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Teachers and students navigating urban violence in Honduras: A view from a school on the margins of El Progreso

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Abstract

Honduras has some of the highest homicide rates in the world, accompanied by rife criminal violence and organised crime. Recent research has explored links between the state and organised crime, bringing into view Honduras' political economy of violence (Dudley, 2011, 2016, 2017; Puerta & Dudley, 2017). Yet despite having become foci of urban violence, schools have largely been left out of the picture. This ethnographic research, based on three months of fieldwork at a public high school on the urban margins of the city of El Progreso, explores how the political economy of Honduras' urban violence is understood and navigated by people at the school through their daily lives. I focus on two examples: first, a police-run gang prevention programme implemented at the school, and second, navigations of the reflections and reproductions of gang structures and dynamics from the barrio at the school. The findings generate insights into how teachers and students respond to the ongoing enmeshment between state and non-state actors in urban violence in Honduras. *Keywords*: Urban violence, education, schools, political economy, Honduras.

Resumen: Profesores y alumnos navegando la violencia urbana en Honduras: Una visión desde una escuela en los márgenes de El Progreso

Honduras tiene una de las tasas de homicidio más altas del mundo, acompañada de una violencia criminal y un crimen organizado muy extendidos. Investigaciones recientes han explorado los vínculos entre el Estado y el crimen organizado, resaltando la economía política de la violencia en el país (Dudley, 2011, 2016, 2017; Puerta y Dudley, 2017). Sin embargo, a pesar de haberse convertido en focos de violencia urbana, las escuelas han quedado en gran medida al margen. Esta investigación etnográfica, basada en tres meses de trabajo de campo en una escuela secundaria pública en los márgenes urbanos de la ciudad de El Progreso, explora cómo la economía política de la violencia urbana de Honduras es entendida y navegada por la gente en la escuela a través de su vida cotidiana. Centrándose en dos ejemplos: en primer lugar, un programa de prevención de pandillas dirigido por la policía e implementado en la escuela y, en segundo lugar, las reflexiones y reproducciones de las estructuras y dinámicas de las pandillas del barrio en la escuela. Los resultados permiten comprender cómo profesores y alumnos responden a la actual interrelación entre actores estatales y no estatales en la violencia urbana de Honduras. *Palabras clave*: Violencia urbana, educación, escuelas, economía política, Honduras.

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Introduction

> Most of the country's politicians – the police, the military and the politicians – are all, in one way or another, part of a corrupt system. A system where, for those who really kill and steal, altars are made, honours are given. And they use these social strata (the *maras*) to do the dirty work for them. So, it suits the system for the maras to be maintained, because they know that the maras will do all the dirty work. And it's easy, if I'm a politician and I do something negative, it's easy to blame them and people are not going to suspect that it's my fault. […] They use these social groups, these young people who are at social risk, to cover up the real conflict we have as a nation. Here in this country, the problem is not the gangs, and people need to have that clear. […] The problem here is the levels of diplomacy and hypocrisy that are used in all strata, from the president to the father of a child (Lorenzo, high-school teacher, 03/12/2019).

Lorenzo is a passionate teacher at a public high school on the urban periphery of the city of El Progreso, Honduras. The country has some of the highest homicide rates in the world, accompanied by widespread criminal violence and organised crime, the most visible expressions of which are (youth) street gangs known as *maras* (Appleby et al., 2023; Jütersonke et al., 2009). As he expresses above, Lorenzo sees the violence experienced by young people in the peripheral urban areas where he works as both highly complex and unmistakably political. His words point to multiple violent actors: gangs (the *maras*), military, police, politicians, the president, and individuals like the "father of a child", who are caught up in what he calls "a corrupt system". An understanding of an elaborate political structure of interlinking and overlapping relationships unfolds as Lorenzo describes how the government "uses" the gangs "to cover up the real conflict," illustrating how he sees politics as moderating and amplifying violence(s) on the periphery of this Honduran city. Lorenzo's understanding of urban violence arises out of his everyday experiences as a teacher, and he navigates this political economy of violence in Honduras in his classroom daily, alongside his students and fellow educators.

This research aims to better understand urban violence in Honduras – which has been studied in much excellent ethnographic work (Carter, 2022; Frank-Vitale & Martínez d'Aubuisson, 2020; Gutiérrez Rivera, 2013; Pine, 2008; Wolseth, 2011) – on public schools and the individuals within them. To carry out this research, I conducted three months of fieldwork at a public high school on the margins of El Progreso, which allowed for an examination of students' and teachers' perspectives, experiences and navigations of everyday violence within a public school, which I came to see as acting as a microcosm of Honduras' broader socio-political environment.

