

**“I Want to Keep Fighting for My Education”:
Stories of Temporary Dropout in Urban
Honduras**

by

Elizabeth Marie Stoiaken

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Approval

Name: Elizabeth Marie Stoiaken

Degree: Master of Arts (Latin American Studies)

Title of Thesis: *"I Want to Keep Fighting for my Education": Stories of Temporary Dropout in Urban Honduras*

Examining Committee: **Chair:** Dr. Gerardo Otero
Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Simon Fraser University

Dr. Nicole Berry
Senior Supervisor
Assistant Professor _____

Dr. Kathleen Millar
Supervisor
Visiting Professor _____

Dr. Adrienne Pine
External Examiner
Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology
American University _____

Date Defended: August 14 2013

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Abstract

Only about one-fourth of Honduran youth graduate from high school, a very low number even as compared to the regional average in Latin America (about 50%). Research on high school dropout typically focuses on the moment of dropout, framing this decision as a permanent withdrawal from schooling. However, this thesis demonstrates how dominant constructs for understanding dropout fall short of accounting for the lived experiences of many young people in Honduras. By analyzing ten students' experiences of "temporary dropout," this thesis explores the phenomenon in which working-class students drop out and return to school during adolescence, in response to factors of structural violence in Honduras. Ideologies for life success and social mobility, which students use to contextualize their experiences, are also discussed. Through an analysis of students' narratives, I illustrate how understanding temporary dropout is essential in order to improve educational outcomes in Honduras.

Keywords: Dropout; Structural Violence; Education; At-Risk Youth; Honduras; Secondary School

*To all of the students in Honduras fighting to
finish their education; to all of the young people
in Honduras wishing they could return to
school; and to all of those brave enough to speak
out against the true barriers to education.*

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A Note on Translation

I have chosen to include all direct quotes from research participants in both English and Spanish, giving the opportunity to bilingual readers to experience students' phrasing in their native language. All translations are mine, and student and teacher comments included here are the exact wording from transcribed interviews. Occasionally, conversations or comments were condensed, or redundancies removed, for space or relevance to the chapter topic. Any passages without a Spanish translation indicate conversations in English with teachers, some of who were bilingual or native English speakers.

Ethnographers often struggle to capture in writing the gestures, inflections, and body language that give full meaning to oral discourse. Honduran Spanish has its own slang, speech patterns and idiosyncrasies, including hispanicized English words, dynamic intonation and syntax conventions, such as use of the informal *vos* in place of the informal *tu*, characteristic of northern Central America. Further, it is difficult to portray how syntax, slang and accents convey subtle, but important differences in class position, social environment and education level (Bourgois, 2009). I have attempted to translate certain passages into comparable slang in English, and point the reader to moments in which the speaker is asserting their class position or level of education through their speech. I have clarified syntax only very selectively, such as when participants changed tense mid-sentence, or if they relayed both voices in a past or imagined conversation, a standard convention of spoken discourse in Honduras that can become difficult to follow in writing. Any changes to the verbatim transcript of participant interviews were made solely to better portray the full meaning and emotion of these conversations in writing.

1. Introduction

The idea of dropping out¹ of school has profoundly negative connotations for most people. A “school dropout” brings to mind educational possibilities cut short, low-paying, low-skilled jobs and few opportunities for success. Indeed, dropping out of school is often directly connected with youth engaging in risky behaviours (behaviours that are harmful to themselves and/or their societies), such as crime and violence, risky sexual behaviour, substance use and unemployment (Cunningham et al., 2008). But depending on the place, dropping out of school has distinct connotations – in a poor country such as Honduras, reasons related to extreme poverty, lack of schools or child labour also come to mind. Over the last twenty years, development agencies and supranational organizations have increasingly focused on education as synonymous with development, pointing to education to increase global competitiveness, to reduce poverty and inequality, to improve health outcomes, and so on. Complaints and frustrations about young people dropping out of school – and parents trying desperately to make them keep going – are some of the most common stories I’ve heard since I began visiting and living in Honduras five years ago.

Though enrolment in high school is slowly increasing across Latin America, just over half of adolescents in the region graduated in 2008 (SITEAL, 2010). The increase in educational attainment rates across Latin America in the last fifty years has been

¹ I am reluctantly retaining the umbrella term “dropout” in this thesis to discuss a variety of experiences moving in and out of school, though I hope to show how the connotations of permanence and failure are problematic. Other terms in use in academia – “early school leaving,” “school failure,” “educational survival rate,” “disengagement from schooling” – also imply a sense of finality that does not speak to the experiences of students in this research. Realistically, most young people who leave school for any length of time are considered to have “dropped out” by the majority of people around them (as well as the extensive literature on this social phenomenon), even if they plan or hope to return to school. I will continue to use “dropout” or “left school” here in recognition of this common usage.

markedly slower than in other regions in the global south, and students consistently perform below expected levels on education-quality tests designed for a countries' level of GDP per capita (Cunningham et al., 2008). Educational inequality across the region is striking – only a third of young people from the poorest two quintiles (40% of the population) have completed 9th grade, compared to more than two-thirds of youth from the wealthiest quintile (the top 20% of the population).

In Honduras, a country still deeply destabilized by a coup d'état in 2009 and with rapidly rising rates of violence that national media has deemed a "youth holocaust," drop out rates are among the highest in the region (La Prensa, 2012). Just 24% of adolescents had graduated from high school by age 22 in the year 2008, and in 2011, one-third of the students enrolled in lower high school grades had dropped out before reaching upper grades² (SITEAL, 2010; World Bank, 2012). Recent studies have shown that the largest decline in school enrolment takes place from ages 15-18 (which covers the transition from lower secondary to upper secondary), where the number of students enrolled in school drops from 50% to 17% (Cárdenas, de Hoyos, & Székely, 2011, p.11). While many large-scale educational interventions focus on increasing access to schooling – quantity over quality – scholars have recently begun to explore why more schools does not automatically mean more graduates. Decades of a development focus on building and improving schools means that in urban areas of Honduras such as the mid-size city of Malagueña, there are countless affordable public schools, many low-cost or free alternative schooling programs, and a steadily-rising number of private, bilingual schools. So why are graduation rates still so low?

I began this thesis research to better understand who is held responsible when a student drops out of high school, both in the popular discourse of this common experience and in young people's own stories of leaving school. The different paths young people take toward adulthood, financial stability and self-actualization succeed and fail within an intricate web of family employment, migration, births, deaths, financial support, opportunities, luck and effort. Within the overwhelming economic vulnerability of life for the majority of people in contemporary Honduras, educational success is often

² See Appendix A for a detailed explanation of the Honduran school system.

highly dependent on a number of uncontrollable variables. Given this situation, I wanted to understand how young people who had already left explained their decision to drop out, and why the minority of young people still in school was motivated to continue.

Contrary to my expectation of talking to two different groups of youth – either in school or permanently dropped out – the stories that young people shared with me often fell somewhere in between these finite categories. They told stories of circulating in and out of school, of long-term personal projects to finish high school that were perhaps “on hold” at the moment, and of leaving school for a while, reconsidering, and coming back with a new dedication to graduate. They contextualized these experiences of leaving and returning to school within a longer time frame than my original questions suggested. I asked students about classmates or friends who had “dropped out” of school, or if they had ever “dropped out” of school, and many of the stories they told me in response were of *waiting* a few years to continue schooling, or *missing* a few years before coming back. Further, these students assigned blame, responsibility and meaning to their dropout experiences largely within the context of what happened afterwards.

The research in this thesis demonstrates how the dominant constructs for understanding dropout – specifically, categorizing youth as either “students” or “dropouts,” understanding dropout as a permanent decision, and focusing on individual deficiencies to understand why students leave school – fall short of accounting for the lived experiences of these young people. Participants in this project described a variety of different experiences of what I will call “temporary dropout,” which has important implications for understanding low rates of high school graduation in Honduras. These students' experiences challenge the notion that research should only focus on the moment of dropout and the build-up to this decision, and instead, urges us to look closely at what happens after a student leaves school. Making these stories of temporary dropout invisible by failing to conceptualize moving in and out of school as anything other than “dropout” obscures how structural factors – beginning with severe economic vulnerability – cause people to think and strategize about education in unique ways.

In the context of Honduras, these “structural factors” are best understood as aspects of structural violence. Medical anthropologist Paul Farmer (2004) has furthered

the theory of structural violence, which uses the active concept of violence to remind us that social phenomenon such as poverty and inequality – which often seem to be passive conditions, for which it is difficult to assign blame in a seemingly endless web of causality – are not individual or local-level problems, but connected to a transnational social order that creates and reproduces social hierarchies and oppression. The structural violence exerted through racism and classism, gender inequality, income inequality and social exclusion coalesce in outcomes such as human rights violations, systematic marginalization, epidemic disease, or educational inequality. Farmer encourages us to engage in a “historically deep and geographically broad analysis” in order to see both the intentional actions behind oppression (where it is quite possible to assign blame), as well as the erasure of historical memory and processes of desocialization that make apparently intractable social ills appear to be “nobody’s fault,” conditions of life that seem to be the natural order of things (ibid, p. 309).

The discussion of temporary dropout in this thesis focuses on the lived experiences of students in low-income urban communities working to *asuperar* [overcome] poverty. It is imperative to recognize that in Honduras, staying in formal schooling continuously through adolescence entails a certain level of economic privilege, and student’s stories of moving in and out of school reflect experiences of poverty and vulnerability in a neoliberal state. The students I spoke to who had dropped out of school temporarily were all from low-income communities, though the financial status of their families (loosely measured based on their own descriptions) ranged from experiencing difficulty meeting basic needs to having a steady income, but vulnerable to any destabilizing event in the future, often expressed as “*estamos bien, por ahorita* [we’re ok, for now].” These stories of temporary dropout cannot all be reduced to lacking funds to go to school, as the precariousness of daily life – even for those who have enough to meet basic needs – can destabilize schooling as well.

The distinct changes in state structures over the last two decades (smaller states with often non-existent welfare systems) and a deeper vulnerability to the volatility of the global economy have had far-reaching effects on the experience of urban poverty in

Latin America today. Vulnerability³ and poverty are different but interconnected experiences, and all but a handful of wealthy students interviewed during fieldwork were living in structural conditions of vulnerability. Honduras ranked at a “warning” level on the 2012 Failed States index, with “uneven economic development” contributing most to the overall ranking of 75th in the world (The Fund for Peace, 2013). Social conditions in Honduras have deteriorated since the 2009 military coup d’état that violently removed democratically elected president Zelaya, with poverty and income inequality rates increasing. More than half of the population is living in poverty or vulnerable to poverty, and the Gini Index (measure of inequality) for the country was high at 57 in 2009, with recent data unavailable for how this may have changed after the severe destabilization of the coup d’état (UNDP, 2013; World Bank, 2013).

A rapidly rising homicide rate has made Honduras the most violent country in the world (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2011; European Commission). Adrienne Pine (2008) has discussed how the structural violence of neoliberalism, compounded by the “death porn” of daily gory images in the mainstream news, has led to the normalization of everyday violence and what Taussig called terror-as-usual (Pine, 2008, 30; Taussig, 1989). The neoliberal logic of understanding violence as individual deviance obscures a long history of structural violence on a global level (particular initiated by the U.S.), leading to a popular lament that Hondurans “these days” are inherently violent, lost or *pícaros* (delinquents, a person intentionally engaging in crime or ill-intentioned acts). Such widespread engagement in self-blame justifies violent tactics for crime control by the state – as well as vigilante crime control – where the violent death of a violent criminal appears to be “crime reduction” (Pine, 2008; Pine, 2013, p. 9). Further, the state has engaged in a dramatic increase in targeted violence

³ Shaidur Rahman (2011) describes vulnerability at a macro-level, as both a condition and a process in poor and industrializing nations: “As a condition, vulnerability describes how national governments are vulnerable to international funding agencies and foreign investors for investment to industrialize; entrepreneurs are vulnerable to their dependent position in the global production chain in their respective industry and to competition from other producers; workers and their organizations are vulnerable to job losses in companies which are externally dependent on access to global markets and subject to unsafe conditions created in their factories. Vulnerability as a process describes the ways and stages through which the actors in [any economic sector] are affected by the nature of global supply chains ...” (p. 240).

and torture against its citizens since 2009 in an attempt to suppress the National Front of Popular Resistance movement formed in response to the coup, impacting nurses, teachers, journalists, protestors and others (Pine, 2013, p. 12).

For the urban poor in Honduras, an ever-present vulnerability to “everyday emergencies” has become a routine of everyday life: precarious employment, oppressive working conditions, mounting debt, little to no ability to save money due to low wages, bureaucratic corruption that destabilizes routine procedures, health vulnerabilities and a fee-for-service health care system (or the gamble of public hospitals, where medicine shortages and scarce resources are commonplace), unstable housing and infrastructure, the constant threat of crime and violence, incarceration, a corrupt, barely-functioning judicial system, natural disasters, migration and deportation, unexpected pregnancies⁴, and so on (Penglase, 2009, as cited in Millar, forthcoming, p. 4). Further, failures of the school system, including harsh academic policies and poor institutional quality, and oppressive gendered and classed discourses all contribute to the profound precariousness of schooling for the majority of Hondurans. Structural violence underlies the very existence of temporary dropout.

There are three key points in the dominant discourse on dropout that cannot account for the stories of temporary dropout students shared with me, pointing to serious flaws in the prevailing theoretical approach to understanding dropout and high school education. These key concepts are interconnected, and together allow us to see what focusing only on dropout and individual risk factors can cover up. The first is the need to categorize youth as either “students” or “dropouts” (Cárdenas, de Hoyos & Székely, 2011; Cunningham et al., 2009; PCERA, 2001; USAID, 2007; USAID, 2009, etc.) This false dichotomy hides the real challenges to finishing schooling that many young people experience, as well as the successful strategies they create to overcome them (Crivello, 2011; Leinaweaver, 2008; Luna & Tijerina Rivella, 2013 and Jeffrey, 2010). Reliance on this construct creates a fundamental mischaracterization of the experiences of many young people in Honduras who may circulate in and out of school.

⁴ Abortion is illegal in Honduras.

The second is the pervasive construct in the literature, as well as dominant social narratives, that frames dropout as a one-time, permanent event of failure (Cunningham et al., 2009; Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew, 2007; Sabates et al., 2010; Di Gropello & Marshall, 2004; USAID, 2009, etc.). Many students I interviewed during fieldwork didn't identify the idea of drop out as useful for understanding their educational experiences, regardless of the fact that international bodies would see them as such. Thus, this research does not support this theoretical engagement with the instance of dropout as core to understanding secondary education in Honduras. The third is an individualistic focus to understanding how and why dropout occurs, commonly called the "deficiency" or "risk" framework in the literature. This approach draws a direct connection between individual and family deficiencies (such as lacking income, lacking educated parents, lacking a nearby school, etc.), resulting risk exposure and negative consequences, such as dropout (Cárdenas, de Hoyos, & Székely, 2011; Cunningham et al., 2009; PCERA; 2001; Figueredo & Anzalone, 2003; United Nations, 2002; Arends-Kuenning & Duryea, 2006; Martinic, 2003; Bedi & Marshall, 2002; Bedi & Marshall, 1999; Covenant House, 2009). Focusing our attention on such deficiencies as a problem on an individual level, this framework obscures the structural violence that systematically excludes the poor from the means to alleviate these deficiencies.

In failing to demonize the violence of poverty, inequality and oppression, strategies for success (such as circulating in and out of school) are seen only as fighting against the limitations of one's own situation. Outside of this dominant framework, however, stories of families' positive, motivational strategies for school success can be re-framed as a fight against systemic oppression and exclusion from opportunities for success (Kemshall, 2008; James, 2012; Luna & Tijerina Revilla, 2013; Yosso, 2006; Gardner, 2011; Murphy-Graham, 2012; Kendall & Shin, 2012; Hull, Zacher & Hibbert, 2009). Thus, this thesis refocuses us on the relationship between structural violence and secondary students' schooling outcomes, following an increasing number of scholars arguing against the deficiency/risk framework.

In rejecting these dominant constructs for understanding dropout and school success, we can better understand the following stories of temporary dropout. Temporary dropout is not always planned, or even understood to be temporary at first, though many young people are still strategically engaged with the long-term project of

education while out of school. It is fundamentally impossible to see the temporary nature of any of these instances of dropout until students are back in school, pointing to a need to reject the dominant analytical framework for understanding dropout that makes this movement in, out and *back in* to schooling completely invisible. Within the particular sociocultural, political and economic realities of Honduras, I hope to show that it is imperative to bring to light the temporary and cyclical nature of many student dropout experiences, otherwise understood as a personal failure and a permanent rejection of schooling.

1.1. The Politics of Education in Honduras: A Brief Review

Colegio publico es mas como ... es mas fuerte sobrevivir [Public school is more like ... it's harder to survive]. (Alex, 16 years old, 8th grade)

In 2013, 56.7% of the population in Honduras was under 24 (CIA World Factbook, 2013). Such a high proportion of youth in the general population means that young people's issues are significant for everyone. The average amount of schooling completed in Honduras is only 6.5 years, though expected years of schooling⁵ are 11.4 (UNDP, 2013). The World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategy for the country has shaped their approach to reaching the Millennium Development Goals, bolstered by programs stemming from the 2000 Education For All initiative to achieve universal primary schooling worldwide (UNESCO, 2000). High rates of primary school graduation are largely due to these initiatives, which have increased primary school graduation rates to 89% and literacy rates to 80% (CIA World Factbook, 2013; European Commission, p. 10). Secondary school graduation rates, however, remain very low.

⁵ "Expected years of schooling", or "school life expectancy", refers to the number of years of school (primary to tertiary) that a child can expect to receive, assuming that the probability of his or her being enrolled in school at any age is equal to the current enrollment ratio at that age (CIA World Factbook, 2013). In short, imagining that enrollment rates in primary school stayed constant through grade 12, this figure allows us to see the number of years of education students would theoretically complete.

High drop out rates after primary school are common across Latin America, with boys consistently dropping out before girls (Arends-Kuenning & Duryea, 2006). In fact, Latin America is unique in the global south in having consistently more girls than boys enrolled in secondary schools (Seelke, 2007, p. 2). There is a marked shift in classroom demographics between primary and secondary levels, as boys outnumber girls by 7% in primary school, but girls represent 23% more of the secondary school population (Castillo, 2003, p.11). In 2007, net enrollment for girls in upper secondary schools was 26%, whereas for boys it was 21% of the school-age population – thus approximately three-fourths of school-aged adolescents are not in school by 10th or 11th grade (Umansky et al., 2007). In the classrooms I visited in Malagueña, girls outnumbered boys even more than I expected. In the 10th grade classroom at the public school where I conducted fieldwork, for example, there were 8 boys and 37 girls.

The government of Honduras has fallen in line with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund's approach to state and economic development in what has been called "inclusive neoliberalism"⁶. This macro-level organization of the Honduran state and economy shapes the educational sector, and in turn the individual experiences of students. Two parallel systems of schoolings have been growing alongside the state-financed public school system – a multitude of "second chance" programs for adults or out-of-school youth (such as the *Educatodos* program), and a rapidly growing network of private and/or bilingual schools. Though all schools must have a Honduran principal in order to be registered with the Secretary of Education and award official diplomas, many private schools are founded, controlled and funded by international groups, churches or

⁶ Inclusive neoliberalism describes a move away from the neoliberal policies of the 1980s and early 1990s, as a strategy to respond to criticisms that neoliberal development policy was not inclusive of the poor or sensitive to country-specific needs. Though economic growth and international competitiveness remain core goals, "poverty reduction strategies" have played a large part in packaging neoliberalism as inclusive. But critics contend that inclusive neoliberalism continues to function as top-down development, focusing on the needs of a transnational business elite and lacking a historically informed, anti-oppression framework. Poverty reduction strategies are accused of functioning much like the World Bank's harsh Structural Adjustment Programs of the past, attempting to temporarily appease the poor instead of advocating for systemic changes to reduce poverty, inequality and social exclusion. For more on inclusive neoliberalism in Honduras and the LAC region, see Ruckert (2010) and Klak et al. (2011).

individuals. “Second chance” programs for adults or out-of-school youth are often fully or partially funded by USAID and other international development funders (USAID, 2007, p. 23).

Whether engaged with the public, private, or alternative school system, young people in Honduras do not experience the possibility of dropping out in the same way. Honduras has one of the most unequal educational equity ratings in Latin America – for example, in 1999 only 50% of young women in the poorest quintile of the population began high school, compared to 70% of young women in the richest quintile (Seelke, 2007; Martinic, 2003). Inequality in Latin America is deeply rooted and resilient: “In its modern form, high inequality is rooted in exclusionary institutions that have been perpetuated ever since colonial times” (Ferranti & Perry, 2003, p. 1, as quote in Bueno, 2010, p. 562). Inequalities in the educational system for urban families are two-fold – the financial hierarchy of access to different kinds of schools (bilingual, private, public and alternative), and the hierarchy of institutional quality in these different school systems. A student from a poor family may well be disadvantaged in two ways – she cannot afford most of the schooling options in her city, and the schooling she can access is severely inferior in quality, providing substandard qualifications for employment.

1.1.1. *The Public Education System*

The political turmoil and transition after the 2009 coup d'état wreaked havoc on the public education system, and many official Honduran statistics are not available for the years after 2008. The public school system in Honduras has been in a sustained crisis, with violent repression from the governments of interim President Micheletti and President Lobo (2010-present). The teacher's union was closely aligned with the government of ousted president Mel Zelaya and remains connected, on a national level, with the Resistance pro-democracy and anti-neoliberal movement (Spring & Bird, 2011). Freeston (2011) summarized the recent chaos in the public school system following the destabilization of the democratic system:

... the teachers have had their salaries slashed, their pensions stolen, their labor rights suspended, their voice taken out of decision-making in education, and their schools put on the path to privatization. When they or anyone else tries to protest, they face their meetings infiltrated by

military, possibly being fired, likely being gassed and beaten, possibly being jailed with sedition charges, and possibly being [sic] killed⁷.

In response to this crisis, in February 2012 the Honduran congress fast-tracked the passing of the *Ley Fundamental de Educación* (Fundamental Law for Education), the most comprehensive reform of the education system since the 1966 *Ley Orgánica de Educación* (Organic Law for Education), supported by grants from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. With wide-reaching reforms, the law declares compulsory primary school to include kindergarten to 9th grade, ensures free education for primary schooling, changes the career track structure, increases the length of the school day and moves control of national scholarship programs to the municipal level, among many other changes. The passing of this law was met with an extremely polarized response – the Honduran government, as well as international institutions such as UNICEF, have hailed the law as the solution to the crisis in the education system. UNICEF's 2011 Annual Report for Honduras describes how the law guarantees the minimum 200 annual school days – a particularly polemic issue during teachers' strikes in 2010 and 2011, which resulted in students receiving less than 100 days of classes – while creating institutional quality improvements and initiatives for teacher capacity development, bringing "long-awaited governance in the education sector" (UNICEF, 2011, p. 2).

Members of the Honduran national congress have not shied away from making a clear connection between the new law and a forced end to teachers' political action, hailing the measure as "ending the politicization of education" and demanding that educational authorities apply the law "*sin voltear a ver hacia el pasado, porque eso no trae nada productiva* [without looking back at the past, because that's not at all productive]" (Velásquez, 2012). The perspective of many officials in the education system – as well as many people I asked about schooling in Malagueña – indicated a widespread frustration with striking teachers. This negative view of teachers was well

⁷ As of 2011, over 65 members of the resistance movement have been killed, disappeared or directly targeted for their participation in the movement, including 14 public school teachers. Human rights organizations have further identified over 300 "suspicious" killings with indication of political motives and/or participation of state security forces (Spring & Bird, 2011).

represented by a manager of alternative secondary programs in Malagueña, who was enraged by what he saw as the infiltration of ideology into education. He described how public school teachers were radicalizing students with socialist beliefs, working together toward “class warfare.” A retired teacher himself, he felt there was a need for mandatory “orientation” classes to ensure teachers’ proper behavior and ideological orientation to remedy the current situation, in which teachers were wreaking havoc on the public school system and infuriating parents with class cancellations. Teachers, he declared with indignation during our interview, “have lost credibility with Honduran society ... they are like a parasite on society.”

Stephanie, a career teacher with a guidance counselling position at one public school and a librarian position at another, was well aware of this negative perception of public school teachers. With tears in her eyes, a deep sense of outrage was clear in her voice as she explained to me what has happened in public education in the last few years:

Entonces [el gobierno] no dice lo negativo de ellos. Solo dicen lo negativo de nosotros. Entonces esto ha creado un conflicto en el padre de familia y nosotros los docentes. El padre de familia le ha dado mas credibilidad muchas veces, muchas, al gobierno y ha dejado al profesor por un lado. El gobierno decía, “Están en huelga porque son haraganes, porque no quieren trabajar.” Entonces vienen ellos y por un anuncia en la radio decía, “Se los están pagando a los profesores los seis meses que no les había pagado.” Y no es cierto. Pero como la gente decía, “Pero si ya les están pagando, porque siguen en huelga?” Y entonces nosotros empezamos, “No es que a nosotros no nos han pagado, es mentira del gobierno!” “No si ya dijo el Presidente, que ya dijo fulano, que ..” De allí empezó a ser esa gran diferencia, esta forma de pensar que nosotros los profesores ahora lo único que hacemos mas bien es perder clase, no cumplimos con el hora de trabajo.

... so [the government] doesn’t say negative things about themselves. They only say negative things about us. So that has created a conflict between the parents and us, the teachers. Parents have given more credibility, many times, many, to the government and they’ve left teachers by the wayside. The government would say “They’re on strike because they’re lazy, because they don’t want to work.” And then on an announcement on the radio they would say, “We’ve paid the teachers the six months that we hadn’t paid them.” And it’s not true. But people would say, “But if they’re paying them, why are they still striking?” So we start with, “No, they haven’t paid us, the government is lying!” [But people would say] “No, if the President already said, if whats-his-name already said that [you’ve been paid, then it must be

true] ...” And that’s where this big shift has started, this way of thinking that now, all we teachers do is miss class, we don’t fulfill our job hours.

While the government places blame for the recent public education crisis on striking teachers, teachers and activists such as Stephanie blame the Honduran state for creating the conditions that forced their political action. Teacher’s unions and education activists have decried the law as a “shock” measure pushed through thanks to the continuing instability created by the 2009 coup d’état, labeling it as a transparent scheme to destroy teacher’s unions by privatizing the public education system (Spring & Bird, 2011). School authorities have reacted with disbelief to the resources they would need to implement certain requirements of the law, remaining profoundly skeptical that the reforms will actually be uniformly implemented. For example, a July 2013 article in the national newspaper *El Heraldo* discussed the supposed solution of municipal-level school control, explaining that *“Este panorama ideal se ve ensombrecido por el constante retraso en las transferencias que por ley debe efectuar el gobierno central a las alcaldías municipales. De hecho, la matrícula gratis fue trasladada en 2012 al nivel local; pero esta no se cumplió este año [This ideal vision is shadowed by the constant delay in the transfers of control that the central government is required by law to move to municipal authorities. In fact, control of the free registration requirement was transferred in 2012 to the local level; but free registration hasn’t been accomplished this year].”*

The condemnation of the Fundamental Law for Education by educational activists as a thinly veiled privatization scheme is related to a key tenet of the law, which expands a decentralization model for school administration and funding responsibilities. Since the early 2000s, the PROHECO program (Honduran Program for Community Education) has moved administrative and funding control of a few schools in each municipality to FEREMA (the Ricardo Ernesto Maduro Andreu Foundation for Education), a non-governmental organization established by the same National Party president who developed the PROHECO program. In theory, this municipal-level model for control would allow local citizens a greater voice in educational decision-making in these “community schools” (Di Gropello & Marshall, 2004).

But in practice, the PROHECO model has been accused of ineffective management, laying the groundwork for destroying the teachers’ professional

associations, hiring unqualified teachers, illegally firing teachers not affiliated with the National Party and other abuses⁸ (Di Gropello & Marshall, 2004, p. 38; Spring & Bird, 2011). The Fundamental Law for Education will extend this decentralization model to all public schools in Honduras (primary and secondary), administered by a Municipal Educational Development Councils (COMDE) for each municipality. Based on similar decentralization programs across Latin America in recent years (as well as the PROHECO model), teachers and activists expect that FEREMA and other private organizations will then assume management of schools through the councils, turning public education into a privately-managed, decentralized system. Teachers have argued that this easily clears the way for the same abusive political and administrative practices now infamously connected with the PROHECO program (Spring & Bird, 2011). While the long-term consequences of the new law remain to be seen, widespread protests by students and teachers continue to meet a violent response from the state.

1.1.2. *Alternative Programs: Educatodos*

Existing outside of the public education system while still administered by the Secretary of Education, Educatodos⁹ distance-education schooling is one of various free alternative secondary school systems operating in Honduras. Many Hondurans living in extreme poverty cannot afford to go to secondary school at all, as paying for transportation, lunch and other related costs in even a free schooling program is impossible. Volunteer teachers at the Educatodos program spoke of students struggling to cover these related costs, who still came walking, biking or by bus to all-day classes on Saturday with just 2 lempiras (about 5 cents CAD) to buy a small bag of water. The Educatodos program was formed to reach such students – those living in poverty and extreme poverty – when it began in 1996, financed jointly by USAID and the Honduran

⁸ The PROHECO program began hiring non-affiliated teachers for the first time in recent Honduran history, allowing many people to practice as teachers without accreditation from the Secretary of Education. These teachers are hired for 10-month contracts without benefits, paid wages lower than the minimum wage, and are not paid for the 3 months of school vacation. For more information on the PROHECO program and the destruction of teacher's rights, see Spring & Bird (2011).

⁹ *Educatodos* is a made-up word – basically a combination of two words – that roughly means “Education for all.”

government (USAID, 2007, p. 23). Educatodos was developed as a radio-education program to increase literacy rates for adults in rural areas, covering grades 1-6 and issuing official primary school graduation certificates. The program design allowed for recent Educatodos graduates to volunteers as facilitators for classes, guiding students through radio instructions (Marshall, Mejia and Aguilar, 2008, p. 149). The Secretary of Education officially recognized students' diplomas upon graduation, and students were able to purchase the textbooks at cost (USAID, 2007, p. 34). By 2007, approximately 500,000 students had accessed the program, and USAID estimated that Educatodos had reached approximately 30% of the total out-of-school population, though dropout rates remain higher in the Educatodos program than at Honduran public schools (ibid).

