

Mexican origin Youth and the Gang Context:
Social Identities and School Experiences

In loving memory of Alex

The light of the world is waiting for you,
And your heart still beats while mine is broken in two.
With these tears I'll be missing you,
and like an angel you sleep.
Sweet dreams.
The memories I'll take with me.
Rest in Peace. This isn't my goodbye.
This is only but a tear falling down my eye.
A prayer that comes from deep inside,
A prayer for you that will never die.

Anna, a freshman in high school, wrote this poem after her former classmate, Alex was shot and killed in a drive-by shooting in the spring of 10th grade. Anna and Alex were not in a gang, but experienced the consequences of living in a neighborhood with a gang problem. During interviews with Mexican origin youth in Chicago about their educational experiences, concerns about gangs came up repeatedly for 30 of the 32 students in this sample. As students transitioned to high school, not only did they have to cope with the neighborhood violence, but also cope with a school environment that categorized many of them as gang members and enacted formal and informal policies that further marginalized them and intensified the trauma.

This article discusses three major themes related to a gang context over the transition to high school: 1) the students' efforts at negotiating their social identity in school and community context with a gang problem 2) experiences of marginalization in the school context, and 3) the consequences of the exposure to violence. The following section will describe the theoretical perspective framing the understanding of social identity processes for the youth in this study.

Theoretical Framework

Identity and the Second Generation

Perspectives on identity formation among minority youth, and Latinos in particular, have become more sophisticated over the years, accounting for the duality and shifting of identity as well as the oppression many youth face (Pizarro, 2005). Furthermore, research on the second generation showed that ethnic solidarity and identification co-occurred with economic progress or downward mobility depending on the social context and the content of social identities (Fernández-Kelly & Schauffler, 1996; Rumbaut, 1996). Much of the research on social identity among immigrants and the second generation has focused on the importance of educational institutions in facilitating successful transitions and

shaping how they fit into U.S. society (Olson, 1997; Portes & MacLeod, 1996). For Mexican origin students, this transition is complicated by a legacy of oppression, conquest, and second-class citizenship (Elenes, 1997; Pizarro, 2005). A social identity and borderlands theoretical framework recognizes the social, political, and local context of Mexican origin youth; accounts for the intersectionality of multiple social identities; and provides a framework for understanding how youth negotiate their social context and accept, reject, and rework the meaning of their social identities.

Social Identity

Social identity captures the relationship between identity as a social product and a social force: social identity refers to “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his[/her] knowledge of his[/her] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). A social identity framework helps us understand that as the social context shapes social identity, one’s social identity offers a framework for negotiating and giving meaning to a particular social environment. Consequently, the combination of distinct social environments and the individual’s responses to those environments works to create differences in social identities and behavior of individuals who share the same group membership.

The development of a social identity involves three processes: social categorization, social comparisons, and psychological work (Tajfel, 1981). Social categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, and disability are only meaningful within the social context through the process of social categorization, and subsequently social comparisons of the group as it relates to perceived differences and value attached to those differences (Hurtado, Gurin, & Peng, 1994; Tajfel, 1978). The third process involved the psychological work, both cognitive and emotional, prompted by the universal motive for positive distinctiveness (Tajfel, 1978). Because being categorized into a devalued group typically triggers this process, it is those social groups that are disparaged or politicized through social movements that are most likely to become social identities for individuals (Hurtado, Gurin, & Peng, 1994).

Borderlands Theory

Framing social identity theory within the broader discourse of borderlands theory provides a specific cultural and political context in which to understand the nuances of the Mexican experience in the United States. Borderlands theory is a theoretical framework that accounts for the historical and political ways in which Chicanos are constituted and constitute themselves as different or as “Other,” the social construction of identity, and multiple subjectivity (Elenes, 1997). According to Elenes (1997), borderlands theory is “a discourse, a language, that explains the social conditions of subjects with hybrid identities” (para. 2). Latina feminist psychologists and social workers have adopted borderlands theory, a perspective

that builds on intersectionality and emphasizes the history and culture of Latino groups in the United States (Hurtado & Cervantes, 2009; Villarreal Sosa & Moore, 2013).

Although this borderlands identity arose from dealing with this literal U.S. - Mexico border, Anzaldúa (1987) expresses that a borderlands identity is not particular to the Southwest and can be a psychological, cultural, or spiritual space for anyone dealing with a multiplicity of identities. Borderlands theory extends social identity theory by addressing how individuals cope with and transcend the negative categorizations of stigmatized identities (Hurtado & Cervantes, 2009). Borderlands theory suggests that this hybrid identity could be a strength and strategic response to a stigmatized identity (Hurtado, 2003). Approaching the experiences of the students in this study from a borderlands perspective acknowledges their unique experiences in a Midwest context, conceptualizations of race and ethnicity, and how this flexibility helps them cope with often disempowering educational experiences.

Method

Extended Case Method

This article uses findings drawn from a larger study examining how Mexican origin students in Chicago constructed their social identity in the school context and how this affected their academic trajectories (Villarreal Sosa, 2011). This study employed the Extended Case Method (ECM), based on the work of Burawoy (1998) and Miranda (2002), grounded in a Chicana feminist epistemology. ECM is an interpretive qualitative method that allows for multiple sources of knowledge and expands or re-works existing theory (Burawoy, 1998; Burawoy et al., 1991; Eliasoph & Lichterman, 1999; Samuels, 2009). The extended case method utilizes a “unique case” to extend or re-work theory (Samuels, 2010). This approach, not only emphasizes the extension of theory, but also contextualizes the experiences of the students within the specific community, historical, and political context.