Based on this fieldwork, in this article I explore how the political economy of Honduras' urban violence is understood and navigated by people at the school

through their daily lives, or in other words, how the individuals at this school – students and teachers alike – deal with urban violence and its embedding within the political economy. In doing so, I focus on two examples: first, a police-run gang prevention programme implemented at the school, and second, navigations of the reflections and reproductions of gang structures and dynamics from the *barrio* at the school. Through these examples, I examine the navigations of the individuals at the school in the violent context within which they study and work. Therefore, this article makes a new empirical contribution in its ethnographic exploration of the contexts of public schools within violent urban neighbourhoods in Honduras, something that has yet to be researched. The findings generate insights into how teachers and students respond to the ongoing enmeshment between state and non-state actors in urban violence, shedding light on how policy could be more attuned to teachers' voices and realities.

I begin with an examination of urban violence in Honduras to provide context to the research and the academic debates surrounding it, particularly highlighting the extensive work that has been done on Honduras' political economy of violence and the links that exist between the state and illicit non-state actors. This is followed by a theoretical section that examines the concept of social navigation and the school. I then explain my research methodology before going on to examine in detail two examples from my fieldwork that demonstrate teacher and student navigations of the complex context of urban violence within which the school exists and which is reflected and re-produced within its walls.

Urban violence and the political economy

Honduras is one of the least studied countries in Latin America, but violence is amongst its most-studied topics. With a homicide rate of 35.8 per 100,000 population in 2022, down from its peak of 91.4 per 100,000 in 2011, the country remains one of the most violent in the world (Appleby et al., 2023; UNODC, 2013). This violence is disproportionately concentrated on the urban margins: between 2005 and 2011, 65 per cent of homicides took place in just 5 per cent of municipalities (Berg & Carranza, 2018; UNAH-IUDPAS, 2014). In 2019, at the time of this research, the department of Yoro (in which El Progreso is located), was the third highest department in terms of both homicide rate and total number of homicides (UNAH-IUDPAS, 2020).

Honduras' violence has often been explained by rapid rates of urbanisation leading to the rise of informal settlements on the urban periphery: the country has gone from being 22.7 per cent urbanised in 1960 to 60 per cent in 2023 (The World Bank, 2023). The so-called "youth bulge" – over 50 per cent of the population is under the age of 25 (UNFPA Honduras, 2023) – along with limited opportunities in terms of education, training or employment for this population, has also commonly been stated as a key reason leading to the growth of youth gangs. However, these causal claims have also been challenged, as the same

patterns do not occur in every context (Glebbeek & Koonings, 2016; Jütersonke et al., 2009).

Scholars studying violence in Honduras have predominantly focused on gang violence, particularly in prisons (Carter, 2022; Gutiérrez Rivera, 2012, 2013), urban *barrios* (Carter, 2022; Frank-Vitale & Martínez d'Aubuisson, 2020; Gutiérrez Rivera, 2012, 2013; Rosen & Cruz, 2022, 2022; Wolseth, 2008, 2011), and the relationship of violence and criminality with churches and religion (Brenneman, 2012; Wolseth, 2011). Several studies have argued that rather than being responsible for much of Honduras' violence, gangs have been used as scapegoats by government and policymakers, and are not necessarily the main culprits (Jütersonke et al., 2009; Ruiz, 2023). Others have posited that gangs may be better understood as creative outlets for young people in peripheral urban areas to expend their creative energies (Carter, 2022).

Honduras' main street gangs – Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and Barrio 18 – originated in the United States and arrived in Honduras in the 1990s when gang members were deported back to their home countries (Bruneau et al., 2011, pp. 93-94; Valenzuela et al., 2013; Wolf, 2010). What had begun as territorial control of *barrios* when there was little to no formal protection given the lack of state presence, evolved into market control for drug trafficking and extortion (Carter, 2022, pp. 89-90). With this shift, violence also spiked: between 2006 and 2011 there was a significant rise in homicides, coinciding with increased drug trafficking through Honduras (UNDOC, 2012). Crises over the past two decades, including Hurricane Mitch in 1998, the 2008 financial crisis, and the 2009 coup d'etat all created space for the *maras* to expand, taking advantage of political instability, power vacuums and a vulnerable population (Berg & Carranza, 2018; Bosworth, 2010; Carter, 2022; Levy, 2020; Phillips, 2019). Now, it is almost impossible to find a young person in Honduras whose life has not been impacted by the widespread criminal societies that the *maras* have become.

