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Author(s): Theo Di Castri

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# CATALYST: EXPANDING HARM-REDUCTION EDUCATION AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR ON DRUGS

THEO DI CASTRI

## ABSTRACT

*Catalyst is a year-long, bilingual (English/Spanish) fellowship program for high school students and their teachers who live in communities affected by the war on drugs (WoD) that is being waged across the Americas.<sup>1</sup> This educational effort is a response to the social suffering caused by the WoD. Catalyst is working to forge transnational networks of solidarity and analysis among youth on the frontlines of the WoD and to ensure that their voices are heard by the growing drug-policy reform movement. In this field note, I argue that existing abstinence- and prevention-based programs fail to address the structural roots of the WoD and that a radical, more comprehensive approach to drug education is needed. I first lay out the context and rationale for the Catalyst program and then outline some of the challenges and lessons that emerged during its inaugural session. Based on facilitators' and students' experiences at that session, the program is seen as a promising first step toward an alternative approach to drug education. I conclude the field note by suggesting new avenues for inquiry and collaboration between the field of education in emergencies and drug-policy reform.*

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1 See [www.catalyst-catalizador.org](http://www.catalyst-catalizador.org). This field note uses the term “war on drugs” to refer to the series of government campaigns and policies of militarization, criminalization, and securitization that have been instituted in the name of eradicating the production, trafficking, and consumption of drugs. While the negative effects of the WoD have been felt across the globe—for example, in Afghanistan, Thailand, and, most recently, the Philippines—for the purpose of this field note, the WoD refers to the effects the prohibition of drugs has had in the Americas.

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## INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, the human cost of the war on drugs (WoD) has been devastating (Collins 2014). The Americas have been hit especially hard. In Mexico, more than 200,000 people have been murdered and more than 61,000 disappeared since Felipe Calderón declared his country's war on drugs in 2006 (Turak 2018; Villegas 2020). In Colombia, US-backed antinarcotics programs have assaulted the right to life, safety, and subsistence of millions of Colombians and worsened the country's forced-displacement problem (Restrepo-Ruiz and Martinez 2009). In the US, punitive drug policies have contributed to a mass incarceration crisis (Alexander 2010) and the national opioid abuse emergency (National Institute on Drug Abuse 2018). Meanwhile, US-led interdiction efforts in Colombia and Mexico have pushed US-bound drug-trafficking routes into Central America and the Caribbean. In the region, this has led to increased militarization, an intensification of gang violence, and the systematic criminalization of youth, all of which contribute to the ongoing migration crisis (Paley 2014).

Despite the human costs that prohibitionist drug policies have exacted across the Western hemisphere, illicit drug use has remained relatively stable over the last two decades (Porter 2012).<sup>2</sup> What's more, a large portion of the general public continues to view the prohibition of drugs favorably (Pew Research Center 2012; Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2017; López 2016). Public support for the WoD across the Americas is unsurprising if one considers the prevalence of abstinence-only drug education programs, such as Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.). Founded under the Reagan administration, D.A.R.E. quickly spread to 75 percent of US school districts and to more than 50 countries, including Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Panama, Colombia, and Brazil (D.A.R.E. 2018). Despite a series of studies that have questioned the program's effectiveness (Clayton, Catarello, and Johnston 1996; West and O'Neal 2004; Gorman and Huber 2009; Aikins 2015), the principles promoted by D.A.R.E. still permeate how school communities conceive the purpose and content of drug education (Cunningham et al. 2008; *La Vanguardia* 2012; Sanchez et al. 2017). Across the hemisphere, programs like D.A.R.E. have imparted a prohibitionist mindset to an entire generation, leaving unquestioned the assumption that drugs ought to be criminalized and those in the drug trade pursued by police and military forces.

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2 Prohibitionist drug policies include strategies to eradicate, interdict, and criminalize the production, trafficking, sale, possession, and/or consumption of illegal drugs through the deployment of police, military, and carceral force.

Alternatives to prohibition do exist. For example, since Portugal decriminalized drugs in 2001 as a response to a national opioid overdose crisis, the country has seen a dramatic drop in overdoses, HIV infection, and drug-related crime (Ferreira 2017). Drug-policy experts in Portugal attribute their success with decriminalization to a better understanding of drug use, which has changed attitudes among policymakers, judges, prosecutors, doctors, and the general public (Ferreira 2017; Roy 2018). Dr. Joao Goulao, Portugal's "drug czar," attributes this change in part to education (Roy 2018), which has helped to shift attitudes toward drug policy and created room for reform.

Decriminalization and legal regulation are far from silver-bullet solutions to problems often associated with illicit drugs. Indeed, they could open up new and unexpected problems, such as increasing children's unintentional exposure to drugs (Wang, Heard, and Roosevelt 2017) or causing a rise in the number of individuals who come into contact with the criminal justice system through a process of net-widening (Rosmarin and Eastwood 2012). To avoid creating such problems, new policy proposals must be evaluated carefully and critically. Moreover, while individual countries may opt to decriminalize or legalize certain drugs within their borders, the production and trafficking of drugs still are illegal at the global level. The United Nation's 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, and 1988 Convention against the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances continue to mandate prohibitionist standards in national drug-control laws, thereby hindering the kind of multilateral, nonprohibitionist drug-policy frameworks needed to disrupt the violence and harm currently experienced along illegal drug supply routes. Finding a sustainable alternative to the WoD will require working across borders to shift mindsets, undoing long-held taboos around illegal drugs, creating space for critical dialogue on drug policy reform, and initiating conflict-transformation processes to repair the damage wrought by prohibition.