Sample

The West Park sample used in this study were a part of a larger sample of 98 youth in the Student Life in High Schools Project (SLP), a longitudinal study of the transition to high school. The SLP used an interdisciplinary approach, triangulating data by drawing from multiple sources, including student and parent interviews, school records, and teacher assessments. For the West Park sample, the SLP selected a stratified random sample of 68 students from a list of the 189 students at Siqueiros Elementary planning to attend Zapata High School. Students were stratified across homerooms, which were tracked by ability and included the bilingual and the gifted bilingual classroom. The consent form return rate was 83 percent. From the students who returned consent forms, 32 students were selected

stratified by achievement and gender, with a goal of a minimum of 25 students entering each SLP high school in the Fall of 1995. The sample size of 25 students per high school was determined based on budgetary concerns, caseload limitations per interviewer, and a review of sample sizes in comparable studies (Fordham, 1996; Phelan, Yu and Davidson, 1994; Reyes, Gillock and Kobus, 1994). This number was selected to allow one primary interviewer to engage in the field and follow this group in depth over the course of the study as each student was interviewed nine times.

The sample consisted of equal numbers of male and female students. Sixteen (50%) of the students were at or above grade level in reading in eighth grade. Six (18.8%) students were one year below grade level in reading. Of the eight (25%) students who were two or more years below grade level, four of those students were in the bilingual program. The remaining two students did not have test scores. Nine students (28%) were born in Mexico and 23 (72%) were U.S. born. All of the students had Mexican-born parents with an average of five years of schooling. The majority (72%) of students lived in a household with both parents and additional 8% lived in a household with two adults.

School Sites

The school sites used for this study were the Siqueiros Elementary and Zapata High School pair. Both Siqueiros and Zapata were predominately Mexican schools (99.6% and 98.6% respectively) in one of the city's largest immigrant port-of-entry neighborhoods. In 1992-93, 47% of the Siqueiros students were considered Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students and 99% were considered low income (Chicago Public Schools, n.d.). Among the students not considered LEP, 68% were meeting or exceeding state goals for reading and 79% were meeting or exceeding state goals for math, well above city averages (Chicago Public Schools, n.d.). The majority (86.2% and 87.6%) of Zapata's students in 1996 and 1997 were low income (Hernández, 2002). Zapata experienced persistent overcrowding issues and a drop out problem.

Data Collection

A series of nine semi-structured interviews of one to two hours in length served as the main source of data. The interviews addressed the following topics: a) perception of support and relationships with teachers b) engagement and success in school; c) goals and aspirations; d) coping strategies; and e) perceptions and experiences based on race, gender, and ethnicity. The series of interviews began with the spring of eighth grade in 1995 and ended in the spring of tenth grade in 1997 with 29 of the 32 students still participating. The interviews were conducted either in the school setting or in a setting comfortable to the student. The author conducted twenty-eight of the 32 interviews. A bilingual member of the research team and the principal investigator of the SLP conducted the remaining four. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and downloaded into NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program. Throughout the data collection, the

research team and a research group was used to debrief the interviews and preliminary analysis, shaping the continued data collection process.

Analysis

Burawoy and colleagues (1991) state that all research and theory development occurs within a context. Thus, the first step in this analysis was to develop an understanding of those contextual factors that may be impacting students such as the community's political, economic, and demographic context (Villarreal Sosa, 2011). Once the interviews were completed, I listened to the tapes and the overall student stories. This allowed for both verification of the transcripts and an opportunity to notice reactions and themes that emerged. I also read the completed transcripts taking notes in the margins and completing a summary form for each interview, which recorded themes relevant to the research questions. I then constructed case studies of students representing varied experiences. Reviewing the data in its entirety is recommended in order to gain an overall sense of the data as an initial sorting out process (Creswell, 1998).

The next approach to data analysis was the coding process, a commonly accepted procedure across qualitative methods (Creswell, 1998). The coding process helped to further identify categories and themes reflected within and across cases. I used the comparative method, which involves comparison of categories during the coding process, across groups and with existing theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I found using data displays and tables helpful in sorting the data by themes and categories with other relevant characteristics of the participants (Miles & Huberman, 1984). This iterative, inductive/deductive approach to coding was used until coding saturation occurred (Padgett, 1998). As the codes were developed and changed throughout this process, already coded interviews were re-coded using the modified coding scheme.

Several established methods were used to enhance rigor and credibility, including audit trails, an evolving design, member checks, and use of multiple data sources (Creswell, 1998; Sheck, Tang, & Han, 2005). An audit trail including raw data, field notes, data reconstruction such as data displays of themes, student responses, and case studies; and a data journal, which included methodological notes, reflexive notes, and observations, was maintained. The design of the project allowed for continued analysis and re-working of interview protocols as the data collection proceeded. Once case studies were written, they were shared with participants for their feedback regarding interpretations. Finally the data was triangulated through observations and extensive time in the field, student interviews, academic and discipline records, teacher assessments, and parent interviews.

Situating Students in Context

The Chicago Context

The social, political, socio-demographic, and historical context shape how students understand their own social identity and how they respond to oppressive conditions. Although the social context included negative meanings associated with students' Mexican identity, aspects of the community context helped students positively reconstruct the meaning of being Mexican (Villarreal Sosa, 2011). West Park has tremendous historical and political significance to the larger Mexican community in Chicago due to its history of political activism rooted in a strong and proud Mexican identity, its impact on Latinos and politics in the city, and the cultural resources in the community (Villarreal Sosa, 2011). West Park continues to be a politically active community and this awareness was reflected in the student interviews:

Well for alderman I would've voted for Ortiz because Chavez, he doesn't live in the community. Mayor Daley's backing him up by giving him support and financial support as well, and I think he's just trying to get Chavez on his good side and give him money so he could tell him what to do. (Sergio, U.S. born, Fall 10th grade).

Sergio and other students were aware of local politics and rivalries due to the frequent exposure to these discussions in their homes and in the community.

In the attendance area for Siquieros Elementary, the percentage of foreign born was 52.9% in 1990 and 51.5% in 2000 (Villarreal Sosa, 2011). Nearly half of the foreign born was made up of recent immigrants, arriving between 1990 and 2000 (Villarreal Sosa, 2011). Not surprisingly, the anti-immigrant agenda was a common discussion in students' homes, at school, and during the interviews.

I think all of the laws that are coming out now . . . They are taking away many of the rights of Hispanics, of immigrants, more so aimed at the Mexicans. [translated] (Brenda, Immigrant, Fall 10th grade).