On its part, the state's response has focused on militarisation and policing, implementing so-called *mano dura* (iron fist) policies, in an attempt to regain a monopoly over violence (Rodgers & Jones, 2009; Winton, 2007). Unfortunately, these policies have been widely criticised for increasing violence rather than diminishing it (de la Torre & Alvarez, 2011; Dudley, 2011; Rodgers & Muggah, 2009). At the time of this research, Honduras' president was Juan Orlando Hernandez, elected in 2013 and controversially re-elected in 2017 amidst allegations of electoral fraud, who championed these policies and also received financial and political support from the United States before recently being indicted for his involvement in drug trafficking (Kinosian, 2017; Robbins & Papadovassilakis, 2022).

Links such as these between the state and organised crime have been widely researched in recent years in the Honduran context, and such direct state involvement in violence is well documented across Latin America (Barnes, 2017; Sobering & Auyero, 2009), including examinations of the ways that state and non-state actors work collaboratively and blur boundaries when it comes to violence

and organised crime (Carter, 2022, p. 306; Gutiérrez Rivera, 2013; Jaffe, 2013; Nordstrom, 2000). In Honduras, Steven Dudley's work has been particularly demonstrative of state complicity in illicit activities, the role of Honduran elites, and the state's connections with gangs and organised crime (Dudley, 2011, 2016, 2017; Puerta & Dudley, 2017), and there has also been important work done on the role of the police and military (Chayes, 2017; Gutiérrez Rivera, 2013; Sanchez & Cruz, 2023). Under Hernandez, Honduras was widely considered a "narco-state," for the links between the government and organised crime (Salomón, 2019).

The new government, led by the first female president Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, whose husband Manuel Zelaya was ousted in the 2009 coup, came into power in January 2022 running on a platform against corruption and organised crime and promoting increased social spending in education and healthcare. However, recent events have brought to light the family's own links to drug traffickers as well (Adams & Ernst, 2024). This political economy of violence in Honduras, with deep links between the state and organised crime, is unfortunately not something time-bound but has become characteristic of Honduras' political establishment. In this article, I use the term "political economy" to refer to the political and economic governance of the country, and I refer to the "political economy of violence" to highlight these links that exist between the state and illicit non-state actors in Honduras.

Urban violence: social navigation and the school

Teachers and students at the school where this research took place were faced with the challenge of navigating this complex urban violence and the political enmeshment between the state and organised crime daily. To understand and analyse these experiences, I propose utilising the concept of social navigation. Political anthropologist Henrik Vigh defines social navigation as "how people move and manage within situations of social flux and change" or "the practice of moving within a moving environment" (Vigh, 2009, pp. 420, 425). Importantly, this navigation regards both the navigation of present dangers and shifts as well as planning for an uncertain future and the tensions between individual agencies and social forces. Vigh writes:

> Within the shifting and fluid circumstances of warfare and social turmoil navigation provides us, as said, with an image of socio-political action as having to be attentive to the constant currents, shifts, pulls and undertows of societal (mis)dynamics – to the large scale or small scale changes that affect one's movement and possibilities, not just while planning action but equally in the very process of acting. When navigating, we have to direct our attention towards immediate social flows and shifts, as well as to how these influence our positions and possibilities, where and how these move and affect us and the point we are moving towards (Vigh, 2009, p. 426).

Vigh argues there has been a "geographic fallacy" in anthropology in the ways that social spaces have been conceptualised as similar to terrestrial ones, namely spaces that are solid, and, if changing, then at a slow pace. Looking at the root of the word "navigation" as coming from sailing, he suggests that seascapes may allow us to conceptualise social space in a way that takes into account how social environments are in constant flux and where "agents within them constantly have to take their bearings concerning multiple forces (waves, wind, current, stars, and so on), some of which are in rapid motion while others are cyclical or relatively static" (Vigh, 2009, pp. 429-430).

Like Bissau, the capital of Guinea-Bissau in West Africa where Vigh researches the experiences of youth combatants, students and teachers at this public school on the urban periphery in Honduras also find themselves in a social environment of constant and rapid change where "uncertainty has gained an air of constancy" (Vigh, 2009, p. 421). Shifting gang control over urban neighbourhoods as well as changing political structures leads to constant changes in governance and the rules and everyday practices that individuals have to adapt to and abide by to safely live in and move within these spaces. Political instability has also been significant over the last decade and a half, with frequent protests that disrupt everyday life, leading to recurrent school closures and strikes.