Due to its distributed, transnational nature and the complex forms of violence it has unleashed across the Western hemisphere, the WoD is often overlooked as a "silent, chronic emergency" (Pigozzi 1999). As such, education research and interventions that address the WoD in the Americas specifically are scarce (Rodriguez-Gomez and Bermeo 2020). With the field of education in emergencies (EiE) gaining force (Alexander 2018) and a growing global movement that is rethinking drug policy (Youngers 2013; Pardo 2014), it is an opportune moment to build new bridges between the EiE field and drug-policy reform. Determining where and how these two fields can work together will enable more youth to

advocate for more just and humane drug policies and to participate more substantively in remedying the profound harm caused by the WoD.

## **RATIONALE FOR A NEW APPROACH TO DRUG EDUCATION**

Drug policies are often justified by claiming that they protect youth, despite the fact that young people are disproportionately affected by the negative impact of these policies (Barrett 2011). Across North and South America, marginalized young people are especially vulnerable to being recruited into the drug trade, thereby heightening their risk of being incarcerated or killed (Barrett 2015). Similarly, crop-eradication campaigns in drug production zones have contributed to human displacement, reduced school attendance, lower family incomes, food insecurity, and health problems (Barrett 2015). High levels of police harassment often drive young people away from the health services that are available and negatively impact their educational performance (Barrett 2015; Legewie and Fagan 2019). Minors are regularly caught up in home raids, where they see their parents being handcuffed and arrested and are themselves sometimes strip-searched (Barrett 2015). Those whose parents are incarcerated for drug-related offenses suffer a number of profound and lasting consequences, such as damaged family relationships and posttraumatic stress disorder, and they may develop antisocial or criminal tendencies (Robertson 2007).

Despite this grave state of affairs, there is relatively little space for young people to voice their own experiences and opinions in discussions of drug policy, especially those living in marginalized communities on the frontlines of the WoD.<sup>3</sup> The absence of this key demographic in such discussions is a major stumbling block to sustainable conflict transformation in the context of the WoD. If we are to avoid repeating the pitfalls of current drug policies, it is essential that we learn from those who have borne the brunt of the violence caused by the WoD. Thus, we must respond to this urgent need—and great opportunity—to explore how drug education can increase youth participation in discussions of drug-policy reform and conflict transformation in the context of the WoD.

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3 “Frontlines” of the WoD refers here to the wide array of communities that disproportionately experience the multiple forms of drug-related violence that are the result of prohibitionist policy regimes along the transcontinental drug supply chain, from drug-producing communities that face military and police crackdowns in rural Latin America, to communities beset by gang, cartel, and state violence in trafficking and distribution zones, to communities grappling with widespread overdoses and substance abuse disorders.

The vast majority of drug-education programs (Figures 1A and 1B) focus on individual choices and personal health without considering the wider sociopolitical dimensions of drugs (Wysong, Aniskiewicz, and Wright 1994; Stephens, Markus, and Fryberg 2008). Abstinence-only drug education programs, like D.A.R.E., focus on the harmful effects of individual drug use (Figure 1A). More progressive drug-education programs (e.g., the US-based UpFront or Beyond Zero Tolerance programs; Skager 2013) have moved beyond a strictly prohibitionist paradigm and operate within a harm-reduction framework (Figure 1B), which takes for granted that some youth will experiment with drugs. Rather than stigmatizing them, these programs offer information and strategies to help participants identify and reduce the potential harm associated with their personal drug consumption. A small but growing body of evidence suggests that harm-reduction education programs may successfully reduce risky behaviors among adolescents (Poulin and Nicholson 2005; Leslie 2008; Fletcher and Krug 2012; Jenkins, Slemon, and Haines-Saah 2017). With their narrow focus on drug use, however, these programs fail to connect individual drug use to the wider structural harm that current drug policies inflict on a wide range of individuals who do not use drugs (e.g., through mass incarceration, forced displacement, human rights abuses, militarization, the proliferation of organized crime, aerial fumigation of drug crops, etc.).

Figure 1A: Traditional Abstinence-Only Drug Education (e.g., D.A.R.E.)

	HARM	REDUCTION
WAR (ON)		
DRUGS	●	

Source: Rodríguez-Gómez and Di Castri (2018)

Figure 1B: Harm-Reduction Education (e.g., UpFront)

	HARM	REDUCTION
WAR (ON)		
DRUGS	●	●

Source: Rodríguez-Gómez and Di Castri (2018)

Getting young people who are being harmed by current drug policies to engage in transforming those policies and the conflicts they fuel will require a comprehensive, politically engaged paradigm for drug education that addresses the sociocultural, geopolitical, economic, and historic dimensions of drug use and drug policy.

Establishing cross-border exchanges will enable students and educators to come together to share their understanding of how the WoD is experienced in different parts of the world and to build a collective, transnational response to the conflict it generates.