In 2001, the program expanded to cover lower secondary school (grades 7-9). Because of the existence of alternative school programs such as Educatodos, many people commented to me throughout fieldwork that there is “no excuse” for not finishing at least lower secondary – you can literally go for free, even if it’s a “bad quality school”, where at least you can get a 9th grade degree to be able to *defenderse*¹⁰ (defend yourself). For 7th-9th grade classes, Educatodos is based on a complementary approach in which a class facilitator guides students through audiotope lessons, with curriculum based on the public school system’s grade 7-9 learning objectives (Marshall, Mejia and Aguilar, 2008, p. 148). However, the Educatodos program where I volunteered and conducted fieldwork did not have the audiotapes that form the core of the learning strategies in this program. Teachers explained that the municipal branch of the Secretary of Education did not provide the tapes, or perhaps did not have them at all, or perhaps they were too expensive to provide for all Educatodos sites across Honduras. Volunteer teachers (local university students or high school graduates) designed their own lessons instead, and students skipped about half of the official textbook – which

¹⁰ The idea of being able to “defend yourself” through schooling is rooted in the power of literacy – if you can read, you can avoid being tricked in signing business or legal contracts, you can find your way around by reading signs, and so on. Many families in poor, rural areas speak of getting their kids to a minimum of 4th or 5th grade, so they at least they can “defend themselves”– they can read, write and sign their name. In the case of lower secondary school, being able to “defend yourself” implies having basic reading comprehension and analytical skills to deal with general business and legal transactions.

many lamented has not been updated since the 1990s –as much of the book requires listening to radio instructions to fill in blanks, hear instructions, and so on. I know of at least two other *Educatodos* programs in Malagueña that do not have radios, and teachers spoke of this as a very common problem. Further, public and private school teachers spoke with great frustration about the quality of *Educatodos* schooling in general, explaining how students who began 10th grade in their institutions after graduating from *Educatodos* were often completely unable to keep up with classes.

1.1.3. *Getting Your Money's Worth: Private Education and Neoliberalism*

The implementation of market-based educational reforms constitutes essentially a class strategy, and one of its major effects is the reproduction of advantages and disadvantages linked to social class.
(Ball, 1995, p. 197).

An individualistic view of society is a hallmark of neoliberal states, in which collective goods and responsibilities are minimized, and the individual becomes solely responsible for her own success or failure. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has argued against this “social atomism,” challenging the notion that society is ultimately made up of individuals by pointing out the fundamentally relational nature of “individual” endeavors in the social world (Abbey, 2004, p. 88). However, a strong emphasis on individual responsibility in the master narratives of success invoked by students in Malagueña makes clear how the neoliberal state – and an increasing acceptance of the logic of privatized education – impacts how young people perceive the distribution of opportunity in society.

Private education has been expanding in Latin America since the 1970s, and many scholars have critiqued the fundamental connection between private education and neoliberalism as detrimental to the concern for education as a shared, public good (Bonic, 2008, p.2). Other scholars have pointed to a strong connection between the emphasis on individual sin, rebirth and moral righteousness in the discourse of evangelicalism and the focus on individual responsibility that is a hallmark of neoliberal governmentality (Hoksbergen & Madrid, 1997; Wolseth, 2011). A teacher at the evangelical private school where I conducted fieldwork explained to me that the school is

both a business and a ministry, describing their goals for students: “We try to inspire these kids that they are fighting a battle for their generation. They can be the chosen ones ... they can lift up their generation.” The idea of education as a public good and a social right is in many ways incongruous with the individualistic logic of evangelical private schooling.

Students’ narratives of their experiences across the three school systems explored in this study highlighted a serious deficiency in quality in public and alternative schools, reinforcing the idea that in Honduras, “you get what you pay for” in education. The rise in externally-funded private schools and a push to decentralize public education with behind-the-scenes private administration schemes have made “you get what you pay for” a reality in terms of educational quality, further cementing the idea of education as a business transaction. Daniel Suarez (2004) has discussed how neoliberalism is “erasing from the social imaginary the idea of public education as a social right” (as quoted in Bueno, 2007, p. 569). Instead, the focus has turned increasingly to receiving a diploma (and its inherent privileges) that one can “own” for life, another piece of private property fiercely protected by neoliberal logic.

Many people, both inside and outside of the private school system, saw paying for education as the only way to demand a quality education. Children in private schooling perceived their parents’ financial sacrifice as one of the strongest reasons to obey their wishes and stay in school – the expense of paying for school is seen to give parents more clout in requiring their children to graduate. These are the social consequences of the neoliberal push to privatize basic services across Honduras (including education), which contributes to a discourse of equity, but not of equality. Applied to social and economic systems, Fonseca (1998) describes how “equity does not guarantee the equality of development standards, but it ensures the minimum amount required so that the countries may rationally be inserted in the global mode, without threatening the system’s balance” (p. 49, as quoted in Bueno, 2007, p. 570). Equity demands fairness and an individual entitlement to privileges and rights based on what you deserve; equality is the idea of basic human rights, regardless of perceived individual levels of entitlement.

In a highly unstable national school system, paying for education also ensures normalcy for families who can afford it, furthering a culture of economic entitlement to quality education. A business contract mediates the fear of strikes and schools closing – a tangible contract relationship with the school director means that you can go to someone personally and demand to receive the service you have paid for. Further, the “surplus social and economic privileges” enjoyed by most parents who can afford to send their children to private school increases the time and resources they have to demand accountability (Kendall & Shin, 2012, p.221).

In contrast, impoverished parents face a double barrier for demanding accountability – the constraints on their own time and resources from living in poverty, and the failure of the state to take accountability and transparency seriously. For example, a determined group of parents of *Educatodos* students spent nearly two years demanding their 9th grade graduates receive graduation certificates after a disagreement between the school and local Secretary of Education officials. In the meantime, students who had technically graduated, but had no documentation to prove it, were unable to enroll anywhere else to continue their education. For these families, there remains a profound disconnection between the neoliberal ideology of individual freedoms leading to opportunity and social mobility, and the reality of scarce economic opportunities and deeply rooted processes of social exclusion in Honduras.

In the following pages, I explore the phenomenon of school drop out in contemporary Honduras. In Chapter 1, I will present key theories on dropout and school success, reviewing literature on dropout in Honduras, general theories of educational attainment and dropout, and the study of youth “risk,” a growing scholarly focus in Latin America. In Chapter 2, I will discuss the methodological framework for this project, as well as the details of my research design. Chapter 3 engages the voices of students from all three schools – Instituto Cristo (private), Colegio Nacional (public) and *Educatodos* (alternative) – to explore how young people use dominant discourses of life success and failure to frame educational choices, which will provide context for understanding temporary dropout. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I will delve into the ten case

studies of temporary dropout, loosely categorized¹¹ by distinct reasons for leaving and returning to school.

Chapter 4 presents Yessenia, Melissa and Julie's stories of strategic temporary dropout, illuminating how ideas of dropout as permanent school failure hide poor families' strategies educate all of their children. Chapter 5 discusses Fanny, Elizabeth, Cindy and Maria's experiences of forced temporary dropout, highlighting how a failing school system can force out students who are struggling academically, destabilizing their schooling trajectory. In Chapter 6, I will present the gendered and classed experience of school disillusionment, largely through the experiences of Kevin, Jonathan and Eduardo, who looked for ways to get ahead outside of school before returning to their studies. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of the urgent need to reject dominant constructs of dropout to truly understand students' schooling decisions in Honduras. In order to clearly see both the structural violence that creates endless barriers to school success for the poor, as well as the positive strategies that students and families create to get past these barriers, we must explore how and why temporary dropout is such a common phenomenon.

¹¹ Though creating these categories is useful to analyze students' experiences and the main reasons they left school temporarily, many stories of dropout and temporary dropout include elements of each of these reasons for leaving. Strategic temporary dropout, forced temporary dropout and school disillusionment are not rigid categories, nor can they describe all experiences of temporary dropout.

2. Youth and Risk: The Context of this Study

Si una persona tiene la oportunidad de trabajar y de estudiar, yo le aseguro de que si lo haría, especialmente los jóvenes, se motivan. Uno se motiva cuando mira que usted al final de mes va a recibir un pago, verdad, y que de ese pago va a pagar su, su colegiatura y todo. Pero imagínese que uno viene a un colegio, tal vez, tengo compañeros que a veces los he visto con 2 lempiras para una bolsa con agua. Porque solo eso tiene para darse a mediodía. Entonces que motivo, que motivación puede tener una persona, un estudiante así? Ninguna.

If a person has the opportunity to work and to study, I can assure you that they'll do it, especially young people, they get motivated. A person gets motivated when they know that at the end of the month they're going to get paid, you know, and that from that payment they can pay their school costs and everything. But imagine going to school, maybe, I have classmates who I've seen sometimes with 2 lempiras [about 10 cents CAD] for a little bag of water. Because that's all they have to give themselves at lunch. So what motivation, what motivation can a student like that have? None.
(Paola, 38 years old, 9th grade at Educatodos)

Dropping out of school is a complex interaction between a student and their family, teachers, administrators, classmates, friends, and larger community. Though significant progress has been made in understanding the reasons for school dropout – as well as many attempts to generalize or categorize experiences of dropout into finite categories – it remains a social process that is different for each student. The only real generalization is that dropout it is a complex, socially embedded and multifaceted phenomenon (Kendall & Shin, 2012). In the literature on secondary school dropout in Latin America and elsewhere, research on this phenomenon falls into two main paradigms: a deficiency/risk framework (see Halpern-Manners, 2011; Bedi & Marshall, 1999 and Cunningham et al., 2008) and a social justice, or holistic, perspective (see Luna & Tijerina Revilla, 2013; Herr & Anderson, 1997 and Erdmans, 2012).

The practice of identifying risk factors, as well as “at-risk” youth, has come to dominate literature on school dropout (as well as research on youth gang involvement, youth fertility and other youth behaviors perceived as deviant). This framework has

significantly furthered scholarly theorization of dropout, identifying numerous factors in young people's life situations, school experiences and family composition that are correlated with high drop out rates, allowing policy-makers to develop targeted interventions and attempt to identify at-risk populations. However, in this thesis I will follow scholars working from a social justice perspective, who have taken issue with the approach of the risk/deficiency paradigm. In arguing that we must analyze the factors that *create* and unevenly distribute risks, a social justice framework moves beyond solely intervening to assist individuals in avoiding risks. In locating reasons for dropout solely at an individual level, with no analysis of the oppressive structural forces that shape poverty, inequality and social exclusion, the myriad reasons for a student living amidst these risk factors remains invisible.

Below I begin with brief overview of the deficiency perspective so that I may illustrate the core constructs of the hegemonic risk/deficiency framework, which remains the dominant discourse for understanding dropout. I will explore how this paradigm functions in the prevailing understanding of dropout across the Latin American region and beyond, examining the risk factors that have been identified in this literature for students in Honduras. Following this, I will review research considering dropout issues within a social justice framework, working against an individual-level approach to understanding dropout that often translates into a blame-laden discourse of failure. I will review theoretical developments in understanding dropout within a social justice framework, such as models of "pushout" and "pullout" of school. While a social justice approach has enriched understanding of the factors leading up to dropout, as well as the social construction of risk, this discourse still categorizes youth as either "students" or "dropouts, generally assuming dropping out to be a permanent decision. In concluding this review, I will show how temporary dropout – circulating in and out of school – is not fully captured by the deficiency/risk perspective or the social justice perspective, and thus the dominant discourse we use to understand leaving high school before graduation cannot fully account for the experiences of temporary dropout that were so familiar to students in Honduras.

2.1. The Deficiency Perspective: Risk Exposure and Negative Behaviours

There are two ways in which dropping out of school is associated with risk – risk that a student *will* drop out of school, and increased risks for a student (and society) *after* they drop out of school. While most of the literature on dropout is concerned with pinpointing particular risk factors that increase a students' probability of dropping out of school, risks for students (and society) after they dropout are seen as unequivocally negative. There is a long list of risks for young people after dropping out, such as unemployment, low-paying or unstable jobs, lack of opportunities, increasing vulnerability and lower levels of physical and mental health (Kendall & Shin, 2012; Cárdenas, de Hoyos, & Székely, 2011). High school dropouts are also viewed as risky for society because of associations with crime, addiction, social unrest and violence (Cárdenas, de Hoyos, & Székely, 2011; Gardner, 2011; Figueredo & Anzalone, 2003). Youth and risk, generally, have become closely connected concepts (Kemshall, 2008).

On the long road to high school graduation, the deficiency perspective (or risk perspective) focuses on what students and families are lacking to help them graduate. Identifying risk factors can conceivably allow professionals to predict which students are at risk of dropping out, increase or create protective factors for these students and ideally create targeted programming to meet their needs. Scholars have designed research to work with large groups of students in exercises of “risk factorology” using risk assessment tools, and have also focused on specific at-risk groups to ‘map’ these young people’s shared characteristics (Cárdenas, de Hoyos, & Székely, 2011; PCERA 2001; Kemshall, 2008). Cunningham et al. (2009), for example, categorized at-risk youth into four categories by focusing on individual characteristics, exposure to risk, and individual behaviors, including markers such as “subject to risk due to their characteristics” (Type 1), “exposed to risks without having materialized the risks into negative behaviors” (Type 2) and “exposed to important risks and have already suffered their consequences” (Type 3). This research has also extended to categorizing protective factors and characteristics of youth “resiliency” in an effort to understand failure through a better understanding of success (Kemshall, 2008, p. 28).

Research on school drop out has traditionally focused on finding correlations between social indicators and dropout risk, usually organized into three main categories of risks that may be embodied by an individual student:

1. Characteristics of individual students and their families: gender, family socioeconomic status, racialized/ethnic identity, mother's education level, health status, youth parenthood, etc.
2. Student experiences in school and/or community: low attendance rates, grade repetition, behavioral problems, social bonds with peers or teachers, peer pressure, etc.
3. The social value of education, or "macro conditions": perceptions of the value of education, lack of interest, cultural factors, employment opportunities, etc.

Even within the deficiency framework, there is a general acceptance that more than one of these factors is involved in nearly all dropout decisions. Researchers continue to search for the most impactful "cluster" of risk factors on dropout probability, but there has been little success in finding a truly generalizable set of factors (Kendall & Shin, 2012).

A focus on the individual student is a hallmark of the deficiency framework, in what has been called the "responsibilization agenda" (Kemshall, 2008). If the responsibility for educational failure or success is in the hands of one student – shaped by her decisions and behaviors – it follows that policy interventions will focus on regulating students who cannot seem to regulate themselves, correcting and guiding them toward the most prudent path. This problematization, or demonization, of youth and an "institutionalized intolerance" of youth views young people as inherently prone to flawed, reckless and dangerous behavior (Kelly, 2000, as quoted in Kemshall, 2008, p. 22). Young people's developing brains, especially in the areas of memory, planning capacity, obedience, temper and decision-making capabilities, often invoked to scientifically explain problematic and risky behavior in youth (Cárdenas, de Hoyos, & Székely, 2011; James, 2012).

Researchers have proposed a "cultural deficit model" that extends the deficiency framework to examine resources other than money that might impact successful schooling. The "cultural deficit model" has been applied to the study of Latino/a students dropping out in the United States, through which researchers have theorized that students lack the characteristics or attitudes needed to succeed in school due to their

cultural values (Luna & Tijerina Revilla, 2013). The idea of a “culture of poverty” locates this supposed cultural deficit within individual families or community structures, where students essentially learn to underachieve – such as the statement that “family poverty is a situation that leads to risk exposure and can nurture negative behavior when protective mechanisms are absent” (Cárdenas, de Hoyos, & Székely, 2011). Even without overtly blaming culture, children of families identified as highly risky are seen as problematic, “with predetermined risk trajectories ripe for intervention” (Kemshall, 2008, p. 26). Gender, race and social class status are often the first line of categorization in identifying students at risk, designations which are often laden with preconceived notions that perpetuate institutionalized racism, sexism and classism (James, 2012, p. 470). In Malagueña, for example, the gender inequity in high school classrooms and the scarcity of young men in school are often explained through assumptions of gendered risk and risky masculinity. Though the cultural deficit model has been widely criticized by scholars for decades (see Kendall & Shin, 2012), these theories continue to inform dominant understandings of dropout, starting with the common use of terms such as “risky,” “troubled” or “dangerous” youth (Luna & Tijerina Revilla, 2013, p. 25). In this discourse, young people exhibit either positive or negative behaviors along the gradient of risk exposure and related consequences – in terms of education, they are either students or dropouts.

2.2. A Review of Risk Factors in Honduras

There is a large body of research that has connected various social factors with dropout risk in Honduras, the Latin American region, and in low-income communities generally. All of these factors impact youth lives and educational opportunities in Malagueña, though I argue that viewing these factors in isolation – as opposed to with a geographically and historically broad analysis to view how structural violence functions in educational outcomes – impoverishes our theoretical understanding of school dropout (Farmer, 2004). However, in order to situate the stories of the ten students in this project within the majority of literature on dropout, I will briefly review the risk factors that have been most strongly connected with dropout for Honduran students from low-income communities.

2.2.1. Family Income

Lack of family income is the obvious magic bullet in the deficiency perspective, as researchers have found that “the probability of youth falling into risk situations decreases with the level of income and education of the family” (Cárdenas, de Hoyos, & Székely, 2011, p.8; Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew, 2007). Policy interventions that emerge from approaching lack of income using a deficiency framework are so-called “band-aid” or short-term solutions such as the *Bono Estudiantil* (Student Bonus) in Honduras, in which the state gives each student’s family \$20-\$30 at the end of the school year to help offset the past year’s schooling costs. The assumption, of course, is that the family was able to pay the costs when they were required. This connection between poverty and dropout risk has guided the explosion of conditional cash transfer programs across Latin America, free lunch programs, and other interventions to help families meet the minimal financial needs of schooling.

Programs such as *Educatodos* in Honduras essentially exist to mediate between poverty and educational achievement, setting schedules around the needs of students whose lives don’t fit into the formal education system, recruiting under-qualified volunteer teachers to keep costs low for students, and so on. The rationale for alternative secondary school programs is based on an acceptance of continuing poverty and exclusion from mainstream schooling systems. Figueredo & Anzalone (2003), for example, exhort USAID educational planners to take into account the needs of young working students and students in poverty in lower-cost alternative schooling models (p. 13). Further, they advocate for alternative models that allow the “participation of students who may not have the qualifications or other means to enter conventional schools” (p. 17). This is a pragmatic approach that accepts poverty and social exclusion as a reality, working around it with supportive programs to strategically cover the needs that families can’t meet.

Erin Murphy-Graham’s (2012) critique of education as “automatically” empowering argues against the neoliberal-influenced, individualistic discourse of empowerment prevalent in much of the development discourse that inspires “alternative” secondary school programs like *Educatodos*. More specifically, she views this approach as conflating empowerment with financial independence, failing to recognize that

empowerment is a relational concept, as “people are not empowered or disempowered in a vacuum” (p.19). Oppression, too, is a relational phenomenon, and focusing on lack of income as an individual risk hides the inequitable structural conditions that perpetuate poverty and social exclusion. In conceptualizing empowerment as a “process of recognition, capacity building and action,” Murphy-Graham critiques the assumption that more schooling automatically leads to empowerment, instead recognizing education as one resource among many for individual and collective empowerment (p. 15).

2.2.2. *Issues of School Access*

Studies have shown that the number of children with access to secondary school is almost double in urban areas, and 90.8% of respondents in a region-wide study of rural secondary school assistance reported that their main reason for dropout was accessibility (Martinic, 2003; SITEAL, 2009). Restrictive distance from a school will not be an issue in this study in the urban setting of Malagueña, though transportation concerns are still relevant. A study conducted by Barham & Gitter (2006) found that educational attainment increased with proximity to affordable secondary schools, an important factor in the urban context of Malagueña as available secondary schools range greatly in price, and distance becomes an issue even within the urban context for poor students who must walk or bike to school. Further, the timing of classes (morning, afternoon or evening) is a relevant factor in schooling access, as the constant threat of violence is a fact of life in Honduras. The impacts on educational decisions are numerous – fear of violence is ever-present in deciding to take a simple walk from home to school to considering the viability of taking a field trip. The timing of night school, for example – usually from about 6:30-10:30pm on weekdays – forces students to weigh the risk to their safety on the commute home and their desire to stay in school. Though night schools were not included in this study, the upper secondary options for working students in this study graduating from Educatoños will be severely limited if safe transportation from night school is not available.

Crivello (2011) and Leinaweaver (2008) have explored how children in the Andean regions of South America often rely on migration to graduate from high school or find work while helping extended family. The practice of “child circulation” described in Leinaweaver’s ethnography in Peru is a common practice in Honduras as well, with

young people moving in temporarily or permanently with family members in cities or larger towns, usually for mutually beneficial reasons. Leinaweaver (2008) has emphasized how this process of rural-urban migration is part of a larger strategy to *superar* and overcome poverty, and Crivello (2011) found a relatively new and rapidly growing emphasis on education in rural impoverished families, often expressed by parents as a desire for their children to be better than their parent's generation (p. 402). In line with Murphy-Graham's critique of empowerment discourse, Crivello urges us to remember that a "capacity to aspire" must not be conflated with a "capacity to achieve." Family and students' strong desire to finish their education exists alongside persistently high dropout rates that are in the Latin American region due to structural inequalities, poverty and processes of social exclusion that strategies to ameliorate schooling access issues cannot always overcome (Crivello, 2011, p. 408).

2.2.3. *Family Composition and Education Level*

A large amount of scholarship has found that that educational attainment is positively correlated with the education level of household heads (Barham & Gitter, 2006; Figueredo & Anzalone, 2003). Indeed, numerous studies have shown that the educational level of a child's parent/s is the most important determinant of years of schooling, and the education of a child's mother has received particular attention. If a child's mother's level of education is low, it increases the child's probability of dropout by over 170% (United Nations, 2002). Statistical analysis in neighboring Nicaragua indicates that raising a mother's education level from "no education" to "completing secondary school" makes it four times more likely that her child will complete lower secondary school (Arends-Kuenning & Duryea, 2006). Further, living in a single-mother family has also been shown to increase the risk of drop out for adolescents aged 14-16, based on a statistical study using World Bank data sets of four Latin American countries (Arends-Kuenning & Duryea, 2006). However, it remains unclear whether a mother's education level would theoretically outweigh single-parent status in the case of an educated single-mother household.

Analyzing mothers' education levels in relation to child dropout is described as having "implications for understanding the intergenerational transmission of poverty," locating the cause of a child's educational failure in the parents themselves as opposed

to the financial consequences of low levels of education (Figueredo & Anzalone, 2003; Arends-Kuenning & Duryea, 2006, p. 282). Children from uneducated households or single-mother families are designated as high-risk – often seen as basically destined to fail – without analysis of the mechanisms of oppression that created the inherent riskiness of single-mother status or that shaped the child’s parents’ lack of access to education. While this correlation has fueled the ‘culture of poverty’ discourse of uneducated mothers who give little value to their children’s education, researchers are increasingly questioning this stereotype. Crivello’s (2011) work has shown that over 90% of caregivers surveyed in poor, rural Peruvian families, often with low education levels themselves, wanted their children to go to university or technical school, and thought this was achievable (p. 398).

2.2.4. Youth Fertility

Early marriage, teenage pregnancy or family assistance with girls have been identified as key reasons for high school drop out in Latin America overall (Martinic, 2003, p.13). Recent statistics in Honduras show that 26% of the female population gave birth before age 18, and 20% of the female population aged 15-19 are currently married/in union, implying that parental responsibility and childcare may account for a significant portion of female dropout (UNICEF, 2010; Covenant House, 2009; Samandari & Spizer, 2010). A related factor in the literature on school/work trade-offs is the burden of childcare for both girls and boys – using survey data, Edwards et al. (1996) found that in Honduras, young people are likely to “delay initial enrolment, and attain fewer years of education” if there is an infant sibling in the home (cited in Bedi & Marshall, 2002, p. 134). However, SITEAL’s 2006 survey across Latin America found that “domestic responsibilities, parenting and/or childcare” was indicated as the reason for dropout by only 12% of participating adolescents ages 15-16, and 8% of adolescents ages 13-14 (2009, p. 2). Of those who reported this as the reason for dropout, 94.4% were female (SITEAL, 2009, p. 4). There are limitations to this survey data, as the important distinction between parental responsibilities, general domestic responsibilities, and caring for children other than one’s biological children was not made in the survey question, making the effect of youth pregnancy on dropout unclear.

Though none of the students in this study discussed having been pregnant, efforts to avoid the dramatically negative impact on educational achievement caused by pregnancy loomed in the background of many girls' interviews. Cunningham et al. (2008) has highlighted the widespread practice of forcing pregnant students to drop out or switch schools in Latin America, a common policy in Honduras to avoid impropriety or a perceived acceptance of deviant youth behavior. The particularly gendered dynamics of these formal or informal policies are focused on hiding pregnant (female) bodies. Young fathers are not forced to experience this same segregation, allowing them to often escape much of the social stigma or even remain completely invisible within the school setting (Erdmans, 2012, p. 55).

2.2.5. *Low Attendance Rates, Grade Repetition and Academics*

World Bank research has indicated that low attendance rates are highly correlated with grade repetition in Honduran primary schools, which is then a strong predictor of dropout, even at the primary level (Bedi & Marshall, 1999, p. 658). Grade repetition rates, including at the primary level, are also higher for boys in many Latin American countries, including Honduras (Martinic, 2003: 12). In an extensive review of dropout literature, Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew (2007) found that grade retention at any age is positively correlated with dropout, and the effects of multiple grade retentions are additive (p. 12). Marchbanks et al. (2011) have explored a positive correlation between exclusionary disciplinary practices (taking students out of the classroom as part of discipline tactics) and grade retention. Poor school performance – often connected to low attendance rates and grade repetition – is also a commonly cited reason for dropout in surveys conducted in the United States (Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew, 2007).

2.2.6. *School Quality*

School quality is considered to be key to drop out decisions by many scholars – a child's school experience has been shown to impact levels of grade repetition and attendance, which then is tied to school dropout (Bedi & Marshall, 2002; Arends-Kuenning & Duryea, 2006). Educational quality is usually measured by a combination of teacher quality and institutional quality measures. Bedi & Marshall (1999) found that Honduran parents' decisions about their child's school attendance was highly influenced

by expected increases in test scores and teacher quality, which was measured by “an active and participative” teaching methodology (p. 658). A recent study conducted in underfunded schools Albania by Abadzi & Llambiri (2011) linked teacher neglect and expectation of student dropout, arguing that teacher quality is often identified by scholars as a concern, but is only vaguely tied to “poverty-related factors” or measured by standardized test scores and surveys. These research findings suggest that teachers in resource-poor schools – a hallmark of public school experience in Honduras – often neglect the majority of students to focus on the few who may succeed.

School quality is measured by calculating textbook/student ratios and student/teacher ratios, and teacher quality is often measured by teacher examinations and student experience surveys (Bedi & Marshall, 1999). Student/teacher ratios have been identified as of particular concern in Honduras – Castillo (2003) has found that Honduras is one of only three countries in Latin America reporting student/teacher ratios over 35, with a nationwide average of 34 students/teacher at the primary level, and 22 students/teacher at the secondary level. Analysts have contended that providing free textbooks, creating classroom libraries and providing teacher training programs would be cost-effective interventions to improve equity in the education system (Seelke, 2007, p. 2). These interventions would be strengthened by an acknowledgement of the extremely inequality between *multiple* education systems in Honduras – private, public and alternative – that makes references to the general “education system” largely irrelevant.

2.2.7. Educational Qualifications in the Employment Market

A large body of research has shown how educational requirements for employment are rising across Latin America, but prospects for jobs are not rising at the same rate. Paola, a 38-year old 9th grade student in Educatodos explained what I heard from most people I spoke to in Malagueña:

Pues mucha valor no tiene [graduarse de la secundaria]. Porque se gradúa de secundaria, y no es que ya va a ir y ya va a conseguir trabajo, no. Aun cuando usted saca su bachillerato, igual, no es que tienen las puertas abiertas. Personas que ya tienen su título universitario y todavía les cuesta, se les hace difícil encontrar trabajo

... nuestro país ahorita esta en problemas bien graves en cuanto al trabajo, verdad, lo que no tenemos.

Well, [graduating from high school] doesn't have much value. Because you graduate from high school, and it's not like you're just going to go and just get a job, no. Even when you get your Bachelor's, really, it's not like they've got the doors open. People have their university degrees and it's *still* difficult for them, it's difficult for them to find a job ... our country right now is in serious problems when it comes to jobs, you know, it's what we don't have.

Studies conducted by the UN have noted that the “speedy expansion of education has led to its devaluation in the labour market ... and demands that candidates meet ever-increasing skills requirements” (2002, p. 23). Perlman (2010) has argued that rapidly rising educational requirements for entry-level positions (such as a garbage collection job requiring a high school diploma) and discrimination in the job market are two key factors that explain why poverty is not decreasing in step with graduation rates increasing across Latin America (p. 229). In Honduras, the unemployment rate in 2012 was 4.5%, but approximately 1/3 of the population is underemployed – and even if employed, 60% of the population is living in poverty. The unemployment rate for youth aged 15-24 is higher – the female youth unemployment rate is 11.2%, more than double the rate for young men (5.3%). Further, about 40% of the labor force is in agriculture, which often involves work for which schooling credentials are not a prerequisite (CIA Factbook, 2013).

It is difficult to grasp the employment prospects of high school graduates in Malagueña from these statistics, or truly understand what the unemployment rate is in the “knowledge economy” where high school graduates will seek employment. The growth of the knowledge-based economy, or knowledge economy, is a key concept in 21st-century globalization literature, defined as an economy “in which the generation and exploitation of knowledge has come to play a predominant part in the creation of wealth” (Dahlman 2007, p.19). Although this definition suggests that “knowledge” may mean more than “educated,” the term generally implies knowledge gained in schooling – the ability of a society to effectively use knowledge already created by others in economic activity and the dedication of individuals in a society to producing knowledge. Carl Dahlman (2007) explains the term in arguing that Latin America must meet the challenge of increasing its “knowledge related factors – innovation, tertiary education, and high

level skills – [which] have become more important for international competitiveness and growth” in order to avoid being “left behind” (p. 40; p. 20).

