Schooling in (Il)legal Economies:

A Comparative Study of Educational Experiences in the Midst of the Drug War

Project Description

In the middle of a room that served as a warehouse, 125 kilograms of coca leaf made a dark green and brown pile. The smell was similar to that of freshly cut grass, but sharper. To one side, a display case showed hand-packed coca flour and greenish pastries. Enrique, one of the community leaders who envisioned coca leaf as raw material for the food and agro-industry, offered us some coca cookies. While we waited for his colleagues to pack the coca, Enrique told the story of Lerma, a tiny municipality in rural southern Colombia. His story ranged from the 1980s, when drug-related violence nearly wiped out the town, to the town's more recent alliance with Colombia's National Training Service to explore commercial uses for coca. He proudly shared that, today, young people freely talk about coca, do research to recover its ancestral uses, and host workshops on collectivism and social change. But, as Lerma ventures into the legal uses of coca and young people learn about their past and the possibility of a peaceful future, the illegal cocaine trade keeps fueling a relentless War on Drugs inflicting violence on school communities and challenging the legitimacy of the state.

Governments across the world have justified the War on Drugs in the name of protecting children and youth from a global menace, turning coca, marijuana, and poppy fields into battlefields and the communities that make a living from the drug market into police, military and chemical warfare targets. For children and youth across the drug-supply chain, anti-drug policies mean separations from loved ones (Barra & Joloy, 2011), opportunities to participate in criminal economies (Chávez & Butti, 2020), health risks associated with aerial glyphosate fumigation (Rodríguez, 2020), and lower school-level achievement test scores (Jarillo et al., 2016). Fear of violence, threats against teachers, and direct attacks on schools by legal and illegal armed forces result in a significant decrease in school attendance (Barra & Joloy, 2011). Pointing to the decades of drug-related violence, politicians, researchers, and media pundits have deemed the War on Drugs a failure (e.g., Seddon, 2020). In response, a global drug policy reform movement has emerged to decriminalize and differently

regulate demand, abandoning efforts to reduce supply by violent means (Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2020).

In Colombia, the country identified as one of the world's largest cocaine producers (UNODC, 2018), coca cultivation has largely defined the country's relations with the United States. Plan Colombia (2000-2016)—a bipartisan initiative[1] that provided the most extensive U.S. aid package ever received by a country in the western hemisphere—militarized coca cultivation, processing and distribution (Abadie et al., 2013) and boosted armed conflict in coca growing regions. Efforts to develop alternative crops have failed miserably (Puerta & Chaparro, 2019), and local farmers continue to rely on coca production to survive.

Within this violent agro-economy, a few cooperatives have taken the revolutionary step of developing new, legal markets for coca (Troyano & Restrepo 2018). In 2017, in Colombia's Cauca region, a farmers' organization in Lerma started commercializing coca for agro-industrial purposes. Through an alliance with Colombia's National Training Service, coca farmers obtained, for the very first time, a permit to purchase, transport, and stock raw coca leaves (Troyano & Restrepo, 2018). Thus, two coca-based commodity chains exist in Cauca: one sustains the global drug market, while the other feeds a licit economy of fertilizers and nutritional supplements for poultry.

The violent educational consequences of the War on Drugs have been examined almost entirely from a consumer perspective (Rodríguez-Gómez & Bermeo, 2020), and the impact of new national and global policies that aim to create a licit coca-based economy on children and their education have not been studied at all. The proposed study, located in different municipalities in Cauca, will examine how two global responses to coca production—the War on Drugs and the Drug Policy Reform movement—shape school life. To do so, I will examine the experiences of administrators, educators, and youth in schools located in two coca-growing areas—one taking part in the licit and one in the illicit drug economy. Conceptualized as an ethnographic study of the political and economic relationships shaping education in an area affected by long-term, drug-related armed conflict, this study places schooling at the interface of a political order established by the national state, challenged

[1] The president-elect of the United States, Joseph R. Biden, Jr., played a key role justifying this initiative in Congress. In May 2000, he authored a report to the Committee on Foreign Relations titled *Aid to Plan Colombia: The Time for U.S. Assistance is Now* (available here).

by illegal armed groups, and impacted by global drug policy; an agro-economic order with licit and illicit dimensions; and social responses that reflect the complexities of navigating safety and opportunity in exchange relations that serve as arenas for cultural activity and political expression (Bestor, 2001).

This proposal draws on my experience conducting ethnographic work on statecraft and educational policy in armed conflict-affected settings in South America, particularly Colombia and Ecuador, and my work with Catalyst, a network of youth and educators who address some of the most pressing cross-border problems in the region (Di Castri, 2020), including the War on Drugs. My study seeks to answer two research questions:

RQ1: How do the legal and illegal coca economies shape educational policies and practices?