## THE INTERVENTION

Catalyst is the first program to convene adolescents from across the Americas with the goal of fostering youth-driven analysis, solidarity, and action around drugs, drug use, and drug policy. The Catalyst 2017 session was an intensive three-week summer course held in Cuernavaca, Mexico, in July 2017. The inaugural cohort included 17 young adults ages 16 to 19 from communities affected by the WoD in Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and the US.<sup>4</sup> Working within a paradigm of expanded harm reduction, Catalyst fills important gaps in the existing drug-education landscape (Figure 1C).<sup>5</sup> The program was designed to equip youth living on the frontlines of the WoD with the ability to identify, analyze, and act to reduce not only the harm associated with individual drug use but also the wider social harm caused by current drug policies. The program represents a radical intervention, rather than a palliative or preventive one, that puts special emphasis on the structural roots of the WoD, such as colonialism, slavery, racism, Cold War politics, corruption, economic inequality, and US interventionism.

*Figure 1C: Expanded Harm-Reduction Drug Education (e.g., Catalyst)*

	HARM	REDUCTION
WAR (ON)	●	●
DRUGS	●	●

Source: Rodríguez-Gómez and Di Castri (2018)

4 Students' experiences of the WoD included having incarcerated family members, suffering police brutality or racist policing, having either personal or familiar experience with overdoses and/or addictions, having contact or involvement with gangs and organized crime, having experiences of counternarcotic state violence, guerrilla violence and/or (para)military violence, experiencing migration/displacement caused by drug-/gang-related violence, having contact or involvement with drug cropping and/or drug trafficking.

5 "Expanded harm reduction" refers to an approach to drugs that considers not only how the risks and harm drug users face can be reduced, but how the wider social and structural harm inflicted by prohibitionist drug policies on individuals and communities along the transnational drug supply chain can also be reduced and transformed.

At the outset of the project, the Catalyst team defined its four central aims:

1. To ensure that the program is accessible to youth who live on the frontlines of the WoD across the Americas
2. To articulate a new paradigm for drug education and present a comprehensive curriculum that recognizes the multiple ways the WoD is experienced across the Americas, and to increase participants' understanding of its complex, transnational roots
3. To equip participants with the skills and support they need to begin transforming the emergencies created by the WoD in their own communities
4. To create meaningful opportunities for Catalyst graduates to participate in the wider drug-policy reform movement after completing the program

Identifying these aims presented the team with unique opportunities and challenges. The following sections outline the lessons learned while pursuing these aims.

### **OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO ACCESS**

Ensuring that youth who live on the frontlines of the WoD could access a program like Catalyst demanded intentionality at all stages of the program's implementation. Program staff conducted extensive outreach for the first session of Catalyst, both online and in person, through their relevant personal and professional networks. The benefits of having a transnational team with networks across the Americas soon became evident. The team was intentional in reaching out to teachers, organizations, and activist networks in both urban and rural frontline communities. For the first phase of the application process, prospective participants filled out an online application form that was available in Spanish and English. To ensure that applicants with diverse skills could attend the program, the application included questions to help gauge their affiliation with the WoD, their involvement in their community, and their capacity to think critically. It also required completion of a creative project, in the applicant's chosen medium, that expressed their vision of a world in which drugs no longer were the cause of violence. Ultimately, 164 students from 14 countries and a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, with a fairly even distribution between urban and rural settings, completed the monthlong application process.



The team took a qualitative, subjective approach to evaluating the applications. The first phase involved reading all the applications and creating a shortlist of the top 35 applicants. Shortlisted candidates were those whose applications suggested the greatest curiosity, open-mindedness, creativity, leadership, and an ability to see connections between different phenomena—for example, the militarization of Mexico's and Central America's counternarcotics efforts and increased migration to the US. To ensure that a range of perspectives from along the transcontinental drug supply chain would be represented at Catalyst 2017, the team also considered national, geographic, and socioeconomic diversity. The shortlist included a fairly even distribution of students from communities involved primarily in the production of drugs, facing the realities of drug trafficking, or dealing with the distribution and consumption of drugs.

The second phase of the selection process involved reviewing reference letters and conducting one-on-one phone interviews with the 35 candidates, after which 22 students were accepted as the inaugural Catalyst cohort. The group included seven students from the US, four from Mexico, one from Guatemala, four Colombians, one Peruvian, one Ecuadorian, and three Brazilians. Eight participants identified as female, eight as male, and one as gender nonconforming. Five were native English speakers, twelve native Spanish, and three native Portuguese; eight were bilingual to varying degrees.

A generous grant from the Open Society Foundations made it possible to provide need-based financial aid to all participants. The Catalyst team also raised funds from personal donors to meet additional costs and uphold the program's commitment to offering full, need-based aid. All but one of the participants self-reported their financial need and were awarded full scholarships.

Despite the financial support, many participants still faced significant social and bureaucratic barriers. The concept of a summer experiential travel program was not familiar to many of them or their families. The parents of some Latin American participants, mainly of girls, were understandably suspicious that the program was a human-trafficking scheme. Some of the US participants' parents were afraid to send their child to Mexico, due to the violent images of the country in US media. Multiple phone conversations and personal meetings enabled the Catalyst team to build rapport and trust with parents, and all but two of the selected students ultimately got their parents' consent.