2.2.8. *Idle Youth*

In the last decade, youth idleness (not working or in school) has become a dominant concern both in literature on dropout and on “youth at risk” in general. Idle youth in Latin America refers to those who are not studying or going to school because of a “lack of educational and labor opportunities ... [not] where the status is chosen voluntarily” (Cárdenas, de Hoyos, & Székely, 2011, p. 3). Honduras had the highest level of idle youth in Latin America in 2009, at 28% (ibid). In a large-scale survey, Cárdenas, de Hoyos and Székely (2011) found that over half of idle youth in Latin America were from the poorest 40% of the population, and a third of these students had an average of 3 years of post-primary schooling but did not complete secondary (p. 7). The notion that there is a complete separation between “idle status” due to exclusion and “idle status” due to choice has been disproven by years of qualitative research, but this nevertheless underlines the concept.

Research into the conundrum of youth idleness has produced particularly telling statistics that connect macro variables with individual young people’s idleness. Cárdenas, de Hoyos and Székely found that a country’s degree of trade openness was positively correlated with the number of idle youth (2011, p. 19). In the context of market-based economies that are seen to “reward enterprise, innovation and risk-taking, but offer little security for those unequipped to take advantage of market opportunities,” this is not surprising (Figueredo & Anzalone, 2003, p. 7). While the authors interpret this “as a negative side-effect of an otherwise positive force that has led to higher productivity due to the faster destruction and creation of jobs,” this information points to the brutal lived realities of a neoliberal economic system experienced by the students in this study, and the central importance of problematizing how such macro-level factors can hinder a student’s ability to continue in school (p. 19).

2.2.9. *Lack of Interest in Schooling*

“Voluntarily chosen” dropout, in contrast to “idleness” due to lack of opportunity, is often reported as “a lack of interest in schooling” on large-scale survey of students who have dropped out, a factor that has been gaining increasing attention in recent scholarship. In SITEAL’s 2006 survey of six Latin American countries (not including Honduras) this reason was the most commonly selected (overshadowing work, financial reasons, accessibility, domestic responsibilities, and sickness) by the 15-16 year-old age group (p. 2). In a recent literature review, Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew (2007) also reported a number of surveys in which the majority of youth identified school curriculum or lack of interesting classes as main reasons for dropout (p. 16).

A lack of “interest” or “desire” to go to school is commonly understood as a failure on an individual level, based on personality, stubbornness or some intrinsic quality of rebellion in young people. But intention, personality and desires, and indeed young people’s process of identity formation generally, is also shaped by social structures. As Phillipe Bourgois (2003) has argued, individualistic explanations of choices such as continuing one’s education can miss the key structural components to a person’s life experiences and decision-making processes (p. 221). As I will discuss in detail in Chapter 3, students’ choices and interests related to schooling in Honduras are part of a larger idea of how they will achieve life success, overcome poverty and get ahead – master narratives that construct opportunity and possibility, and thus shape individual desires, choices and interests. Gardner (2011) has discussed how opportunity is socially constructed:

Nobody is born with an instinctive sense of what is possible or where opportunities lie. People develop a sense of what is possible as they are socialized, as they are taught and come to learn how the conditions under which they live facilitate certain actions and outcomes, and as they come into a sense of themselves and their relationship to society (p. 599).

Recognizing that individuals have this “culturally-constrained capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001, as quoted in Murphy-Graham, 2012, p. 21) does not reduce the people to mindless products of the social world, but locates the social world and its structures within the individual. Students’ interest in school, then, is the individual-level iteration of the perceived value of schooling, societal narratives of success and failure, and so on.

The meaning that students assign to their thoughts, desires and choices, as well as the agency they exercise by declaring a lack of interest in school is shaped by structures of their society.

2.3. Beyond the Deficiency Framework: A Social Justice Approach

A social justice perspective on dropout is not a dismissal of the idea of risk. Instead, a social justice approach contends that by focusing on identifying risks in individual students, the deficiency framework normalizes and perpetuates the social processes that create poverty, inequality and social exclusion that are the basis of these risks – it is an ahistorical, decontextualized approach to understanding school dropout (Kendall & Shin, 2012, p. 218). In short, the “individualistic and blame-laden language of risk transforms social and collective risks into individual ones” (Kelly, 2001, as quoted in Kemshall, 2008, p. 23). The “responsibilization agenda” key to the deficiency framework is built from a master narrative of inherently risky, deviant youth destined to be in gangs, do drugs, or leave school, who are “often accorded an inflated and superstitious form of destructive power” (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009, p. 314). Instead of asking why these risks exist, and how students are dealing with them, young people are blamed for the very conditions that oppress them (ibid, p. 315).

Identifying risks is only useful within to a larger understanding of social processes, and a focus on changing those root causes. The danger of the deficiency perspective is that in identifying what students or families are lacking, they are inevitably being compared to a norm – a family that has all the resources needed for educational success. This may seem benign when considered in terms of material resources, but what about the implicit “norm” in social resources and cultural resources that also impact success in education? As Fine (1993) eloquently explained, “risk is not an abstract or rhetorical construct, but one in which people, groups and communities are assessed on the basis of the values that society holds dear” (as quoted in James, 2012, p. 465). A deficiency-informed approach to understanding school dropout that focuses on individual, familial and cultural deficits upholds social hierarchies, obscuring the need for

dropout interventions and programming to focus on efforts to confront the structural violence of institutionalized oppression.

Kendall & Shin (2012) have pointed out how focusing on the problems and deficits of young people has reinforced a societal narrative of at-risk youth destined to engage in negative behaviors, bringing the consequences upon themselves and those around them (p. 217). Master narratives such as this one refer to the way in which social issues such as dropout are commonly understood and narrated, skewed toward the perspective of those with power (Luna & Tijerina Revilla, 2013). Foucault (1974) has shown how discourse is controlled and perpetuated by dominant groups in society, and as this narrative is repeated, we construct the world around us and reinscribe social hierarchies. Power, in Foucault's view, is most effective when it seems to be the natural order of things – such as understanding dropout in low-income communities as “typical” or “inevitable.” Master narratives that perpetuate an individualistic approach to understanding school dropout allow us to avoid seeing this structural violence, focusing instead on how individuals have failed or succeeded while accepting the socio-structural circumstances of their lives.

In a study of Latina/o high school students who had dropped out in Nevada, Luna & Tijerina Revilla (2013) discussed how “by blaming themselves for leaving school without graduating, participants internalized the majoritarian narrative that blames students for ‘failure’ instead of using a counterstory” (p. 34). The idea of a counterstory – one that works against master narratives to highlight the experiences and resistance of oppressed peoples – is parallel to Yosso's (2006) challenge to cultural deficit theory in recognizing “community cultural wealth.” In a study of students' identity formation in a Mexican prep school, Herr & Anderson (2003) asserted that in the process of identity formation, “the social environment serves to legitimize some voices and not others” (p.46). To work against this, affirming community cultural wealth focuses on how the cultural knowledge, skills, ideas and community connections of students who are oppressed or marginalized are often positive and motivational (Luna & Tijerina Revilla, 2013, p. 26). This rejection of the “culture of poverty” myth – where working-class culture is problematic, dangerous and risky – moves away from the deficit framework, recognizing individual and community agency against and within structures of systemic oppression.

2.3.1. *Reconceptualizing School Dropout*

Qualitative studies of dropout have sought to improve the limited understanding of dropout provided by the deficiency perspective. Most importantly, qualitative research with youth brings their own voices and stories to the table, balancing the abundance of professional and academic knowledge produced about young people's choices and experience of risk (Kemshall, 2008; James, 2012; Knesting, 2008; Gardner, 2011). In exploring students' lived experiences in school and leaving school, I follow researchers such as Hattam & Smyth (2003), Luna & Tijerina Revilla (2013) and Herr & Anderson (1997) who have argued that young people's complicated lives do not fit neatly into the dominant constructs for understanding dropout, which confuses and leads to misdirected policy responses.

In reconceptualizing school dropout, researchers have introduced theories of "fading out" of school and "pathways" to drop out, acknowledging that there is a process of disengagement that builds up to the day a student formally withdraws from school, which in many cases goes back as far as elementary school (Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew, 2007). This developmental process framework for understanding school withdrawal rejects the idea that dropout should be studied as a finite "event", such as Finn's (1989) participation-identification model, which analyzes how students' positive participation in school over time contributes to a positive personal identification with schooling. The most common approach to exploring a students' "pathway" to drop out is the push/pull model, which argues that drop out is "occurring due to either 'push' factors that force a student out of school, or 'pull' factors that interfere with a student's commitment to his or her education" (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011, p. 522).

The push/pull model allows for more investigation into how risk is unequally distributed, as many researchers have noted how *push* and *pull* factors do not effect all students equally. Bradley & Renzulli (2011) found "unique patterns of pushout/pullout for different [self-reported] race-gender groups" in students who dropped out of high school in the United States, arguing that a students' socioeconomic status (SES) and racial identity impacted the likelihood they would experience pushout or pullout. Institutionalized racism and classism in school environments, as discussed by Valenzuela (1999), James (2012) and Luna & Tijerina Revilla (2013) can be seen in the

uneven distribution of experiences of school pushout in students who identify with racialized or marginalized groups. Though this approach is still based on risk factors and retains a focus on categorizing students' experiences, it begins to look beyond correlations to understand how these factors are working in students' multifaceted lives.

2.3.2. *Being Pushed or Pulled Out of School*

A student may be pushed out of school (expelled or asked to leave) because of factors such as failing, behavioral problems, inability to pay, or inadequate attendance rates. Hostile school environments, including negative teacher and staff behavior towards students, as well as counseling that encourages students with behavioral problems or academic failure to leave school are other examples of pushout (Luna & Tijerina Revilla, 2013, p. 23). "Failed school structures, practices and policies" are important causes for dropout, and continue to be significantly underappreciated by scholars (Kendall & Shin, 2012, p. 214). Understanding these factors as "pushout" goes beyond seeing poverty as a deficiency by showing how school failure underlies factors that appear to be individual students' problems, as many students are "pushed out of urban schools due to a systematic process of dehumanization, isolation, and ultimately exclusion" (p. 214).

In an ethnographic study of Mexican and Mexican-American high school students in Houston, Valenzuela (1999) found that students were deeply concerned and demotivated by the disrespect they felt from their schools: "they oppose not education, but *schooling* – the content of the education and the way it is offered" (p.5). Valenzuela highlighted the importance of caring student-teacher relationships, as well as schooling that recognizes and respects students' social and cultural identities. Her concept of subtractive schooling has become a popular analytical framework for opposing schooling that divests students of "important social and cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure," after which many scholars have focused on creating additive schooling (ibid, p. 3). Carl James' (2012) study of the stereotyping of black boys in Toronto schools highlighted the importance of understanding "how the hegemonic schooling policies, programs and practices perpetuate stereotyping that are oppressive to racialized students," which draws significant parallels to stereotyping based on social class status and gender in Malagueña. Knesting (2008) listened to

many students' bitter complaints about teachers and school personnel, such a student who described how many of his friends had been kicked out, because "they don't want you infecting other students with any rebellious ideas" (p. 7). The school environment – including administrators, teachers and students – is a microcosm of the larger social world, and without a proactive anti-oppressive framework it is difficult for all students' experiences in school to be "meaningful, self-validating, relevant, safe and empowering for them" (p. 486).

"Pull" factors are generally understood in the literature as connected to dropout that occurs because of factors that interfere with a students' commitment to his or her education (Bradely & Renzulli, 2011, p. 522). Factors that pull young people away from schooling often include increased responsibilities at home, the influence of peer groups, or a desire or need to work. Incarcerated young people from poor neighborhoods with an active drug trade in Gardner's (2011) ethnography, for example, described the "the almost gravitational pull of the streets" in disengagement from school or formal work (p. 594). In dropout research in Honduras, working is the most commonly identified "pull" factor, as many scholars have sought to understand how families living in poverty must negotiate the opportunity costs of school vs. work (Bedi & Marshall, 1999). Researchers have identified an increase in both push and pull factors during the sixth grade transition period for young people in poor neighborhoods, arguing for an increased focus on transition periods that reflects the spike in dropout rates in Honduras after 6th grade and after 9th grade (Kendall & Shin, 2012, p. 15).

2.3.3. *Circulating In and Out of School*

The experiences of students described in this thesis fall within and outside of the developmental process framework, as students experiencing strategic temporary dropout and forced temporary dropout did not describe a long-term process of disengagement (in fact, being forced to drop out of school or leaving strategically for financial reasons often came as a shock, or as a consequence of another life event). Conversely, students who described school disillusionment often did acknowledge a period of disengagement, such as one student who described how he first stopped going to class periodically, then frequently, and eventually left school entirely. In conceptualizing the reasons behind students' experiences *leaving* school, the push/pull

model provides the most useful analytical framework for the stories in this thesis. However, the idea of a “pathway” to dropout still ends at the moment of dropping out, which falls short of conceptualizing the second half of the story for many students in contemporary Honduras – their subsequent return to school.

Students who move in and out of high school over the course of their adolescence have received very little attention in the literature on dropout. There has been, however, a growing attention on adults who return to school after non-completion in their youth. A recent example is Erin Murphy-Graham’s (2012) study of the positive changes experienced by youth and adult students in an alternative secondary school program in Garifuna villages in Honduras. However, studies that revisit “dropouts” in high school equivalency or “second-chance” programs often do not connect this return to education to the earlier decision to drop out, but rather constitute an entirely separate body of scholarly literature on adult high school equivalency education, literacy education and work-study programs (with the notable exception of Luna & Tijerina Revilla, 2012). One of few scholars to use the concept of “leaving school temporarily,” Gingras (2000) mentions that rates of secondary school completion are high among young adults ages 20-24 in Canada due to the country’s well-developed “second chance” system that captures many adolescent dropouts later in life (p. 14, in PCERA, 2001).

However, this brief mention of the temporary nature of dropout maintains the disconnection between a youth “dropout” and an adult accessing a second-chance program (PCERA, 2001). Studies of young adults in “second-chance” programs often focus on students with a particular shared experience or students in alternative programs, such as pregnant students in specialized programs or youth within the criminal justice system (Hallman, 2007; Erdmans, 2012; Gardner, 2011). These bodies of research produce a dichotomy between “dropping out of school” and “adults who go back to school” that does not reflect the lived realities of many students in Honduras, including the ten students in this study. Nor do the experiences of these students, moving in and out of school over the course of their adolescence as part of a larger project focused on life success and social mobility, truly fit into either the literature on dropout or the literature on “second-chance” programs.

The goal of social justice perspective in education is to foment a system with equitable distribution of resources, where students have the opportunity to fully explore their own capabilities through transformative learning for well being, success and happiness (Sen, 1999). As schools are situated within larger systems of power that perpetuate inequality and marginalization, a social justice perspective in education sees the individual student as part of the community around them. This is the essence of a social justice framework, where risk is recognized, but not without prioritizing why and how risk is unevenly distributed. The ultimate goal, which I hope to further through in this research, is to challenge and dismantle the structural violence that is at the root of these risks, as opposed to helping one individual avoid them.

In the dropout literature, many scholars have successfully argued that we must widen the frame for understanding dropout, moving away from a fixation on the moment of leaving school to see the “pathway” of factors of disengagement that build up to this moment. However, in order to understand temporary dropout in Honduras, I contend that we must also reject strongly ingrained constructs in the literature of young people as either “students” or “dropouts,” and of dropout as a one-time, permanent event of failure. Widening the frame even further, it is possible to see how the “pathway” to what appears to be dropout may in fact be a pathway that leads into school, out of school, and then back into school.

3. Methods and Methodology

The goal of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of issues of secondary schooling and low graduation rates in Honduras. I wanted to understand how young people who had already left explained their decision to drop out, as well as why the minority of young people still in school was motivated to continue. I was guided by inductive qualitative methods in conducting data collection, analysis and interpretation for this project.

3.1. Research Design and Setting

This research was conducted in the mid-size city of Malagueña, Honduras, an urban setting where schools are numerous and geographically accessible (diminishing the issue of dropout due to excessive distance to school). Approximately 77% of the population in Latin American lives in urban environments, increasing the general relevance to the region of a study about education in a city (Bueno, 2007, p. 564). Educational options for high school in Malagueña include private bilingual schools (non-religious, Evangelical or Catholic), private schools (non-religious, Evangelical or Catholic), well-funded public schools, poorly funded public schools, trade schools and alternative distance-education programs such as the Educatodos program. Based on data from the most recent (2000) census, secondary school enrollment in Malagueña measured very close to the national average of about 30%, while other Honduran municipalities reported secondary enrollment rates ranging from 9.5% to 51.9% (Castillo, 2003).

The consistency of drop out is not the same for young people from rich families and poor families (and by extension, private schools and public schools) but such a distinction is often forgotten in literature that discusses “dropout” generally. Based on my literature review and information about severe educational inequality in Honduras, I

designed a comparative study of students at three different schools to increase theoretical sensitivity. In order to meet students with a variety of financial backgrounds and life situations, I chose three schools from each general schooling system in Malagueña – one private school (here called Instituto Cristo), one public school (here called Colegio Nacional), and one alternative program (referred to by its general name, Educatodos). These three schools roughly represented three financial tiers of schooling options – the private school system was prohibitively expensive for most (though the possibility of scholarship for excellent grades exists); public school was technically free, but still unaffordable for many given frequent extra cost for materials, projects and administrative fees; and alternative programs such as Educatodos were the cheapest possible option for students. Generally, private school students were from wealthier families, and public and alternative students ranged from financially stable working-class families to very poor families, though there was some variation. In comparing these schools, it became clear that going to high school is a very different experience for students at different institutions (see Table 1). Thus, this project explores student experiences with dropping out or school success across income levels and school systems.

To study why some students leave high school before completion and others continue to graduation, I originally planned to conduct half of my interviews with students at each school, and half of my interviews with students who had dropped out of each school. Given high dropout rates in Honduras (with Malagueña as no exception), I knew that enrolled students, teachers, administrators and parents would know other young people who had dropped out. Using snowball sampling, I planned to ask these in-school participants to facilitate my connection to students who had dropped out of each school. However, as I began to better understand secondary schooling in Honduras, my approach to youth participant interviews changed.

An unexpected number of youth currently enrolled in alternative school and public school reported having previously dropped out and returned to school, telling stories of how they “waited” a few years (*esperé un tiempo*), “missed” a few months (*perdí un año*), or “left” their studies (*lo dejé*) before coming back. I realized that I had engaged a false dichotomy in designing a study that separated youth (and particularly low-income youth) into the permanent categories of “students” or “dropouts.” Following

a grounded theory approach, I allowed “the eventual direction of and focus of the study” to emerge through such realizations throughout the fieldwork process (Sandelowski, 1995, as quoted in Heath & Cowley, 2004, p. 147; Jones, 2010, p. 10). By the end of fieldwork, I had focused mainly on interviewing the young people currently enrolled at the three school field sites, with whom I had gained trust and familiarity as a volunteer in the classroom. From these students, I heard a range of stories that covered staying in school, dropping out of school and coming back to school. None of the relatively wealthier and upper-class students I interviewed at the private school, however, had ever dropped out of school, pointing me toward the importance of emphasizing the structural violence of poverty and inequality on experiences of temporary dropout.

Table 1: Profile of the Three Schools

	INSTITUTO CRISTO	COLEGIO NACIONAL	EDUCATODOS
<i>Basic School Information</i>			
School type	Private, bilingual, Christian	Public	Public, distance-education model
Degree offered	Arts & Sciences Degree (academic track)	Information Technology Degree (vocational track)	Equivalency certificate (9th grade certificate)
Grades offered in High School	7th - 11th grade (no cycles) ¹²	7th-9th grade (cycle 1) 10th-12th grade (cycle 2)	7th-9th grade (cycle 1)
Sections offered	All day, M-F	Morning, Afternoon or Night sections M-F; Saturday or Sunday distance-learning	Saturday or Sunday distance-learning
Section Observed for Fieldwork	7th-11th grade (shared classroom)	10th grade, M-F afternoon section	9th grade, Saturday distance-learning section
<i>Student Body</i>			
Total # of students, 12th	-	35	-

¹² Instituto Cristo did not offer 12th grade because of the Arts & Sciences academic track degree they offered, which is completed upon 11th grade graduation. Students who graduate with an Arts & Sciences degree are generally expected to go to University (as opposed to vocational track degrees, which include an extra 12th grade year and are seen as leading directly into technical trades).

Total # of students, 11th	6	24	-
Total # of students, 10th	10	45	-
Total # of students, 9th	9	67	86
Total # of students, 8th	14	118	57
Total # of students, 7th	15	167	70
High school student body size	54 students	456 students	213 students
<i>Teachers and Staff</i>			
Number of High School teachers	8	17	6
Student /teacher ratio, high school overall	6.75 to 1	12.5 to 1	35.5 to 1
Student/teacher ratio in classroom setting	Ranging from 7/1 (if all teachers are present) to 12/1	Ranging from 24/1 to 60/1, depending on grade size	Ranging from 35/1 to 55/1, depending on grade size
Education level officially required for teachers	Bachelor's degree (if not from teacher's college, can request a permit from Secretary of Ed.)	Bachelor's degree in field, from teacher's college	Currently in university, at least graduated from high school
Observed teacher education level	Bachelor's in field (often not from teacher's college), various still in university	Bachelor's in field from teacher's college	Currently in university
# of Administrators	6	9	1
Administrator education level	Bachelors in Education	Masters	Bachelors
# of staff meetings per week	5 – every morning, before class time	Sporadic and during class time, re: teacher's strikes	Sporadic and during class time, re: special events
<i>School Day</i>			
Length of School day for observed section	8am – 3pm	12:40pm – 5:20pm	7am – 5pm
Official # of class hours received per week	30 hours and 50 minutes	20 hours and 50 minutes	8 hours and 25 minutes
Official # of class	6 hours and 10 minutes	4 hours and 10 minutes	8 hours and 25 minutes

hours in school day (not including breaks or lunch)			
Average observed number of class hours per day	5-6 hours	2-3 hours	4-6 hours
<i>Costs and Funding</i>			
Official yearly cost to attend	L. 4, 750 (\$240 CAD)	None	None
Official additional monthly cost to attend	L. 3,500 (\$177 CAD)	None	\$5 (can be waived)
Unofficial costs to attend	Special books, transportation (if needed), lunch/snack	Books (\$10), materials for special projects (\$15-\$30 per project), transportation (if needed), lunch/snack	Books (\$50), materials for special projects (\$15- \$30 per project), transportation (if needed), lunch/snack
Official private scholarships available?	Yes	No	No
Percent of students with private scholarships	15% full scholarship, 8% partial scholarship	-	-
Unofficial scholarship/discounts provided	No	Yes - teachers sometimes pool money to help students with uniforms, books, lunch, etc.	Yes - teachers sometimes buy lunch for students with no money, ask mayor's office to give a scholarship for materials
Starting teacher salary/month	L. 6,000 to 7,000 (\$300- \$350 CAD), increase with seniority	L. 9,600 (\$510 CAD) after public employee deductions, increases with seniority	Volunteers – stipend for lunch from student fees
Funding sources	Student tuition fee (for daily operations), US private donations (for special projects)	Secretary of Education (for daily expenses), foreign donations (for special projects)	Student fee (for daily operations), mayor's office (for special events)
Students pay for required books?	No (only novels or special books for projects)	Yes	Yes

3.2. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual basis for this project is a belief that educational policy decisions should be informed by the priorities identified by students, working to engage with the barriers that students and their families experience as constraining or shaping their educational choices. To understand such high numbers of dropout in Honduras, this research follows a growing number of scholars who assert the importance of prioritizing the narratives of youth in qualitative research about youth issues (Ingram, 2011; Santos Pais, 2008; Herr & Anderson, 1997 and Gervais, 2011). As Santos Pais (2008) has declared, it is key that research on youth issues move away from the problematic tendency to have no input from children: “listening to the voices of children and respecting their right to be heard is imperative for any research that monitors the implementation and exercise of [children’s] rights” (as quoted in Gervais, 2011, p.3).

I have drawn from many research traditions to create a methodological framework for approaching issues of temporary dropout, including narrative analysis, discourse analysis and critical ethnography. Narrative research is a popular methodology for researchers of comparative education, for studying major life events such as leaving school early and for understanding how individuals view themselves within their social environment (Van de Hoonaard, 2012). Discourse analysis recognizes that the way we talk about the world around us is not just descriptive, but actually *constitutes* the world around us. Foucault’s theories of discourse assert how “discourse limits how we can think about the world ... powerful components of society control the way we talk about phenomena, and, thereby, define them” (Rabinow, 1984). Finally, critical ethnographic studies in education have long been concerned with understanding the interactions between human agency and social structures, such as school institutions (Anderson, 1989, p. 251).

Analyzing students’ narratives allowed me to understand how young people make sense of their schooling decisions. Though young people’s identity formation is a deeply personal process, it is shaped by the world around them. Listening to youth tell the story of their life as a student provided rich, contextual data that illuminated their developing identities in relation to the sociocultural structures in which they were embedded. Deeply personal experiences such as financial insecurity, class identity,

empowerment and motivation can be explored in personal narratives, allowing me to better understand students' perspectives on their educational decisions. The dynamics of power in educational institutions can be seen through an analysis of students' experiences of inequality and social class positioning, which is particularly important given severe educational inequality in Honduras. For example, the ways in which higher-class, privileged students spoke of dropout contrasted to how poorer students spoke of their own educational choices, which illuminated dominant ideologies that structure how people understand educational success and failure (discussed further in chapter 3).

There are multiple ways of understanding the stories students shared with me. I did not seek to have a representational sample in this project, or attempt to produce generalizable information about youth and secondary schooling in Honduras. Instead, I was interested in learning about student subjectivities, or learning about people and their experiences – individual knowledge that is “personal; partly intuitive; affective; and may not have any direct relevance outside of the person who holds it” (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 10). This study seeks to follow the ethnographic tradition of prioritizing the voices of people negotiating life decisions within the structural constraints that shape their environment and opportunities – these students' stories provide the complex, nuanced and often contradictory real-life context needed to better understand secondary education and dropout Honduras.

I drew from ethnographic traditions in this research particularly as I considered how my personal connections in the city of Malagueña would figure into my research design. Traditions of critical ethnography inspired my decision to insert myself into the school environment as a volunteer and engage in participant observation in the classrooms of the three schools (Mayan, 2009, p. 39). An ethnographic approach allowed me to widen the frame of insights and experiences considered “data” – participant observation, an open inquiry into people's thoughts and actions, and the practice of critical reflexivity inspired me to draw from family conversations, everyday interactions and experiences of daily life at these three schools in Malagueña to inform this research.

3.3. Data Collection

I began fieldwork by meeting with the directors of each the three schools in this study. My formal relationship with each school began after obtaining a signed consent form from each school director allowing me to conduct research at their school, as well as a signed approval for my volunteer work as a teaching assistant during fieldwork. During my initial meeting with school directors, I explained my research and its purpose, clarifying my intention to engage in participant observation through my time spent volunteering. Directors were given contact information for my research supervisor and the Office of Research Ethics at Simon Fraser University (SFU), and an offer to view my detailed interview questionnaires. I also presented a letter of introduction from the Director of the School for International Studies at SFU. I maintained regular contact with school directors throughout the research period, including regular updates on fieldwork progress.

On the first day of my weekly volunteering trips to each school, I gave a brief presentation to the class and teachers regarding my research question, methodology, and goals. In the first weeks of my time volunteering, I distributed permission forms to all students 15 and older, in order to begin the process of seeking their parents' approval for interviews. While teachers occasionally pointed me toward interviewing particular students (usually high academic achievers), I scheduled the majority of my interviews based on my own interactions with students, and their willingness and interest in participating. Upon completion of fieldwork, I had interviewed 29 students – ten from Instituto Cristo, ten from Colegio Nacional and nine from Educatodos.

3.3.1. *Participant Interviews*

In all instances, I conducted student interviews at an agreed-upon time during the school day when a student and their teacher felt they could miss 20-40 minutes of class time. The majority of students provided me with their signed parent/guardian consent form, and occasionally I spoke with students' parent/guardians over the phone, explaining the information provided on the consent form, and gaining their oral

consent.¹³ Students also signed an Interview Assent Form, which emphasized that their participation and comments were private, and would not influence their grades or classwork. Any student over 18 signed their own Interview Consent Form, after showing me their national ID card with their date of birth. Interviews were conducted in private, either in an empty classroom, an empty school office or an outdoor picnic table or bench on school property. I used a semi-structured interview questionnaire to guide my conversations, though the format allowed for tangential conversations or stories (which I encouraged). Minor modifications or additions to the questionnaire were made throughout fieldwork, though the key categories of questions were not changed. All interviews were audio-recorded, and student participants were informed that I would use a pseudonym in the write up of the study. Student interviews generally lasted between 15 and 45 minutes.

3.3.2. *Key Informant Interviews*

The key informants I engaged in this study included eleven teachers, eight school administrative staff, two parents and two municipal-level officials. I used one questionnaire to guide my interviews with teachers, administrators and other staff, and a different questionnaire for interviews with parents. I began interviews with teachers and staff before beginning youth participant interviews, and continued interviewing key informants throughout the fieldwork process. Teachers and staff provided valuable context for understanding the secondary school environment, clarifying details of school functioning, providing a portrayal of the study population, and giving their own perspective on their own students' successes and failures. I was particularly interested in parents' perspective on institutional quality and reasons for dropout together with students' thoughts on these topics, though parents were particularly difficult to locate for interviews outside of the few who arrived during school hours. The Educadores school director connected me with two municipal-level managers of alternative programs, whom I also interviewed as key informants for a larger-scale perspective on alternative program provision and goals, as related to high school dropout. Apart from these

¹³ In these cases the student was given a copy of the parental consent form to bring to their parents.

officials, I focused on recruiting participants only from each of the three schools rather than pursue further interviews with municipal-level officials, to focus on students' narratives as the core of this research. Though I followed an interview questionnaire for all key informant interviews, the format remained flexible in order to take advantage of the varying perspectives, experiences and positions of these key informants.

3.3.3. *Participant Observation and Gathering School Demographic Information*

Time spent volunteering in the classrooms of each school gave me an insider's perspective on these three education systems from a teaching standpoint, as I was able to participate in checking homework, administering tests, disciplining students, answering questions, and correcting in-class work or homework. This allowed me to actively participate in the different teaching and learning environments of each school, as well as to observe daily classroom interactions over the three-month period. In fulfilling my responsibilities assisting teachers and helping in the classroom, I had to work within the school's financial resources, teaching approach and institutional constraints. Further, I was able to connect with teachers while I became a temporary part of the classroom, discussing teaching methodologies, daily frustrations and successes, and ideas for improving learning outcomes and school experiences.