Almost all students were very aware of the anti-immigrant sentiment across the country and perceived it as anti-Mexican.

Although a collective history as a conquered people is shared with other Chicanos and people of Mexican descent, Mexicans in the Midwest live far from Mexico and have no direct connection to the land like a Chicana/o living in the Southwest. Writers such as Ana Castillo (1994) remind us that Midwestern Mexicans' geographical distance from Mexico reinforces the need to minimize social alienation by maintaining solid ties to Mexican culture and traditions:

I grew up perceiving myself to be Mexican despite the fact that I was born in the United States . . . We were able to replicate Mexico to such a degree that the spiritual and psychological needs of people so despised and

undesired by white dominant culture were met in our own large communities (Castillo, 1994, p. 25).

A similar theme was reflected in the student interviews:

I consider myself Mexican even though I was born here . . . I wish so much that I would be born in Mexico. I mean—it's that I consider myself a hundred percent Mexican . . . I love my country so much—it's like I'd rather be born over there than here. (Diana, U.S. born, Fall 10th grade).

Like Castillo, the majority of the students in the sample identified as Mexican when asked about their ethnic and racial identity.

The larger ECM study produced three broad patterns of Mexican identity among the students: 1) an *immigrant identity*; 2) a *U.S. Mexican identity*; or 3) a *U.S. minority identity* (Villarreal Sosa, 2011). These identities were based on students' understandings and description of being Mexican, which were influenced, but not determined by place of birth. Students with immigrant identities claimed to be Mexican as an ethnic and racial identity and did not feel the need to justify or explain this choice. Students with a U.S. minority identity considered themselves Mexican as a racial identity, but did not identify with being Mexican ethnically; that is they were not interested in Mexican culture or learning about Mexican culture. The majority of students developed a U.S. Mexican identity. These students were proud of and felt connected to their Mexican heritage while also discussing experiences of discrimination and racism toward Mexicans. These patterns of Mexican identity will be used throughout this article.

The Gang Context

The SLP students faced serious risks living in West Park due to the high level of gang violence in the neighborhood. The students lived in a police beat identified by the Chicago Police Department as a gang “hot spot” due to the high number incidents of gang violence (Jacob, Spengel, & Wa, 2000). As we interviewed the students, we learned that they faced an increased threat of violence and pressure to join a gang as they made the transition from eighth grade to high school. Students worried about the increase in gang threats due to crossing multiple territories on their way to school and managing relationships with gang-involved peers in a larger school with an increased number of gangs.

The Transition to High School

The transition to high school brings together various conditions that can push a youth toward further marginalization and in some cases, gang involvement. Students moved to a larger, more anonymous environment with less structured support (Roderick & Novotny, 1994), making it more likely that teachers see them through the lens of the negative meanings associated with a student's social

identity. Finally, students are in a stage of identity development in which they begin to think about their place in the world and question the reality of their educational opportunities and the barriers they face. Gang research suggests that for Hispanic students, lack of school opportunities and educational frustration were critical in the development of a gang identity (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Freng & Esbensen, 2007).

During this transition process, I was able to identify four patterns of academic identities among the students (Villarreal Sosa, 2011). *Underachievers* had very low expectations and described themselves as lazy. These students had average to above average test scores, but had low grades. *Discouraged* students would try hard to improve at times, but continued to fail and have low achievement test scores. Their persistence alternated with moments of hopelessness about school. The majority of students had *tentative* academic identities. These students consistently had average to above average grades and test scores. They regularly did their work and wanted to go to college, but worried about flunking or dropping out of school and struggled with confidence in their abilities. Their grades were easily impacted by problems outside of school or contextual factors. Students with *solid* academic identities had above average grades, clearly focused on school, and had confidence in their academic ability. Finally, those with *troublemaker* academic identities had low motivation, were often in a gang, and experienced frequent suspensions and detentions. These identities were not fixed, but changed or had the potential to shift during the transition to high school. These academic identities will be used in relationship to the gang context and their Mexican identity.

Negotiating Identity in the Gang Context

Understanding gang involvement is difficult, particularly in a setting where everyone is touched by gang associations in some way. Students had to negotiate the extent of their gang involvement and/or manage relationships with members of rival gangs in order to remain neutral. Students were forced to respond to a gang identity as teachers and staff often imposed it on them regardless of a student's actual gang membership. In a climate of fear and serious levels of violence, the response has been an aggressive attempt to control the gang problem disproportionate to the actual threat (Brown & Benedict, 2009). In this context of fear, schools can lose sight of the fact that the vast majority of their students are not in gangs. The males in the sample often reported experiences where they were treated as potentially violent.

Andres reported such an experience for hiding a candy bar in his backpack. When his teacher discovered that he was hiding something during class in his backpack, she suspected he was carrying a weapon and called security:

Andres was looking inside his school bag. I ask to see what was inside and he said "no." I thought that it might be something else (a gun, a knife, spray paint, etc.) that could hurt or destroy property. I asked the security guard to search his bag. (Teacher Discipline Referral, 9th grade)

Andres was not gang-involved and did not have any discipline reports for fighting or disrespecting teachers. Yet, the teacher's first assumption was that Andres could be carrying a weapon rather than stolen hall passes or food that shouldn't be brought into the classroom. Students managed the gang context and this imposed gang identity in a variety of ways: joining a gang, isolating themselves from their peers, or becoming a negotiator.

Gang Members

Gang membership was based on interviewer observation, reports of others such as teachers or parents, and self-reports. Four (12.5%) of the students, one girl and three boys, were gang members. While three these students had underachiever or tentative academic identities before high school, after the transition, all four adopted a troublemaker academic identity. Three of the four were at or above grade level, but all dropped out of school (See Appendix A). All four students were vulnerable academically having experienced grade retentions, difficult transitions out of bilingual education, and tracking. However, the transition to high school led them down a path of increased academic marginalization. The knowledge that they were in a gang often led to increased tracking, disciplinary procedures for minor infractions, and being told by school staff that they were not wanted in the school.