Camilo's case is illustrative of the bureaucratic hurdles many students had to overcome in order to attend Catalyst 2017.<sup>6</sup> As a minor from Colombia traveling abroad alone, Camilo needed a permit that was signed by both his parents or legal guardians in order to exit the country. Camilo was raised by his grandmother and father, but as there had been no formal transfer of guardianship, he had to travel to another town to get his mother's signature. In addition, because nobody in his family had a bank account, Camilo had to rely on a sympathetic teacher to handle the funds Catalyst sent him to cover his expenses. However, while Camilo got what he needed, insurmountable bureaucratic delays prevented three other students from getting their passports in time to attend Catalyst, so of the 22 students accepted, only 17 were able to participate.

Lack of internet and telephone connections impeded many participants' communication with the Catalyst team and complicated the logistics of getting them all to Mexico. Advance planning and a great deal of patience was required to help participants obtain the required travel documents, and once they had their passports, visas, and permits, many needed help making sense of the flight tickets, the airport check-in process, and interactions with custom agents. To address this, the team designed a bilingual handout with detailed instructions and scripts to help students navigate the airport.

The experience of getting all the participants to Mexico was an excellent reminder that financial resources are not the only barrier marginalized youth face in accessing a program like Catalyst. Ensuring that youth from the frontlines of the WoD can access and participate in transnational conversations about drug-policy reform requires a proactive and well-resourced distribution of both financial capital and the social and cultural capital needed to navigate the bureaucracies and institutions of international travel.

Despite the team's best efforts to make Catalyst 2017 as accessible as possible, there is room for improvement. For one thing, students without access to the internet or computers were, by default, excluded from the application process. Therefore, future iterations of the program will experiment with allowing prospective participants to submit their applications via WhatsApp. Another problem is that students without sufficient local support to overcome the many barriers they faced were also prevented from accessing the program. The Catalyst team therefore plans to engage program alumni in developing additional support materials for future prospective participants. This will include conversation guides to help prospective

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6 All names have been changed to protect participants' identities.

participants obtain their parents' consent and support, a guide to finding other adult allies who can help them negotiate local bureaucracies, and a guide to navigating immigration regulations.

### **“IT ISN’T A WAR ON DRUGS, IT’S A WAR ON PEOPLE”: DESIGNING AN EXPANDED HARM-REDUCTION CURRICULUM**

One challenge of designing the first iteration of the Catalyst curriculum was to chart a coherent arc that would recognize the participants' richly diverse experiences and knowledge while providing sufficient conceptual tools for students to conduct deep, critical analyses of the WoD. The Catalyst team wanted the curriculum to facilitate an exploration of the interactions between micro-level considerations (e.g., How does our personal identity affect our relationship to drugs and drug policy? How do drugs circulate in our brains and bodies and what effect do they have?) and macro-level considerations (e.g., How and with what effect do drugs, money, guns, people, etc., circulate within a community? A country? A continent? How do drug policies facilitate the circulation of certain goods and people and impede that of others? How can history help us understand these dynamics?). Equipping students to think structurally and intersectionally about the WoD was an essential aim of the curriculum design.<sup>7</sup>

The Catalyst 2017 curriculum ended up covering nine topics, in the following order:

1. Personal identity
2. Drugs and the body
3. The history of the WoD in the Americas
4. The economics of the WoD
5. The types of violence of the WoD

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<sup>7</sup> Intersectionality here refers to what critical race theorist, lawyer, and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw describes as “a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things” (see Crenshaw 2017). In the context of Catalyst, students were encouraged to interrogate how their multiple identities (gender, geography, social class, race/ethnicity, nationality, etc.) intersected to produce different experiences of the WoD.

6. Drug policy and gender
7. Race and class in the WoD
8. The WoD in the media and political discourse
9. The WoD in art and culture<sup>8</sup>

The curriculum avoided lectures and instead used inquiry-based learning to help participants see themselves as active producers of knowledge. Most lessons included images, texts, YouTube videos, and role-playing scenarios in which participants put their critical skills into practice. To promote systematic and intersectional thinking, the teaching team relied heavily on hands-on visual aids and Post-it Notes to gather clusters of ideas/concepts/phenomena and encouraged participants to articulate the connections they saw between them (see Figure 2 and Appendix B).

*Figure 2: Students practicing intersectional thinking in the Catalyst classroom*



*Source:* Photo courtesy of Benjamin Fogarty Valenzuela

In the Catalyst classroom, participants were encouraged to recognize the stake each of them had in conversations surrounding drug policy and to see themselves as agents of social change within the complex systems in which they are embedded. Proceeding from the feminist principle that the personal is political (Hanisch 2006), the Catalyst team used storytelling and narrative analysis to connect students' lived

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix A for a more detailed overview of the contents of the Catalyst 2017 curriculum.

experiences of the WoD to the broader historical narratives of genocide, slavery, and colonialism that underpin the drug war. For example, the instructors hung a large timeline around the perimeter of the classroom. As participants learned about the major historical processes underpinning the WoD, they marked them on the timeline and were then invited to add significant events in their own family histories and to explore the personal effects of macro-level historical processes. Such activities enabled participants to share and reframe their personal affiliations to the WoD (Rodríguez-Gómez 2017) and to explore how their narratives complemented, complicated, or contradicted those of their classmates.

Teaching in the Catalyst classroom was not without its challenges. Fifty percent of the curriculum was delivered in Spanish, the other half in English, with simultaneous translation provided for monolingual students. Participants' academic skills varied widely, and their diverse academic and linguistic abilities required facilitators to be closely conscious of classroom dynamics. Extra support and instruction were offered as needed, and challenging questions were posed to participants who appeared understimulated. Catalyst is exploring the possibility of developing a pre-program academic skill-building correspondence course for future participants with academically disadvantaged backgrounds and a pre-program second-language course for monolingual students.