I gathered demographic information about each school with the help of school directors, who collected the information I requested anonymously from enrollment charts and records. Often, a staff member would answer my general questions (regarding school founding, recent history and funding information), and would skim school records to calculate the information I requested, such as the number of student drop outs in the previous year, the gender make-up of a particular grade, and so on. In this way, I collected basic comparative data for the three schools without viewing past or current students' names or identifying information (see Table 1).

3.4. Data Analysis

Before beginning the analysis process, all participant interviews were transcribed verbatim. I transcribed interviews in Spanish, and conducted a thematic analysis using open coding. First, each transcript was coded line by line to develop preliminary thematic categories. I conducted this line-by-line coding without using a codebook and without seeking to draw connections between interviews, with the goal of exploring the data without a pre-conceived categorization scheme. Grounded theory coding techniques focus on social and social psychological processes, as opposed to topics (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2003). In using grounded theory coding techniques, I paid close attention to participants' language and actions, as well as how they constructed reality in their narratives. In order to stay close to the data, I focused on answering two key questions in coding: "What is this data a study of?" and "When, how, and with what consequences are participants acting?" (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2003). Next, I reviewed my initial codes to create general thematic categories, which I then broke into specific dominant and sub-dominant codes. At this point in the analysis, I maintained in a codebook and began to identify interactions between dominant and sub-dominant codes. I used both topical codes (i.e. "relationship with mother" or "family responsibilities") and action codes (i.e. "justifying academic failure"). Finally, I conducted final interpretations and extracted quotes as I organized my presentation of themes and data during the writing process. At this point, I translated all quotes to English.

In the process of data analysis, I found that thirteen students had the shared experience of dropping out and returning to school during their adolescence, which became the main focus of this thesis. I returned to these students' stories to look for patterns and relationships between their temporary dropout experiences, again coding dominant and sub-dominant themes specific to temporary dropout. This coding process allowed me to develop the categories of strategic temporary dropout, forced temporary dropout and disillusionment with school that I use to discuss temporary dropout in this paper (detailed in chapters 4, 5 and 6). Visual techniques such as colour coding, concept maps and diagrams of students' stories of temporary dropout helped me to see how variation in the structural conditions of students' lives shaped their conceptualization of their temporary dropout experiences.

Three student interviews were excluded from this deeper-level analysis of temporary dropout case studies. These students were aged 26, 28 and 38 at the time of our interviews, had dropped out of school at least 10 years earlier, and had dropped out of rural primary schools. These adults' experiences of dropping out of school a decade or two earlier were inconsistent with the ten young peoples' dropout experiences in the present-day urban Honduran school system, and therefore I excluded these three interviews from my analysis. The other ten students who had experienced temporary dropout were between 15 and 22 years old at the time of our interviews, and had all dropped out and returned to school recently, during their adolescence.

The fluid and exploratory nature of inductive coding meant that I often recognized key thematic categories in what I had originally deemed as less important codes— my categorization of codes continued to evolve as I engaged in multiple readings of the data (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2003). To give a specific example, after completing line-by-line coding for one interview of a student who had temporarily dropped out, it became clear that she had spoken extensively about her family. Action codes such as “feeling a responsibility to contribute,” “explaining family’s collective goals” and “describing how her mother supports her” were grouped into the thematic category of “family relationships.” Next, this category was broken into dominant codes such as “parent influence on education,” “strategies for children’s education” and “students’ responsibility to family.” A dominant code such as “students’ responsibility to family” was then broken down into sub-dominant code such a “supporting siblings,” “sacrificing for siblings,” “parents’ sacrifice,” “collective goals” and “responsibility to succeed.” However, I began to see that the concept of sacrifice appeared consistently in her narrative, even in discussing topics unrelated to family. Thus I re-categorized the “sacrifice” code, which I eventually found to be a general thematic category in students’ narratives of temporary dropout (particularly in strategic temporary dropout, which I discuss in Chapter 4).

3.5. Positionality

My decision to undertake this research specifically in Malagueña requires a brief explanation. Qualitative researchers have recognized the importance of researcher reflexivity and positionality, especially in ethnographic research. Feminist standpoint

theory asserts the importance of “strong reflexivity,” demanding that reflexivity not only be exercised in the field, but in all aspects of research interest and design: “background assumptions and beliefs grounded in the researcher’s social location generate a problematic to be studied and a set of preliminary hypotheses” (McCorkel & Myers, 2003, p. 203). Following in this tradition, I will present a brief statement of my own motivations for pursuing this project, with the intention of continuous reflection regarding my own worldview and experiences.

When my husband (who is Honduran) started 7th grade classes at age 24, we were often frustrated by the quality, professionalism and rigor of classes at his particular *Educadores* program. At the same time, the opportunity this distance-education program provided to adults like him who had dropped out of school at a young age was invaluable, regardless of the quality. His struggle to make the best of this program – as well as the stories of his classmates and their efforts to graduate under often extremely difficult circumstances – sparked my initial interest in exploring why finishing school is so difficult in Honduras, how students experience dropping out of school, and how and when students may return to schooling.

When I began fieldwork, I hoped that my family connections in the community would soften some of the inherent power dynamics present when a young, white, American researcher speaks with families about their educational decisions – the “symbolic violence exerted through the interview relationship” (Bourdieu et al. 1999, as cited in Auyero & Swistun, 2009, p. 13). However, asymmetrical power relations are difficult to escape, as “cultural privilege inevitably clings to our words and thoughts” (Schutte, 2011). Two aspects of my identity were particularly impactful to this research – being an American student, and being the wife of a Honduran person.

I was treated as an “insider” by the few American teachers at the private, evangelical school where I conducted a third of this fieldwork, which resulted in conversations and reflections that were undoubtedly shared with me because of our common cultural and national background. My assumed (and relative) wealth as an American gave me the social capital to be treated as an insider by higher-class students and teachers in many conversations about the “poor decisions” or moral failings of lower class students or families, much to my own discomfort. My family connections to a

variety of people in Malagueña facilitated many of the connections I made in the field. For example, I was first introduced to Instituto Cristo because my niece goes to primary school there, and students in high school were aware that I had this connection. I was connected to the alternative school in this study because my husband attended classes there on a different day, and teachers, students and administrators were aware of this connection, though our different educational levels were treated as an anomaly. His experiences as a student at this institution inevitably give me a personal perspective on the school while I was conducting fieldwork. Further, his experience dropping out of school to work after 6th grade in rural Honduras has also greatly informed my own perspective and interest in this topic.

My husband joined me for most of my initial introductions to schools and administrators, asserting my cultural position as a married woman. Helping my stepdaughter with her 3rd-grade public school homework allowed me to personally experience the frustrations of poor institutional quality and frequently cancelled classes for teacher strikes. Finally, I was able to engage my extended family in Malagueña for data triangulation – “cross-checking” with a variety of sources to gain further insight into the phenomenon being studied. Patton (2002) has asserted that the goal of triangulation is not to get the same answer from everyone, noting that, “inconsistencies should not be seen as weakening the evidence, but should be viewed as an opportunity to uncover deeper meaning in the data.” My experience discussing data and developing conclusions with family and other key informants served to complicate and expand my understanding of the nuances of temporary dropout, ideologies of success and failure, and school experiences in Malagueña.

3.6. Methodological Challenges

I encountered a variety of methodological challenges as I conducted research. First, this study was limited by the requirement that I have signed parent/guardian consent forms for interviews with students under 18 (most of the students in this project). This limited my sample to students who were motivated to remember to ask their parent/guardian to sign the form, and whose parent/guardians was interested, able and willing to sign. This may have impacted my conclusions regarding strong parent

involvement and interest in their children's education, and students' motivation to participate may have been part of their general enthusiasm for participating in school, limiting my conclusions about temporary dropout to students with these characteristics. Though I was able to contact students' parents/guardians by phone on a few occasions, in these cases I was still limited to interviewing youth whose parents/guardians were available to answer the phone during the day and were supportive of their child's participation.

Second, it became clear over the course of fieldwork that the effectiveness of my role as a volunteer teaching assistant (through which I was conducting participant observation) depended greatly on the school director's interest to my volunteer work. I had hoped to have a similar role at each school that would allow me to become part of the classroom during fieldwork, working closely with students to gain their trust and watch their learning experiences unfold. Further, I hoped to experience "working" in each particular institutional community to better understand the differences between school systems. However, my experience in each classroom developed very differently. The school director at Instituto Cristo did provide me with concrete tasks in the classroom, allowing me to closely engage with students in their learning process. But at Colegio Nacional, I acted mostly on my own initiative to assist with classwork during English classes (I found that teachers were generally unavailable to meet outside of class time, as they often taught at other schools). In many instances, I was tasked with simply observing classes and perhaps checking homework. At Educatodos, I was asked to teach part of each weekly English class, but due to frequent class cancellations, schedule changes nearly every week, and unexpected test/quiz administration, I never had the opportunity to actually give any of the lessons I had prepared. Further, by introducing myself as a volunteer teaching assistant and researcher, I often had to clarify participants' assumptions that I was conducting an analysis of school functioning or instructional quality that would result in concrete recommendations for improvement. My role as an unobtrusive researcher of sociological phenomenon thus had to be repeated frequently.

Finally, as I have discussed above, my research design continued to develop over the course of fieldwork due to a variety of challenges, as well as my methodological approach in progressively discovering a core problem during fieldwork (Heath & Cowley,

2004, p. 143). My original approach included two sets of interviews – youth currently in school and youth currently out of school, with similar numbers of youth connected to each school. However, I did not anticipate how long it would take to normalize my presence in the classroom and gain students' trust, which resulted in my decision to wait about a month or six weeks to begin interviews. At this point, I experienced unexpected delays in receiving signed parent/guardian consent forms from sometimes-forgetful students, which made it a challenge just to complete the goal of interviewing ten students from each school. School administrators, teachers, and students also had little to no suggestions for contacting students who had dropped out of their particular school, as they had generally lost touch. Further, my own mobility was limited by extremely high rates of armed robbery, sexual assault and other violent crimes in Honduras, which limited my willingness to design a project that involved tools such as going door-to-door, walking around in different neighbourhoods, or going alone to unfamiliar locations to meet acquaintances of students as part of snowball sampling. Most importantly, I encountered an unexpected number of enrolled students who had dropped out previously, leading me toward a deeper investigation of this particular phenomenon.

My focus on students who had returned to school after dropping out clearly excludes a large cohort of students who had not returned. Thus this research does not provide generalizable information about young people's experiences after dropping out, but instead explores the particular phenomenon of temporary dropout. I recognize that for many young people, dropout is not temporary, forced or strategic, and their experience of dropout is indeed to leave school permanently. Ideally, I would have also liked to interview youth who had dropped out and not returned to school. But given the time and resource constraints of research for a Master's thesis, as well as the challenges discussed above, this was not an option for me during my three months of fieldwork.

4. Ideologies of Success in Honduras

Siempre la vida de alguien quien estudie va a ser mejor que alguien que no lo hace [The life of someone who goes to school is always going to be better than someone who doesn't].
(David, 11th grade, Instituto Cristo)

To better understand students' experiences of temporarily dropping out of secondary school, it is important to first understand what education means to them, what success looks like and how to get there. Master narratives that I heard in my conversations with students provide an ingrained, familiar story of "why students drop out" or "how a person can get ahead in life" – a storyline that even students who have dropped out can fall back on to explain their own decisions. Understanding these master narratives about education, dropout and social mobility in Honduras contextualizes the experiences of students in this study. The dominant narratives that students used to discuss opportunities, disadvantages, successes and failures perpetuate a worldview and moral order, and structured how they understood their community and themselves (Gardner, 2011, p. 591). Four key concepts were frequently repeated by students in describing the value of education, imagining life success and envisioning their own social mobility: being *gente educado* (educated/respectful people), *asuperando* (overcoming), *saliendo adelante* (getting ahead) and working to *ser alguien en la vida* (becoming someone). Together, these concepts form a dominant discourse for envisioning, recognizing and achieving life success, a master narrative for getting ahead within the economic vulnerability and instability of the neoliberal state. It is within this discourse of life success that temporary dropout is given meaning.

The ideologies of success detailed below differ in important ways from the discourse of dropout in the literature. As discussed in Chapter 1, dominant constructs of dropout emphasize the finality of dropout, an individual responsibility for success or failure, and a strong distinction between "students" and "dropouts." Alternatively, students in this study tended to understand leaving or staying in school in a much larger

timeframe, as part of a path to life success, getting ahead and overcoming poverty. Focused on “overcoming,” “getting ahead” and “becoming someone” (concepts that all start from encountering barriers, having nothing, and being a nobody), recognition of the structural violence of poverty and mechanisms of social exclusion is obvious in these Honduran ideologies of success. The scholarly risk/deficiency framework, however, mistakes poverty as an individual-level phenomenon without structural or historical roots, hiding the systemic nature of oppression and the sinister reproduction of social hierarchies.

4.1. Education in Latin America: Creating Equals or Reproducing Inequality?

Schools are complex social institutions, forming part of an interconnected web of social relations between individuals, families, communities and state structures. Nationalistic ideological projects of the state are carried out in school, “building trust in institutions and the rule of law” as students learn how to become good citizens (Cárdenas, de Hoyos, & Székely, 2011, p. 3). Other ideological projects are carried out in schools as well, such as Instituto Cristo’s evangelizing mission, Colegio Nacional’s commitment to supporting teachers’ rights and the Educatodos program’s mandate to “develop” Honduras, with the power of international development agencies behind them. Social class distinctions are reinforced in schools, as students feel the power (or lack thereof) of their class status in interactions with classmates, parents, teachers and administrators. Secondary school “can operate as a process of class sifting and sorting despite the egalitarian mythologizing surrounding comprehensive education” (Reay, 2010, p. 223). Schools are sites where social capital is negotiated – not only can students perceive a variety of cues to distinguish and reinforce classmates’ social class position while in school, but they are also gathering their own social capital through education.

While student status distinguishes the young people in this study from their currently out-of-school peers, students are also distinguished from one another depending on whether they attend private school, public school or alternative school. As one teacher at Educatodos explained, parents are known to punish their kids if they’re

not behaving in regular school by sending them to the “poor kids’ school” for a while. He had also found that *“muchos estudiantes consideran este programa como la ultima opción cuando han pasado y salido de todas las escuelas de Malagueña, y vienen y piensan que van a pasar aquí por fuerza y no es cierto, si no hacen el trabajo* [a lot of students consider this program to be their last chance after they’ve started and failed at all the schools in Malagueña, and they come here and think there’s no way they won’t pass and it’s not true, if they don’t do the work].” Many students discussed public school and private school as clearly for different “kinds” of people, though the specifics of this stereotyping varied widely in my conversations with students. Elodie, a Instituto Cristo student, clarified her intentions when reflecting on how she might like to go to a different school if she could – she’d like to hang out with different kinds of people, but, *“no tan ... personas tan ... desordenadas si se puede decir eso* [not so ... people who are so ... disorderly people, if you can say that]. Later, she described public schools based on what she has heard:

En la escuela publica, se ve mas ... pierden clase seguido, entonces también no les ponen mucho interés a los alumnos, si no que hacen lo que quieren los alumnos, es un desorden las clases y todo. Que no van a clases, que hay personas que hacen un desorden, hay personas que, si quieren, fuman en el colegio o la escuela o van borrachos.

In public schools, you see more ... they miss class all the time, so also they’re not very interested in the students, and instead the students do what they want, it’s chaos in the classes and everything. Like they don’t go to classes, there are people creating all kinds of disorder, there are people who, if they want, smoke at school and go to school drunk.

A variety of Colegio Nacional public school teachers, on the other hand, often stressed to me that private school isn’t as great as everyone thinks. They explained that the teachers, often young and recently graduated with a major in a field such as math, social studies or biology will teach for six months or a year until they find a job in their field. As opposed to the required formal training in the public system (public school teachers must have a degree from the Teacher’s College), private school teachers often have no formal training in pedagogy and – according to public school teachers – lack the professionalism of Teacher’s College graduates.

Amidst these contradictory stereotypes of school choices, it is clear that not only are individual schools a site of class sifting and sorting, but the multiple school systems are as well. As a Instituto Cristo student succinctly stated, the value of a high school degree in Malagueña “*depende también de que colegio me gradue. Porque hay universidades que tampoco no van a necesitar de que me gradue así como que de Colegio María de Jesús. Es dependiendo de cada colegio* [depends on what school I graduate from. Because there are universities that aren’t going to need me to have graduated from, like, Colegio Maria de Jesus (a local public school). It depends on the high school].” The school system maintains the existing class structure and high degree of inequality in Honduras on a larger scale. Further, the unequal distribution of career track options in different schools compounds this inequality – these career tracks lead directly to specific employment opportunities.

While many scholars have pointed out these obvious flaws in the myth that education is the great equalizer of opportunity, Herr & Anderson (1997) have fought against completely demonizing schools, pointing to the positive roles that schools can play in fighting systemic exclusion of the poor and working against the reproduction of social inequality, arguing that the “equalizing view of schools is not so much overstated as insufficiently theorized” (p. 58). Schools promise individual transformation and the possibility of class mobility, as students from all financial backgrounds are moving toward the inalienable social status of a high school graduate. Practical benefits of high school graduation include a range of employment opportunities that were previously out of reach, as well as the opportunity to apply to University. Even if the actual possibilities for employment after graduation are low, just the ability to *qualify* to apply for jobs available only to graduates is significant.

Indeed, the practical value of a high school diploma after graduation is changing. Educational requirements for employment are rising across Latin America, and the value of a secondary school degree is decreasing quickly. In light of this situation, when I began this research I wondered if perspectives about the value of education in the employment market were related to drop out decisions, and if some students decided to leave school because graduating simply wasn’t going to help them get ahead in life. Many researchers have argued that the rate of returns to education is decreasing, and that students know it. But does that mean that going to school isn’t worth it? Data

presented in the *Social Panorama of Latin America* study conducted by ECLAC in 2011 has shown that “a considerable portion of the adolescent population attending school has low expectations as to the returns and opportunities that this increase in the number of years of schooling will bring later on in life” (p. 23). Similarly, Janice Perlman (2010) found that in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, “favela (slum) residents have become disillusioned with education.” In a 1969 survey, almost all of her respondents rated education as “the most important factor for a successful life,” while in a 2001 re-study, decent work with decent pay was overwhelmingly rated as the most important factor (ibid, p. 229).

Nicole and Melissa, students at Colegio Nacional and Educatodos, discussed their parents’ opinions on the fact that schooling doesn’t get results, and that maybe learning a trade is better. Nicole’s grandmother often asked her why she bothered going to school, since it wasn’t going to be worth anything – an opinion echoed by many students who knew that a high school diploma wasn’t a promise of employment or financial stability. However, nearly all students stressed the absolute importance of graduating from high school, regardless of deteriorating prospects in the job market. Melissa explained her motivation to finish high school even if her mom might have been right that it’s good for nothing:

[Las oportunidades que uno tiene con un bachillerato] digamos que no son muchas porque hoy el estudio no esta tan, que digamos ... tantos graduados. Yo tengo todo mis primos, graduados de mejores colegios, y incluso uno esta ahorita en la U y de que, esta trabajando de albañil, ayudándole al papa. Entonces en eso a veces tiene razón mi mama, dice que el estudio no sirve. Sirve mas un oficio, y es verdad. Pero igual, no sabemos el día de mañana, en el futuro, puede servir un titulo, o algo. No yo les digo [a mis padres], tan siquiera graduarme, ya el día de mañana puedo sacar mi oficio.

[The opportunities you have with a high school diploma] aren’t much because today studying isn’t so, like ... there are so many graduates. Like my cousins, graduated from the best schools, and there’s even one who’s at the U right now and for what – he’s working as a bricklayer, helping his dad. So sometimes my mom is right, she says education is good for nothing. A trade is better, and it’s true. But at the same time, we don’t know what’ll happen in the future, a diploma could be useful, or something. No, I say to my parents, I’ll just graduate at least, in the future I can learn my trade.

Though a variety of students who had experienced temporary dropout described how they became disillusioned with the value of finishing high school, as Perlman (2010)

has suggested, they described an even greater frustration with attempting to enter the job market without a high school degree (discussed in Chapter 6). For most students, frustration with employment prospects didn't mean that going to school was worthless. Students in Malagueña felt that getting a high school diploma was the bare minimum just to have a chance – an opinion especially stressed by those who had previously dropped out to get a job. There is indeed significant disillusionment with high school as the key to success, but *without* education there's not even a chance.

4.2. Achieving Social Mobility: Rising Above *La Crisis*¹⁴

Self-actualization – the project of achieving life success – is a dominant concern for young people around the world, including students in Malagueña. The key themes in students' ideologies of self-actualization include getting ahead, overcoming, and becoming someone – all relative concepts framed against what is currently missing. Leinaweaver (2008) has explored this framing of poverty as a fundamental lack in her research in Peru:

This 'economic lack' ... suggests that they experience poverty as an incompleteness. To define an impossible choice as caused by a fundamental lack is essentially to identify what is lacking, a step which is necessary before they can seek and create new possibilities for themselves and their children (p. 107).

Sixteen year-old Nicole described her experience of poverty in discussing why she was committed to going to school: "*A veces uno quiere, verdad, tener mas. Tener mas, así, que no falta nada. Pero si falta. Falta mucho* [Sometimes you want, you know, to have more. To have more, like to not lack anything. But things are lacking. A lot is lacking]". This is the starting point for an "ideology of betterment" invoked by students, which "masks a social ugliness that becomes visible when conceptualizing what it is that is being overcome" (Leinaweaver, 2008, p. 110).

¹⁴ People in Honduras frequently use the term *la crisis* [the crisis] to refer generally to the global economic crisis in 2008, the deterioration of state functioning in Honduras since the 2009 coup and the innumerable macro- and micro-level crises across Honduras as a result of these events.

Students from all three schools saw themselves following a highly individualized path to success against all odds, in contrast to a perception of Honduras as “ruined,” “deteriorated” or “in crisis.” Narratives of individual success gain further meaning when set against this perceived normality of failure, the masses who are lacking and who need help – there are few people who have gotten ahead, and many who have not been able to overcome. One Educatodos student described how education is a personal responsibility, because “*si nosotros no queremos hacer nada ... es por eso que no hay muchos que han salido adelante* [if we don’t want to do anything ... it’s because of that [attitude] that there aren’t many people who have gotten ahead].” Eduardo, another Educatodos student, felt that in Honduras, “*son raras y contadas la gente educada* [polite/educated people are few and far between].” In learning to become *educado* and becoming someone, to *superarse* [overcome] means “to acquire some traits and shed others” (Leinaweaver, 2008, p. 110).

In situating themselves as surrounded by a multitude of un-educated people who haven’t risen above their life circumstances, students imagine the possibility that they might rise above the masses, overcoming either personal economic limitations or the general deterioration of society to *ser alguien en la vida* [become someone]. Such a narrative, set against this backdrop of failure, allows young people to make sense of their life choices, opportunities, setbacks and achievements, and articulate hope for the future – if you know how to take advantage of an opportunity, you’ll find a way to get ahead. In a world of *falta de dinero* [lack of money] and needing *ayuda* [help], taking advantage of opportunities for schooling when they do arise is a common directive for young people in working class communities. In contrast, “wasting” an opportunity is a shameful act: discussing a nephew who did not lack financial support but had dropped out of school to the great frustration of his family, the young man’s aunt described the situation using this common perspective: “*No es que no tuvo oportunidad. Es que no aprovecho. Eso es diferente* [It’s not that he didn’t have the opportunity. It’s that he didn’t take advantage. That’s different].”

When discussing the decisions of poor, working-class friends or family, master narratives of success or failure articulated by both rich and poor students in Malagueña reflected a strong cultural deficit orientation. Carlos, a student at Educatodos, for example, discussed his frustration with classmates who had dropped out: “*Yo platicaba*

así con ellos que vuelvan, y no, dicen que muchas tareas, que no se que ... pero allí, que no quieren asuperar. Así es ellos [I'd talk to them, you know, tell them to come back, and no, they'd say there's a lot of homework, this and that ... but you know, it's that they don't want to overcome. That's how they are]." David, the son of an evangelical pastor receiving a full financial-need scholarship at Instituto Cristo, commented on an assumed lack of emphasis on education in lower-class families, as well as changes in the traditional family structure, as key reasons for high rates of dropout in Honduras:

Bastante lo tienen que dar los padres. Porque muchos padres, tienen ... no son personas, quizás trabajan en un oficio. No le dan de estudiar. Y no lo ponen presión y le dicen no, trabaja conmigo ... tiene que ver bastante la enseñanza en los hogares porque en Honduras no es tanto económico si no que la familia, así. Y todo eso viene ... ha salido la luz, económicamente, moralmente, en muchos áreas. En si la familia Hondureña esta bastante deteriorada, y por esto se ha visto afectada en todas las áreas del país.

[Parents have to put in a lot of the effort. Because a lot of parents have ... they're not people who, maybe they work in a trade. They don't give [their kids] schooling. And they don't put pressure on them, and they say no, work with me ... teachings in the home have a lot to do with it because in Honduras it's not so much economics, but the family, like that. And all of that contributes; the light has gone out economically, morally, in a lot of areas. As it is the family in Honduras is very deteriorated, and because of that we've seen all areas of the country affected].

High rates of international migration and punitive immigration laws in the US that severely limit migrants' mobility, far-reaching changes in the structure of Honduras' economy, and advances in women's rights and social position have profoundly changed what a "typical" Honduran family looks like. The imagined ideal of lifelong heterosexual couples living within close-knit, multi-generational families acting out traditional gender roles has clashed with the normalization of divorce, long absences of family members due to international migration, changing gender norms and a massive increase in women's employment. Master narratives, such as the "deterioration of the family" are often-repeated tropes for understanding these changes, and shape how students like David view their own families, their classmates' families, and their changing society.

4.3. Discourses of Life Success: Always Keep Moving Forward

4.3.1. *Becoming Somebody*

The notion of “becoming somebody” has been discussed by many scholars of identity formation and social mobility, including Hattam & Smyth (2003), Leinaweaver (2008), Herr & Anderson (1997) and Crivello (2011). Hattam & Smyth (2003) understand young people’s projects of becoming somebody as both establishing a sociocultural identity and striving for economic independence, creating “a sense of meaning and self-worth at an interface between their inner life and the social context in which they live” (p. 382). Much of the scholarly literature on young people’s developing identities and schooling, as detailed in Chapter 1, has focused on a tension between working-class subjectivities and schooling, producing many studies on how “students ‘become somebody’ within and against the context of schooling” (Herr & Anderson, 1997, p. 45).

In students’ visions of success in Malagueña, however, “*llegar a ser alguien en la vida* [becoming somebody in this life] and graduating from high school were tightly linked: “*Si quiere ser alguien en la vida, tiene que estudiar a fuerza* [if you want to be somebody in this life, you have no choice but to study].” Echoing many students’ comments, Crivello (2011) found that “schooling was viewed as a requirement for future well-being, owing to its role in becoming a ‘professional,’” in her research in the Peruvian Andes (p. 403). Students stressed how their goal to become somebody gave them the motivation to keep going in school, with dreams of becoming a professional, living well, doing better than their current situation or becoming more than their parents. Many also invoked their parents’ goal for them to become somebody, such as Carlos’ mother’s requirement that he pay attention in class “*para que sea alguien así en el mañana* [so I can be somebody in the future].” Marine’s parents inspired her to continue with schooling, with her and her sisters’ futures in mind: “*así que seamos alguien en esta vida, que seamos mas que ellos ... por ellos que lo hago* [so that this way we can become someone in this life, we can be more than they are ... I am doing this for them].” Some students spoke of becoming somebody and graduating interchangeably, often with some variation of the phrase “I want to graduate, you know, I want to become

someone.” Maria, for example, discussed her decision to work full-time and go to school on the weekends: “*Si, es un poco difícil, va, pero pienso que vale la pena, esforzarse para llegar a ser alguien.* [Yeah, it’s kind of hard, you know, but I think it’s worth it, putting in the effort to be able to be somebody].”

4.3.2. Being “Gente Educada”

The term *gente educada* has always caught my attention as a non-native Spanish-speaker. The term is used in a variety of contexts, with subtle changes in meaning that may simply imply politeness, or may imply social class status and respectability. *Gente educada*, literally translated to English, means “educated people,” but the term *educada* involves being respectful or polite, implying moral education or manners. Valenzuela (1999) has described *educación* as “a foundational cultural construct that provides instructions on how one should live in the world. With its emphasis on respect, responsibility and sociality, it provides a benchmark against by which all humans are to be judged, formally educated or not” (p. 21). The way in which students flesh out the meaning of this cultural construct allows for a better understanding for what it means to be a respectable, successful person. Their descriptions of what it means to be *educado* speak to the importance of performing your class position through educational status, through both manners and displays of formal knowledge. Schooling is generally “seen to afford a certain ‘distinction’ or status to a person,” and one’s *educación* is an articulation of social class positioning gained through schooling and moral education (Crivello, 2011, p. 404; Leinaweaver, 2008). *Educación* is learned and performed in the social world, a key behavioral marker of “becoming somebody.”

Though the term may be applied to a polite person without concern for their educational status, there is a strong relationship between educational attainment, social status and being *gente educada*. A senior official of alternative secondary programs in Malagueña used the term to indicate class superiority in discussing educational outcomes. He explained to me how people who are more *educado*, “*con diferente cultura* [with a different culture],” send their kids to school so they’re able to find work, while others (non-*educado* people) “*malacostumbran sus hijos a ser haragán y improductivo* [get their kids used to being lazy and unproductive].” The Instituto Cristo youth pastor’s admonishment to high school students after a crude sexual drawing was

found in the bathroom provides another example of how this term can imply social status in perceptions of manners and respectability: clearly distraught by this anonymous transgression, the pastor reprimanded the students with a reminder that, “*Somos Instituto Cristo, estas cosas pasan en Colegio María de Jesús, estas no son cosas de aquí del tipo de personas que son! Estas actividades vulgares no son para ustedes de la clase de familia que son, de gente educada que son!* [We are Instituto Cristo, these things happen at Colegio Maria de Jesus (local public school), but these aren’t things for here, for the kind of people you are! These vulgar activities are not for you, from the class of families you are from, the respectable people that you are!]”