Within this constantly shifting environment, youth and teachers find themselves in a position of having to be constantly alert to the changes within their environment, both to assure their own day-to-day survival, as well as to *salir adelante* ("get ahead"), an expression commonly used by youth as they explain their motivations for staying in school – despite the challenges involved – as they try to "make something of themselves". This theory of social navigation provides a lens through which to look at how young people and teachers in this high school struggle to navigate both everyday challenges, while also struggling to expand their horizons of opportunity for the future. As one of the youth I interviewed put it in an interview:

> Everywhere you look you see people being killed, you see how violence abounds here in our country. There are so many problems. […] It affects everyone. I don't like this country when I see on television how people are killed, how dead people turn up everywhere. I've been told that here at school there are quite a few people who are… [She shrugs and gives a knowing look, clearly implying that there are students involved in criminal activities] But if I behave well and listen to my teachers, and if I study, nothing will happen to me. Thanks to God my parents gave me the opportunity to study (Grade 7 girl, 12/02/2019).

Despite extensive research on violence in Honduras, schools have largely been left out of the picture, despite having become foci of urban violence, as demonstrated in research conducted by the UNHCR (Díaz, 2019; Fredrick, 2018). While these studies focus on violence within schools, my approach is inspired by the work of sociologist Javier Auyero and school teacher María Fernanda

Berti (2015), who instead focus on the school within its environment. In their book *In Harm's Way*, based on a 2-year ethnographic study in Argentina, they situate the school within a context of urban violence, foregrounding the context of the *barrio* surrounding it to build their theory of "concatenations of violence," which posits that different types of violence overlap and intersect in particular ways.

My focus on the school as a research site was inspired by their work, to see what the school makes visible as a particular space from which to understand urban violence, yet while I situate it in the context of the *barrio* it is located in, I foreground the school as the primary space of observation. This view of the school as embedded in its surroundings, however, is important particularly to understand the political economy of violence and how those within the school navigate this. While gang violence is a pressing concern for many of these individuals, it is not the *only* kind of violence to be navigated in the school context. In Honduras, neoliberal reforms are leaving public schools sorely under-resourced: during his presidency, Juan Orlando Hernandez attempted (largely unsuccessfully) to privatise education and healthcare (Buitrago, 2019), and there remains a clear move in this direction (Levy, 2019), as well as further moves towards militarisation and policing of youth, including in schools (Gutiérrez Rivera, 2010).

Methodology

This research was conducted from January through March 2019 in El Progreso, Honduras' fifth largest city, at a public high school in a *barrio* on the urban margins. The research was motivated by my previous engagement in the context over (at the time) six years. I co-direct an NGO in Honduras dedicated to supporting youth's access to secondary and post-secondary education, and through this had previously been able to observe the struggles that teachers and students contended with regarding urban violence and the lack of government support for public education. El Progreso's experience of rapid urbanisation and spikes in urban violence have also mirrored the national trends, so while basing this research here was motivated most significantly by my existing networks and the access this granted me, it also made sense given my research focus.

Spending three months immersed in a public high school (importantly, one not connected to my NGO) provided a view into the complex dynamics of this public institution and its surroundings. The school had a student body spanning grades 7-12, split into morning, afternoon and night shifts. It was an old building, with a courtyard where students often played football and a kiosk to buy snacks at break time. Most of the student body came from the *colonias* and *barrios* on El Progreso's urban periphery, many of which were designated *zonas calientes* due to the high levels of gang and other criminal activity that took place in these areas.

While I lived with friends just outside the city, I was at the school five days a week. I also knew several students from the school, and they introduced me to the director, Fernando, and the guidance counsellor, Patricio, who would become key in helping me build relationships with students. At the school I spent my days in the guidance counsellor's office, the staffroom, classrooms, and in the courtyard, having conversations as they emerged as my relationships with participants deepened. My approach towards the research can best be characterised as "deep hanging out" (Geertz, 1998): spending time, learning from teachers and school administrators, and slowly building relationships with students. I also got involved in various school initiatives, helping organise the student council elections, supporting with preparation for an *escuela para padres* (school for parents) evening (which, as it happened, was about youth violence), and attending extracurricular events.