As was to be expected, some heavy stories were told in the classroom. At the end of every day, participants broke into small groups, accompanied by an adult facilitator. Together they processed the day's events, and these meetings helped to identify participants who needed one-on-one emotional support. A psychologist was on call to address any mental health issues that were beyond the team's ability to handle; thankfully, no such issues arose. However, by the end of the program, participants and facilitators were emotionally drained by the intensity of living in such close quarters and discussing heavy material for three weeks straight. In the postprogram debriefing, the Catalyst staff agreed that all facilitators should receive additional training to deal with trauma and that a mental health professional should be on campus throughout the program. The team also learned important lessons about taking sufficient breaks, having access to green spaces, and engaging students in regular physical activity. A key takeaway from Catalyst 2017 was the importance of creating an environment of emotional and mental wellbeing that encourages meaningful sharing, listening, and engagement with the curriculum.

Despite the challenges, participants' feedback suggested that the curriculum sparked the kind of analysis and understanding it was designed to. For example, one participant explained what she was learning at Catalyst:

Since at least the time of the conquest, drugs have been linked with relations of power. So whether you look at religion and its processes of imposing certain dogmatic ideas that have persisted through time, or whether you look at the importance of the pharmaceutical industry and consider the financial interests at play, you begin to rethink the terms by which things are deemed “moral” or “immoral.” And then there’s the link between groups who are marginalized from society, such as migrants who are excluded and must then seek alternatives in the illegal . . . It resists or, I don’t know . . . limits your ability to categorize “the good” and “the bad.” It’s really something much more complex. (from an interview for a documentary about Catalyst 2017, translated from Spanish)

The transnational component of the program also resonated with many participants. It was the first time many Latin American participants had heard about mass incarceration and police brutality in the US, and many US students were taken aback to learn about the effect their government’s policies have south of the border. In a blog entry, one student summarized the exchanges that took place during Catalyst 2017:

It amazes me how [one’s] experience and position within the WoD can alter one’s perspective drastically . . . The purpose of these lessons and Catalyst overall as a course was to connect the similarities and acknowledge the differences between each other. This experience was more than discussing the historical components of the WoD. It was a life experience that offered empathy, knowledge, and understanding.

The program culminated with students exhibiting the creative projects they produced during the course at a public exhibition in Mexico City, which was attended by roughly 50 people. Students who had struggled to speak up and share their viewpoints in the classroom at the beginning of the program could be seen discussing their projects with total strangers. Their projects included paintings, sculpture, photography, sound art, and performances, which spoke to the nuanced perspectives participants developed during the program. One student made a model that brilliantly depicted the many actors and diverse human costs of the WoD (Figure 3). The caption on his model echoed Paley’s (2014) argument about the WoD: “It isn’t a war on drugs, it’s a war on people.”

Figure 3: “It isn’t a war on drugs, it’s a war on people”: A model constructed by a Catalyst student illustrating the fallout of the war on drugs



Source: Photo courtesy of Benjamin Fogarty Valenzuela

The team ended Catalyst 2017 with many ideas for how to improve the next year’s program. For example, despite the facilitators’ efforts to link the personal and the political and to ground classroom discussions in students’ lived experiences of the WoD, participants’ engagement with concepts such as “racism” or “capitalism” often remained abstract and impersonal. The Catalyst 2017 team also realized that treating race, class, and gender as different topics on different days ended up reifying the concepts as separate phenomena, rather than allowing students to explore the ways they intersect to produce multiple experiences of the WoD. Accordingly, the Catalyst 2018 team began experimenting with a curriculum designed to engage students in a more material, historical, and intersectional analysis of the WoD. Surveys conducted at the end of each day of the Catalyst 2017 program helped the team identify where and how the curriculum could be made more engaging and responsive to students’ lived experiences. The team also agreed to dedicate more time to building specific skills that will help students launch their own initiatives upon returning home.

The Catalyst curriculum is a living document that will evolve from year to year, based on the input, knowledge, and experiences generated each summer. A group of graduates from each cohort will be invited to participate in designing the following year’s curriculum. In a few years, the team will begin bringing alumni in as facilitators and will eventually pass off leadership of the project to them. These strategies are intended to ensure that Catalyst remains youth driven and responsive to the multiple needs, experiences, and interests of future cohorts.

### **CATALYZING CHANGE BACK HOME AND BEYOND**

On the last day of Catalyst 2017, students participated in a community-organizing workshop that equipped them with a basic foundation in the theory and practice of community activism. All students were encouraged to use the conversations,



questions, and ideas that emerged during the program to launch projects in their own communities that would help to transform the violence caused by the WoD. Students were prompted to use the knowledge they generated at Catalyst to articulate locally relevant and contextually sensitive interventions of their own design. Thus far, 13 of the 17 participants have implemented projects to spread what they learned at Catalyst 2017. These projects have included giving presentations on drugs and drug policy at their schools; starting reading groups to learn more about the history and politics of the drug economy; pursuing research on indigenous inequality through an internship at the Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Fiscales in Guatemala; orienting their undergraduate thesis research toward the construction of masculinity within the context of Mexico's drug war; becoming a facilitator at Colombia's National Museum for Historical Memory in Bogotá to explore the links between the country's armed conflict and the WoD; being trained to assist people with expungement paperwork in the wake of California's recent legalization of marijuana and engaging in local and state forums on the effects that legalization will have on Latino communities; and participating as a youth stakeholder in consultations about the rights of children and adolescents in Colombia and internationally at a Latin American forum held in Guatemala.