The way that you speak, dress and present yourself is a strong indicator of being *educado*, proving that you’re not “on a bad path” through learned behaviors and respectability. Maria, an Educatodos student, explained that *gente educado* are those who, “*le tratan bien a uno. O sea, con la forma de hablar pues, de expresarse a uno* [treat you well. Like, with the way they talk, the way they express themselves to you].” Alex, a wealthy student from Instituto Cristo, gave a similar description of “*ser alguien que tenga su forma de hablar, no, no, como decir una persona que no puede decir una palabra sin decir una mala palabra, y la forma de hablar de uno también* [being someone who has a way of speaking, who doesn’t ... like, not like a person who can’t say anything without saying a bad word, and the way that you speak as well].” Though both of their answers hinge on speech, Alex (a wealthy student educated in private schools) focuses on proper speech and avoiding cursing, while Maria (a poor student who faced bullying from students and teachers for her unkempt appearance in primary school) focuses on treating others with respect. Paola, an adult student at Educatodos, captured the multifaceted meaning of *educación* in connection with speaking politely and formal education:

No solamente en cuanto a las palabras que salgan de su boca – esto es parte de la educación – pero una persona educada también es una persona, verdad, que tiene bastantes conocimientos. Las dos cosas.

Not only the words that come out of your mouth – that’s part of *educación* – but a *persona educada* is also a person, you know, who has a lot of knowledge. Both things.

Melissa, an Educatodos student from a nearby rural town, discussed how the poor are systematically excluded from employment opportunities through visible cues indicating job readiness and professional social status:

Si viene una persona, digamos, de recursos bajos, ya esa persona lo ven de menos solo por tal vez, se graduó en un colegio mas chasta como dicen, Pero ya miren esta persona, lo miren bien cambiado, bien vestida, ahhh ... esta persona es lo que dejan. Y tal vez la otra persona tiene mejores conocimientos.

If a person comes along, let's say, of low resources, now they're going to see that person as less just because maybe, they graduated from a lousy, like they say, high school. But then they see that other person, they see them all fixed up¹⁵, well dressed, ahhh ... that's the one they choose. And maybe the other person [of low resources] has more knowledge.

Melissa's description of this unfair labor market hinges on the importance of appearance, clothing and subtle behavioral cues to indicate *educación*, the kind of professional an employer can feel comfortable hiring. Most students echoed these sentiments, stressing that people who are *educado* know how to behave themselves, how to present themselves appropriately and act in the correct way – as Elodie said at Instituto Cristo, “*todo depende de uno mismo* [it all depends on you].”

On the path to becoming *gente educado*, students are actively reinforcing correct and incorrect behavior, learning how to perform their educational status. Carlos, the son of a coffee farmer, illuminated how *educación* is a learned behavior: “[*ser educado significa*] que esta bien corregido pues ... venimos a la escuela para aprender sobre eso también, aquí hay mucho sobre eso, la educación [that you're real corrected, you know ... we come to school to learn about that too, here there's a lot about that, *educación*].” Correction means that you've started out wrong, and ways of being without *educación* need to be fixed. Learning to 'correct' your speech and behavior has practical benefits in the job market, as Julie described:

Bueno, por ejemplo, el ser una gente educada, en la forma de conversar, hiendo a un trabajo y ver a una entrevista con el, por

¹⁵ The literal translation of the word Melissa used here is “changed,” describing the visible transformation from poverty to professional.

ejemplo con el gerente como de una empresa o una oficina, uno tiene que ver el comportamiento hasta de hablar, de hacer las mímicas ... entonces eso sería una buena [educación] ... el respeto en el vocabulario. Tener un buen ... léxico. Entonces, eso, también va, y el respeto mas que todo.

Well, for example, being a *gente educada*, in the way that you speak, going to a job and going to an interview with, like for example with the boss of a company or an office, you have to look at behavior even with the way you talk, the way you gesture ... so that would be a good [educación] ... having respect with your vocabulary. Having a good ... lexicon. So, that too, right, and respect more than anything else.

In Julie's explanation, the key to *educación* is respect for others. Respecting others generally implies a regard for a person's intrinsic worth or an admiration of certain qualities in a person; however, such feelings must be communicated in a way that others can perceive. Here, proper vocabulary and manner of speaking are key indicators, implying that in order to treat another person well you must behave properly in their presence. But schooling is necessary to develop both "a good lexicon" and be able to have "respect with your vocabulary," and thus a certain educational status is necessary to be able to show this kind of respect. Julie's classmate at Colegio Nacional, Kevin, gave a similar explanation related to employment prospectus:

Pues aquí la gente educada es bien vista. Porque así en los trabajos, les miren bien formal uno, bien educado, ya tiene una oportunidad ya. Que le den trabajo. Mucho que ver. Tiene importancia ser educado.

Well here *gente educada* are well thought of. Because like at jobs, if they see you're real formal, real *educado*, then you've already got the opportunity. That they'll give you a job. It has a lot to do with it. It's important to be *educado*.

How does a person learn to be *educado*? Adriana, at Colegio Nacional, explained that the term refers to someone "*que haiga estado en escuela, y la educación que les da los padres también, y los maestros* [who has been in school, and the education that your parents give you, too, and the teachers]." Cindy, from Educatodos, applied the concept to herself immediately: "*Ay a mi me gusta ser gente educada. No lo niego. Porque a cualquiera le gustaría ser gente educado. Mi familia eso me ha enseñado, ser educada.* [Oh I like to be *gente educada*. I won't deny it. Because anyone would like to be *gente educado*. My family has shown me that, to be *educada*]."

Aurelie, a 9th grader at Instituto Cristo (where moral education is a top priority), explained how one acquires *educación*, a latent capability that must be developed in a person:

O tal vez ... sale de el, sale de esa persona, o sea sale no que alguien le esta diciendo, "anda, mira, recógele esto, que se le cayo, anda compra ... así, por favor" si no que ya es algo que una persona lo trae. Y también lo puede adquirir por medio que siendo, o sea, cumpliendo esos valores que nos enseñan que no haga esto, sea cortes, sea aquí, así. Entonces, puede que una persona va a aprender a ser educado o muchas personas ya lo traen y tal vez a veces no lo sacan.

Or maybe, it comes naturally, comes naturally from that person, I mean [*educación*] comes out not because someone's telling you, like "Hey, go pick that up, they dropped something, go grab it, go buy ... you know, like, please" but that you already have that [reaction] within you. And you can acquire it through being, well, following through with the values that they teach us like don't do this, be polite, do that, you know. So it could be that a person is going to learn to be *educado*, or a lot of people have it in them and maybe sometimes no one ever gets it out of them.

Schooling allows you to become *educado*, both by gaining knowledge and becoming cultured, learning how to behave. Students from all three schools described this term as closely connected to accessing employment and proving yourself as a respectable, cultured person. The implicit connection between moral values, social status and education is perpetuated through judgments of *educación*: appearing as a polite professional (being "corrected") and learning from textbooks (gaining knowledge). This discourse contributes to a larger moralization of poverty, exemplified by the school official's implicit reference to social class in discussing people who don't let their kids get used to being lazy and unproductive – those with a different culture, people with *educación*. Further, Elodie's statement that "it all depends on you" shows how *educación* functions in the highly individualized quest to become someone, which starts with personal displays of a particular set of "correct" behaviors.

4.3.3. Getting Ahead and Overcoming

In the discourse of overcoming, many students expressed visions of their own success as against all odds or against the norm: "*superarse* becomes meaningful ... when set against the background of *falta de economía* [economic lack]" (Leinaweaver, 2008, p. 110). Some students from poorer families focused on their lack of money as

the limitation to overcome, and spoke of needing or lacking help. Many students who didn't express dire financial insecurity repeated a different, less tangible limitation to overcome –a general narrative of the deterioration of society, the same discourse heavily stressed by the teachers who pushed young people to “fight for their generation” at Instituto Cristo. Young people who rejected school were also rejecting the opportunity to overcome and move forward. In contrast, overcoming the current limitations was a strong motivator for students like Eduardo, who explained why he was in school: “*Porque me quiero mejorar pues. Quiero superarme pues, en varias formas.* [Because I want to better myself, I guess. I want to overcome/get ahead, I guess, in a lot of ways].” Fanny's parents, for example, had migrated to Spain to work, which provided her with the inspiration to stay in school: “*[Mis padres] se están esforzando mucho, tuvieron que irse de aquí para que nosotros pudiéramos superarnos en el estudio* [My parents are putting in so much effort, they had to leave here so that we could overcome/get ahead through our studies].”

Getting ahead, or “making it” (*saliendo adelante*) was the most commonly articulated goal for the future in my conversations with students, and a mandate to keep going/moving forward (*seguir adelante*) was frequently invoked as the way to get there. There is a subtle difference between the terms *saliendo adelante* and *seguir adelante* – the former implies having reached a certain level of success, having ‘made it’ in life; the latter refers to the continual process of moving forward and getting ahead. Yessenia's description of what it would feel like to graduate uses both of these terms:

El valor es que uno se siente orgulloso, va, porque ha salido adelante, uno contento allí ... bueno tiene mucho valor, graduarse. Hay que seguir siempre adelante, no tirarse para atrás ... para que uno salga adelante, ya que los papas a uno le están dando el apoyo para que uno estudie, hay que saberlo aprovechar

The value [of a high school degree] is that you feel proud, you know, because you've gotten ahead, you're there, feeling good ... I mean, it has a lot of value, to graduate. You have to always keep moving forward, never backwards ... so that you can get ahead, since your parents are giving you the support to study, you have to know how to take advantage of that.

The goal of “making it” (*saliendo adelante*) gave students the determination, effort and motivation to keep going, such as Melissa's answer when I asked if she saw

dropping out as a possibility in her life: “*No, porque ya comencé, tengo que terminar y echarle ganas. Aunque es duro pero tengo que echarle ganas porque lo que quiero es graduarme y salir adelante* [No, because I already started, I have to finish and give it all I’ve got. Even though it’s hard but I have to give it my all because what I want is to graduate and get ahead].” Many students also mentioned parents’ sacrifices and support as providing the impetus to keep going (*seguir adelante*) in school, inspiring them to work hard in school and take advantage of this support. An ideology of moving forward allowed many students to see themselves as overcoming limitations, or to look optimistically toward the future even if job prospects were dim: “*Usted tiene que pensar siempre en el futuro y no mirar para atrás. Seguir siempre para adelante* [You have to always think about the future and never look back. Always keep going forward].”

In Honduran students’ narratives of self-actualization, it becomes clear that success is a highly individual responsibility, and the school setting is where many young people can distinguish themselves. Though the value of a high school degree in the labor market is changing, it still holds a promise of opportunity for many students and remains a highly valued achievement. Students’ journeys through schooling are motivated by ideas of becoming *gente educada*, of *asuperando*, of *saliendo adelante* and of becoming someone (*ser alguien en la vida*), part of a personal project of life success that is larger than school. Further, a students’ individual success is often tightly linked to family wellbeing in the future, which “makes the concept so poignant and meaningful for youth who come to realize that their own potential is often the only possibility through which their entire family can *superarse* [overcome/get ahead]” (Leinaweaver, 2008, p. 129). Students’ description of their individual responsibility to take advantage of opportunities and get ahead in life differs in important ways from the scholarly framework of individual risk/deficiency. While the risk/deficiency framework locates what is lacking for school success at an individual level, the personal responsibility students identify is centered on the necessity of effort and dedication to personally overcome socio-structural barriers to success. Within this world of high-stakes achievements and ideologies of success, I will now explore in detail the experiences of temporary dropout reported by ten young people in this study.

5. Sacrifice, Waiting and Strategic Temporary Dropout

Me dolió porque mi sueño era terminar. Porque este año estuviera ya mas bien en segundo de carrera, ya el otro año estuviera graduándome. Pero cuando no se puede, no se puede. Hay que entender [It hurt because my dream was to finish. Because this year I would've been already in 11th grade, the next year I'd be graduating. But when there's no way, there's no way¹⁶. You have to understand].
(Melissa, 8th grade, Educatodos)

As discussed in the previous chapter, discourses of life success and opportunity make clear the profound vulnerability of daily life in contemporary Honduras. Having the opportunity to go to school but deciding to leave is often discussed disparagingly, as wasting a chance that you might never have again. However, certain reasons for leaving and returning to school hold more cultural validity than others, such as the distinction between “waiting” to continue school because of family poverty and deciding to leave school though the financial resources exist to continue. The temporary dropout experience that I will call “strategic temporary dropout,” in which students purposefully wait to complete schooling while their families stabilize financially, is part of a longer-term family project of social mobility and educational achievement. Of the three loose categories of dropout I encountered in this study, the only students who spoke of intentional or planned experiences of leaving school were these family-centric stories of strategic temporary dropout. These students who had dropped out strategically, knowing they would start again a few years later, made a strong distinction between themselves and classmates who they had seen drop out by “choice.”

¹⁶ Melissa's phrasing here literally translates to “when one can't, one can't.” She avoids placing blame on anyone for her dropout with this phrasing, pointing to a generally impossible situation as opposed to any fault of her own, her teachers, or her parents.

The social structures that create urban poverty are a reflection of state organization, and scholars who analyze experiences of poverty have revised many earlier theories that described poverty in the strong, centralized states of decades past (Gonzalez de la Rocha et al., 2004, p. 186). Classic marginality theory, which described the experience of urban poverty as one of living in an economically and culturally marginalized world, cut-off from the “mainstream” structures of society entirely, has been largely discredited. Current theories of social exclusion describe how the urban poor are just as integrated into the larger social and economic system as anyone else, but they are systematically excluded from opportunities for financial success and social mobility.

As I will discuss in telling Yessenia’s story below, students often have to choose career tracks in high school – which translate directly into prospects for employment – solely based on the costs associated with the various options (for example, the teaching career track involves numerous projects and presentations, creating a significant extra expense for materials). Giving up on a preferred or economically-viable career track to choose the cheapest option is an everyday example of exclusion from opportunities for a better life – this is the true “marginalization,” a series of social structures of exclusion from the opportunities for success available to those who have the time and money (Gonzalez de la Rocha et al., 2004, p. 184). Strategic decisions of temporary dropout allow families to deal as best as possible with structural social exclusion and profound economic vulnerability, though this strategy doesn’t put them on equal footing with those who have a financial advantage – their child won’t graduate with a degree that ensures gainful employment, but at least they will graduate from high school.

An insistence on dropout as permanent in the dominant discourse – as well as conflating all experiences of leaving school under the umbrella of “dropout” – devalues family strategies to overcome poverty through education, which may be a slow, halting path to graduation. Family strategies such as strategically pulling a younger sibling out of school temporarily to allow older siblings to finish in perhaps higher-quality schools (before beginning the younger sibling’s education again) provide a counterstory to the “risky youth” master narrative, highlighting the community cultural wealth that Yosso (2006) demands be recognized. The very experience of living in poverty is so fundamentally unstable that many life events can disrupt formal schooling temporarily in a way that differs dramatically from dropping out, and the need for such strategizing

points to poverty – and the social hierarchies of opportunity that perpetuate social exclusion – as the root cause of these experiences moving in and out of school. A focus on structural constraints moves away from blaming individuals, pointing policy responses toward systemic oppression and social exclusion as opposed to individual-level interventions.

In this chapter, I will explore the stories Julie (Colegio Nacional), Melissa (Educatodos) and Yessenia (Colegio Nacional)¹⁷ told of leaving and returning to school to provide insight into the experiences and circumstances of strategic temporary dropout. The chapter begins with an introduction to the context in which each student left school, followed by an exploration of the main themes that arose in interviews with these students: family responsibilities, sacrifices, lack of control over barriers to education, expectations of academic achievement and motivation to *salir adelante*. I will show how dominant constructs of understanding dropout devalue and invisibilize the experience of strategic temporary dropout, insisting on categorizing young people as either “students” or “dropouts” and viewing leaving school as a permanent decision. In contrast, students’ own narratives of strategic temporary dropout make clear that their decision to leave school temporarily was based on their long-term commitment to education and family prosperity.

5.1. Stories of Strategic Temporary Dropout

5.1.1. Melissa (16 years old)

After finishing primary school and her first year of secondary school at Colegio Nacional, Melissa had chosen instead to go to Educatodos after spending three years out of school. After finishing 7th grade, she explained how she left school: “... *de allí, no, perdí tres años. No estude tres años por la situación económico* [from there, no, I

¹⁷ As mentioned in the introduction, none of the students from Instituto Cristo shared stories of temporary dropout. Economic inequality in Honduras is reflected in educational inequality, where private school students are by default wealthier (with the exception of scholarship students). A wealthier family dealing with financial difficulties can move their student to public school or to alternative school, and thus the experience of dropping out for financial reasons is extremely uncommon among private school students.

missed three years. I didn't study for three years because of the economic situation].” She elaborated on the family circumstances that caused her to miss those three years:

[Mis padres] no podían porque mi otro hermano tenían gastos de escuela, como los dos estaban en escuela, tenían gastos, y en el colegio público se gasta mas que este colegio así a distancia. Y entonces no podían estar ... gastando mucho. [Me pedían] que los comprendiera, porque no era porque ellos no querían, si no que ... falta de recursos económicos. Entonces, yo tuve que entender, no podía obligarlos tampoco.

[My parents] couldn't do it because my other brother had school expenses, since we were both in school, they had a lot of expenses, and in public school you spend a lot more than at this distance school. So they couldn't be ... spending so much. [They asked me] to understand, that it wasn't because they didn't want to, but because of ... a lack of economic resources. So, I had to understand, it's not like I can obligate them.

At 16 years old, Melissa had started 8th grade at Educatodos and was happy with the distance-learning system, which allowed her to help out at home and do her homework on the weekdays. Her brother had finished primary school during the years she was out of school, but he had then decided to study a trade at the *Escuela Taller* (Trade School), which offers certification in bricklaying, cabinetry, welding, gastronomy and other areas. Things were still difficult for her family financially – Melissa and her mom had started selling tortillas out of the house, because they often couldn't make ends meet with the money her father made in contract construction jobs: “Y no me da pena [vender tortillas] porque es un trabajo honrado, peor que una vaya a robar o has a ver que hacer no mas [And I'm not embarrassed to sell tortillas because it's honorable work, it's worse to go steal or stand around wondering what to do].”

5.1.2. Julie (19 years old)

Julie, a 10th grader at the public Colegio Nacional, had also waited to start secondary school after finishing primary school, spending two years at home in a town on the border of Comayagua. With 8 older siblings and 3 younger siblings, Julie's family had to strategize to support all of their kids in finishing high school:

Julie: *Bueno en ese tiempo yo pase en la casa con mi mama, ayudándole y todo ... Después de que saque sexto grado, yo no seguí. No seguí dos años. Entonces ellos tomaron la*

decisión – dijeron espérate estos dos años, y después si. Entonces ... ya graduadas la mayores, entonces ellos están ayudando a nosotros.

ES¹⁸: *Entonces siempre sabia que iba a entrar de nuevo?*

Julie: *Si, siempre, si.*

ES: *Se sentía presionada durante este tiempo?*

Julie: *No ... yo ... tome las cosas, bueno dije yo, algún día voy a poder entrar el colegio y dije yo, es mejor porque si nos poníamos todos de un solo a querer estudiar entonces unos van a tener dificultades y mis papas no van a poder entonces, pero no, tome con paciencia las cosas y ahora estoy mejor porque ya ve ... en la noche, mis hermanos, soy mayor de edad y yo he deseado trabajar y digo yo, poderles ayudar y poder ... pero ellos no quieren. Y tengo 19 años y ellos dicen que hasta que me gradué voy a estar en la tarde [risa]. Entonces ese es la ... entonces ahora estoy logrando más mas bien yo.*

Julie: During that time I stayed at home with my mom, helping her and everything ... after I did sixth grade, I didn't continue. I didn't continue for two years. [My parents] decided, they said wait these two years, and after that, yes. So ... after the older ones graduated, now they're helping us.

ES: Did you always know that you'd go back to school?

Julie: Yes, always.

ES: Did you feel a lot of pressure during this time?

Julie: No ... I took on the situation, I mean I said, someday I'm going to be able to go to high school and I said to myself, it's better because if we're all in school at one time some of us are going to have difficulties and my parents aren't going to be able to do it so no ... I was patient with the situation and now it's better because I mean, my brothers – I'm an adult and I've wanted to work, I've said I want to help, but they don't want me to. And I'm 19 years old and they say that

¹⁸ I use "ES" to identify myself in these conversations.

I'm going to be in the afternoon classes until I graduate [laughs]!¹⁹ So really now I'm ... now I'm achieving more.

Julie stressed during our interview that she was highly dedicated to doing well in school, lamenting the disruptions she had to deal with when her classmates interrupted the class or distracted other students. Her parents had rented a place to stay in the city of Comayagua, separating the family as her father and brothers stayed back to work on their coffee plantation in order for the remaining younger children to finish school. She was beginning her last three years of secondary school, which her English teacher saw as assurance that she'd graduate: "When they get to this level (10th grade), they almost always finish – it's generally during *ciclo comun* (7th-9th grade) that they drop out."

5.1.3. Yessenia (17 years old)

Yessenia's story of her transition from primary to lower secondary school exemplifies leaving school strategically. When I asked if she had ever dropped out of school, she immediately said no. Later, she went on to explain what happened when she was thirteen:

Cuando salí de escuela primaria, yo le decía a mi mama "Mami, yo quiero entrar al colegio." Y me decía que no, me decía que "Yo de donde te voy a dar dinero?" ... le digo yo "Mami pero es que yo quiero entrar," le digo. "Bueno el otro año," me dice. "Vaya pues!" le digo yo, y así fue. Después de que salí de sexto grado, perdí un año. No entre al colegio. Hasta el siguiente año entre al colegio.

When I got out of elementary school, I would say to my mom, "Mami, I want to go to high school." And she would say no, she would say, "Where am I going to find money to give you?" and I would say, "Mami but I want to go!" "Well, next year," she said. "Ok then!" I said, and that's how it went. After I finished sixth grade, I missed a year. I didn't go to high school. It wasn't until the next year that I went to high school.

I asked if she felt a lot of pressure during the year she wasn't in school:

¹⁹ Julie's laughter signified her awareness as a 19 year-old that she could have been going to night school and working during the day, as afternoon classes are not the typical adult choice for secondary school. Her brothers' insistence that she stay in the afternoon section and focus on her studies was both endearing and frustrating, given her desire to work and help her family.

Yessenia: Si. Si porque este año no tuve la oportunidad de entrar al colegio, si no que hasta el otro año.

ES: Siempre estaba pensando en entrar?

Yessenia: Siempre. Si, siempre.

Yessenia: Yes. Yes, because that year I didn't have the opportunity to start high school, not until the next year.

ES: Were you always thinking about starting high school?

Yessenia: Always. Yes, always.

Yessenia never described this experience of not enrolling in school without mentioning that she did go the next year. Instead of affirming that she dropped out, she explains circumstances that made her miss a year before starting high school. Conversations such as this one during my interviews were so common (especially the initial answer of "no," followed by an explanation) that I felt the need to modify my original questionnaire, changing the question "Have you ever dropped out of school?" to "Have you ever missed any years of school?"

Yessenia had indeed started 7th grade a year later in her small town, though during these lower secondary years she had walked two hours each way to school and her grades had dropped: "*Seria porque caminaba bastante me olvidaba en lo que iba en el camino, o no se ... estaba cansada* [Maybe it was because I walked so much I forgot what I had learned on the way, or I don't know ... I was tired]." When we spoke, Yessenia was in 10th grade at Colegio Nacional, and was living with her uncle in Malagueña, who is supporting her financially. She had dreamed of enrolling at a different school for a teacher training degree, but her mom said no – she had heard it was an expensive degree, since students have to buy their own materials for the many projects, lesson plans and teaching activities they are required to develop. Coming from a single-mother family had limited Yessenia's choices: "*Mi mama es madre soltera ... no tenia ayuda. No tiene quien le de, va, para ayudarla. Mi tío le dijo a mami que si me puso aquí en este colegio, el mi iba a ayudar. Entonces por eso entre aquí.* [My mom's a single mother ... she didn't have help. She doesn't have anyone to give her, you know, to help her. My uncle told my mom that if she put me here at this high school, he'd help me. So that's why I started here]." Things have been going well, except for the fact that Yessenia was failing four classes in the current quarter, and was feeling the pressure – if she had more than two failed classes at the end of the quarter, she would

be automatically expelled until the next year. Even if she failed one class, she'd have to pay 400 lempiras (approximately \$20 CAD) to continue onto the next quarter.

5.2. Key Themes of Strategic Temporary Dropout

5.2.1. *Family Responsibilities and Sacrifices*

Yessenia, Julie and Melissa emphasized their responsibilities to their families in their narratives, including daily responsibilities such as cleaning, cooking and helping at home, responsibilities to their siblings as part of a family strategy for success, and lifelong family responsibilities such as caring for parents in the future. Each of their families had conceptualized the goal of enrolling them in school until graduation as a collective, family responsibility, where the first step is gaining the opportunity just to enroll in school. While they had experienced setbacks in reaching this goal, it was clear to these three girls that their parents were giving everything for them to finish their education.

Julie's description of her family exemplifies the close relationship between stories of strategic temporary dropout and a dedication to collective family success in the future, illustrating how temporary dropout can be a strategic decision to work toward a larger goal. With twelve siblings and her parents, Julie described her family as a tightly connected network of sacrifice, support and responsibility. As a middle sibling, she had sacrificed two years of schooling to allow her older siblings to graduate, but now received financial and moral support from her parents and older siblings while she finished school. She had also sacrificed the quality of her schooling (going to cheaper public school) so that her younger siblings could go to private school. Julie explained how she had provided moral and academic support to these siblings during their schooling; similar to the support she had then received from her older siblings.

Her description of her time out of school reflected the security of living within this network of sacrifice and support, as she described approaching her strategic temporary dropout decision with patience and being able to achieve more in high school at an older age. All three students noted how their parents' hard work and sacrifices laid the foundation for their own sacrifices, which in turn shaped their motivation to reach their

goals. Julie articulated her personal goals and family goals as one in the same: “*Mis padres han dado toda la vida por nosotros ... entonces mi anhelo es poder graduarme, y sacar mi nivel, o sea, poder ayudarles a ellos y darles una vida mejor en su vejez* [My parents have given their whole lives for us, so my inspiration is to be able to graduate and reach a higher level, you know, be able to help my parents and give them a better life in their old age].” The social mobility that Julie, Yessenia and Melissa could access through graduation allowed them the possibility to move their family collectively to this “higher level,” which was both a collective goal and a personal responsibility owed for the family sacrifices that had been made for them.

5.2.2. *Expectations of Academic Achievement and Motivation to “Salir Adelante”*

While the goal of going to school was a collective, family responsibility for Julie, Yessenia and Melissa, succeeding in school was a highly individual responsibility. Melissa knew her parents felt a strong responsibility to send her to school, explaining that their goals for her were to “*sacarme adelante y darme todo lo que puedan por mientras ellos están vivos, esto es lo que dicen. Que aprovechan ahorita, porque el día de mañana ellos no saben, y el único que me pueden dejar es el estudio* [help me get ahead and give me what they can while they’re alive, that’s what they say. Take advantage now, because tomorrow who knows, and the only thing they can leave me is education].” She knew she had to match her parent’s dedication with a commitment to her studies and academic success:

No [dejaría mis estudios] porque ya comencé, tengo que terminar y echarle ganas ... mis papas me apoyan, siempre y cuando me dicen que me pongo las pilas y no me quede. Porque si me quede, de nada sirve estar repitiendo años y estar pagando ellos, invirtiendo dinero en vano. Tal que me ponga las pilas, como dicen ellos, y salga adelante.

[I wouldn’t drop out] because I’ve already started, I have to finish and give it all I’ve got ... my parents support me, but if and only if I study hard and don’t fail. Because if I fail, it’s not worth it to be repeating years and have them pay, investing money in vain. As long as I give it all I’ve got, like they say, and get ahead.

Julie felt a similar responsibility to her parents, who were giving “everything” for her to study, even making her food and cleaning for her when she has to do homework.

She knew that if she dropped out, *“la reacción que tuvieran ellos seria fuerte. Porque es lo que mas quieren, que uno se gradué. Y que vaya bien en el colegio [they’d have a strong reaction. Because this is what they want more than anything, that we graduate. And to do well in school].”* Failing or leaving school would be a complete disregard to everything her parents had done for her, and she explained how she actively chooses not to focus on things that discourage her, like difficulty understanding homework, classes she doesn’t like, or a teacher’s behavior, emphasizing that *“uno no debe de dejarse guiar por los pensamientos, no debe de dejarse llevar por esas ideas [you can’t let yourself be guided by those thoughts, you can’t let yourself be lead by those ideas].”* Within the web of sacrifices and support of Julie’s twelve siblings and parents, finishing school successfully was her contribution and reward for the support she’s received and the sacrifices she’s endured.

Yessenia’s mom gave her emotional support as she dealt with living far away from home and academic challenges in school, helping her focus on the goal of graduating. She mentioned fighting the same discouraging feelings that Julie tried to disregard:

Es bueno estar en este colegio aquí, porque si le enseñan bastante a uno. Bastante. Y ... a veces uno no entiendo porque se pone a preocupar, se pone a pensar muchas cosas y por eso no ... uno se aplaza. A veces me pega una tristeza , me pegan ganas de llorar y lloro y hasta llamo a mami ... le digo que me voy salir, me dice que siga. [Si saliera del colegio] se sentiría mal.

It’s good to be here at this school, because they really teach you a lot. A lot. And ... sometimes you don’t understand because you get worried, you start to think all sorts of things and because of that, you don’t ... you delay yourself. Sometimes I get so sad, I want to cry and I cry and I even call my mom ... I tell her I’m going to leave, she tells me to keep going. [If I left school] she’d be upset.

But when I asked Yessenia directly if she saw dropping out of school as a possibility in her life, she said no – her goal was to graduate and *salir adelante* [get ahead]. If she failed too many subjects, she’d wait and start again next year, but she wouldn’t drop out, situating “waiting” and “dropping out” as very different decisions: *“Bueno yo digo que el estudio no lo dejo. No. [Well I would say I’m not gonna leave my studies. No].”* Yessenia conceptualized herself as someone dedicated to her studies – even if she was forced to wait a year between grades – pointing to a serious

mischaracterization of youth in the dropout literature that categorizes young people as either “students” or “dropouts.”

All three girls had various friends or classmates who had dropped out. Yessenia had friends who left school because “*se acompañaron, se casaron ... y otros porque no quisieron seguir, no le hallaban entrada* [they coupled up, got married ... and others who didn’t want to continue, they couldn’t get a handle on school].” Julie was frustrated with her classmates whom she had seen leave school, making a strong distinction between “choosing” to leave and needing to leave, as in her experience. She found it impossible to understand why these classmates would decide to leave while having the means to continue:

Ahorita tuve dos – tres – compañeras que ya se fueron, porque iban a llevar retrasadas, se habían quedado. Y otras que, bueno, se han salido de colegio. Ahorita tengo una amiga, ella se salió de colegio y se caso. Entonces estas experiencias que yo digo, pucha, y de edad menor que mi! Ella solo tiene 16 años y digo yo, porque hizo eso? Entonces ya ves ... ella estaba en un privado, y ella ... digo yo, no se porque ellas hacen eso. Yo digo que seria una idea absurda, sinceramente, porque si yo tengo una idea de queirme a graduar? Seria ... feo dejar [los estudios].