Students and teachers alike were curious about my presence (as a young, white woman my presence was unusual, though almost always welcomed) and were interested to hear what I was doing. My prior knowledge of the area helped enormously in building trust and rapport, as did my experience with the NGO I co-direct in Honduras, which demonstrated a long-standing commitment to the public education sector. Particularly for teachers, I am aware that this may have influenced their willingness and the extent to which they shared with me their grievances about the state of public education.[1] Often, the subject of violence would come up without prompting, and in other cases I would mention what I was researching and people would almost always respond with stories. I also spent time with some students outside of school watching football games, and in some cases in their homes. Finally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with both students and teachers, usually after several weeks of building relationships with participants. These lasted anywhere from thirty minutes to up to two hours. Over three months, I conducted a total of 52 interviews: 31 with 35 students and youth (including some group interviews), and 21 with teachers and adults. Several participants were interviewed more than once.

For the political economy component, I relied on participant observation during the school day as I spent time in classrooms, the staffroom, and across campus, watching day-to-day life at the school unfold. All participants provided full informed consent. I used verbal as opposed to written consent, as signing a document can create an uncomfortable formality and an unnecessary barrier to otherwise natural interactions. Participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw their consent at any time, and that their responses would remain anonymous. All names in this article are pseudonyms, and identifying characteristics of participants have been removed. Parental consent was not requested, as obtaining this could have put youth at greater risk, not just because violence is a sensitive topic and often occurs at the hands of parental authorities, but also as I (and others) believe in valuing youths' opinions and perspectives, and that young people can make their own informed

decisions to consent, based on the principle of "adolescent evolving capacity" (Santelli et al., 2017, p. 12)[2].

Safety for all research participants was also ensured through conducting interviews during the daytime in spaces where participants felt comfortable, such as classrooms, the school courtyard, or the guidance counsellor's office. After leaving the field, I coded my field notes and interview transcripts manually, without the use of software. These codes allowed me to see the overarching themes coming out of the data and to group these into different kinds of perspectives on violence. This grounded theory approach allowed me to understand how my research participants perceived, experienced and navigated the acts of violence they encountered in their lives and at the school.

The political economy of violence at the school

> It was lunchtime and I was sat with Patricio, the school's elderly but energetic guidance counsellor, in his office talking about my research, our conversation backed by the whirring of a plastic fan. We discussed the seemingly never-ending stories about different forms of violence that students face at school, in their homes, and their communities. "The educational centre reflects the situation of the country," Patricio said, nodding solemnly. I jotted down his words in my notebook. The next day, in a conversation with Antonio, a passionately leftist social sciences teacher, I asked him what he thought about this statement. "Yes", he agreed, "it's just that here [at the school] it's on a smaller scale. What happens here inside the school is the same as what the society really lives outside: delinquency, crime, drugs, family abuse, alcoholism. Here we also live it, right here, that pain" (Fieldnotes, 11/02/2019 and 12/02/2019).

The school is a reflection and reproduction of its environment, with forms of violence that flow in and out of its doors. Having laid out the context of urban violence and its political economy in Honduras, as well as a theoretical overview of social navigation and the school environment, I now move towards my own ethnographic evidence and analysis. In doing so, I demonstrate how the individuals at the school understand and deal with urban violence and its embedding within the political economy.

Policy priorities, policing, and teachers' political discourses

One of Honduras' long-standing policy priorities has been policing, guided by *mano dura* securitisation logic that posits that increasing policing will decrease violence – something that has proven ineffective (de la Torre & Alvarez, 2011; Rodgers & Muggah, 2009). During my time at the school, a US-funded programme was initiated called Project GREAT: Gang Resistance Education And Training, carried out in classrooms by local police officers. After reported

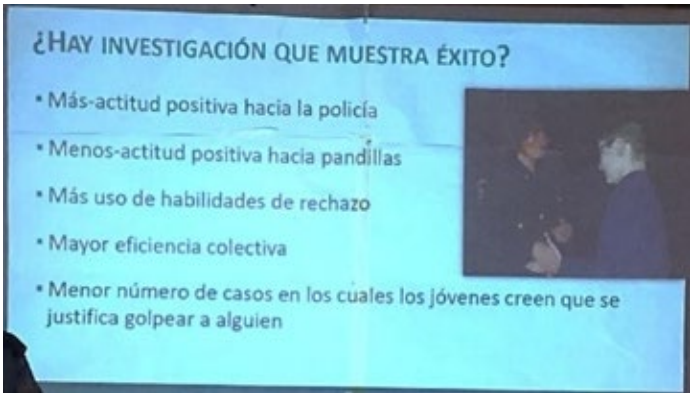
successes combating youth gang violence in the United States since the 90s, the programme was being replicated in countries across the Americas. This programme provided an entry point into looking at the role of political (state) actors in violence and violence prevention, how these reflected policy priorities, and how the school community responded. With a US-created curriculum, funded by the US embassy and with police trained by the US military, many teachers were sceptical of the programme's intentions. The school's director told me he had agreed to have the programme take place at the school:

> The role of the police, especially here, is to prevent. [...] We don't usually have police or military inside classrooms, but given the circumstances that we are living in at this moment, it is important that the police themselves come and give [the students] a talk and explain what they shouldn't do so that they don't fall and end up in prison (21/03/2019).

There was a note of underlying scepticism, but also an openness to try.

When the programme was formally introduced, I joined the staff meeting. Watching the police's presentation after having spoken to several sceptical teachers prior made certain things stand out – particularly the fact that the top "success point" of a slide about how the programme's success was measured by having "more positive attitudes towards police" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Police presenting Project GREAT in a staff meeting



In a study of the impact of the programme in the United States, researchers found that the effect of the programme on children was minimal, but that "GREAT will continue because of the powerful symbolic political and public relations utility it has for various stakeholders" (Palumbo & Ferguson, 1995). In the same way, political reasons were certainly at play in the programme's implementation in Honduras.

Several teachers also saw the political implications of a US-funded, police-run programme. When one of the policemen said that their mission with the programme was "apolitical," they were met with laughter by teachers. Students, too, recognised the presence of police in their school as something political, and

many were not pleased: at an assembly held for the programme's launch, the student band, despite warnings from the school administration, played a popular anti-government protest song on their way out of the assembly hall. But Project GREAT is not only political because of the state actors who are implementing it but also because of how and why it is funded. "The state is using the police in such a way as to make people believe that the work [of preventing violence] is being done," said Antonio, the social sciences teacher, when I brought up the staff meeting later. "But in reality what they are doing is *maquillando la situacion* [applying makeup on the situation]."

With crime rates still among the highest in Latin America, and the political economy of Honduras' violence becoming ever more apparent (Dudley, 2011, 2016, 2017; Gutiérrez Rivera, 2013; Puerta & Dudley, 2017), the government needed to show – even if symbolically – that they were doing something to counter this violence, to maintain dwindling public support. Meanwhile the United States – who were supporting the then government – also had a vested interest in maintaining the government's (and their own) positive public image. This is ultimately, it seemed, what Project GREAT was there to do: attempt to maintain the political economy of violence concealed in the shadows, while making it seem like they were preventing youth from joining gangs, and by extension preventing violence.

The investment in policing is, of course, connected to broader issues of government policy and budgeting. Skewed policy priorities led to an ongoing lack of funding for school resources, overcrowded classrooms, teachers' salaries being delayed, and students struggling to cover costs in what is supposedly a free public education system. In one staff meeting I attended, teachers expressed feeling abandoned by the government, and angered by ever mounting responsibilities. The neoliberal model expects individuals, like these teachers, to "solve" these problems, without providing the necessary structural support. And yet despite these needs, the support being offered at this moment in time was this police-run gang prevention programme, which was neither wanted nor, according to Palumbo and Ferguson's US-based research (1995), effective.

Reflections and reproductions of gang structures and dynamics at the school

While Project GREAT was present at the school in order to *prevent* youth gang violence, it was clear from this research that youth *already* understood their lives as being structured by gangs. From the school, I was able to observe the reflections and reproductions of gang structures from the *barrio* within the school environment and to see how young people and teachers at the school navigated these complex dynamics. One day I was sitting in a café in the city centre with two boys I knew well, Oscar and Enrique, aged 15 and 16 respectively, one of whom was a student at the school. I asked them to draw me a map of the school's surroundings, handing them a large sheet of paper. The result was a map with communities drawn as individual boxes around the school, carefully marked in

straight lines with a ruler, each with the community's name and the controlling gang. Their decision to directly draw out gang territories when asked about the school's surroundings demonstrates the essential importance gangs play in shaping youth's perceptions and understandings of their surroundings.