A Facebook page for the alumni of Catalyst 2017 has helped keep students engaged in a transnational conversation about drug-policy reform since their participation in the program. Participants and facilitators regularly post articles related to the WoD and drug-policy reform. Emails, phone calls, and WhatsApp messages have enabled the team to stay in touch with students since their graduation. Upon their return home, each student was paired with a local mentor to help them launch their own initiatives and/or get involved in existing regional efforts. Unfortunately, it was wishful thinking to expect a meaningful relationship to grow between two strangers introduced via email, and most of these mentorships failed to get off the ground. Catalyst needs to develop a more comprehensive and rigorous system to engage with and support students once they return home.

While it is relatively easy to integrate meaningful youth representation into the design and leadership of a small-scale summer program like Catalyst, ensuring the substantive representation of frontline youth in government and international policymaking is significantly more challenging. In the eyes of its organizers, Catalyst's summer program is not just a one-off experience for a small handful of exceptional teenagers but the first step in a long process of translating what is being learned and achieved in a microcosm into structural change. There is much work to be done on this front.



## CONCLUSION: “SEEING THROUGH THE FOG”

Catalyst was not originally conceived within an EiE framework. That said, there seems to be much fertile and as yet unexplored common ground between the program and the field of EiE. Given the strong emphasis on community participation in the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies’ Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies (2010), Catalyst offers a model that could complement and enhance existing efforts to engage emergency-affected communities in transforming the conflicts that affect them. Rather than designing an intervention that operates directly on the frontlines of the WoD, Catalyst offers a space away from the violence and instability of communities affected by the drug war. In the midst of a crisis that often only permits reactive thinking, Catalyst aims to foster deep, collaborative thinking. The Catalyst model brings together disparate stakeholders of a conflict and affords them the space and time to think critically and transnationally about the root causes of the violence they experience. In such a setting, youth can participate meaningfully in negotiating and building a curriculum that is responsive to their experiences. They can begin to articulate radical visions for youth-driven conflict transformation and to cultivate the skills and capacities needed to realize their visions in ways that otherwise might not be available in their day-to-day lives. Valentina, a participant from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, expressed this in her spoken-word performance at the final showcase:

Fog is a spectre that feeds on the fear, sadness, and hopelessness that forms around the souls of the dead, our dead . . . But through Catalyst, we young people have been able to open our eyes and walk together through the fog. (translated from Spanish by the author)

The inaugural session of the program left the Catalyst team with many important questions: What does transnational, youth-driven social change look like in practice in emergency situations? What kinds of educational interventions are most conducive to fostering such change? How can the model and strategies Catalyst is developing be adapted to other transnational emergencies in the Americas (e.g., the Central American or Venezuelan migration crises, or protecting land and indigenous rights across the Amazon)? These are but a few of the questions that currently animate the Catalyst team and offer exciting possibilities for further research and collaboration between the program and readers of this journal.

While some may be inclined to dismiss Catalyst as a boutique initiative, the Catalyst team prefers to view it as a small but important laboratory for learning how to increase meaningful youth participation in the creation of new educational strategies to transform the violence of the WoD. As Hodgkin (2007) has argued, participation can “begin in small ways in individual classrooms and schools, without necessarily entailing wholesale national educational reform” (34). That said, the Catalyst team is also committed to making the curricular materials and best practices that emerge from the program accessible to a wider audience. We see a great opportunity to learn from EiE practitioners who are better versed in rolling out large-scale programs and guided by a commitment to ensure quality education for all.

The D.A.R.E. program was able to shape the attitudes of an entire generation. Catalyst aims to develop a more just and humane paradigm for the next. Catalyst offers a promising new vision of drug education that will contribute to sustainable, socially just conflict transformation within the context of the WoD in the Americas. Over the next five years, the Catalyst team will assemble and mobilize a robust and expansive network of actors, knowledge, and resources around their vision of drug education. The team has plans to develop and disseminate open-source curricular materials for educators across the Americas; launch teacher-training programs; provide ongoing support to graduates via seed grants, mentoring, and speaking opportunities; and evaluate and collect evidence on the impact of the Catalyst curriculum via a comparative research agenda. Recognizing the wealth of knowledge and experience the EiE field offers on all these fronts, the Catalyst team invites anyone who is interested exploring a potential collaboration to contact us at [info@catalyst-catalizador.org](mailto:info@catalyst-catalizador.org).