While all four students identified as racial minorities, they had different relationships with their Mexican identity. Omar and Tita, identified as minority group members, but did not identify with their Mexican ancestry. Because of the lack of connection to their Mexican heritage, Omar and Tita had fewer cultural resources such as connections to family or community activities to draw upon in resisting gang membership. Tony and Oscar identified with a U.S. based Mexican identity; they viewed themselves as a minority within the U.S. *and* strongly identified with their Mexican ancestry. For those students with a U.S. Mexican identity, their identification with Mexican culture was a resource both of them drew upon in their negotiation of their gang involvement through meaningful connections with adults in the extended family and cultural resources such as activism or church events.

Flores-Gonzales' (2002) views academic identities as fixed and divided students into those with "school identities" or "street identities." However, the youth in this study show us how varied and complex their identities can be. The level of gang involvement and identification with the gang changed over time for all four students as did their academic identities. These youth were reachable in that they continued to have misgivings about their gang involvement, had moments of improved grades, and wanted genuine connections with adults.

Isolated Students

Isolation from all peers was a response to the gang context utilized by eight students, four boys and four girls. These students avoided gangs completely and contact with their peers in general. Eight of these students were immigrant identified and two had U.S. Mexican identities. The students had either a (50%) tentative or (50%) solid academic identity. For boys, isolation and rigidity around their peer relationships helped them to stay in school. In fact, Andres and Roberto were the only two males with a U.S. Mexican identity who graduated from high school. For the boys, isolation served to protect them from being categorized as potential gang members; thus, experienced less marginalization in the school environment. Teachers did not treat them in the same way as the peers who chose negotiation rather than isolation, and therefore, did not experience the same frustration with discipline procedures. Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller (2009) find that isolation, as a parenting strategy, is important in protecting the second generation from downward mobility.

These family environments have the effect of isolating children from much of what is going on outside: they are expected to go to school and return home with few distractions in between. While such rearing practices may be frowned upon by educational psychologists, they have the effect of protecting children from the perils of street life in their immediate surroundings. (p. 1095)

In the case of SLP students, this is a strategy employed independent of parents, with different consequences by gender.

Isolation was a strategy that helped boys to graduate, but did not have the same protective result for the girls. Eighty percent (n=4) of the boys graduated while only 25% (n=1) of the girls graduated. For these girls, their academic identity competed with gender expectations. They were involved in networks with others in the community *not* attending school. This worked to their disadvantage, particularly in dating. All three had boyfriends who were not in school, working full-time, and in a hurry to get married.

For Mike and Samuel, the immigrant identity and strategy of isolation provided them some protection from both the school's unconscious or conscious categorization of Latino males as potential gang members and peer harassment. Depending on the type of identity that students displayed at school, the same behavior would be interpreted differently. Samuel's experience demonstrates how powerful identities can be in mediating perceptions of academic ability. Samuel's academic skills were lower than some of the other boys in the SLP, but is described in his school records as having "excellent scholarship." He was born in the U.S. and was in the regular education program. However, he identifies as an immigrant. He is described by teachers as "polite" and "engaged" for the same behavior

described in the U.S. Mexican or U.S. Minority identity boys as “defiance” or “disengagement.”

Negotiators

The more typical experience was what I call the negotiator. Nineteen students, eleven girls and eight boys, were in this group. Students had frequent dealings with gang members due to sibling gang involvement, gang involvement of friends, or managing the gang boundaries where they live, but were not in a gang themselves. These students maintained relationships with peers in opposing gangs. Particularly for the males, maintaining associations with gang members meant they had to deal with teacher perceptions of them as a potential threat or potential gang member. Gerardo, Sergio, Carlos, and Alex are examples of those boys who managed to stay out of gangs and maintain relationships with various peers, but unfortunately their negotiation skills were not enough to help them cope with marginalization at school. None of the eight boys in this group graduated from high school, while three (27%) of the girls did not graduate.

Half of the boys in this group (n=4) were underachievers in high school, two were troublemakers, one had a discouraged academic identity, and one had a tentative academic identity. Most had a similar academic identity in high school with one exception; one boy went from an underachiever academic identity to a troublemaker identity. The three girls who dropped out of the school maintained an underachiever academic identity (n=2) or a discouraged academic identity (n=1) over the transition to high school. One student maintained a tentative academic identity and one maintained a solid academic identity. The majority of girls in this group, however, experienced a positive shift in academic identity over the transition to high school. Three went from an underachiever identity to a tentative identity and two went from tentative to solid academic identities. All girls in this group either maintained their academic identities or experienced a positive shift over the transition.

Given some of the literature on girls and identity negotiation (e.g. Gonzalez, 2001; Way, 1996), I expected that girls would be skilled in the flexibility to move between groups and demonstrate flexibility in identity when crossing borders between peers and within the school context. However, it was unclear to what extent boys would have the ability to negotiate peer relationships and boundaries between groups and demonstrate a similar flexibility. I found that many boys such as Sergio, were skilled at moving between peer boundaries and peer groups, but the way they were treated in school was a barrier too difficult to overcome regardless of their ability to be flexible in their identity or attempts to counter a gang identity. Their lack of success was not necessarily due to overload of conflicting identities as Flores-Gonzales (2002) suggests of her “neutroids,” but the fact that the stigma and negative weight of identities for Latino males was overwhelming; it was too difficult to overcome no matter how skilled of “negotiators” they were.

Sergio, for example, was able to remain neutral and avoid conflict with gangs. He explained that he does not get caught in the middle because he “knows people from both sides” (Fall 9th grade). Other boys used different strategies such as creating alternatives to the gangs. Carlos and his friends created another peer group called a “club.”

I’m in a club, *se llama el Club de Porocho*. [it’s called the Porocho Club] . . . My friends are wild . . . They did the club for people to be in it and to get out of gangs. That’s the point of the club and have fun instead. I’m in it and they call me a name . . . *Y me quita los problemas* [And it helps me forget my problems]. (Winter 9th grade)

The boys showed creative ways such as this group Carlos and his friends developed to avoid trouble with gangs. Other strategies included placing an emphasis on work or spending time with their girlfriends. Despite these strategies, they frequently had negative interactions with teachers leading to suspensions, getting kicked out of class, and other disciplinary actions.