These gang structures are defining of community structures in El Progreso, and in much of urban Honduras, and the strict demarcations between gang territories also include control over who can and cannot move between different areas. Within the school, the importance of these structures manifested in different ways. Upon entering, gang presence was immediately visible, as one of the gates had large letters reading "MS13" sprayed in black paint across its rusted metal face. Patricio later explained that the school was located on a fault line between MS13 and Barrio 18 territory. Other graffiti across campus also attested to this, and students told stories about how friendship dynamics were carefully negotiated because of the potential danger of being seen to be close with individuals who were known members of gangs, or even people from *barrios* where opposing groups were in control.

Javier, aged 14, lived in a *barrio* controlled by MS13, not far from the school. "Two years ago, when there was the massacre in the *barrio* where I live, it was on the street outside my house," he told me the first day I met him. "They killed three people. I was there, I saw it. That was my first death." Javier explained that he had several friends who were active gang members but, he said, he tried to keep his distance. These tensions of closeness/distance that he maintained led to a tense situation one day at the school during my fieldwork.

> "I was selling doughnuts [for a school project] and I was offering some to some guys from the other side, because there are guys who are in the *la trece* (MS13) and *la 18* (Barrio 18)," Javier explained. We were sitting in the guidance counsellor's office with Patricio and another teacher.
>
> "So I was offering some doughnuts to some guys from the *la 18* and super fast they told them that I was there with them and they called me over like 'hey man, come here' and so I went and said 'what's up?' and they asked me 'is it true you're hanging out with *los mierdosos*?'"
>
> "With who?" asked the other teacher.
>
> "With *los mierdosos,*" Javier repeated. "That's what they call them."
>
> "Ah, because they're from the other side, right?" said Patricio, nodding. The boys Javier had been attempting to sell doughnuts to were from an 18th Street area, while he lived in an MS13 zone. Because of the rivalry between the two groups, the boys from Javier's MS13 community referred to those from the *la 18* community as "*los mierdosos*," roughly translating to "the shitty ones".
>
> "Yes," he said, nodding. "[And I said] 'Yeah man, I was with them,' I told him, 'I was offering them doughnuts, I was selling,' I said."

> "And what did they say?" Patricio asked.
>
> "[They said] 'Ahh, alright then *perro*, but don't do it again because they could take a photo of you.'" Javier recounted, before adding by way of explanation, "They think I'm gonna sell them drugs."
>
> "Yeah, it's dangerous," Patricio said, nodding, before turning to me. "It's like being in the line of fire, right in the middle. It's not a good position" (Fieldnotes 02/28/2019).

The above demonstrates students' careful navigation amongst their peers at the school and makes it clear that students were keenly aware of these gang dynamics within the school environment.

Fernando, a member of the school's administration, had dealt with some of the more severe cases of violence on campus. Over a long conversation in his office with cups of over-sweetened coffee, he shared a story about a former student called Walter. Walter and his friend were *sicarios* and drug dealers in the *barrio* where they lived, Fernando explained. One day, the two of them were shot at in their neighbourhood and Walter's friend was killed, while he got away with a bullet in his upper arm. Sometime later, Walter was with another friend selling drugs in the "wrong neighbourhood," and his friend was decapitated with a machete – just up the road from the school. For a while in his final year, Walter had a girlfriend at school. Not long before the academic year's end, he "sold" her, giving another group the right to kill her in return for money.

> "Have you heard of the groups that chop people up into pieces and put them in plastic bags?" Fernando asked me.
>
> I nodded, having read about such cases in the news.
>
> "Well, he sold her to one of them."
>
> Another friend of Walter's, who knew about the "sale," tipped her off and told her to leave the city. The school never heard from her again (Interview, 21/03/2019).

We talked at length about this story, and the different forms of violence at play: the violent jobs that Walter and his friends engaged in as hitmen and drug dealers, the territorialised gang violence that led to Walter and his friend being attacked when trying to sell drugs in the "wrong neighbourhood," the structural violence of poverty that had, perhaps, pushed them to pursue these life paths, the physical violence of which Walter and his friends were victims, and the gendered violence present in Walter's selling of his girlfriend.

> "The biggest problem we face here [at the school] is the dispute over territory between one gang and another […] that is what really worries us, teachers, the most, that we cannot control these groups," Fernando tells me.

> "Why do you think there are so many young people who fall into this type of thing?" I ask.
>
> "Because of social problems that teachers cannot really deal with. That is at the state level, at the government level, because that is a product of unemployment, of family disintegration, of the insecurity that exists in all the neighbourhoods, and so on."
>
> I ask what he hopes will change.
>
> "Through education, we hope that one day this country will really change. I don't see any other way. […] What should happen is that the government should allocate more funds to try to include all those young people who do not have access to formal education and open opportunities for them […] The government says that they are doing this and that, but in reality, that is not true. There are so many young people who are not given opportunities. It hurts my soul to see a kid fall into these things. It is terrible. But we do as much as we can. There are things that we cannot do" (Interview, 21/03/2019).