RQ2: How do school administrators, teachers, and students make sense and experience the intersections of the coca economies, schooling, and political power?

To answer these questions, this comparative case study targets two K–12 schools in the Cauca region: one in El Tambo, where coca feeds cocaine production, and the other in Lerma, where farmers grow coca for legal purposes. To account for the global and local dimension of the War on Drugs, I combine archival work and document analysis of school-wide policies with interviews and in-depth participant observation. The research will shed light on a global phenomenon—the drug industry—that educational experts have largely overlooked, despite the fact that the War on Drugs directly impacts hundreds of millions of children around the world (Barra & Joloy, 2011). Through a comparative design, this ethnographic study will advance the field of education's understanding of the impact of opposing legal frameworks on the lived experiences of educators and youths. In so doing, the research links economic and political processes to education policy and schooling to provide a more holistic understanding of how global and international dynamics shape educational experiences; and tease apart whether coca decriminalization might offer real promise for transforming schooling for youth in the frontlines of coca production.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Violence against children is a global phenomenon that is often underreported (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2019). Even though the differentiation between victims of

conflict-related violence and victims of drug-related violence can be blurry, Save the Children (2019) calculates that nearly one-fifth of children and youth worldwide live in a conflict zone, and UNODC (2019) estimates that a total of 205,153 children aged 0 to 14 years were killed between 2008 and 2017. This number includes children killed in the context of organized crime, particularly drug trafficking, community violence, and gang-related violence. These figures show that schooling does not happen in isolation from armed conflict and related forms of violence; on the contrary, it illustrates how education is nested within wider political and economic arrangements (Novelli et al., 2014). Aware that both licit and illicit markets depend on state regulations to function, educators, and students are affected by both arrangements in multiple ways that can only be fully understood when the dynamics of armed conflict are situated at the intersection of politics and economics.

Since the early 2000s, the field of education in emergencies has analyzed the multifaceted relationships between education and armed conflict (Burde et al., 2017). Discussions in the field tend to focus on: (1) education as a tool for peaceful coexistence or as a catalyst of conflict, and (2) educational provision in conflict and protracted crisis (Pherali, 2019). This study fits into this latter strand of work.

Scholars who analyze the effects of armed conflict on education have prioritized the visible aspects of violence. This body of literature illustrates the manifold ways that education stakeholders suffer the physical consequences of armed conflict (e.g., Poirier, 2012). In situations and contexts of armed conflict, schools have been used for many types of military purposes: bases, barracks, detention centers, targets, and even recruitment centers for child soldiers (e.g., Burde et al., 2012). A recent report by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack provides ample evidence that, in recent years, school populations have been threatened, injured, tortured, and killed by armed groups while in school or on the way to or from school (GCPEA, 2015). In Colombia, between 1980 and 2018, the National Teachers Union reported a total of 1,088 educators' assassinations (Peña Castañeda, 2018). During the peace dialogues between the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) and the government (2013–2016), at least 10 teachers were killed by parties involved in the conflict, and 65 schools were either physically damaged, mined, or used for military purposes (UNICEF, 2016).

The vast majority of this literature emphasizes violence as a one-way force that prevents the *normal* operation of education systems and disrupts schools' capacity to guarantee learning. This emphasis on a deviation from "normality" raises crucial questions about school dynamics in settings where armed conflict is not an exception but simply another aspect of everyday life integrated into state and non-state actors' usual workings.

An emerging body of literature has started to explore teachers' and children's lived experiences of schooling in long-running conflicts (e.g., Vega & Bajaj, 2016). Though valuable, this work tends to study specific educational actors while ignoring the relationship among the state, the economy, and schooling. There is a dearth of research on how global and national political and economic arrangements linked to political insurgency and illicit economies influence school life. This gap is further confirmed by a recent systematic review of the literature on education in the context of the War on Drugs (Rodríguez-Gómez & Bermeo, 2020). Based on a content analysis of 420 articles published across 20 educational subfields, the review revealed an absence of educational studies about the intersection of schooling and the wider economic and political relationships in areas growing and commercializing illicit crops. Instead of viewing schools in isolation from the social context in which they are situated, in this proposal I nest schools in a web of social forces.

Analyses of the relationships among economic, political, and educational processes in education tend to reify the notion that the state can be understood through relatively simplistic state theories that assume homogeneity of state actors, institutions, and their logics. For example, urban education research tends to assume neoliberalism orients all school-related practices towards a "market discipline" (Lipman, 2011; Anyon 2014). Literature in emergency education tends to approach the state as a fragile entity, and to equate fragile states with a lack of political will. Therefore, weak institutions, policies, and public services serve as explanations for poor educational access. Although these two examples represent different niches within the broad education field, both are inclined to describe the state as a homogenous unit.