The girls, while being skilled negotiators, carried the burden of being the negotiators of truces; negotiators with the males to convince them not to get into trouble, stay out of gangs, or leave the gangs; serving as bridges between gang-involved males and helpful adults; and reporting potential violence to parents or school staff. Anna often mediated between gang members and if she feared that violence would occur, she reported the incident to the school or used her network of adults to inform parents.

‘Cause you know the other one that wanted to kill him, I had known him since seventh . . . I didn’t know what to do. So I told Mr. L. and they fixed it. They told my other friend not to . . . they told him that if he gets near my friends, that they’ll lock him up . . . So he got mad, he’s like, “that’s not fair ‘cause what if another gang kills him, they’re gonna blame me.” I go, “well you should have thought of that. Why did you say that you were going to kill him? We can’t take chances.” (Spring 9th grade)

Anna showed tremendous courage, sometimes even risking her friends becoming angry with her to protect someone from a possible assault or shooting.

Girls could maintain these relationships with gang-involved peers and not have the same consequences at school regarding how adults categorize them. For girls, maintaining relationships with gang-involved peers meant they paid an emotional cost. As other research on Chicanas suggests, gender roles are often much more complicated than they appear on the surface (Hurtado, 2003). In taking on these roles as peacekeepers, emotional caretakers, and advocates, the girls moved in and out of traditional gender roles as well as a sense of power. As Valenzuela (1999) finds, girls are often tasked with providing support to their male friends, enacting a femininity that promotes school. Keeping their male peers safe

is yet another task, but with potentially serious consequences for the girls if they do not, in turn, have support.

School Marginalization

While successful negotiation with peers made staying out of gangs possible for many boys, negotiating their school environment was more difficult. These boys who managed to stay out of gangs experienced a similar marginalization process within the schools as those boys who were in gangs. The experiences of the male students in the SLP mirror the findings of Freng and Esbensen (2007), who test Vigil's (1999, 2003) multiple marginality framework, and find that all African American and Hispanic youth regardless of gang membership experience multiple marginality. The gang membership, for Latino and Black youth, only adds to an already marginalized experience. Students already marginalized due to racial, ethnic, or linguistic reasons are further labeled as "other" in their schooling experiences because they are poor, gang members, or considered "thugs," either unconsciously or consciously affecting teachers' perceptions of students and their interactions with students. Previous research suggests that Mexican origin students are often marginalized by teachers and administrators by isolating them from opportunities to learn or participate in practices necessary for successful school experiences (Pizarro, 2005; Reyes III, 2006; Vigil, 1999, 2003). The students in this sample provide an opportunity to further understand how both gang and non-gang youth experience marginalization within the school.

Practices around attendance, suspensions, and discipline infractions were a great source of frustration for the boys. At the school level, policies and procedures often exasperated the negative consequences of those procedures. When students were out for numerous days, whether it was due to cutting class, suspensions, or illness, they were not welcomed back and often were discouraged from returning or placed on attendance contracts. Attendance contracts were helpful to some students who had been cutting classes. However, for students who had significant barriers to school attendance, the attendance contracts were perceived as being kicked out. Omar describes his perspective on attendance contracts:

She kinda kicked me out. She did... Yea 'cause I was either supposed to go to school and sign a contract. But I had other things to do so I couldn't go to school. I couldn't go to school every day 'cause I had like to work, to make up the money for the accident. (Spring 9th grade)

Omar was faced with numerous challenges getting to school, and being placed on an attendance contract without support in solving some of the issues preventing him from coming to school was a way of pushing him out. After students had been dropped from school, they would be told to transfer to an alternative school and were given these "referrals" to another school without any follow up or support.

The youth experienced an accumulation of discipline procedures leading to serious consequences for seemingly minor infractions. As I read the discipline files for the youth in the SLP, their infractions were things such as cutting classes, insubordination, tardies, etc. None of these youth had been involved in fights on school grounds. Yet minor offenses set them on a path toward getting further behind in their classes and lower grades due to in-school and out-of-school suspensions. Students felt again, a sense of powerlessness in not knowing how to avoid getting into trouble. Because getting suspended felt so random, they felt that working hard in class was a waste of time. Oscar talked about the impact that suspension had on his motivation.

So, beginning of the year, I used to do my work. I used to work a lot, this and that, but you know, you never know when things are gonna happen, you gonna get suspended, or this and that and you know, I got suspended a couple of times, and all the work that I did in my classes was waste, so the second time around, I kind of felt that, you know, the hell with school now. It's not like I'm gonna pass or anything. (Spring 10th grade)

Oscar had gone from a successful eighth grade year earning A's and B's at the end to dropping out. His moments of academic success were undermined by these prolonged absences and unwelcoming context upon his return.

Understandably, there was a great deal of fear by administration and teachers of potential violence. However, this fear led to the treatment of Latino males as potential threats. In understanding the experiences of the Mexican origin boys in high school, it is important to consider how social identity influences or shapes the borders students must cross, their own perceptions of these borders and social worlds, as well as barriers that may prevent them from crossing. While the majority of students do not join a gang, the experience of marginalization and stereotype threat in the school is a part of the dynamic that leads to dropping out. The boys became so frustrated that they often talked back to teachers, walked out of class, or refused to do homework when they were treated with disrespect. In turn, they would experience suspensions which kept them out of school and caused them to feel increasingly marginalized from school. While some students may have been very skilled at negotiating their relationships with gang members, the constant attacks they experienced within the school context made staying in school more challenging than staying out of a gang. This environment did not value the strengths these boys possessed and the perseverance they demonstrated. Sergio sums up the high school experience when talking about what advice he would give to an eighth grader:

Well, not to be frightened like what they say that it's all hard and you have to study every night. It's the same thing, it's that . . . you have more responsibilities because over here if you mess up, they will just, they won't deal with it. They'll get rid of you. To them it ain't a loss. To them it's a convenience . . . (Fall 9th grade)

To Sergio, he and other students were a burden to the school and not valued. This school would not allow for mistakes or adolescent misbehavior for this group of boys.