Fernando's own analysis of the school's situation and teachers' responsibility is complex. Concerning the story he shared about his ex-student Walter, his perspective raises questions such as: how might the disenfranchisement and marginalisation of living on the margins have led them to this life path in the first place? What is the role of the state in addressing these multifaceted issues that affect young people at the school? What role can teachers play in supporting youth, and what is out of their hands?

It is clear to Fernando that Walter and his friends act as individuals within the (gang) structure of their community, and are affected both by the structural territories of (gang) violence as well as by lives of poverty and marginalisation. But it is also clear to him that these *barrios* are marginalised precisely because of the government's inability (or unwillingness) to invest in the necessary infrastructure and services to bring these populations into the public sphere, or to invest in opportunities for young people themselves. In this story, we see that if students are involved in violence outside of school, that same violence is reflected and reproduced within the school and that these reflections and reproductions of violence are also tied to broader political structures, and especially to policy decisions. This leaves teachers and school administrators like Fernando in a complex position, trying to support students without putting themselves at risk, and knowing that their roles as teachers can only go so far because these issues are tied up in the broader political economy of Honduras' violence.

Conclusions

At this high school, teachers' and students' day-to-day experiences have shaped their understanding of urban violence. In seeking to understand the experiences of those within these peripheral urban public schools, it is therefore critical that

Honduras' violence be understood as being embedded within a broader political economy. As police make their way into classrooms to prevent a problem that young people are already living and navigating on a day-to-day basis, and as we observe the complex relationships between gang structures outside and inside the school, it is clear that the political economy moderates individuals' experiences of urban violence.

Teachers and students alike understand their experiences and environments as deeply political, and their navigations demonstrate a tension between resisting both the influence of gangs as well as the militarization of their school, and also confinement to the structures within which they operate. The reflections and reproductions of gang structures and dynamics from the *barrio* at the school, and students' and teachers' navigations of these dynamics, show a clear understanding of youth gang membership as being the result of policy decisions that have pushed young people into these life pathways, as well as the links of these gangs to political structures. In other words, these issues do not exist in a vacuum: they are a result of state action and inaction. Lorenzo's words at the beginning of this article highlighted these understandings of the links between gangs and the state from his perspective as an educator, and this is reflected in research linking organised crime in Honduras to the government and elites (Dudley, 2016). Project GREAT, however, ignores the complex links between state and non-state actors that individuals at the school see so clearly, leading teachers and students to distrust the programme and its intentions.

As I got to know students, teachers and school administrators, heard stories of the ways gang violence crept into the school, and watched as teachers struggled with police involvement in classrooms, I also saw how students and teachers grappled with navigating the political enmeshing of this violence. But despite the state's support of Project GREAT as a violence-prevention initiative that creates an image of state opposition to gang violence in the country, thereby disconnecting the political economy from the everyday experiences of violence, the individuals I spoke with no longer seemed to buy into this rendering of the situation. Rather, participants understood the paradox of a state-run violence prevention programme working to prevent the same issues that the state itself fosters through its policy decisions and funding priorities.

The results of this research therefore present a contribution to advancing our understanding of violence in Honduras as being moderated by underlying political forces, building especially on Dudley's work on state complicity in Honduras' elicit activities (Dudley, 2011, 2016, 2017; Puerta & Dudley, 2017) through the perspectives and experiences of individuals within the context of a school. It also makes an empirical contribution in that it looks ethnographically at the previously under-researched contexts of public schools within violent urban neighbourhoods in Honduras. This has important implications for understanding how teachers and students experience and navigate violence and how it can, perhaps, be more effectively confronted. Understanding teachers' struggles and

experiences in particular is important so that policies can be better attuned to their voices and needs.

* * *

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Notes

1 While the NGO I co-direct has since grown, at the time of this research it was very small and not widely known of – certainly not by teachers at this school. It therefore played a lesser role in my positionality at the time that it would today.
2 There is a large debate around the ability of youth to provide their own informed consent. Researchers who have studied informed consent by adolescents in research agree that youth over the age of 12 are capable and should be deemed capable of making decisions regarding their own involvement in research (Hein et al., 2015). In this research, the youngest age of youth interviewees was 13.

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