Just now I had two – three – classmates that already left, because they had failed classes, they’d stayed behind. And there are others who, well, they’ve left school. Just now I have a friend, she left school and got married. So these experiences, it’s like, god, they are younger than me! She’s only 16 years old, and I’m thinking, why did she do that? So, you can see ... she was in a private school, and she ... I keep thinking, I don’t know why these girls do things like that. I think it would be absurd, honestly, because if I have the goal of getting to graduation? It would be awful to leave my studies.

Melissa had seen how the value of education was decreasing – she described how her aunt had just graduated, and she’s now she’s just another “*ama de casa con dos hijos y el titulo allí guindado* [housewife with two kids and her diploma hanging on the wall].” Melissa’s use of the common phrase describing a diploma just “hanging on the wall” implies both the lack of employment opportunities for high school graduates, as well as a strong judgment that a high school graduate ought to “use” their degree. She mentioned three friends who had dropped out recently, two who had to work and one who said she left because “*la educación dicen que no sirve ... pero ellos, es que no entienden* [education, they say, isn’t worth anything ... but those people, it’s that they

don't understand].” Regardless, Melissa was dedicated to graduating in spite of low job prospects, because “*igual, no sabemos el día de mañana, en el futuro, puede servir un título, o algo* [no matter what, we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, in the future, maybe a diploma will be useful, or something].” Reflecting on the numerous limitations she had already overcome and would have to continue confronting, Yessenia was similarly determined to get ahead: “*A veces me desanimaba, pero como mi idea es salir adelante, siempre allí voy aunque sea baja, pero allí voy* [Sometimes I got discouraged, but my idea is to get ahead. I'm still going even if it's with low [grades], but I'm still going.”

5.2.3. Lack of Control Over Barriers to Education

The conversation I had with Yessenia had a tired, exhausted feeling that spoke to her experience of poverty as one of unmet needs and personal sacrifices. She had dealt with leaving home to go to school, not having anyone to help her with materials she doesn't understand and compromising on her dream to go to a teacher training program. She expressed her feelings of powerlessness by consistently emphasizing her mother's lack of *ayuda* (help), explaining that as a single mother she doesn't have a house or anyone to help her. Yessenia also often thought about how she doesn't have a father to give her the help that she needs. Though she was living with her uncle (who was paying her schooling costs), Yessenia still felt an acute sense of powerlessness and lack of help.

In these stories of strategic temporary dropout, the decision to temporarily leave school was often just one of a number of limitations to be overcome in order to get ahead. Julie, for example, noted strategies for getting around financial, academic, personal and school environment limitations in order to reach her goal of graduating, such as renting a house with her mother and sisters to be closer to her school (though it separated the family) and guiding herself away from her own discouraging thoughts. Overcoming certain limitations, however, was out of her control, such as the possibility of academic failure because of poor quality in teaching. In each of these three stories, students expressed a precarious balance between a general lack of control over these barriers to success, and a faith in their continued strategies to get around these limitations.

Though Julie, Yessenia and Melissa felt their success in school was a very personal responsibility and focused on “guiding themselves away” from getting discouraged, they each observed serious problems with school quality. These deficiencies certainly impacted their grades, but with the generally profound lack of confidence in the state’s ability to solve these problems, poor school quality ultimately was another limitation they must personally overcome in order to succeed. Though these girls and their classmates could easily describe the deficiencies of the institutional quality of their school, most students felt a profound inability to affect change.

When I asked Yessenia if her sadness came from living far away from home, or from the situation at school, she said school is the problem – the Computer Technician degree that Yessenia was completing had a heavy math and science course load. She explained how she tries to practice, tries to find a way to understand the numbers, and the anger was clear in her voice when I asked if there isn’t any support she can get from the teachers or the school. No, she said firmly. She had asked her Math teacher, and relayed this conversation to me with disgust – *sometimes I ask the math teacher – I say, I’ll come to your house, and you can teach me! And she says no. Because she’s busy, she says.* Even though teacher strikes have lessened since 2009, Julie explained that *“siempre hacen falta, hora de clase se pierda, algunas temas que no miran por el tiempo, no lo dan ... el nivel es bastante* [they still miss days, we miss class, some topics they don’t cover because of the time, they just don’t give them ... it’s pretty bad].” She elaborated on the impact of the strikes, feelings that many of her classmates echoed:

Los maestros, que ellos vieran ... tomar otras medidas. Porque si ellos no dan clases, ellos no pierden nada. Los únicos que perdemos es nosotros. Porque después, si perdemos una o dos semanas y ligerito vienen las clases y no explicar bien, si no que de un solo y ya exámenes. Entonces uno si no le entiende a un tema, claro que en un examen va a salir mal. Entonces allí por eso uno tiene bajas notas, y entonces ... seria otra medida también de los maestros.

If the teachers, if they could see to ... take other measures. Because if they don’t give classes, they don’t lose anything. We are the only ones who lose. Because later, if we miss two or three weeks and suddenly have classes and they don’t explain well, just everything all at once and suddenly there’s a test. So if you don’t understand a topic, of course on an exam you’re going to do badly. So then

because of that you've got low grades and so ... the teachers should take a different approach.

These three narratives point to a number of institutional constraints that are impeding students' best efforts to succeed, including instability in paying teacher's salaries, overworked teachers, limited classroom resources and a complete lack of programming for students who are struggling academically, who are currently given monetary punishments or forced to leave school (discussed further in Chapter 5). Overall, it was obvious to these students that changes in the education system on an institutional and national level would alleviate many of the problems they currently face. Regardless, these entrenched injustices constituted students' current reality in school, forcing them to create immediate tactics for succeeding in this situation. By focusing on controlling their emotional response to these blatant injustices, these students are forced to shift the full responsibility for academic success away from schools and teachers, and onto themselves.

Julie and Melissa's framing of their strategic temporary dropout experiences as a necessary inconvenience to ensure family prosperity and their own educational success (as well as that of their siblings) points to the ineffectiveness of using dominant constructs in the dropout discourse to describe these experiences. Though technically "dropouts," both Julie and Melissa remained very connected to the project of education and their status as students in the years they spent out of school. Their dropout experiences were neither failures nor permanent decisions, and the risk factor of each of their family's lack of income gives only a superficial explanation for their temporary strategic dropout. Looking deeper, it is clear that a lack of quality schooling in rural areas, mounting schooling expenses (even in public or alternative schools) can make sending all siblings to school together impossible, a hierarchy of quality in various school systems and the mechanisms of oppression that create the structural violence of poverty and social exclusion created the circumstances that led to these experiences of temporary strategic dropout. Further, without a longer-term perspective that allows us to see the temporary nature of these dropout decisions, it is impossible to understand how these young women's educational strategies function to fulfill family obligations to siblings and parents, working toward collective family success.

Yessenia presents a number of risk factors in a deficiency-informed analysis. She grew up in a rural town, with a single mother living in serious poverty. The closest middle school to her town was two hours away by foot, and she was “idle” for a year while she stayed at home helping her mother after 6th grade. She would be categorized as Risk Type 3 (exposed to important risks and having already suffered the consequences) in the risk typology presented by Cunningham et al. (2009). Yessenia’s individual and family characteristics, from this perspective, shaped her exposure to risk and her eventual failure to avoid succumbing to these risks. But there is little value in identifying the risk factors listed above as Yessenia’s *own* deficiencies. Rather, Yessenia’s discussion of her lack of control over her life circumstances points to the importance of considering not what her family is lacking, but what the world around her is lacking. Structural violence is found in the compounded injustices that make her mother’s single parent status an automatically risky experience, a lack of schools in rural areas such as Yessenia’s hometown, an unspoken financial hierarchy of degree options in high school (leading directly to employment prospects), a state unwilling to properly finance a public school system and an education system that excludes the poor with hidden everyday costs.

The effect of applying the risk/deficiency framework to a need to categorize youth as either “students” or “dropouts” produces stories in which Melissa, Yessenia and Julie were high-risk youth with a strong probability of school failure, who dropped out as expected. The positive, motivational strategies that these students and their families developed to overcome various barriers to success in education, such as Julie and Melissa waiting to finish in order to support their siblings’ schooling, or Yessenia moving in with family members to finance her education, rely on the “community cultural wealth” that Yosso (2006) has shown to be hiding under an ahistorical deficiency-informed analysis. These three girls’ continued determination and success in school – a counterstory to the discourse of dropout as permanent failure – remains hidden as well. Family strategies to temporarily disrupt formal schooling amidst the profound vulnerability of living in poverty are reduced to individual-level deficiencies (a discourse Yessenia herself adopts in wishing her family had “help”), instead of finding fault in the structures of social exclusion that have created the barriers they must face. In these

three stories, young women and their families made the decision for them to temporarily drop out of school in order to stay committed to their education long-term.

6. Circulating In and Out of School: Institutional Policies and Forced Temporary Dropout

Si no gradúan, es por el desaprovecho²⁰ de ellos [If they don't graduate, it's because they chose to waste their opportunity].
(Teacher, Educatodos)

Some students drop out of school because the teachers don't support them, they say, "You aren't a good student, you don't need to be here." So the students don't want to come.

(Javier, teacher, Instituto Cristo)

Bueno para que fuera mejor aquí? Bueno que haiga, en las clases pues que haiga mas dinámica. Es que yo miro que todas las clases son bien aburridas. Que solo guías. Entonces, que haiga dinámica, algo que nos motiva así, un poco, porque solo estar allí leyendo, escribiendo, solo escuchando a los maestros allí que "lero, lero" ... hace aburrida la clase. Entonces que haiga mas dinámica. Claro no todos los días, pero de vez en cuando por lo menos. [What could make it better here? Well if there could be ... if classes could be more dynamic. From what I've seen classes are really boring. Just doing study guides. So, if they could be more dynamic, something to motivate us, you know, a bit, because just sitting there reading, writing, just listening to the teachers talking blah, blah ... it makes classes boring. So they should be more dynamic. Obviously not every day, but sometimes at least].

(Nicole, 10th grade, Colegio Nacional)

While strategic temporary dropout describes the experiences of many students in Malagueña, not all young people in this study who had left school temporarily did so strategically. Cindy, Elizabeth, Fanny and Maria, students from Colegio Nacional and Educatodos who had also circulated in and out of school during their adolescence, described their experiences either as tied directly to the school environment or school policies. Forced drop out for academic failure is a common policy in Honduras, though there has been very little research into this phenomenon. A limited number of scholars have recently begun to call for the eradication of expulsion for academic failing where no

²⁰ *Desaprovecho* literally means, "to not take advantage".

supportive services are available for students who are struggling academically, often for reasons related to school quality (Cunningham et al., 2008). Even for students who were not explicitly affected by academic failure, students' narratives demonstrate how these threatening policies and others factors in the school environment can impact a families' perspective on keeping their child in school. For students who were forced to leave school due to low grades, many of these dropout experiences are temporary (returning after weeks, months or years), but they may be permanent, as students must recover from the destabilization of their educational trajectory through options such as employment, migration or building a family.

Within the dominant constructs for understanding dropout, these experiences are read as “failing out,” in which an individual student lacks the motivation, intelligence or interest to get good grades, becoming a “dropout” and permanently leaving school behind. Focusing on their individual exposure to risk factors, the consequences of these risks are understood as negative behavioral outcomes, such as choosing to leave school. Without a social justice perspective, it is impossible to see the impact of structural factors such as inflexible school policies, a total lack of tutoring or academic support for students struggling in their classes, poor teacher quality and pressure on administrators to create positive school outcomes and leave “problem students” behind. Most importantly, the return to school by all four students whose stories are discussed here remains invisible in the dominant discourse on dropout. These students' narratives stressed the positive influence of a motivating adult in their lives, as well as a renewed dedication to school upon return – a counterstory to the narrative of an at-risk, failed, permanently out-of-school youth with destructive potential to themselves and their society.

6.1. The School Environment, School Policies and Administration

Academic success and failure is generally viewed as an individual outcome, but the school environment – structural and interpersonal, shaped by both physical installations and school personnel – nourishes or limits students' ability to achieve academically. Public school staff and administrators at Colegio Nacional were closely

connected to students' activities within the school environment, and were quick to comment on how students succeed and fail in the different school systems. Laura, the school director, expressed her frustration with the afternoon section of high school (in which the young people I interviewed were studying), explaining why she preferred the night section where she taught classes:

La jornada de la noche es muy bonita ... no se, la clima los favorece, y otra cosa que allá son gentes mayores, mas entendibles, y se trabaja bien. Eso es lo que me gusta. Que uno los pide y allí lo traen. Como trabajan ellos, ellos responden, a ellos le cuesta su estudio.

Night school is so nice ... I don't know, the temperature is favorable, and the other thing is that they are older students, more understandable, and classes work very well. That's what I like. You ask them for something and they bring it. The way they work, they give the effort you expect, they have to give up a lot to go to school.

Her sense of relief in working with students who already came to class with a high level of dedication to schooling and an adult sense of responsibility reflects the frustration that many teachers expressed with teaching adolescents. Off-hand remarks about how the afternoon section has it easy were common (it can generally be assumed that they don't have jobs or significant responsibilities because of the 1:30-6:30pm time frame), minimizing these students' efforts in comparison to more difficult life situations. Similar to Laura's frustration, the director of the Educatodos program often berated young distance-education students for their lack of *educación*, responsibility and morality, delaying class with long discourses on the topic.

While policies of forced temporary dropout appear in private, public and alternative schooling, the lack of institutional resources in public and alternative school systems make students highly vulnerable to these policies. At Colegio Nacional and Educatodos, there was no support for a student struggling academically. While Instituto Cristo offered tutoring every day after school from 3-5pm, neither Colegio Nacional nor Educatodos were able to offer any tutoring or extra academic support for students, much to the frustration of most students I spoke to. Given this situation, any student ill-fortuned enough to be placed in a classroom with low quality teaching is destined to struggle academically, possibly fail and even have to repeat a year, unless they can teach themselves the material from the book. For example, I heard in-depth complaints about the math teacher at Colegio Nacional from most of the students I interviewed, a

teacher whom I never observed actually give a lesson in the various times I sat in on her class during fieldwork (instead often ending class early or talking on her cell phone, at most checking homework assignments and assigning further homework). As the quarter came to a close, these complaints turned into serious concerns about possibly failing math, as forced temporary dropout policies threatened to impact their future in school.

At the three schools where I conducted fieldwork, policies for academic failure were different – at Colegio Nacional, a strict policy was enacted every quarter after testing in which any student who failed more than two subjects was forced to leave until the next year. At Educatodos, students who were failing were pushed along until it was no longer possible for them to reach the minimum grade average of 60% for the year, after which they were asked to leave. At Instituto Cristo, I didn't encounter any official academic failure policy like these, though I heard stories of students who had left because they "couldn't handle" or "didn't like" the academic rigor or individualized learning style, which may have been a euphemism for failing out of school. Further, the unique learning style and resources at Instituto Cristo (students completing their workbooks at their own pace, significant individual help from teachers, daily after-school tutoring opportunities, daily homework reports signed by parents and unlimited opportunities to re-take tests) made academic failure much easier to avoid²¹.

Even so, a teacher at Educatodos explained to me what he has seen happen to students who dropped out of private schools. When they would come to enroll at Educatodos, they faced a serious problem for enrollment: "*Salen de la secundaria privada debiendo mucha cuota y entonces [los administradores] no les firman las notas. El estudiante matricula aquí diciendo que ya los va a traer pero nunca los trae.* [They leave private high school owing a lot of fees, and so the administrators don't sign their transcripts. The student enrolls here saying that they'll bring the transcripts soon, but they never bring them]." Eventually, a student in this situation would have to drop out of

²¹ Instituto Cristo's self-directed learning style is not typical of private schools in Malagueña. However, private schools in Malagueña generally have lower student/teacher ratios, and more resources than public or alternative school to help students avoid academic failure.

Educatodos as well, because the institution cannot give them a certificate (per grade) or a degree (upon graduation) without proof of their graduation from lower grades.

After testing each quarter, Colegio Nacional and Educatodos both held one requisite *recuperación* [recovery] class, in which any students who had failed were prepared to re-take the test and given a second chance to pass. The school director at Colegio Nacional, explaining that “*nadie ha desertado* [no one has dropped out]” in the last year, pointed to *recuperación* classes as the solution for any student who fails a class. However, it is entirely possible that students will also fail the *recuperación* test, after which they would either be required to pay 400 lempiras (\$20 CAD) to “carry” a failed subject onto the next quarter (which would force them to repeat the school year if they did not pass by the end of the year), or they would be forced to leave immediately for failing more than two subjects. It was a challenge to find teachers who were available to give these *recuperación* classes at Colegio Nacional, which sometimes resulted in a science teacher giving a social studies *recuperación* class, and students were often asked to pay to attend these classes (if they were outside of the regular schedule).

Despite these difficulties, the school director insisted that there had only been one dropout the year before, a student who had failed all of his materials “*de burro* [like a donkey]”. I had a very difficult time getting information from administrators at all three schools about how many students had dropped out per quarter or per year, often because this information did not seem to be tallied anywhere. Many times, I just received information on the number of graduates per year. When I mentioned to a group of students at Colegio Nacional that the Director told me there had been only one dropout the year before, they laughed in disbelief:

No, como así! Casi la mayoría salen! Son pocos los que logran graduar. No se porque dice esto ella. Ahora hay muchos estudiantes en nuestro curso pero ya para fines del año, va a ver que baja bastante.

No, what do you mean! Almost the majority leave! There are only a few who make it to graduation. I don't know why she said that. Right now there are a lot of students in our grade but by the end of the year, you'll see that it goes down by a lot.

They offered a variety of opinions and frustrations about the responsibility of teachers and staff and the frequency of dropout, such as one student who said “*yo creo que la directiva debe de servir para ayudar a los que están teniendo dificultad* [I think that the administration should work to help to students that are struggling].” Another student sitting near him agreed, explaining that the administration is ostensibly in charge of dealing with academic issues: “*supuestamente tiene que intervenir cuando hay una problema académica, pero no hacen lo suficiente, deberían de hacer más* [supposedly they have to intervene when there’s an academic problem, but they don’t do it enough, they should do more].” Echoing what many other students had said, Nicole, a 10th grade student, explained that a lot of the teachers don’t give study guides or any information about what will be on the test, and often a majority of the class failed the regular test, scraping by later with the *recuperación* test. Students’ description of why their classmates dropped out reflected a common perspective in an environment where if you can’t learn by yourself, it doesn’t make sense to continue: “*Salen porque es muy difícil, se pone mas difícil el material. Si ven que no les va bien en la escuela o que no están hechos para la escuela, porque continuar* [They leave because it’s difficult, the subjects get more difficult. If they see that they’re not doing well in school or they’re not made for school, why continue]?”

6.2. Stories of Forced Dropout and Return to School: “I Don’t Want To Leave Again”

6.2.1. Cindy (16 years old)

Cindy was an energetic student in 9th grade at Educatodos, from a financially stable family that gave her significant emotional and economic support in her studies. She described being forced to drop out of the public school Colegio Maria de Jesus with the drama and seriousness of a closely averted disaster: “*casi no termine mis estudios* [I almost didn’t finish my education].” Her story, however, made it clear that she had always been on a path to graduation, with family support and economic stability acting as a strong buffer against any possibilities of falling permanently off-course. She described others around her who had dropped out as “*rebeldes, no miran las cosas ... si nosotros no aprovechamos es decisión de nosotros* [rebellious, they don’t see things

clearly ... if we don't take advantage that's our decision]." With a family who supported her and helped to resolve problems, she was able to overcome the unexpected blow of being forced to drop out, as well as any discouraging thoughts she herself would have – "a veces yo me derrumbaba y aunque yo le diga 'yo quisiera trabajar también', 'no, estas loca' mami dice, 'termina primero tus estudios, y de allí, veremos si trabajas' [sometimes I would get off-course, but even though I would say, 'I want to work too', my mom says, 'you're crazy. Finish your studies first and then, we'll see about getting a job']."

Cindy's experience in 7th grade at Colegio Maria de Jesus had been difficult, though she remained confident in the effort she had made and did not seem to have internalized this experience as a personal failure:

En el Maria de Jesus es bien duro. Y que, me forcé bastante y di lo mejor de mí. Pero las cosas no se pudieron. Mas que nada es que no pase matemáticas, ni estudios. Porque las maestras, me dejaban tareas ... y hacia los mapas y siempre me las ponía de malo porque dijo que no eran esos mapas y yo me hacia loca, iba hasta internet y vieras me desvelaba, y en eso mi madre pero ... no los pase. Y yo me, me desanime. Pero ya de allí, mi madre me dijo, "no, mira en este colegio, haces dos cursos en un solo año" pues digo yo, ah pues aquí esta la oportunidad. Y me vine a este colegio, digo yo, a sacar todo el jugo que tengo y pa'adelante. Y hacer las cosas que me piden porque quiero pasar.

At Colegio Maria de Jesus it's really hard. And I tried very hard and gave it my best. But things didn't work out. The biggest thing was that I didn't pass math or social studies. Because the teachers, they leave us so much homework ... I'd do these maps and I always got them wrong because they'd say that they weren't the right maps, and I'd go crazy, I'd go to internet cafes and honestly I'd stay up so late, and at that point my mom ... but I didn't pass. And I got discouraged. But from there my mom said, "No, check out this school, you can do two grades in one year" so I said that's the opportunity. And I came to this school, I think, to give it all I've got and keep moving forward. And do everything they ask of me because I want to pass.

Cindy failed these two classes in the last quarter of 7th grade, so she was only out of school a few weeks before starting the grade again at Educatodos. This strategic choice to go to distance-education school, which has no summer break, allowed her to move ahead of her former classmates in public school who had also failed the year. It also meant that she was only in classes about eight hours per week, and the rest of the time she was at home, which she described as time spent "si no arreglando, si no viendo

tele ... haciendo cosas [either cleaning up or watching tv ... doing things].” When we talked, she was about to finish 9th grade and was preoccupied with choosing between a well-regarded public school and a private school for upper secondary school, illuminating the options available to her thanks to her relative economic privilege. She was focused on choosing a career track that she liked, and did not see dropping out as a possibility for her in the future – “*No me lo perdonaría ni yo misma. No, no quiero. No dejaría la escuela* [I wouldn’t even forgive myself. No, I don’t want to. I wouldn’t leave school].” Her experience being forced to drop out did not make her a “dropout,” or someone who had left their studies. Perhaps her path to graduation had taken an unexpected turn, and she had been forced to endure the consequences, but she had never “left” school.

6.2.2. Elizabeth (19 years old)

Elizabeth was one of Cindy’s classmates, nearing completion of 9th grade. She had started 8th grade a year earlier at the suggestion of her sister-in-law, after dropping out four years before when she failed 8th grade in a town on the outskirts of Malagueña. She was the older of two sisters, living with her mother and her aunt in a precarious economic situation: “*Cuando no tenemos, no asisto a clases. Y cuando tengo, si. Porque cuando no tengo ... cuando no me da, es que no tiene, y no puede venir porque no puedo pagar pasaje* [When we don’t have any money, I don’t go to classes. And when I do, I go. Because when I don’t have any, when my mom doesn’t give me money, it’s because she doesn’t have any and I can’t come because I can’t pay the bus fare].” However, things had recently improved after they had opened a *pulpería* (corner stores) out of their house, which had successfully sustained the family – “*Este año gracias a dios no, no ha pasado* [This year, thank god, that hasn’t happened].” She was happy with the distance-education model, grateful for the efforts of the volunteer teachers and content with the change of pace. She explained how “*estando en la casa uno pienso solo en lo mismo, mientras estando en el colegio uno se inspira pensar en la tarea, en recordar todo lo que dicen a uno* [being at home you just think about the same things, but in school you get inspired thinking about your homework, remembering everything they tell you].” Her experience leaving school at fourteen began the same way as Cindy’s experience in seventh grade:

Cuando deje los estudios fue que ... la verdad, me inspire mucho al ver que, que no pude pasar, solo eran tres materias las que llevaba, y hice una recuperación y las recupere, pero como que me quede en dos no pude seguir, porque como lo que se puede llevar solo es una, y yo tenía dos. Entonces me enfoque mas a la decepción de no seguir, por las dos, y ahora me arrepiento de no haber seguido, solo por los dos. Entonces por allí me salí por eso, de allí, a la segunda vez volví y de allí no me gusto porque no estaban mis mismos compañeros con los quien yo me llevaba y convivía bien. Entonces si me salí otra vez. Pues de allí, cuando le dije a mami, mami me castigo y me ponía a hacer oficio, me ponía a hacer todo a mi. Todo me tocaba. Por no haber seguido estudiando. Si fueron dos años de estar así.

When I left school what happened was ... honestly, I got really focused on seeing that I couldn't pass, it was just three classes that I failed, and I did a *recuperación* and I passed, but since I failed two I couldn't continue, because you can only fail one, and I had two. So I focused more on the disappointment of not continuing, because of those two, and now I regret that I didn't keep going, just because of those two. So I left because of that, and from there, I came back [to school] a second time and from there I didn't like it because my old classmates weren't there, the ones who I got along with and hung out with. So I left again. From there when I told Mami, she punished me and had me doing housework, she had me doing everything. Everything fell on me. Because I didn't keep going with my education. Yeah, it was two years like that.

Similar to Cindy's experience, Elizabeth went right back to school after being forced to drop out. However, the social consequences of staying back a grade proved too difficult for her to overcome, as well as her focus on having failed by so little because of "just those two" classes. Her mother's influence figured strongly into her narrative, as she mentioned her scolding and advising to think of what was best for her. Elizabeth had eventually told her mom that she wanted to go back to school, and hearing her sister-in-law talk about graduating from *Educados* gave Elizabeth the motivation to sign up for classes. If she decided to leave school again for personal reasons, she knew her mom would be furious – "*Allí si me mata [risa]. Allí si me mata. Si la verdad que si, porque fueron tantos años de fallarle entonces ya no la quiero fallar* [Oh she'd kill me [laughs]. She'd just kill me. Yeah because you know, there were so many years of failing her so I don't want to fail her anymore]." Through her mother, Elizabeth conceptualized schooling as integral to her life as an adolescent, and thus being out of school was a "failure." Similar to Cindy, Elizabeth's time out of school was not a permanent decision, but a period of punishment until she saw things clearly and got back on the right path.

6.2.3. *Fanny (17 years old)*

When Fanny and her sister moved to Malagueña from San Pedro Sula, Honduras' industrial capital, they were forced to start at Colegio Nacional because no other school would accept a student "carrying" math from the year before. Fanny had to pay 800 lempiras (\$40 CAD) for this "carried" class, and would automatically fail her grade if she didn't pass by the end of the year. She was trying to prove herself to her parents during the current school year, trying not to fail again:

Fanny: *Ya segundo y tercero lo hice en San Pedro Sula. En San Pedro me fui a arruinar el colegio, va. Uno fueron los amistades. Los amistades hacen que uno se descontrola en los estudios. Bueno a veces ni iba al colegio. Me salía de los clases, si entraba me iba a relajear.*

ES: *Y perdió el año?*

Fanny: *Si, perdí el año, fue primero de bachillerato. Por eso estoy repitiendo. En primero otra vez ...*

ES: *Que dijeron sus padres?*

Fanny: *Este carrera es de mucho gasto y yo solo pedía pisto y pedía, pedía y a finales salía con bajas notas, me quedaba en diez materias, así. Me sacaron del colegio, casi al fin me tuve que salir porque ya no había remedio que pasara. No podía pasar. Entonces me sacaron del colegio, me tocaba estar en la casa ... asear, hacer comida, prácticamente casi todo me tocaba. Como no hacía nada allá, entonces me tocaba encargarme de mis papas.*

Fanny: Second (8th grade) and third year (9th grade) I did in San Pedro. In San Pedro I went to ruin my studies, really. One thing was my friends. Friends make you lose control of your studies. I mean sometimes I didn't even go to school. I'd leave classes, and if I did go, it was to mess around.

ES: And did you lose that year?

Fanny: I lost that year, it was 10th grade. That's why I'm repeating it now. In 10th grade again.

ES: What did you parents say?

Fanny: This is an expensive career track and I'd always ask for money, money, money and then I'd finish with low grades; I was failing ten classes, that sort of thing. They pulled me out of school, almost at the end of the year I had to leave because there wasn't a chance I'd pass anymore. I couldn't pass. So my parents took me out of school and I had to be

at home ... clean, make food, pretty much everything fell on me. Since I wasn't doing anything at school, I had to take care of my parents²².

Fanny and her sister were now living with their older sister and her family in Malagueña, since their parents had migrated to Spain to work. Their family economic situation was stable, with both parents sending money monthly to their children. Fanny knew that her parents had sacrificed so that she and her sister could get ahead in life through education, and felt she'd disappointed them the year before:

ES: *Se sentía presionada durante este tiempo [fuera del colegio]?*

Fanny: *Por una parte me sentí mal, porque hice decepcionar a mis papas. Hice que gastaran de puro gusto. Fue la parte mala. Y otra bien porque pasaba en la casa, y pasaba ocupada.*

ES: *Y porque regreso al colegio?*

Fanny: *Mis papas. Porque ellos se están esforzando mucho, tuvieron que irse de aquí para que nosotros pudiéramos superarnos en el estudio. Y no sería justo con que lo volvía a pagar con los mismos del otro año, que volverme a salir otra vez. Si, ya he cambiado. Ahora no me salgo de clases, nada.*

ES: Did you feel a lot of pressure during that year [when you're weren't in school]?

Fanny: On one hand I felt bad, because I disappointed my parents. I made them spend money like it was just for fun. That was the bad part. And on the other hand I was fine because I was at home, and I was busy.

ES: Why did you come back to school?

Fanny: My parents. Because they are putting in so much effort, they had to leave here so that we could overcome/get ahead through our studies. It wouldn't be fair to pay back their sacrifices with the same as the other year, leaving school again. Yeah, I've changed. I don't leave classes anymore, nothing.