Exposure to Violence

Students were also impacted in a significant way by the constant exposure to gang violence. Eleven students experienced the death of a close friend or relative due to gang violence and all students discussed being victims of gang violence, witnessing gang violence, or having a close friend or family who were victims of gang violence. Moreover, the grief and trauma due to the gang violence often went unacknowledged by the adults, both family and school staff, in the students' lives. Even before Alex's death, Anna had expressed her frustration with the adults in her life for not acknowledging the sense of loss she and others felt after a gang shooting or death of a friend. After Alex died, I observed that many adults in the school treated his death as "just another gang shooting" and students were expected to carry on as usual.

The students' own words provide the best description of the level of violence they faced on a daily basis. The following words represent excerpts from over 88 references to gang violence in the interviews of the 30 students who talked about gangs during the interviews. I chose at least one line from each of the 30 students who talked about gangs in the interviews.

That Night I Had a Dream About the Devil
They're shooting all the time
Beating people up
People killing each other
They'll go after you
A rival gang came over and shot him
They could beat up anyone
Probably something will happen to them
Someone's gonna end up getting shot
More people are gonna end up getting killed
One person's gonna get shot
He was the one who got killed, got killed
 And I got mad
My friend got shot
He got shot cause his brothers
I had a feeling about him
 That he was gonna die
My friend, they're gonna kill him
They want to kill her
I had to go another block, so I wouldn't get shot
They shot three guys from the truck
My mom was afraid they could kill him

I saw them pull up...they shot him
They stabbed her again
He heard the bullet go through his head
He just died like that,
 They shot him
He was with his family in the park
 And they shot him
There's more violence
 So they won't go to school
I get chased everyday
Hey, what's happening here?
 We're losing people
It really don't hurt you because, I mean, a lot of people have been dying
A lot of people have been dying real fast.

Some students reported experiencing nightmares after shootings. Many worried constantly about which of their friends would be next or when they might be shot. Without exception, all of the students experienced the death of at least one peer, and some students experienced the death of multiple friends. Many others had experienced or knew others that experienced a shooting or stabbing and survived or had been “jumped.” Of the 32 students in the SLP, one was shot and killed and two others were shot and wounded.

Reaction to Trauma

The behavior students exhibited as a result of the trauma was often seen through the lens of the categorization of a “gang member,” preventing school staff from understanding the meaning of student behavior. Tony’s behavior that looked like “gang behavior” was a reaction to the trauma in his life. Looking back, as a tenth grader, Tony traced the beginning of his emotional difficulties to eighth grade, after a friend was shot and killed. After this incident, Tony had difficulty controlling his anger and described “going crazy” or his mind just going blank. Tony was never asked why he was experiencing such an extreme state of anger. He explained, “I don’t know, my head goes blank, and if they [gang members] start doing anything, I go crazy going after them” (Spring 8th grade). Tony was reacting to the gang members out of his anger and grief over the death of his friend. Tony began to use marijuana in order to “feel better” (Spring 8th grade), and began to injure himself by carving his own tattoos.

Tony was hurting and did not have appropriate guidance in coping with the traumatic experiences. Rather than understanding Tony’s behavior from a perspective that acknowledged the trauma he had experienced or the mental health needs he may have had, Tony was perceived as a gang member and thus, only a youth to be watched and punished. Several students used the word “loco” or “crazy” to describe themselves, even those not in a gang. In Vigil’s (2003) research on gang members, he describes the state of mind called “locura” as “the

psychological stated of quasi-controlled insanity” (p. 230). Vigil explains that “locura” is a culmination of street experiences, particularly among the gang members who have had traumatic lives.

Similar to the boys, girls experienced multiple layers of trauma due the exposure to violence or threat of violence at the community level. Girls felt responsible for the emotional well-being of their male counterparts and felt a responsibility to prevent their male friends from getting hurt or becoming gang-involved. When violence did occur, they carried the emotional burden of the aftermath of gang violence; supporting others in the grieving process or expressing the sadness after a gang-related death.

For those girls that did actively participate in gang life, they risked exposure to sexual violence in addition to the gang violence. Girls had to cope with the gang violence and always consider the possibility of gendered violence. Tita, one of our gang-involved students, experienced sexual violence at home. Tita lived at home with both parents and two older brothers. Tita was courageous enough to speak out about the sexual abuse and disclose it to me during an interview. Escaping to the streets was preferable for Tita than dealing with the sexual, physical, and emotional violence in her own home. However, this same survival strategy of taking to the streets made her suspect; she becomes a “street girl” and when she had the courage to report the abuse to the police, she was not believed.

Transcending Trauma

Students faced enormous challenges, yet many were able to remain hopeful in the face of such dire circumstance. Despite the many negative experiences in school, many youth continued to look to school as a sanctuary:

When I’m outside my whole day is depressing. You know outside is like, I get crazy, you know. I don’t think about it, you know. But at school you like a whole different person, you know. I’m nice to everybody and everything. (Tony, Winter 10th grade)

Even though Tony experienced a sense of marginalizing in the school, the school was still a sanctuary from the violence on the street. Many students found ways to cope and in some cases, transcend the trauma they experienced. Janette was able to use Alex’s death as part of her transformative experience. Janette started high school with a troublemaker academic identity and worried that she was going to fail and get into fights in high school, but gradually changed her academic identity. She eventually developed a tentative academic identity and graduated with honors. After Alex’s death, her grades temporality declined, she was very depressed, and had difficulty concentrating in school. However, Janette used Alex’s memory as an inspiration to continue to work hard:

And since now that Alex rests in peace, he's not with me, everything I'm gonna do is gonna be for him, he's gonna be in everything. If I pass my classes, I'll always think about him . . . (Spring 9th grade)

Janette found solace and purpose in Alex's memory as she worked hard to be the first in her family to graduate from high school.

