as gangs or robberies, what youth does for fun in community, and what he/she does with friends.
Personal Experience with Violence	Describe any time a youth has been personally effected by violence: For example, being assaulted, the homicide or assault of a friend or family member, home robberies, being threatened by a gang or other community member, or being harassed or beaten by the police. Put discussions of family violence in family section.
School Experience: Interactions between Schools and Youth	
Schooling History	Briefly describe the number and type of schools youth has studied in since kindergarten. Describe any reasons for moving schools.
Academic Dispositions	Briefly describe the young person's attitude about school, including beliefs about importance of schooling, how they completed assignments, how they acted in the classroom, their grades, any discipline problems, or any times they flunked.
Relationships with Teachers	Briefly describe youth's relationships with teachers, including opinions about teachers, how teachers treated them, any problems they had with a teacher, and any time they went to a teacher for support.
Relationships with Peers	Briefly describe youth's relationships with peers, including how well he/she got along with others, any problems with classmates, what they did together for fun, and how peers provided him or her with academic or motivational support or failed to do so.
Educational and Career Aspirations	Briefly describe youth's educational and career goals and plans. If the youth has dropped out, explain if and how those aspirations have changed.
Dropout and High School Processes and Factors	
Dropout Process: Before, During, and After	*Before Dropout:* Explain the background variables and school factors which put the youth at risk for leaving school. *During Dropout:* Describe the situation that triggered the young person to drop out. *After Dropout:* Describe what the young person did after dropping out, including work or family obligations. If the youth dropped out multiple times, repeat the "Dropout Story" section for each case.
"Dropping In" Process and Factors	For those youth who returned to school following dropout, describe his or her experience after coming back. Summarize the reasons the youth returned to school and resources or support he/she had to do so. Describe outcome (Did youth complete the school year? Did s/dropout again? When?). Provide explanation for outcome, if possible.
High School Process: Before, During, and After	*Before High School:* Describe what types of students the youth was prior to high school. *During High School:* Describe motivation and support for seeking high school education. Explain what high school was like for him or her and any challenges it presented. *After High School:* Describe what plans youth had post-graduation as well as any experience he/she had trying to make those plans a reality.
Non-Dropouts: Avoiding Dropout Outcome	Describe the conditions and factors that contributed to youth never dropping out. When possible, compare to youth with similar backgrounds or dispositions who dropped out.