Even so, Fanny felt it was possible that she'd drop out before finishing, likely because of grades, "*porque ahorita me dijeron que si me quedo me sacaran otra vez.*" Y

²² In terms of daily household cleaning and cooking needs.

no quiero volver a salir. Ya serian dos años perdidos. Solo es que ponga de mi empeño y me forcé mucho para salir adelante con mis materias [because my parents said that if I fail they'll take me out of school again. And I don't want to leave again. That'd be two years lost. I just have to make the effort and try really hard to succeed in my classes]." Though she had not been forced to leave by school administrators (and admitted she had been more focused on her friends than her studies), rigid policies and little to no supportive academic services can make schooling without consistent academic success "not worth it" for parents, impacting their decision to continue to invest a considerable portion of their income in their children's schooling. Though Fanny's parents had technically pulled her out of school, the severity of failing in the high-stakes academic environment with no safety net for students struggling academically (or those who "choose to waste their opportunity")²³ forces temporary dropout.

6.2.4. Maria (21 years old)

Maria's story of leaving school was unlike any of the other ten students I interviewed who had experienced temporary dropout, combining elements of strategic temporary dropout (so her young sister could attend school) and disillusionment with school after experiencing a particularly negative school environment. She explained how she had stopped going to school after 6th grade:

María: *La verdad que mi madre fue bien humillante, como nosotros siempre hemos sido una gente humilde y casi la gente de arriba le quiere ver de menos a uno y así los profesores ... bueno el trato no es muy bueno. Bueno, en mi tiempo. O sea ... [risa nerviosa] como le digo [risa]... o sea, le humillan a uno, pues. Era positiva porque por lo menos aprendí a leer y escribir y todo eso, va. Pero ya por lo demás? Era pésimo, el trato. Como le digo, mi mama trabajando y nosotras en la casa, entonces nosotros nos alistábamos y nos íbamos. Así. No íbamos ni peinadas y eso. Usted sabe los niños pequeños como agarran piojos? Si entonces nos llevaban a la bomba y nos echaban agua.*

ES: *Entonces se burlaban las maestras?*

²³ This is a quote from a public school teacher, given in full at the beginning of this chapter. Students like Fanny were often discussed with little empathy - choosing to waste your time at school is a serious affront to the hurdles the majority of students must overcome to finish their education.

María: *Si, si.*

ES: *Que horrible.*

María: *Bueno, le voy a decir, porque yo no seguí estudiando después de que salí de sexto. Bueno a mi hermana y a mi, sacamos el sexto juntos va, y a nosotros nos decían que nosotros no servimos para nada, y todo eso va, y entonces nosotros nos decepcionamos. Y mas también que mi mama no podía.*

ES: *Así les decían los maestros?*

María: *Si. Que no servíamos para nada, que a que íbamos a ir al colegio, entonces de allí decimos nosotros, "No, pues ... no entremos al colegio."*

Maria: Honestly my mom was really humiliating, since we've always been poor, and you know people above want to see you like you're worth less than them and that's what the teachers ... well, the treatment isn't very good. I mean, in my time. I mean ... [laughs nervously] ... how can I say this ... [laughs] ... well, they humiliate you, I guess. It was positive because at least I learned to read and write and all of that. But everything else? It was awful, how they treated us. Like I said, my mom worked and we were at home, so we got ourselves ready and went to school. Just like that. We didn't go with our hair combed and all of that. You know how little kids get lice? Yeah, so they'd bring the hose and they'd spray us with water.

ES: So the teachers were making fun of you?

Maria: Yeah, yeah.

ES: That's awful.

Maria: So, I'll tell you, I didn't continue studying after I finished 6th grade. My sister and I, we finished sixth grade together, right, and they'd say to us that we weren't good for anything, and all of that, so we got disillusioned. And also, too, my mom couldn't do it [financially].

ES: The teachers would say that to you?

Maria: Yes. That we weren't good for anything, that what were we going to go and do in a high school, so from there we said "well no ... we won't go to high school."

Maria's mother's financial situation and two siblings had limited her from continuing to high school immediately, though she was out of school for much longer than the years her sister needed to finish. Her story illuminates the power that teachers can have in shaping students' perception of themselves and of their abilities, in this case compounding financial limitations. Her teachers' lack of faith in the possibility that she'd

have any reason to be in high school positioned Maria and her sister in a culture of poverty that determined her future – a poor, unkempt little girl from a struggling single mother family was basically set up to fail in any attempt to overcome poverty and get ahead. Regardless of this awful treatment, Maria discussed her decision to continue schooling as a child (with her family's support) as a one-time opportunity that she'd chosen not to take. She explained that education was a right, but "*siempre y cuando sea menor de edad porque ya una adulta ya no le puede estar ayudando. Porque ya tuvo su oportunidad siendo adolescente* [if and only if you're a minor, because as an adult no one can be helping you anymore. Because you already had your chance as an adolescent]."

If dropout is understood as a permanent decision, where at this point Maria transitioned from a "student" to "dropout" presumably for the rest of her life, her ongoing engagement with education remains invisible. Maria's return to school six years later, and her high academic achievement in the classroom, is completely hidden. Though the circumstances surrounding the event of her dropout certainly warrant investigation, it is important to understand that they caused a *delay* in Maria's schooling, as opposed to an end. Maria explained to me how her co-workers had motivated her to go back to school, and that finally after a middle-aged woman she worked with finished lower secondary, she had made the decision to go back.

I initially met Maria after her teacher at Educatodos immediately suggested that I speak to one of the brightest and most applied students in the class. She had enrolled at 19 years old, and as she was nearing the end of 9th grade she was considering her options for upper secondary. However, she was severely limited by her job, the constant threat of crime, and her financial situation:

ES: *Piensa entrar a colegio?*

María: *Sí, si me gustaría.*

ES: *En donde?*

María: *Bueno ... aquí a Colegio María de Jesús. Si me gustaría entrar. Pero ... como le digo tengo que pensarlo bien porque es bien peligroso, porque así como yo solo puedo a la noche.*

ES: *Y sale muy tarde?*

María: *Sí, entran a las 6 y salen a las 10.*

ES: *Y a esa hora ya no hay buses.*

María: *No.*

ES: *Tendría que caminar entonces?*

María: *Si.*

ES: Are you thinking about starting 10th grade?

Maria: Yes, yes I'd like to.

ES: Where?

Maria: Well ... here at Colegio Maria de Jesus [local public school]. I'd really like to start. But ... like I said I really have to think about it because it's really dangerous, because, like in my situation, I can only go to night classes.

ES: And they end pretty late?

Maria: Yeah, they start at 6 and end at 10.

ES: And by that time there aren't buses anymore.

Maria: No.

ES: So you'd have to walk?

Maria: Yes.

Maria explained that spending over 600 lempiras (\$30 CAD) a month on daily taxi rides, over a fourth of her monthly income, was far too expensive to consider. She laughed nervously whenever we touched on financial topics, explaining the depth of her financial vulnerability – “*Si pierdo mi trabajo no podría seguir. Si porque nadie mas puede ayudar. Solo Dios* [if I lost my job I couldn't continue in school. Yeah because no one else can help me. Only God].”

Cindy, Elizabeth, Fanny and Maria were forced to drop out because of school policies or factors of the school environment, though their experiences diverged after leaving school. Financial status made a significant difference in how these girls talked about the future – Cindy's financial stability gave her a certainty that she'd finish her education, and a confidence that there would be rewards for her efforts. In contrast, Elizabeth's financial insecurity shaped her conversations about the future, similar to Maria's statement that “only God” could help her if she lost her job: “*Mi meta es terminar aquí. Como empecé aquí quisiera terminar. Mi idea no es dejarlos si no que seguir*

luchando por ellos [My goal is to finish here. Since I started here I'd like to finish. My idea is to not leave my studies, but that I want to keep fighting for my education].” A sense of certainty and control permeated Cindy’s narrative, while Elizabeth and Maria framed their experiences with a general sense of vulnerability to possible limitations. As Elizabeth said, “*Cuando estamos mal, si me preocupo. Si me preocupo bastante, solo me encomiendo a Dios, que nos da fuerza* [When things are bad financially, I worry. Yes I worry a lot, I just give myself to God, asking that he gives us strength].”

Fanny did not need to consider whether she’d be financially able to go to school thanks to her family’s economic stability, but her feelings of uncertainty regarding her educational future stemmed from her academic troubles. All four girls were influenced by a motivating adult in their lives as they returned to school, though both Fanny and Elizabeth had first disappointed their families before feeling obligated to keep going in school to “make up for” this disappointment. Cindy was also heavily influenced by her parents, who had clearly guided her through the experience of forced temporary dropout with a positive outlook. Maria’s co-workers provided the support and inspiration for her to enroll in school and flourish as an excellent student. Though Cindy and Fanny had rebounded quickly after being forced to leave school, and Elizabeth and Maria did not return to school for several years, each of these girls expressed a strong and renewed sense of dedication to their schooling informed by their earlier experiences of failure.

Elizabeth and Cindy’s stories bring to light the consequences of forced drop out policies for academic failure, while Fanny and Maria’s stories reflect the impact of the social environment of school on the decision to leave and return. When a poor learning environment at school is compounded by harsh policies of forced temporary dropout, students such as Elizabeth and Cindy are straightforward examples of this double disadvantage. Fanny and Maria’s stories, however, reminds us of the difficulty of categorizing students’ experiences of leaving school. Fanny’s experience of temporary dropout was as much forced as it was unavoidable, after a year of skipping school and avoiding going to class. In contrast, Maria was extremely discouraged by the treatment from her teachers in primary school, which gave her little initiative to look for a way to continue her schooling until she was emboldened by encouraging friends. School policies, administrators and teachers can shape an outlook that reflects a paradoxical “institutionalized intolerance of youth” in high school, alienating many students in the

classroom and normalizing educational failure in adolescence, especially for those who can't keep up academically (Muncie, 1999, as quoted in Kemshall, 2008, p. 23). Together with monetary punishments for academic failure, forced temporary dropout policies and a lack of academic support services, these factors create an environment hostile to academic success for students living in urban poverty in Malagueña. Nevertheless, students impacted by these policies often distinguish themselves from young people who “choose” to drop out – temporary forced dropout was just a short-term setback on a lifelong path to overcome these structural barriers to success.

7. Getting Serious about School: Gendered Discourses of Education

Bueno yo digo que las cipotas, verdad, le han ganado en muchas cosas a los hombre. Ahora los muchachos, solo se dedican así a andar en pandillas, va, en grupos así, feas pues. Y se dedican a andar robando, porque lo hallan mas fácil que estudiar.

Well I would say that girls, you know, have gained a lot of things over men. Nowadays boys, they just spend their time in gangs, you know, in those groups, those awful groups. And they dedicate themselves to stealing, because they think it's easier than studying.
(Nicole, 10th grade, Colegio Nacional)

During fieldwork, I found myself asking students and teachers over and over again why there were so few boys in the classroom, as I often saw male/female ratios of 10 to 1 or even higher. An obvious disconnect between working-class masculinity and schooling was usually the explanation for why there were so few boys in school, which people illustrated using the dominant themes of either male street involvement, an intrinsic male dislike of schooling or male employment responsibilities. Though high achievement in education was often discussed as the “new norm” for women, negative stories of poor women who chose to “stay back” as housewives revealed a class bias in the discourse of educational achievement for both working-class women and men. The explanations I received about gender in the classroom allowed me to piece together a shared conceptualization of how schooling decisions are made within classed and gendered discourses of success and educational achievement.

To explore the impact of these master narratives on working-class students, in this chapter I will first review key themes in student's discussion of educational success related to gender and class. Next, I will present the stories of Jonathan, Kevin and Eduardo's experiences of temporary dropout, followed by a review of the main themes in their narratives related to their return to school after dropout. Finally, I will present the story of Alex, a private school student, who experienced a long period of disengagement

(but not dropout) from school, illuminating the impact of class on the temporary dropout decisions of working-class youth.

7.1. Key Themes in the Discourse of Education and Gender

In understanding the discourse of education detailed below, I follow Erin Murphy-Graham's (2012) feminist approach in recognizing that social norms in Honduras can be limiting for both women and men: "The very nature of power must be examined from a feminist perspective ... from this vantage point men are also disempowered, because social norms limit their potential for being and doing" (p. 18). Further, I share Diane Reay (2010) and Nicola Ingram's (2011) concern with the problem of high male dropout rates and the narrative of "failing boys" in society (Reay, 2010). Research by both of these scholars have pointed to the enormous amount of emotional work required by working-class boys in order to succeed in both academic and social worlds, resonating with the current tension between working-class masculinities and educational achievement in Honduras. With a concern for the power these social norms and gendered narratives of achievement have on students' perception of their own capacity, the opportunities available to them, and their place in the world, I will now briefly review the key themes of a discourse of gender and education in Malagueña.

7.1.1. Women Who Want to Overcome: Excelling in Education

All of the participants in this study felt that opportunities for men and women with high school degrees should be the same, though many noted barriers to opportunities for women in the employment market. Participants often framed these opinions as part of recent change in gender relations: "*hoy en día la mujer tiene el mismo valor que el hombre* [these days, women have the same value as men]." A teacher at Colegio Nacional, during a presentation for students about to begin a practicum in their career track, implored all students, male and female, to focus on having a career instead of just a job: "*Ya no acepto que digan 'atrás de un gran hombre esta una mujer.' Yo le digo 'a la par de un gran hombre hay un mujer* [I don't want to hear people say anymore that 'behind any great man there is a woman.' What I say to that is '*next to a great man is a woman*']]." Many young women in school articulated an oppositional stance regarding

men's achievements or abilities, positioning recent gains in women's employment and educational achievement not as gaining equality, but as surpassing men's position in society. The comments made by a student at Colegio Nacional on the increasing number of girls in the classroom exemplifies this framing:

Por ejemplo antes, la mujer casi no tomaba importancia a que estudiar y todo eso, decían es para ama de casa y ya estuvo. Y ahora no, hay un cambio, igual, mas bien ahora yo miro que sobresalen los mujeres en el estudio y en los trabajos.

For example, before, women didn't really give any importance to studying and all of that, they'd say she's a housewife and that was it. And now it's not like that, there's a change, actually, really now I see that women are the ones excelling in education and in jobs.

While a strong master narrative in Honduras celebrates women's recent advancement in education and employment propels many girls forward in their educational goals, there is also a strong class bias in this narrative. Students across the three school systems spoke disparagingly of graduating and having "*el título allí guindado* [your diploma hanging there on the wall]," especially for women who may have finished some schooling and then choose to "waste" this achievement by dedicating themselves to traditional, reproductive-realm work such as caring for children, cleaning and cooking. The comments of two relatively wealthy private school girls exemplify how their shared vision of success was positioned in direct contrast to traditional female roles and experiences, the domain of low-class women who "can't get ahead":

Elodie: *Creo que [la educación] es algo que uno elige hacer. Porque hay personas que solo no les gusta ... sacan la primaria y no les gusta secundaria y ya. Se quedan solo con la primaria y terminan aseando ... trabajando empleas domesticas, personas así.*

I think [education] is something that you choose to do. Because there are people who just don't like it ... they finish primary school and they don't like secondary and that's it. They stay with just primary and they end up cleaning ... working as domestics, people like that.

Aurelie: *Por ejemplo las muchachas ahora quedan embarazadas y solo terminaron sexto grado, y cosas así, o igual, no por eso no terminan hasta sexto, y ya buscan sus hijos y su esposo y así.*

Girls now, they get pregnant and they just finish sixth

grade, and things like that, or on the other hand, they don't finish sixth grade for other reasons and then they go looking to settle down with kids and a husband and that's it.

Aurelie: *Lo que quiero es graduarme y poder salir adelante y no quedarme, que, atrasada y sabiendo que podía desperdiciar todo este conocimiento y quedarme tal vez en una casa cuidando niños.*

I want to graduate and get able to get ahead and not stay, like, behind, and knowing that I've wasted all of this knowledge and staying maybe in a house taking care of kids.

These girls consistently framed their future plans to advance in opposition to “failing”, “falling behind” or “staying back”. A life of traditionally female tasks – pregnancy, caring for the family, cooking and taking care of children – is directly connected with failing or falling behind. This framing of failure positions future academic and professional success not as success in the male realm, but as success in a higher-class female realm where a *muchacha*²⁴ would help with cleaning and childcare (as was the case for many families at Instituto Cristo).

In Jessaca Leinaweaver's study of child circulation in the Peruvian Andes (2008), she discusses how teenage pregnancy interacts with the possibilities of achieving social mobility through education in the rural Peru, where becoming pregnant literally embodies a girl's disrespect for her parent's and teacher's efforts toward her overcoming poverty. Thus moral guidance is “designed partly to prolong a girl's unmarried and childless state for as long as possible so that she has a better chance of achieving professionalization and *superación* [overcoming]” (Leinaweaver, 2008, p.125). As in Honduras, early motherhood in Leinaweaver's study is seen as a direct affront to any chance for social mobility through education, and attempts to provide moral guidance are focused particularly on girls, who are often assigned the total responsibility for committing the transgression of engaging in sexual relationships and becoming pregnant.

As Aurelie and Elodie discuss, girls who want to get ahead, become *educado* and overcome poverty – such as the multitude of girls who are now “excelling” in

²⁴ Literally, “muchacha” means girl. In this context, it refers to a maid/cook/nanny, similar to the term “servant girl.”

education and work in Honduras – must work hard to avoid entering the traditional female realm of pregnancy, childcare and housework until much later in life. Though the master narrative of women excelling in education does often account for the social mobility of very poor young women (and even for teenage mothers who are able to later “overcome” their position as a young parent and continue in school), working-class girls are still often seen as destined to “stay behind.” A comment a friend made to me in discussing a relatively poor female friend finishing 9th grade at an alternative school shows how even while finishing schooling, a poor working-class girl can be seen as unable to overcome her destiny as a housewife, incapable of becoming a “professional” in the knowledge economy: “*Ella solo se va a graduar para poder defenderse. Eso no es para trabajar de eso* [She’s just graduating to be able to defend herself. Going to school isn’t so she can work from that²⁵].”

7.1.2. Intrinsic Male Dislike of Schooling

The most common explanation I heard for why there are fewer boys in high school in Honduras was simply that boys don’t like school. Elodie, an Instituto Cristo student, explained how boys generally, “*se salen de estudiar también, no les gusta, que dicen que el estudio no es para ellos* [leave school, they don’t like it – they say that school isn’t for them]”. Melissa had left public high school for three years so that her brother could complete primary school, but he’d since left schooling: “*Ya estuviera en tercero, pero no quiere colegio. No le gusta. La mayoría de varones así son. Lo que les gusta es un oficio* [He’d be in 9th grade by now, but he doesn’t want school. He doesn’t like it. The majority of boys, that’s how they are. What they like is a trade].” Male students also mentioned that boys don’t like school in our conversations, such as Kevin’s explanation for his 10th grade class of 37 girls and 8 boys: “*Pues eso es porque uno de hombre, no le gusta tanto el estudio. Ha de ser por eso, digo yo. Son mas aplicadas las mujeres en el estudio* [Well that’s because men, we don’t like studying as much. It’s gotta be because of that, I would say. Women are more applied in schooling].”

²⁵ “That” refers to a “professional” job requiring educational credentials, such as an office-based position requiring high-level reading, writing and customer service skills.

This framing of disinterest in schooling was often articulated against the other option, pursuing a trade or working. Many students identified learning a trade, as well as physical labor in general, as traditional male jobs and reasons for why men have more opportunities in the job market. In this sense, boys' inherent dislike of schooling would lead them toward a trade instead, which can also be seen as an acceptable option for getting ahead in life. One student pointed out gendered preferences for certain high school career tracks, with electricity, refrigeration, or commerce as typical male options. She was not surprised that there were so few boys in her information technology degree, which was "for women."

Other students didn't frame male dislike of schooling as a clear-cut choice between work and school, focusing instead on boys' behavioral problems in class and lack of interest in learning in general. In public school, Nicole had seen "*varones que se salen, verdad, porque no les interesa la verdad el estudio. Y hay cipotas también que se salen porque no les interesa el estudio. Porque solo quieren venir a pasar el tiempo aquí, solo pasar el tiempo, me entiendes. Solo estar sentados allí* [guys who leave, because they honestly just don't like school. And there are girls too who leave because they're not interested in school. Because they just want to come here to pass them time, just to pass the time, you know what I mean. Just sitting there]." Girls in public and alternative school reflected on their male classmates acting out in class as leading their eventual dropout, such as Julie's explanation for the gender disparity at Colegio Nacional: "*es por el motivo del comportamiento de los varones. Mas faltan ... mas interrumpen ... hay varón que son perversos. Será que les aburre* [it's because of the behavior of the guys. They miss more classes, they interrupt more, there are guys who are vulgar. Maybe it's because they get bored]." In this conceptualization, boys don't fit into the school environment itself, behaving badly until they eventually get bored enough to drop out.

This discourse echoes many upper class students' description of the "disorderly" young people in public schools, detailed in Chapter 3. Such disorderly boys who are vulgar, can't concentrate in class and "just don't like" school are classed in the gendered discourse above, which refers to deviation by the "typical" young man in Honduras – poor, working-class boys uninterested in school. In contrast, upper-class boys, who possess the subtle speech patterns, demeanor and etiquette to express their *educación*

and social status, are not referenced in this discourse of “disorderly,” uninterested boys – destined to graduate, go to university and get a high-paying job, these young men with financial privilege are on a path to professionalization regardless of whether they get bored in school.

In recent years, qualitative studies in education working from a social justice perspective have furthered an understanding of the correlation between characteristics of identity and drop out rates, particularly by exploring the (dis)connection between working class subjectivities and education. Scholars such as Reay (2010), Hattam & Smyth (2003), Herr & Anderson (1997) and Ingram (2011) have argued that schooling must do more to reconcile students' identities in educational design to avoid reproducing social hierarchies, as “the processes behind class advantage and disadvantage work through the individual” (Reay, 2010, p. 223). Echoing the ways in which students in Malagueña see working-class masculinity as clashing with schooling success, Ingram’s (2011) work has shown how educational environments still “stop short at challenging the assumption that working-class culture is deficient,” supposedly producing young men with little interest in school or professionalization (p. 288). The perspective that working-class boys must modify their identities in order to succeed in school – to be “changed” by schooling, learning to perform their *educación* and professional status – is still strong.

7.1.3. Male Street Involvement

High rates of violent crime are a universal concern and frequent topic of conversation in Honduras, and significantly more men are involved in crime and violence than women. One conversation I had with a teacher about why there were so many more girls in his high school classroom left a strong impression – he just looked at me quietly and said, “Well, the jails are full of men. And so are the cemeteries.” People often spoke of young people from poor families who’ve left school, don’t have a job and

are involved in suspicious activities as *perdidos* [lost], implying a constant danger of straying from the right path²⁶.

Family-level patriarchal structures in Honduras have historically been exercised through economic and social control of the household. Pine's (2008) work in urban Honduras has shown how the changing economic landscape in the last half-century has created a drastic reduction in rural economic opportunities, and massive rates of migration to urban areas and abroad. She has discussed how the resulting increase in women working in formal employment and women heads of household have had an emasculating effect on men exercising traditional masculinities – the “economic base of patriarchy in Honduras has been radically transformed” (Pine, 2008, p. 33). The effects of shifting economic realities and the impact on dominant masculinities has been connected to the rise in gang membership and crime, as many men search for economic opportunities and different, perhaps illicit avenues to exercise “traditional” household control (Pine, 2008). The consequences of profound shift in the foundations of traditional masculine authority through household leadership have been explored in other settings with significant conceptual parallels to this situation in Honduras. For example, Phillipe Bourgois (2003) has shown how men in East Harlem in the early 1990s were “searching for respect” by exercising violent, dominating masculinities against changing social and economic systems that challenged existing notions of successful masculinity.

Various students spoke of friends who had left school to join gangs or do drugs, such as Eduardo's description of his friends from the *barrio* [neighborhood] – as opposed to friends from school²⁷ – who have gotten into drugs: “*Se han metido mucho a la droga y entonces lo han dejado ... prefieren mas la droga que la educación. Esos son del barrio* [They get into drugs and so they leave school ... they prefer drugs over education. Those are my friends from the neighborhood].” Many saw street involvement

²⁶ For a detailed analysis of gang violence, Christianity and young people's lives in contemporary Honduras, as well as social narratives of the generation of “lost young men,” see Wolseth (2011).

²⁷ Eduardo described the stories of friends who had dropped out from different parts of his life, distinguishing between friends he met at school and friends from the *barrio*, implying differences in class status and reasons for dropout.

as a strong threat, or even an inevitable destiny, for boys: *“Los varones de pronto nos enfocamos mas a otras cosas negativas ... los varones son mandados a andar en delinquiendo, andar en drogas así [I think that men, we focus more on the negative things ... men are the ones who are destined to be delinquents, get into drugs and that].”*

The spike in violent crime is a recent phenomenon in Honduras, which many students discussed as part of a larger trend of women getting ahead while men fall behind. Framing this tendency for street-involvement as a male characteristic was sometimes explained by gendered fears of crime victimization, such as Nicole’s reasoning that *“La mujer es mas consiente. Tiene mas miedo, le da mas miedo que el hombre pues. Porque el hombre, que, el varón puede andar en cualquier lugar y no siente miedo [Women are more aware. They’re more scared, they get scared more than men, I guess. Because men, I mean, a guy can go out anywhere without feeling scared].”* One private school teacher connected family “disintegration,” a factor often referenced in interviews to explain high dropout rates, which creates family destabilization, both emotionally and financially, and fuels disinterest in school: *“Donde esta la desintegración familiar, entonces ya no puede haber un apoyo como al cien por ciento de la familia ... el niño no le importa seguir estudiando, la mama aunque quisiera no puede, ya se le salió de sus manos [Where there is family disintegration, after that there can’t be one hundred percent support of the family ... the kid doesn’t care about continuing to study, the mom even if she wants to she can’t [financially], it’s out of her hands].”*

Male students easily connected young men and street involvement in a general sense, though their explanations for why they personally did not fit this stereotype varied. While some had internalized ideas of uninterested, badly behaved boys to explain their own experience of dropout, others referenced this connection generally, but not on a personal level. As someone who had already dropped out and returned to school, Jonathan spoke to his personality and dedication to schooling in explaining why he wasn’t that kind of guy: *“No, es que ahora, yo creo que la mayoría de los varones ya no les gusta estudiar si no que les gusta irse a la calle, andar en pandillas, y las mujeres están mas interesadas en estudiar [No, it’s that now, I think that the majority of guys don’t like studying anymore, instead they like to be out on the street, to be in gangs, and women are more interested in studying].”* When I interjected that he’s a guy, and he’s

here in school, Jonathan said, “*Eso es lo bueno ... que a mi no me gusta andar en la calle y perder el estudio solo por andar allí. Yo nunca he tenido problemas con nadie. Eso es lo bueno* [that’s the thing²⁸ ... I don’t like to be on the street and lose out on my studies just to hang around out there. I’ve never had problems with anybody. That’s my advantage].”

The impact of changing economic and social structures on gender roles has led many scholars to declare a global “crisis of masculinity,” connecting a rise in domestic and public violence to a loss of the security of traditionally masculine roles of economic and family provider (Weaver-Hightower, 2003, p. 478). However, I follow other scholars who have cautioned that identifying such a “crisis” furthers a shallow conception of heteronormative masculinity that leans toward biological determinism, hiding the complex, multifaceted realities of constructing a gender identity. Matthew Gutmann’s (1996) work on understanding *machismo* in Mexico, for example, challenges the universal assumption of Mexican men as *machista*. Gutmann’s analysis of gender performance complicates the supposed hegemony of *machismo* – similar to the supposed hegemony of dangerous, uninterested young men in Honduras – and aims to “undo our ability to speak of a unitary Mexican man, or Mexican urban man, or even a Mexican urban working class man, in any reasonable manner” (ibid, p. 3). Though dominant ideas about masculinity certainly obscure the heterogeneity of men’s identities as Jonathan’s comments exemplify, social norms and well-known ideas about working-class masculinity and schooling still hold significant power for young men. Their identity related to education and decision-making about school is exercised against a powerful discourse that connects poor young men with rising rates of crime and violence, infusing perceptions of working-class masculinity with fear, mistrust and panic.

7.1.4. Male Employment Responsibilities

Family responsibilities specific to oldest sons, and men in general, were another common explanation for the lack of boys in high school classrooms. Responsibilities such as working to support family, or leaving school to give younger siblings the chance

²⁸ I understand *eso es lo bueno* here to mean a combination of “that’s my advantage” and “that’s the good thing (for me).”

to attend, were seen as a sacrifice that boys sometimes had to make. Eduardo explained how for men, going to school is *“mas complicado porque la mayoría de mis compañeros, trabajan bastante. Y las mujeres, son pocos los recursos que tienen, por ejemplo la mujer casi no trabaja, una que otra que trabaja pero hay otros que están en la casa no mas* [more complicated because the majority of my [male] classmates, they work a lot. And women don’t have as many resources, like women don’t often work – there are a few here and there who do but others are just at home].” In this explanation, both men and women are disadvantaged. While women have fewer resources because they don’t often work, men have to deal with more limitations to going to school because of the time they spend working. Further, Eduardo reasoned that since many women are mainly spending time in the home, they often decide to go to school.

Elodie, a private school student, illustrated a similar imagined scenario of the gendered dynamics of schooling decisions in poor, working-class families. She clarified that she was talking about public schools in order to make clear that she was referring to lower-class families:

También hay padres que, solo porque es varón no quieren pagar la educación o no lo quieren mandar al colegio para que ayude a su hermana, la mujer menor. Hablando también de las escuelas publicas, también hay papas que ... digamos es, un varón el mayor. Entonces, trabaja, y ayuda pagar los estudios de la menor, que supongo sea una mujer.

There are also parents who, just because [their child] is a boy they don’t want to pay for education or they don’t want to send him to high school so that he can help his sister, the younger girl. Talking about public schools, you know, there are also parents who ... let’s say a boy is the oldest. So, he works, and he helps to pay for the schooling of the younger one, who would be a girl.

I asked if the same dynamic would happen if the oldest child were a girl, but Elodie felt it would be different: *“La ponen a estudiar, y cuando se gradúa que trabaje, y le ayude a los demás.* [They would put her in school, and when she graduates she’d work, and help the rest].” Thus gender was the primary determinant in her perspective, not financial restraints – if the oldest child was a girl, she would have to get through school no matter what. If the oldest child were a boy, the traditional male responsibility of providing for family would fall on his shoulders, even if that meant he was unable to graduate himself. Elodie’s teacher, Samantha, had also seen boys who left public

schooling – and occasionally private school – because of the weight of these responsibilities. However, as she explained these stories she corrected her earlier description of this problem as specific to boys: *“igual hay niñas que se ven en ese problema de tener que ayudar, o tener que trabajar para poder estudiar. Es económico* [but at the same time, you know, there are girls that you see with this problem of having to help, or having to work. The problem is financial].” Others also described similar circumstances in which family poverty (and need for young family members to work) was the main driver of dropout, positioning employment responsibilities a problem for poor students in general. At the same time, a responsibility to work was framed as key to traditional working-class masculinity, with many students and teachers referencing an inevitable male responsibility to work to explain gender disparity in classroom.