Tony's case also shows that there were opportunities for intervention that were missed by the adults around him. Tony continued to make attempts to improve his grades and attendance, especially after his prolonged absence. At one point, there were two classes he was passing; both of those teachers encouraged him to come back to school. Tony also found an adult baseball team in the neighborhood and joined the team. Tony explained that tenth grade was going better, "When I got that A on history, I'm like, 'I could do it,' and everything" (Spring 9th grade). Even his friends noticed his improvement and said to him, "Man you changed. Man, you used to never care about another thing and now you changed all of a sudden" (Winter 10th grade). Those moments described above where Tony is "reachable" were lost in the midst of failure, low expectations, and frequent suspensions and absences. By the last interview, Tony did not have much hope of graduating. He continued to express how important graduating from high school was to him, but realized that even if he took summer school, this would not be enough. When asked how he thought teachers would remember him in high school, he said, "The one that wanted to learn but had so many problems" (Spring 10th grade).

Discussion

Schools play an important role in the shaping of social identities by assuming or imposing a particular identity or meaning of that identity on students. In the case of Latino males, it is often the "gang" or "street" identity that can be reinforced or imposed through informal and formal school practices (Vigil, 1999). Most of the work on gangs and education has focused on gang members only, but as the youth in this sample show us, most Latino males regardless of gang membership are subjected to similar treatment and experiences. While for most youth, these experiences did not lead to gang involvement; they did lead to enough frustration with their school experiences that they were eventually pushed out of school.

Consistent with Tajfel's (1981) work on social stereotypes, one of two social functions of stereotypes is relevant here, "their role in contributing to the creation and maintenance of group 'ideologies' explaining or justifying a variety of social actions" (p. 146). In the case of overcrowded, urban schools, over-estimation of extreme individuals leads to over-labeling students as gang members and potentially violent; justifying the high rates of suspensions as well as hostile and disrespectful actions that lead to the eventual "voluntary" decision to leave school. Racial and gender disparities in school discipline and the use of suspensions is a

matter of racial justice and merit civil rights enforcement in education (Losen, 2011). Furthermore, there is no justification for the use suspension or removal from class or school experienced by these boys; there is no research base suggesting this has any positive result in school achievement, engagement, or change in behavior (Losen, 2011). On the contrary, research suggests that suspensions are a significant predictor to dropping out (Losen, 2011).

As communities and schools deal with the reality of gang violence and are increasingly concerned about safety, the school response has been to ignore the problem or to respond with policies of suppression-only versus a more comprehensive approach (Spergel, 1995). All misbehavior by certain youth is interpreted as “gang behavior” and subjected to harsh “three strikes” type of policies. In addition, these policies often target all youth who are dressed in the street style of the time without regard to their actual gang involvement. As Klein (2007) states, “[i]t is still the case that if you spot a young male with baggy pants, a white t-shirt, and a shaved head hanging around a park, he is probably not a gang member” (p. 27). Yet, we assume exactly the opposite. Thus, when students ultimately stop coming to school, are kicked out, or perform poorly, it is the “street socialization” and gang activity that is the cause. We fail to critique how the socialization processes in the school context contribute to the students’ decision to stop coming to school. While schools can exacerbate a problem, they also offer the possibility of providing a positive schooling experience and countering the socialization on the streets.

For those youth involved in gangs, the picture that emerges here is one that provides hope compared to what is often considered a problem too overwhelming to be addressed. Vigil’s (1999) description of gang members implies that many have an “anti-authority edge” and describes street children as those coming from lower-income households within low income communities, headed by a single mother or grandmother, and having limited extended family or support networks, and already have educational deficits. The youth in this study are more consistent with Spergel’s (1995, 2007) research; the gang youth came from one parent and two parent families, were not the most economically disadvantaged families in the neighborhood, and tend to test at grade level. They are on the academic borderlands; they can either be on a path towards academic achievement and graduation, or disengagement and dropping out. What this complex picture of the gang youth tells us is that the proposition of countering a gang identity and street socialization may not be as difficult as Vigil (1999) suggests. Youth do have other social networks and opportunities for socialization outside of the gang, particularly if they remain connected to their Mexican ancestry and culture.

A borderlands framework also helps us to move forward with understanding the complexities of identity with Mexican origin youth. From the youth experiences, we learn how the experience of the gang context varies by Mexican identity and gender. Chicana/o scholars such as Urrieta (2003) are beginning to address the deconstruction of masculinity and femininity in the exploration of

identities using the foundation laid by Chicanas such as López (2012) and Anzaldúa (1987). Latino males need to be provided a space for them to reconstruct masculinity and express their pain as they find a way out of the “locura.” Feminist writings have to continue to extend to include Latino men and address their privilege as well as their vulnerabilities and gender relations within a cultural context (Hurtado & Cervantez, 2009).

As these boys have shown us, some masculinities are racially stigmatized. López (2012) describes racially stigmatized masculinities as “the spectrum of cultural scripts, performances, and embodiments of what it means to be a man that are accorded ‘racial’ stigma” and can only be understood from a relational perspective (P. 241). Thus, as López states, one of the most critical and immediate implications is the need for on-going training in anti-racism for school staff, faculty, and administration.

Latina feminist psychology based in a borderlands and social identity perspective acknowledges the need to address group trauma produced by the experience of racism and discrimination (Hurtado & Cervantez, 2009). What is known from the work on historical trauma with the Native American population is that healing from group level trauma must happen in community, not in isolation (Brave Heart, 2011). Not only are we not providing opportunities for individual level healing with youth, but also not allowing for expression of that trauma in a community context, where group level healing is possible leaving youth abandoned to cope on their own.

In addressing the gang problem, the loss that has become a normal part of their experience must be acknowledged. Each time the students lost another classmate to gang violence, it was shocking to see that this loss was not recognized by any of the adults in their lives. After each death, students were expected to continue to go to school, take their tests, and go on with their activities as usual. Previous research documents the increased level of PTSD among students with exposure to high levels of community violence (Thompson & Massat, 2005). However, current definitions of what is considered a traumatic incident and therefore, requiring a response from school, exclude community level violence that has come to be an expected occurrence (DiRaddo & Brock, 2012).