To make sense of the dual and even contradictory role the state plays in Cauca, I avoid taking the unity of the state as a given. Here I draw from literature in the field of anthropology of the state to approach the state as a network of social relationships with multiple sources of authority and multiple

legal systems (Cooper, 2019). Cooper (2019) highlights how, rather than a monolith attached to old ways of doing, the state is embedded in webs of relations that are susceptible to change and innovation. Hence, within the state individuals can organize to resist particular mandates and work together to advance local agendas and even introduce new and radical ideas (Cooper, 2019). Through this lens, the state contains contradictions and inconsistencies that can turn into great possibilities for social transformation (Gupta, 2012; Cooper, 2019). This pluralist account of the state helps me explain variation in drug policy and attend to the manifold ways in which education stakeholders respond to political and economic conditions. I consider the interplay between economic and political factors, mainly the market and the state (Collinson, 2003), to grasp how educators and students position themselves vis-à-vis the intersection of coca economies and political power. Aware that economies depend on government regulations to function (Anyon, 2014), this study approaches the coca market as a cultural construct. Precisely, I conceive the market as a localized set of social actors, transactional relationships, trade practices, and products that forges relationships and social practices (Bestor, 2001). From this standpoint, I plan to examine the effects of an illegal or legal coca economy on a school's management, curricular decisions, and relationships between adults and students, including the messages students receive from educators about their present and future affiliation with the coca economy and the armed conflict.

Research Design and Methodology

My overarching goal is to yield empirical insights that sharpen current understandings about schooling amidst the War on Drugs and the Drug Policy Reform movement. I aim to advance an understanding of politics and economics as nodes of complex socially constituted processes and generators of specific social relationships and practices in schools. Aware that such a study demands a historical and comparative perspective, I designed this project as a comparative case study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017), which incorporates a comparison of similar social processes in different locations with an analysis of how relationships among local, national, and international dynamics unfold and evolve across time. To build a robust dataset that traces the relationships among schooling, state operations,

and coca-based economies without losing sight of global dynamics, I rely on archival work, open-ended and semi-structured interviews, and participant observation.

Phase 1: Archival Work (Ongoing–early Fall 2021)

To understand the effects of United States and Colombia's state intervention in the Cauca region, I am conducting archival work in both countries. In the United States I prioritized the Library of Congress, the Central Intelligence Agency Library, and WikiLeaks Public Library of U.S. Diplomacy to identify documents related to U.S.-Colombia relations (1980-2020), particularly counternarcotics cooperation, and Plan Colombia in Cauca. In Colombia, I will examine the archives of the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Education. Across all archives, I will intentionally seek primary sources focused on Cauca and/or rural education in this region. I will schedule informal conversations with international and local experts and make official requests to the archives for public documents related to these topics. Aware that most documents in these official archives are produced by governments, in my analysis I will pay attention to the interests and sources of authority they cite, the problems and solutions they propose, and the changes they present over time. I will pay close attention to the rationales for military and non-military intervention and how these evolve across time and levels of policy implementation. This process will inform the design of interview protocols.

Phase 2: Sites, Interviews and Participant Observation (late Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

To make sense of the impact of (il)legal coca economies and the socio-political experiences they shape on schooling, I will conduct fieldwork in two K–12 schools, one in El Tambo and one in Lerma. Both are located in the Cauca region and serve comparable student populations: the first participates in an illicit coca economy and the second in a licit coca economy. I will prioritize work with students and teachers in 10th and 11th grades because Colombia's curricular guidelines and learning standards for these grades suggest that discussions about illicit substances, armed conflict, U.S. imperialism, and the global economy occur in these grades. Interviews will focus on participants' ideas and perceptions regarding the political and economic environment that surrounds each school; participant observations will prioritize school dynamics that intersect with the legality of the coca economy—for instance, class content, attendance tracking, and disciplinary measures.

After obtaining IRB approval, I plan to spend more than three months at each school to collect school policy documents; conduct two rounds of interviews with school administrators, teachers, and students; and engage in participant observation. When possible, I will also join and participate in the WhatsApp groups teachers have created. Through contacts I established in both sites, I also plan to conduct in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in each town, including coca traders and community leaders. These testimonies will be valuable in documenting how the coca trade has shifted in the last years and its implications for each school community. In order to understand how the legal and illegal coca economies shape educational policies and practices, my initial round of interviews will begin with questions about the transformation brought by the coca economy in each town and school in the last decade. Here I will emphasize school administration, curricular design and a thorough description of the school population, including parental livelihoods, students' participation in the coca economy, and their perspectives on the purposes of being educated in each milieu. I also envision these interviews as opportunities to build rapport with research participants. In a second interview round I will address how school administrators, teachers, and students make sense of the intersections of the coca economies, schooling, and political power more explicitly. To capture how the current politics of coca trade has (*or has not*) altered educational provision, policies, and practices, these semi-structured interviews will connect the content from the first interview to questions about the relationships among schools, armed actors (including law enforcement agencies like the police and the military), and illegal armed forces.