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## APPENDIX A

Table A1: Overview of the Catalyst 2017 Curriculum Objectives

<p><b>Day 1</b></p> <p>Who are we?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants and facilitators will know the names of everyone in the group.</li> <li>• Participants and facilitators will understand the personal reasons behind everyone's decision to participate in Catalyst and learn more about the War on Drugs.</li> <li>• Participants and facilitators will express the expectations they have for the program and their participation in it.</li> <li>• Participants will be introduced to the general structure of the course.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Day 2</b></p> <p>Where are we standing?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants can explain Cuernavaca's importance in the history of the War on Drugs in Mexico.</li> <li>• Participants can tell the basic history of the Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad.</li> <li>• Participants are familiarized with Cuernavaca's Centro Historico.</li> </ul> <p><i>Guest Speaker:</i> Pietro Ameglio, peace activist, on the Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad</p>
<p><b>Day 3</b></p> <p>Personal identity and the War on Drugs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants can identify multiple dimensions of both their individual and social identity.</li> <li>• Participants can recognize the contradictions that emerge between their own self-perception and the perceptions of others.</li> <li>• Participants understand their individual identities as historically constructed and as operating within larger social structures and power relations.</li> <li>• Participants recognize, in themselves and others, different forms of privilege and disadvantages, and the ways in which these are linked to broader social structures and power.</li> <li>• Participants recognize their affiliation and contact with the War on Drugs as a possible dimension of their identity.</li> </ul> <p><i>Guest Speaker:</i> Jessica Marjane, lawyer and trans-rights activist from Red de Juventudes Trans, on personal identity and politics</p>



<p><b>Day 4</b></p> <p>Introducing the War on Drugs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants formulate questions that invite further investigation of the forms of indifference, intolerance, and inequality that perpetuate and are perpetuated by the War on Drugs.</li> <li>• Participants familiarize themselves with the primary and secondary sources that will allow them to find answers to their questions about the War on Drugs.</li> <li>• Participants understand the value in taking a multidimensional, intersectional approach to the War on Drugs.</li> <li>• Students recognize the ways in which a single concept (e.g., the police) can take on multiple meanings in different localities and contexts.</li> <li>• Students identify key actors and institutions that participate in the War on Drugs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Day 5</b></p> <p>Social history is family history: Historicizing the War on Drugs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants construct a timeline of the main historical currents of the War on Drugs in the Americas.</li> <li>• Participants identify the ways in which the War on Drugs impacts everyday life.</li> <li>• Participants understand there is a connection between the history of the War on Drugs and their own personal and familiar histories.</li> <li>• Participants understand that individual actions impact wider social histories, and vice versa.</li> </ul> <p><i>Guest Speaker:</i> Nidia Olvera, historian and anthropologist, on the history of peyote in Mexico and on the practice of history as activism</p>
<p><b>Day 6</b></p> <p>Drugs or medicine? The neurobiology of psychoactive substances</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students can problematize the distinction between “drug” and “medicine.”</li> <li>• Students can articulate Norman Zinberg’s notion of “drug, set, and setting.”</li> <li>• Students understand the basic neurobiology of the reward circuit in the brain and the pathways that can lead to drug abuse.</li> <li>• Students can identify various models and explanations of drug abuse (e.g., moral, medical, criminal, social).</li> <li>• Students can pick out the argument of an existing text/video and learn how to argue from a perspective that may be different from their own.</li> </ul> <p><i>Guest Workshop:</i> ReverdeSvColectivo, Mexico City-based harm-reduction collective, on reducing the harms of personal drug use and of the War on Drugs</p>

<p><b>Day 7</b></p> <p>The economics of the War on Drugs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants can identify the general characteristics of the capitalist mode of production.</li> <li>• Participants can identify the principal components of a supply chain, from production through consumption.</li> <li>• Participants can compare (and question) the differences between a legal market (coffee) and an illegal market (cocaine).</li> <li>• Participants will identify the ways in which prohibition and protection within drug supply chains affect people’s everyday lives.</li> <li>• Participants recognize the structural and economic violence that feeds the War on Drugs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Day 8</b></p>	<p>Day trip to Mexico City</p>
<p><b>Day 9</b></p> <p>The War on Drugs in political discourse and the media</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants identify ideas and stereotypes commonly employed in political rhetoric about drugs/the War on Drugs.</li> <li>• Participants are familiarized with different explanations and justifications for the War on Drugs.</li> <li>• Participants deepen their historical understanding of the War on Drugs by locating political speeches within their historical contexts.</li> <li>• Participants can identify biases and stereotyping within political speeches and media stories.</li> </ul> <p><i>Guest Speaker:</i> Marcela Tuarti, journalist, on journalism in the context of Mexico’s drug war</p> <p><i>Guest Workshop:</i> Graffiti and stencil art</p>
<p><b>Day 10</b></p> <p>Forms of violence of the War on Drugs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students recognize that the violence and social problems associated with the War on Drugs are differentially distributed across the hemisphere.</li> <li>• Students identify points of difference and commonality in the issues faced by their respective communities.</li> <li>• Participants learn how to make a basic podcast.</li> <li>• Participants learn to orally communicate the findings of their research about a case study illustrating the violence of the War on Drugs.</li> </ul> <p><i>Guest Workshop:</i> Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Francisco de Vitoria, on human rights activism in the context of Mexico’s drug war</p>