In addition to acknowledging the trauma experienced outside of school, schools need to consider how the cultures and contexts of the schools contribute to, exacerbate, or intensify the trauma. Jose-Kampfner & Aparicio (1998) explore both the consequences of neighborhood violence as well as the institutional violence students experience (e.g. linguistic terrorism/erasure of language). Students were impacted by the community violence in the development of PTSD; but were further traumatized by being belittled, humiliated, and segregated in school. In the name of safety, outside violence is duplicated inside the school with the discipline, and focus on over-control of adolescents. This research by Jose-Kapfner & Aparicio is supported by the experiences of the youth in the SLP. Students reported feeling

disrespected and belittled by staff and felt a sense of powerlessness as they navigated disciplinary procedures that felt random and unwarranted. Instead, schools can draw upon the work of restorative justice and incorporate restorative practices in the school (Mirsky, 2011).

As Fine (2004) states, schools not only inherit racial and ethnic identities, they play a part in reinforcing and shaping those meanings. There are numerous promising policy and practice responses that can create environments that support students in achieving educational success. Schools need to consider alternatives to suspensions and find ways to help students transition back into the classroom after long absences. Vigil (1999) provides examples of more positive approaches such as asking gang youth to serve as an advisory council to the principal. Schools implementing “culture of clam” initiatives are attempting interventions such as positive behavioral support throughout the school, peer jury, peace circles, and mentoring. One of the key issues in implementing a “culture of clam” is that the focus should be on changing the behavior of the adults in the building so that adults respond in respectful, caring ways that hold youth accountable. In addition, school environments should consider creating more democratic learning environments and maintain an awareness of the socio-cultural issues faced by students (Arfaniarromo, 2001). What is so striking among the youth in this study is that despite repeated occurrences of marginalization and trauma at the school level, students continued to look to schools to provide them with safety from the community violence and opportunities for learning. Students continued to express a desire to go to school or continue their education.

Appendix A: Mexican and School Identities

Table 1: *Mexican and School Identities for Gang Members*

Student Name/ID	Mexican Identity	School Identity 8 th	School Identity H.S.	Read/Math GE 8 th	GPA 8 th	Outcomes
Omar (464)	U.S. Minority	Troublemaker	Troublemaker	7.3/6.8	1.41	Drop
Tony (469)	U.S. Mexican	Underachiever	Troublemaker	8.6/9.4	1.58	Drop
Oscar (484)	U.S. Mexican	Tentative Academic	Troublemaker	9.2/9.3	1.69	Drop
Tita (486)	U.S. Minority	Tentative Academic	Troublemaker	7.3/8	2.64	Drop

Table 2: *Mexican and School Identities for Isolated Students*

Student Name/ID	Mexican Identity	School Identity 8 th	School Identity H.S.	Read/Math GE 8 th	GPA 8 th	Outcome
Mike (462)	Immigrant	Solid Academic	Solid Academic	7.7/9.8	3.35	Graduated
Andres (473)	U.S. Mexican	Tentative Academic	Tentative Academic	9.7/9	1.54	Graduated
Roberto (474)	U.S. Mexican	Tentative Academic	Tentative Academic	6.5/8.7	2.54	Graduated
Samuel (480)	Immigrant	Tentative Academic	Solid Academic	7.3/7.4	1.75	Graduated
Saul (490)	Immigrant	Solid Academic	N/A	./.	3.0	Drop
Cynthia (463)	Immigrant	Solid Academic	Solid Academic	9.4/11	2.92	Graduated
Dora (488)	Immigrant	Tentative Academic	Tentative Academic	./.	3.0	Drop
Daniella (489)	Immigrant	Solid Academic	Solid Academic	5.9/6.4	1.83	Drop
Brenda (491)	Immigrant	Tentative Academic	Tentative Academic	5.6/6.7	1.76	Drop

Table 3: *Mexican and School Identities for Negotiators*

Student Name/ID	Mexican Identity	School Identity 8 th	School Identity H.S.	Read/Math GE 8 th	GPA 8 th	Outcomes
Carlos (465)	U.S. Mexican	Underachiever	Troublemaker	6.8/6.6	2.08	Drop
Gerardo (467)	U.S. Mexican	Discouraged	Discouraged	5.6/6.9	1.5	Drop
Ruben (471)	U.S. Mexican	Underachiever	Underachiever	9.7/9.6	2	Drop
Abiel (481)	U.S. Mexican	Underachiever	Underachiever	9.9/9.5	1.6	Drop
Sergio (482)	U.S. Mexican	Underachiever	Underachiever	8.1/9.5	3.23	Drop
Ivan (492)	U.S. Mexican	Underachiever	Underachiever	5.9/8.6	1.75	Drop
Victor (493)	U.S. Mexican	Troublemaker	Troublemaker	6.2/6.9	1.82	Drop
Alex (476)	U.S. Mexican	Tentative Academic	Tentative Academic	8.4/7.9	3	Deceased
Anna (468)	U.S. Mexican	Underachiever	Tentative Academic	9.6/7.5	2.58	Graduated
Diana (472)	U.S. Mexican	Underachiever	Tentative Academic	9.3/8.1	2.38	Graduated
Iliana (475)	U.S. Mexican	Underachiever	Tentative Academic	9.9/8.5	1.67	Graduated
Mari (477)	U.S. Mexican	Solid Academic	N/A	8.8/8.4	3.77	Graduated
Lorena (478)	U.S. Mexican	Tentative Academic	Solid Academic	9.6/10	2.54	Graduated
Chely (479)	U.S. Mexican	Tentative Academic	Solid Academic	8.6/9.1	2.92	Graduated
Janette (485)	U.S. Mexican	Troublemaker	Tentative Academic	7.5/8.4	1.33	Graduated
Theresa (487)	U.S. Mexican	Tentative Academic	Tentative Academic	7/8.9	3.17	Graduated
Haydee (483)	U.S. Mexican	Underachiever	Underachiever	10/9.6	2.38	Drop
Ali (466)	U.S. Mexican	Discouraged	Discouraged	6.8/5.3	1	Drop
Yesenia (470)	U.S. Mexican	Underachiever	Underachiever	8.1/7.4	1.62	Drop

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