To capture dimensions of life that go beyond coherent interview narratives, interviews will be complemented with participant observations of what administrators, teachers, and students say and do. These will involve daily interactions in classes and less structured school environments such as public assemblies, hallways, and meetings. In the classroom, I will keep detailed field notes on teachers' and students' ideas about the armed conflict's transnational and national dimensions, including drug trafficking. Outside the classroom, I will capture participants' perceptions and practices related to students' engagement with the coca economy. Outside schools, guided by my contacts in El Tambo and Lerma, I aim to tour coca growing areas to acquaint myself with coca-cropping jargon and coca-related activities and to learn how youth and their parents relate to and participate in two

different coca economies (see Collinson, 2003). After interviews and observations, I will write descriptive memos with attention to the circumstances in which each took place and my first impressions.

Phase 3: Data Analysis (Fall 2021–Spring 2022)

To analyze the data, I plan to follow three lines of inquiry. The first focuses on *politics*. Here I examine how different groups' interests, including law enforcement agencies, training and research institutions, and armed militias, shape schools' policies, practices, missions, and messaging about the purpose of schooling. The second emphasizes *economics*. Here I concentrate on coca-related activities reported by participants and how these impact youth's schooling through new social roles, labor patterns, and opportunities for moneymaking. The last line explores areas of *school life*, such as school procedures and management practices and school culture and climate, curriculum design, particularly the nature of educator-youth relationships, with a focus on understanding how these are shaped by the political economic order created by state arrangements.

To develop a first understanding of the data and avoid creating external categories that obscure local meaning, I will read through the complete corpus and write descriptive memos, which will also inform my coding framework. Then, to connect the documents' content to participants' responses, I will code written documents and interview transcripts and memos in one NVivo file. This will facilitate my efforts to capture the tensions between what is said and done by the research participants and what was described and promised in the written policy documents. The coding will be done manually. Then, in writing the comparative analytical memos, I will explore if and how coca-related activities take on different meanings and implications for school communities situated in opposing legal frameworks. To achieve this, I plan to make frequent comparisons across schools and pinpoint instances when participants link schooling with broader political and economic configurations. Finally, to test my analytical insights, I will conduct reliability checks with key informants. Findings will be presented in academic conferences, such as the American Educational Research Association, Comparative and International Education Society and the International Society for the Study of Drug

Policy. I plan to write three peer-reviewed articles for journals interested in U.S. drug policy, anthropology of education, and education in emergencies, and a policy brief in English and Spanish.

Security Considerations

Drawing from my previous experience conducting fieldwork in areas affected by armed conflict in Colombia and Ecuador, I plan to prioritize and protect the physical and psychological integrity of my participants and myself by following the principle of "Do No Harm." I translate this principle into concrete strategies that rely on strong relationships with local allies, emphasize awareness regarding risk factors and trauma symptoms (see Loyle & Simoni, 2017), and prioritize participants over my research. While El Tambo and Lerma are ideal cases to compare the internal workings of schooling in two different political and economic frameworks, I selected these sites because I have strong ties with community leaders, teachers, and students in both locations.

Implications and Contributions

My study makes four major contributions. First, by looking at two active and opposing state and economic configurations conditioned by the global drug trade, this research expands current educational theorizing that tends to treat the state as a homogenous and dissolving unit in a neoliberal world. Second, by linking the War on Drugs and the Drug Policy Reform to everyday school life in Cauca's rural areas, this research contributes to current debates on the multifaceted relationships between armed conflict and schooling. It moves beyond description and reporting on physical attacks on schools to theorize how more subtle forms of insecurity and uncertainty linked to the legality of the economy manifest in everyday schooling. These empirical findings will contribute new insights to the academic field of emergency education. Third, the study makes methodological contributions by developing a comparative case study approach to analyzing the state in relation to global and local economic processes and schooling in conflict-affected settings. Finally, in a context where educational research has prioritized the analysis of drug use (Rodríguez-Gómez & Bermeo, 2020), this research delves into an understudied segment of the drug supply chain: production. This emphasis on production opens new avenues for research that links U.S. interventionism, drug diplomacy, and education across the Americas.

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