<p><b>Day 11</b></p> <p>Race, class, and the War on Drugs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants can identify the ways in which stereotypes about class and race play a role in the War on Drugs.</li> <li>• Participants understand racism and classism as systems of unequal distribution of power, privilege, and resources.</li> <li>• Participants recognize the ways in which the effects of the War on Drugs are felt differently according to a person's race/ethnicity and class.</li> <li>• Participants can compare and contrast the way that race and class intersect with the War on Drugs as it is waged in different parts of the hemisphere.</li> </ul> <p><i>Guest Speaker:</i> Asha Bandele, Drug Policy Alliance, on race and the War on Drugs in the US (via Skype)</p>
<p><b>Day 12</b></p> <p>Gender and the War on Drugs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants can identify gender-related stereotypes at play within the War on Drugs.</li> <li>• Participants understand <i>el machismo</i> (sexism) as a system that distributes power and resources unequally.</li> <li>• Participants can identify the relationship between <i>el machismo</i>/sexism and the War on Drugs.</li> <li>• Participants recognize the ways in which the effects of the War on Drugs are felt differently according to one's gender identity.</li> </ul> <p><i>Guest Speaker:</i> Isabel Blas, Equis: Justicia para las Mujeres, on the incarceration of women in the context of Mexico's drug war</p>
<p><b>Day 13</b></p> <p>Bling-bling: Critical approaches to narco-esthetics</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants recognize the presence of narcotrafficking in music, decorative art, painting, and popular culture in general.</li> <li>• Participants explore the relevance of popular culture in the normalization of the War on Drugs.</li> <li>• Participants can identify the elements of their everyday lives that are influenced by the practices promoted by narcotrafficking and militarization, including in the language and words that they use.</li> <li>• Participants recognize that art and culture can also serve as a space to critique narcotrafficking, militarization, and the War on Drugs.</li> </ul> <p><i>Guest Workshop:</i> Maria Emilia Fernandez, assistant curator at the JUMEX museum, on the War on Drugs in contemporary art</p> <p><i>Guest Speakers/Performers:</i> Kyle Rapps, spoken word artist and rapper, and Melina Gaze, performance artist, on art as a tool for political resistance</p>

<p><b>Day 14</b></p> <p>The past and the future: Different visions of drug policy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants can compare and contrast prohibitionist drug policy with proposed policy alternatives (harm reduction, decriminalization, legalization).</li> <li>• Participants can explain the basic tenets of Plan Colombia and articulate their opinions on whether it was a success or failure.</li> </ul> <p><i>Guest Speaker:</i> Paul Mahlstedt, former counternarcotics officer with the US State Department, on Plan Colombia (via Skype)</p> <p><i>Guest Workshop:</i> Jorge Herrera, drug policy reform youth activist, on youth activism, alternatives to prohibition, and the future of drug policy</p>
<p><b>Day 15</b></p>	<p>Students work on final projects.</p>
<p><b>Day 16</b></p>	<p>Final exhibition in Mexico City</p>
<p><b>Day 17</b></p> <p>Catalyzing change back home</p>	<p><i>Guest Workshop:</i> Dean Chahim, community organizer, Community Organizing 101</p>

## APPENDIX B

### A TYPICAL ACTIVITY FROM THE CATALYST CURRICULUM

#### **From Day 4:** Introducing the War on Drugs

**Duration:** Two hours

In this activity, students are tasked with assembling a giant, octagonal puzzle made up of eight pieces (see Figure 2). Each piece of the puzzle has a “dimension” of the War on Drugs written on it: History; Health and the Body; Economy; Discourse and Media; Violence; Race and Class; Gender; Art and Culture.

The pieces of the puzzle are distributed face down on the floor. Participants form groups of two or three and each group selects a piece at random.

Once the students have been divided into groups and have picked their piece of the puzzle, they are invited to browse a cloud of Post-it Notes on the wall, each one containing a phenomenon related to the War on Drugs: Police Brutality; Mass Incarceration; Human Trafficking; Forced Disappearances; Drug Abuse; Militarization; Organized Crime; Drug Mules; Money Laundering; Aerial Fumigation; Corruption; Femicides; Paramilitaries; Guerrillas; State Violence; Human Rights Abuses; Unsafe Streets; Arms Trafficking; Opioid Crisis.

Individually, students make note of the phenomena listed on the Post-it Notes they feel best fit into the “dimension” of the War on Drugs that their puzzle piece represents. They then convene with their group members and compare notes with each other. They establish a list of the four phenomena that most belong to their puzzle piece. With the support of the facilitators, the participants search the internet for information and arguments that will permit them to explain the relationship between the subconcept and the macro-category of the puzzle piece they have been assigned. They are given a handout to assist them in constructing their arguments.

The group reconvenes. Each team reads out the four concepts they have claimed. If only one team has claimed a given concept, a member of that team takes the Post-it Note from the wall and sticks it to their piece of the puzzle, offering a brief overview of the concept and why it belongs to their “dimension.” In the case where two or more teams claim the same concept, those teams engage in a debate as to why they think the concept belongs to their “dimension,” employing

the arguments they previously constructed. Once all the groups have read out and claimed their four concepts, the students assemble the pieces of the puzzle together. Once assembled, the students realize that all eight of the pieces meet at the center of the puzzle. The facilitator calls attention to the fact that many of the concepts the students were arguing over are in fact multidimensional. Such multidimensional concepts can be studied and are probably best understood through a variety of disciplinary lenses. Accordingly, the contested Post-it Notes are placed at the intersection of all eight pieces.

Once all the Post-it Notes have been placed on the puzzle, the facilitators steer the closing of the discussion with the following questions:

- What struggles did we encounter when formulating our arguments?
- How did we overcome those struggles?
- Which Post-it Notes generated the most debate? Why?
- Why is it important to recognize the ways in which all these concepts are interrelated?
- What are the dangers of analyzing these concepts or even the War on Drugs as a whole through a single conceptual lens?