7.2. Young Men’s Stories of Temporary Dropout: Disillusioned With School

7.2.1. Kevin (19 years old)

When I spoke to Kevin, he was in 10th grade at Colegio Nacional. Kevin described his family’s financial status as generally “fine,” positioning his family as solidly working-class – not poor enough to worry constantly about money, not wealthy enough to go to private school. Our interview tape is filled with the usual sounds of school at Colegio Nacional: chairs screeching and doors slamming, students yelling, running and laughing, and loud banging from ongoing construction as we sat in an empty classroom with the door half-closed. This was Kevin’s second time in 10th grade – when he was 15 he dropped out of 9th grade, enrolled again about two years later, passed 9th grade, and then failed 10th grade. When we spoke, he was approaching the last quarter of his repeated 10th grade year and would have two years left after that:

Kevin: *Me salí a mitad de tercero. Por problemas personales ya no quería seguir estudiando. Ya como que me había aburrido ya el estudio.*

ES: *Y como se hizo la decisión para salir?*

Kevin: *Yo lo decidí. Mi mama me regañaba todos los días. Porque al principio deje de ir a clases. Ella siempre me iba a levantar, que tenés que ir a estudiar, que tenés que ir a estudiar y yo*

no le hacia caso a ella. No pues ... al principio era difícil porque, como no es profesional uno, con todo allá y el trabajo. Y en este momento mi mama con un esposo de una compañera de ella, fue que me consiguió trabajo. Sin eso era difícil ...porque como ... imposible se puede decir.

ES: *Y como fue que regreso?*

Kevin: *Me puse a pensar y verlo ... darle la misma felicidad a mi mama que cuando en la primaria.*

Kevin: I left [school] halfway through 9th grade. Because of personal problems, I didn't want to keep studying. It's like I had gotten bored with school.

ES: And how was the decision made that you'd leave school?

Kevin: I made the decision. My mom pleaded with me every day. Because at first I stopped going to classes. And she'd always go to wake me up, saying you have to go to school, you have to go to school and I didn't pay attention to what she said. So I mean ... at first it was difficult because, like when you're not a professional, with everything all set and a job. And it was then that my mom, through the husband of a co-worker of hers, it was then that she got me a job. Without that it was hard [to get a job]... because, you know ... impossible, you could say.

ES: And how did it happen that you came back to school?

Kevin: I started thinking and saw things clearly ... [I wanted to] give my mom the same happiness as when I graduated from primary.

7.2.2. Jonathan (18 years old)

A classmate of Kevin's in a classroom with eight boys and thirty-seven girls, Jonathan was also in 10th grade at the time of our interview. Jonathan's family was struggling financially, which he described as an economic situation that was "*normal, ni alta ni baja, porque nosotros la ayudamos así pues* [normal, not high or low, because we help with the situation as best we can, you know]," though he described worrying about money, especially when there was nothing to eat. The oldest of five siblings, he and his brothers were living with his mother after his father had gone to the United States to work a few years earlier. He recalled being on the honor roll in 6th grade after working hard in school, and knew that his mother depended on him, at least, to graduate and be

able to help the rest of his siblings. He described how he had left school for about a year, before finishing 9th grade:

Jonathan: *No pues, [risa] eso fue por un ... que andaba yo enamorada de una muchacha. Como ella no vivía allí cerca, entonces como yo tengo una familia que vive allí cerca donde ella, me salí para ir a trabajar al campo. Y no mas como vivía cerca ella, me fui para allí. Solo estuve un año allí, de allí me volví a venir para acá para estudiar.*

ES: *Y que dijeron sus padres?*

Jonathan: *Nah, que no pensara en eso.*

ES: *Estaban enojados?*

Jonathan: *Nah, enojados, enojados no, si no que ... me estaban diciendo que pensara bien las cosas.*

ES: *Y como fue que regreso?*

Jonathan: *No, por mi mami, que me dijo que me tenia que graduar yo, que ya había llegado a 3ero que tenia que graduarme, que me faltaba poco.*

ES: *Entonces ella cambio su perspectiva?*

Jonathan: *Si, me vine para acá entonces.*

Jonathan: Well no [laughs] that was because ... because I was all in love with this girl. Since she didn't live close to here, and I have family who lives close to where she lives, I left to go work in the fields. And just because she lives close by, I went out there. I lived with my family and we worked together as a family to help each other. I was only there for a year, and after that I came back here to study.

ES: What did your parents say?

Jonathan: Nah, that I stop thinking about all that.

ES: Were they mad?

Jonathan: Not like mad, mad, no ... more like they were telling me to think hard about things.

ES: How did it happen that you came back?

Jonathan: No, for my mom, she told me that I had to graduate, that I'd already gotten to 9th grade, that I had to graduate, that I only had a little left.

ES: So she changed your mind?

Jonathan: Yeah, I came back here then.

7.2.3. Eduardo (17 years old)

Eduardo had graduated from public primary school, and started right away at one of the more prestigious public high schools in Malagueña, Colegio Maria de Jesus. However, his lack of interest in doing his homework led to failing four classes, and his mom's decision to pull him out of school if he wasn't going to put in any effort: "*Yo era muy haragán y a Mami le mentía pues, que 'Mami no nos dejaron tarea' y era mentira porque nos dejaron bastante pues, por lo mas solo por no hacer tarea va, por eso la mentira* [I was really lazy, I'd lie to Mami like 'Mami they didn't give us any homework' but it was a lie because they gave us a lot actually, but just to not do the homework, you know, that's why I lied]." He had stayed at home for the year and a half, an "idle youth" according to dropout literature, or one of the many students who drop out and "*son una papada ... haciendo nada* [are slackers²⁹ ... doing nothing]," according to Kevin's description of dropouts in our earlier interview. During this time, Eduardo watched his classmates continue on to 8th grade and observed his brother's academic achievements. At 15 years old, he started distance-education for lower secondary school at Educatodos, where he had gotten to 9th grade by the time we had our interview. He described his experience while he was out of school:

ES: *Se sintió presionado durante este tiempo que no estaba en colegio?*

Eduardo: *Mmm ... si. Me arrepentía pues. Me quedaba no mas pensando que por puro haragán no hacia esto y me arrepentí pues, por no estar estudiando.*

ES: *Porque empezó en este colegio?*

Eduardo: *Un amigo me dijo, mira me dijo, allí no es tan difícil que se diga, pero si es algo difícil ... me dicen que allí en Colegio Nacional se gasta mas. Las clases son mas tranquilas allá que allá, aquí, gasta menos y aprendes mas. Mami a mí me dijo, "Es la ultima oportunidad, y si vos no aprovechas, es problema tuyo. No te voy a ayudar si no aprovechas ... si la aprovechas, si. Si no, no contás conmigo."*

ES: Did you feel a lot of pressure during the time you weren't in school?

²⁹ This use of the word "papada" is similar to the English phrase "a bump on a log"

Eduardo: Mmm ... yeah. I regretted it, I guess. I'd start thinking that just to be lazy I didn't do it and I regretted it, I guess, I regretted not studying.

ES: Why did you start here at this school?

Eduardo: My friend told me, look, it's not like really hard, but it's kind of hard ... they say that at Colegio Nacional you spend more. The classes are more relaxed at Educatodos than Colegio Nacional, here you spend less and learn more. My mom said, "This is the last chance, if you don't take advantage of it, it's your problem. I'm not going to help you if you don't take advantage ... if you do, I'll help. If you don't, then don't count on me."

7.3. Key Themes in Narratives of Young Men Returning to Education

Understanding temporary dropout allows us to see how time spent outside of school impacts young people, and under what circumstances they are able to reintegrate into education. As Kevin, Jonathan and Eduardo's stories of drop out illuminate, each of these three boys explored possibilities for life outside of school, articulating their experiences within dominant master narratives of an intrinsic male dislike of school or a rejection of school to take up the employment responsibilities of traditional masculinity. But gendered and classed narratives of education are not fixed, as public opinions and stereotypes are constantly transforming alongside structural changes in society. In this section I will explore how these three young men's experiences with the harsh reality of leaving school before graduation changed their commitment to the value of schooling – with their "real world" experience outside of schooling, they had seen that there are increasingly fewer options for getting ahead and overcoming poverty in Honduras without high school graduation.

7.3.1. *Social Environment and Comfort*

Back in school after a period of temporary dropout, none of these boys felt that they'd be interested in going to another school if they could, though many complained about the quality of the education they were receiving. As other stories of temporary dropout have illustrated – such as Elizabeth's experience returning to school after her friends have moved to the next grade, and subsequently dropping out due to her

negative social experience (detailed in Chapter 5) – a positive reintegration into a caring school community proved to be essential for young people returning to school after temporary dropout. Kevin, Jonathan and Eduardo articulated how a sense of belonging was an important factor in their engagement and identification with their school. They each expressed a strong appreciation for feeling comfortable at school:

Kevin: *No, creo que no [me iría a otro colegio]. Aunque pudiera no me fuera de aquí.*

ES: *Esta feliz aquí?*

Kevin: *Si, me siento cómodo aquí.*

Kevin: No, I don't think I'd [go to another school]. Even if I could I wouldn't leave here.

ES: You're happy here?

Kevin: Yeah, I feel comfortable here.

Eduardo: *No pues aquí ... los profesores son buenos profesores. Lo tratan bien a uno, los compañeros también. Es bonito estar aquí.*

Eduardo: No, I mean, here ... the teachers are good teachers. They treat you well, the classmates too. It's nice to be here.

Jonathan: *[Estoy en este colegio] por todos las amistades que tengo aquí, verdad, y por los profesores ... no me llegara estando con otros profesores, he estado desde primero aquí y voy a terminar aquí, yo creo.*

Jonathan: [I'm at this school] because of the friendships I have here, you know, and because of the teachers ... I wouldn't be able to get into learning from other teachers, I've been here since 9th grade and I'm going to finish here, I think.

Though friends and teachers were not prominent themes in their stories of dropping out, concerns for feeling comfortable at school underlined their descriptions of returning and staying in school. Jonathan's decision not to enroll in school in the rural town where he had moved to be closer to his girlfriend, for example, was closely related to feeling uncomfortable and disconnected in the school environment: "*Colegio hay, allá. Pero no me gusta el lugar allí. No se, porque ya me acostumbre a vivir aquí.* [There is a school there. But I didn't like that place. I don't know, because I'm used to living here]." For these boys, the journey back to school involved a new perspective and a

higher level of dedication to schooling. When Jonathan, Eduardo and Kevin recommitted themselves to schooling, being part of a caring community of friends and teachers was important as they reintegrated into the school environment.

7.3.2. Mother's Influence

Students' mothers played a prominent role in their stories of returning to school after temporary dropout, compounding perceptions of feminine associations with education. Each of these three boys lived in different circumstances – Eduardo lived with his father and siblings, while his mother was working in the US; Jonathan lived with his mother and siblings, while his father was working in the US; and Kevin lived with his 22 year-old cousin, while his mother was working in Tegucigalpa (his father was absent in his narrative). Jonathan's mother was his inspiration to go to school: "*Como ella no estudio, quiere que yo me gradué aunque sea solo yo* [Since she didn't study, she wants me to graduate even if I'm the only one³⁰]." He came back to school because of his mom, who succeeded in changing his mind about working in the fields – her influence outweighed his father's, who had been consistently urging Jonathan to leave school and join him in the United States. Kevin's mother was also his main source of inspiration. He reflected on the excitement of graduating from primary school, where seeing "*la alegría de la madre, la mama mía por ejemplo, ella estaba bien alegre cuando salí de la escuela* [the happiness of your mom, like my mom for example, she was so happy when I finished primary school]" was a strong memory. His mom scolded him and pleaded with him to go to school when he got bored with school, though she eventually helped him find a job. But she was also the motivation for his return to school, which Kevin described as a decision to make his mom proud by graduating.

Eduardo's mother, who was supporting his schooling through her employment in the United States, would not tolerate his failing grades and lack of effort in 7th grade, pulling him out of school before he officially failed the grade: "*No pues me iba quedando en como cuatro materias, no pude mas ...Mami no me dejo hacerlo mas* [Well I was failing like four classes, I couldn't keep going ... Mami didn't let me go anymore]." While

³⁰ As the oldest of five siblings, if Jonathan was the "only one" to graduate, it was assumed that he could at least teach basic knowledge to rest of his siblings.

he was out of school, his mother scolded him and gave him advice, pushing him to think about his future. Eduardo's mom was unwilling to pay for him to fail classes or be a lazy student, so his return to school was "one last chance" as she agreed for him to go to distance-learning classes at Educator: "Me dieron esta oportunidad gracias a Dios, y lo estoy aprovechando [They gave me this opportunity, thank God, and I'm taking advantage of it]." Students' mothers, and occasionally fathers, often figured into narratives as their main inspiration to finish school, as well as the strongest enforcer of their educational obligations.

7.3.3. Attitudes About the Value of Schooling

Changing ideas about the value of schooling were a strong underlying theme in stories of returning to school, which were often articulated as a critical moment of realization or a determination to change after temporary dropout. I found two sub-themes related to changing attitudes about the value of schooling in these narratives: the value of education for employment prospects, and the value of education for the personal project of *saliendo adelante* (getting ahead) and becoming someone.

Kevin and Jonathan both experienced the harsh realities of employment when they left school – Kevin sold agricultural products with a friend of his mother's, and Jonathan worked on a farm in a rural state with his extended family. Kevin had found that it was impossible to get his job without the personal connection from his mother, finding very few options without at least a high school diploma. His experience working was challenging, and left him with a strong determination to stay in school:

Kevin: *No, no, tendría que pensar una y mil veces para dejar el estudio otra vez. Si. Porque allí como esta la situación en nuestro país, si uno no es profesional no se alimentaría ni nada.*

ES: *Puede pensar en alguna razón que tendría que dejar los estudios de nuevo?*

Kevin: *Pues ... ninguna, creo yo. Siempre buscaría una solución para seguir estudiando.*

Kevin: No, no, I'd have to think a million and one times to leave school again. Yeah. Because the way the situation is in our

country right now, if you're not professional you can't even eat or anything.

ES: Can you think of any reason that you'd have to leave school again?

Kevin: Well ... there's no reason I'd leave school again, I think. I'd always look for a solution to keep studying.

Jonathan's experience working in a rural town had a similar impact on his dedication to school: "*Nah hambre. No los dejo ya. Cuesta recuperar un año ya. Es mas, el tiempo perdido ... es mejor estudiar que dejar el estudio así a medio paro.* [No way, man. I'm not leaving my studies now. It's hard work to get that year back. And what's more, the lost time ... it's better to study than to leave your education halfway done]." A perspective focused on the value of a high school diploma in the future was a key motivating factor for these boys in returning to school – Jonathan explained how graduating was very important to get a job, which was impossible without a diploma. Similarly, while Kevin had previously left school to focus on working, his renewed dedication to school was centered on the knowledge that he had to graduate to even have a chance at getting a good job.

Eduardo's family was able to support him financially while he wasn't in school, though negative experiences outside of school changed his opinion about education, as well. He described how at his first high school, "*Siempre dejan bastante (tarea) ... como yo era haragán, no los hacía. No me importaba entonces no los hacía. Pero ahora es diferente* [They'd give a lot of homework. But because I was so lazy, I didn't do it. I didn't care so I didn't do it. But now it's different]." Watching his peers move up in school and his brother's academic achievements had a strong impact on him:

Decía yo en mi mente, como se va a poner a creer que mis compañeros ... o a veces iba a traer notas de mi hermano, en colegio y lo miraba que pucha, excelencia académica pues, y yo que porque yo no lo hacía? Después ya miraba mis compañeros pues en segundo curso y yo pucha, digo yo ... me quedaba no mas pensando que por puro haragán no hacía esto y me arrepentí pues, por no estar estudiando. Pues me puse a pensar que pucha, no es justo que mis padres están gastando de puro gusto y yo no estoy haciendo nada en nada.

I'd say to myself, how is it possible that my classmates ... or like sometimes I'd go get my brother's grades in high school and I'd see, man, academic excellence, you know, and why didn't I do that? Then

I saw my classmates in 8th grade and I'd think, man, just because of pure laziness I didn't do it and I regretted it, not studying. Then I'd start to think, man, it's not fair that my parents are spending money like it's just for fun and I'm not doing anything in anything.

When we spoke, Eduardo's current focus was on entering the Air Force, for which 9th grade graduation was necessary. This was his ticket to becoming someone, fueling his motivation to better himself and approach his schooling differently: "*Quiero superarme pues, en varias formas. Por ejemplo, me ilusiono en entrar la base pero no sabría, es Dios el que decide* [I want to overcome, you know, in many ways. I'm focused on getting into the Air Force but I don't know, God is the one who decides³¹]."

7.4. Alex's Story: School Disillusionment With Financial Privilege

The notion that education is not just an activity for the elite, but an intrinsic right for all people is part of a continuing shift in the social imagination of education in Latin America. Amidst the structural violence of poverty, inequality and processes of social exclusion, schooling remains a high-stakes endeavor for working-class young people whose families are struggling financially. While the discourse of education as a human right is expressed by many Hondurans, deep-seated inequality in society means that working-class families cannot always afford to conceptualize education as the inevitable full-time activity for their children until adulthood. As Eduardo's story illustrates, parents may not be willing to continue paying for schooling if their child is failing multiple subjects, or as in Kevin's case, if their son is determined to work, parents may have to relent instead of paying for him to refuse to go to class. With the pressure to overcome poverty, get ahead in life and become someone, a young man declaring himself uninterested in school will have to look for another way to achieve life success.

³¹ Eduardo's plans, however, have unfolded differently – he did not graduate from 9th grade, again because of failing grades, and he failed the entrance exam for the Air Force. Shortly after leaving school, he migrated to New York to join his mother and work with his uncle's tree-cutting business, where he had started with a wage of \$500 USD per week (about twenty times the minimum wage in Honduras). Though he was no longer focused on becoming someone through education, his determination to succeed had shifted to possibilities through employment.

Stories of boys' disengagement and disillusionment with schooling were not exclusive to working-class young men. However, actually dropping out was not the normal outcome of stories of school disillusionment I heard from relatively wealthy young men like Alex – he had stayed in school throughout a trajectory of disengagement, failing and a renewed dedication to schooling. Alex's mother owned a successful bar/restaurant in Malagueña, and his American father was working abroad, sending money and visiting a few times a year. He described very negative experiences in primary school in Spain and Honduras, telling stories of being bullied and suffering. But as his social experience started to get better in lower secondary, his dedication to school seriously wavered. He had been almost totally disengaged with schooling, which he described "either not going or not paying attention at all," for the last few years: he had failed sixth grade, failed seventh grade twice, and gone to five different private schools after failing or getting expelled from each one as he repeated sixth and seventh grade. He described what had happened during this period of time:

Alex: *Sinceramente no se que paso ... es que los videojuegos eran una adicción para este tiempo. Era adicto a eso. Y le robaba dinero a mi madre solo por ir a jugar. Todo el día pasaba allí.*

ES: *Y como fue que salió de eso?*

Alex: *Es que, como, me dijeron que la enfermedad de mis ojos estaba ya grave, y me puse a pensar de que, pucha, me voy a poner lentes y todo para seguir jugando o que sea estudiar ya. Empezar a estudiar y ponerme serio en el estudio.*

Alex: I don't know what happened ... videogames was an addiction during that time. I was addicted to that. And I'd rob money from my mom just to go and play. I'd spend all day there.

ES: And how was it that you got out of all that?

Alex: Well, when they said that the problems in my eyes were getting serious, and I started to think, man, I'm going to put on glasses and all of that just to keep playing, or is it going to be studying. Starting to study and getting serious about studying.

Alex's narrative of returning to school shared many of the same themes prominent in Jonathan, Kevin and Eduardo's narratives. He described feeling very

comfortable in his current school environment, receiving advice from a parent (in this case, his father) and a changed attitude toward schooling: “*Lo que hice antes de entrar a este colegio fue cambiar de personalidad. Completamente. Antes, me valía lo que me dijeron. Ahora tomo el tiempo para pensar en lo que me dicen* [What I did before I came to this school was completely change personality. Completely. Before, I didn’t give a damn what they said to me. Now I take the time to think about what people say to me].” But regardless of these similarities, Alex’s experience does not fit into the discourse of “failing boys” – working-class young men pressured to join gangs, take on employment responsibilities, or reject schooling completely. Given his economic status, his continued enrollment was not questioned as he struggled to engage with schooling. His family’s financial privilege created the possibility for his mother to enforce a rule that schooling is not a choice: “*Como yo soy menor de edad, prácticamente mi madre no me obliga, es obligatorio prácticamente* [Since I am a minor, really it’s not that my mother makes me go, but it’s pretty much obligatory to be in school].”

Rigid gender norms and classist assumptions are a form of structural violence, shaping young people’s view of themselves, their opportunities and the world around them. Working class boys and girls are not only fighting the impact of family poverty and institutional constraints on their educational outcomes, but strong gendered and classed narratives that create a division between poor, working-class subjectivities and high educational achievement. A deficiency-informed discourse of dropout falls short of accounting for the impact of these oppressive gendered and classed narratives of opportunity on the educational decisions of young people living in urban poverty. Most importantly, a focus on dropout as a one-time event of failure squarely places Kevin, Jonathan and Eduardo’s stories into the discourse of “failing and uninterested” working-class boys, with the stories of the seven young women considered in earlier chapters as examples working-class girls who “can’t make it” in education and “stay back” doing household work. This shortsighted analysis obscures the most important part of these ten young people’s stories – their eventual return to school and continuing commitment to their education.

With an analytical framework that allows us to view the temporary nature of many dropout experiences, it is possible to see how this time spent outside of school is slowly

changing the discourse of educational value for working-class young people. As Eduardo, Kevin and Jonathan's stories illustrate, their time outside of school showed them that education has become increasingly necessary to get ahead, fueling a strong re-commitment to education based on positive connections to their schools, the support and encouragement of their mothers and a new-found conviction in the value of education. Their return to education was articulated as a critical moment of personal dedication to "get serious about school," setting themselves apart from the dominant discourse of dangerous, failing, uninterested boys.

8. CONCLUSION

Si dejo mis estudios, seria como que deje todo. Sin educación estamos fritos [If I left my studies, it'd be like I left everything. Without education we're screwed].

(Carlos, 9th grade, Educatodos)

Three important interventions into the literature and discourse on drop out, “at-risk” youth and schooling in Honduras have emerged from these narratives: (1) the practice of categorizing young people as either “students” or “dropouts” obscures how youth may move fluidly between these categories as part of longer-term projects of achieving life success and overcoming poverty (2) a shift to understanding dropout over a longer time frame, in order to account for students who drop out temporarily, and understand the reasons they circulate in and out of school and (3) how structural factors, such as poverty, social exclusion, institutional-level failures of schooling, and classed and gendered discourse of dropout must be prioritized in place of individual-level deficiencies to truly understand why students leave (and often return to) school.

The nuanced, contradictory nature of students’ narratives complicate large-scale studies that seek to understand the cause of dropout through a finite list of possible “reasons.” Viewing educational success or failure in single snapshots of time is far too simplistic, and fails to acknowledge that education and social mobility are lifelong projects, especially for those experiencing structural violence. Students’ stories of both staying in school and dropping out of school reveal a strong class-based discourse for discussing educational success or failure. Emphasizing students’ experiences, choices and goals reminds us that it is very difficult to generalize “youth” or “students” or “dropouts.” Moving forward, it is imperative that qualitative research continues to focus on situating educational decisions in the context of a student’s life, and pursuing a better understanding the structural-societal constraints that shape a student’s journey in pursuing education.

Critical education researchers have argued for an increased focus on how advantages and disadvantages are reproduced in the functioning of schools and within research agendas such as the deficiency or risk framework (Gardner, 2011). Scholars have argued for moving away from dropout prevention programs that focus only on youth deemed at-risk, to avoid perpetuating systemic social exclusion (Kendall & Shin, 2012). Other have noted the importance of a family-centered approach to understanding schooling decisions and creating programs that value students and families' identities and concerns, moving away from a scientific, top-down approach (Kendall & Shin, 2012; Herr & Anderson, 1997). Researchers consistently call for improving teacher quality and school quality in tandem with larger efforts to create inclusive school environments (Kendall & Shin, 2012; Herr & Anderson, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). Policy recommendations following qualitative research with youth in school emphasize a broad range of programming and policy interventions in a holistic, community-based approach – “those that change the family, school or community environment in long-lasting and positive ways” (Kumpfer & Alvarado, 1998, as cited in Kendall & Shin, 2012).

All but these one of scholars, however, are working outside of Latin America and tailoring these recommendations for the United States and other “developed” countries. Recommendations for impoverished, historically oppressed countries such as Honduras generally focus on quantity over quality – increasing the number of schools, increasing the number of students in school and increasing the number of graduates. While these “quantity” increases are important, the holistic interventions mentioned above are just as essential for “developing” countries to allow meaningful, long-term engagement in school for young people. Structural violence – social structures that systematically marginalize the poor from opportunities for survival and success – are at the core of the experiences of temporary dropout discussed here, and a research and policy focus on these structures of oppression will create more sustainable and holistic solutions to problems such as deep-rooted educational inequality.

Educational inequality, institutional failures and oppressive classed and gendered discourses of educational opportunity present immediate prospects for policy intervention, along with steps to reduce poverty and inequality overall in Honduras. The massive quality gap between alternative, public and private school and resulting inequality in opportunities for success exacerbates already-severe inequality and

reinforces the exclusion of the poor. School policies that force students to drop out because of academic failure must be eliminated³², and students are in desperate need more opportunities for tutoring and academic support. There is great potential for using the classroom setting to begin conversations about gender roles and discourses in society, where teachers and school personnel can begin to actively combat discourses of “failing boys” and working-class girls who “stay back”.

Increasing investment in the public secondary school system within an anti-oppressive framework could bring much-needed improvements to school infrastructure, teacher’s capacity, respecting teacher’s rights, reducing costs for students and prioritizing students’ needs. While the new Fundamental Law for Education appears to be a renewed commitment to the Honduran education system, a thinly-veiled decentralized scheme for privatizing educational control will sacrifice the integrity of public education while missing the opportunity to collaborate with teachers. A continuing push for privatizing education may well deepen educational inequality, changing the discourse of education from equality to equity, where rights are not intrinsically deserved, but won by an individual through behavior and entitlement.

Longitudinal studies are most effective for understanding social mobility and educational achievement, and this study does not benefit from such a perspective. However, students and their families can share a long-term personal perspective of their experiences in education, and we can better understand decisions about education by listening to these narratives. Positive stories of students getting ahead and overcoming oppression by going back to school shapes a counterstory to discourses of failing, at-risk youth, bringing to light to a longer-term process of survival and success that truly describes the experiences of many students in Malagueña.

³² The new Fundamental Law for Education mandates the abolition of fees for academic failure, though it remains to be seen exactly how and when this will be implemented, and how forced dropout policies will be impacted.

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Appendices

Appendix A.

Basic Structure of the Honduran Education System

The Honduran education system is organized into four levels. *Educación pre-básica* (pre-basic education) consists of a network of pre-kindergarten centers for children ages 3-5. *Educación básica* (primary school) includes grades 1-9, and is divided into Cycle 1, Cycle 2 and Cycle 3, with a standardized test marking the transition between each cycle. Cycle 1 (grades 1-3) and Cycle 2 (grades 4-6) include the same learning material for all children, and basic primary school graduation is celebrated in grade 6. After primary graduation, school enrollment is no longer compulsory. Students must decide between an academic or pre-vocational stream at the start of Cycle 3 (grades 7-9), which is also known as *Ciclo Común*. *Educación media* (secondary school) consists of three years (grades 10-12) of either academic or vocational schooling, ending with graduation with an academic or professional secondary school diploma. The vocational-track professional diploma differs from attending trade school, as it also requires completion of general high school academic requirements. These last three years are referred to as *Ciclo Diversificado*.

The last two periods of schooling causes some confusion in terminology, as well as statistics consistency. After the devastation of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, the Honduran Secretary of Education launched a “process of educational transformation” based on the introduction of a new *Currículo Nacional Básico* (Basic National Curriculum) that has been accelerated by the recent passing of the Fundamental Law for Education in 2013. These changes included the designation of grades 7-9 as the last phase of primary school, to encourage a new norm of mandatory primary schooling consisting of nine years instead of six (UNESCO-IBE, 2010). However, in the general Latin American region and in scholarly publications, the term “secondary school” is used consistently to refer to schooling beginning after graduation from grade 6 (SITEAL, 2010a). For the sake of clarity, in this research the terms “lower secondary school” and “upper secondary school” will be used to distinguish between grades 7-9 and grades 10-12. The general term “secondary school” or “high school” will be used to refer to grades 7-12, following the majority of literature in Latin America and internationally. In Spanish-language interviews, students generally used the term *colegio* to refer to secondary school generally, *ciclo* to refer to grades 7-9 and *carrera*, *bachiller* or *ciclo diversificado* to refer to grades 10-12.

The last level of schooling, *educación superior* (higher education), refers to 4-5 years of university-level schooling. Students with a professional secondary school diploma (from the pre-vocational stream in Cycle 3) must complete equivalency schooling if they wish to enter university, whereas students graduating secondary school in the academic stream may enter university immediately. Students graduating from Instituto Cristo with an Arts & Sciences degree, for example, can enter university the next year, whereas the students graduating from Colegio Nacional with a Computer Technician degree may have to complete some equivalency classes before starting their university career.

			AGE
Pre-Basic Education			3-5
Basic Education (Escuela)			
Grades 1-6	COMPULSORY ENROLLMENT		6-11
Secondary School* (Colegio)	Ciclo Comun		
Grade 7	(students at Educatodos)		12
Grade 8			13
Grade 9			14
	Ciclo Diversificado/Carrera		
Grade 10	Academic Track (students at Instituto Cristo)	Vocational/Professional Track (students at Colegio Nacional)	15
Grade 11			16
Grade 12			17
University			18-22

*Recent changes would have designated grades 1-9 as “primary school,” to extend compulsory enrollment. In popular discourse, it remains that grades 1-6 are considered primary school (*escuela*), and grades 7-12 are considered secondary school (*colegio*).