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WHERE THE STREETS CROSS THE CLASSROOM:
A STUDY OF LATINO STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON
CULTURAL IDENTITY IN CITY SCHOOLS AND
NEIGHBORHOOD GANGS

Susan Roberta Katz¹
University of San Francisco

Abstract

This study is an ethnography of eight middle school students, all immigrants from Central America and Mexico with siblings or close friends active in gangs. The investigation attempts to solve the puzzle of why these teenagers from marginalized ethnic communities were increasingly involved in neighborhood gangs and how schooling potentially contributed to that involvement. Though the students were seeking a positive cultural identity as Latinos, they felt thwarted at school by negative stereotypes. Suggestions are made that assist educators in maximizing opportunities for youth to achieve a positive sense of identity and minimize their chances of engaging in self-destructive behavior.

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Introduction

They put us in ESL classes, and then they forget about us. They call us trouble-makers. They don't care if we succeed. The gangs give us something we don't get in school. We feel like we belong.

- Ricardo García, 15, a member of a gang in Richmond, California.

San Francisco Examiner, July 10, 1994

Front page stories in the Sunday newspaper told of two major weekend events impacting the lives of youth in the Northern California city of Bahía. One hopeful article described a peace-making conference of mostly African-American former gang members inspired by the year-long truce in Los Angeles between the Crips and the Bloods. The second article depicted a drive-by shooting in the heart of Bahía's barrio, which wounded four innocent victims. The Latino community was not included in the gang truce. Instead each weekend seemed to announce a new retaliation between the *Sureños* and the *Norteños* - the Latino parallels of Crips and Bloods.

When I was teaching middle school in 1992-1993, students would regularly come into my classroom first thing every Monday morning to give their personal accounts of the events in the newspapers. On the Monday after this particular weekend, Julio told me his older brother was in lockup because of the drive-by. The police had come to his house early Sunday morning to inform his family that Elvin was in jail but would not reveal the nature of the crime. Twenty-four hours later, the police returned to report that Elvin, a *Norteño*, was being held for attempted murder. He had shot five *Sureños* in a drive-by shooting; two were dead.

In the beginning of that school year, Elvin was 15 years old and a student in my seventh grade ESL (English-as-a-Second Language) class. He would speak to me about his gang activity with the *Norteños* and confessed he had done drive-bys. When I asked him how he felt about his actions, he simply responded, "I don't know. I never found out if I killed anyone or not." He believed his actions were justified since he was retaliating for his homeboys.

Thinking I could be trusted, he showed me his gun at the end of one day in late September. Wanting to honor his trust, I let him leave school,

but not without misgivings. If I reported him, he would get expelled and be out in the streets forever more. If I did not report him, I would be delivering the message that I condoned the possession of guns at school. Furthermore, as a friend later warned, I could get fired. After hours of internal struggle, I finally reported his action to the vice-principal, and Elvin was expelled the next day. Expelled to nowhere, just as I suspected. He hasn't been to school since.

Many months after his expulsion, I saw Elvin at the *Cinco de Mayo* parade, walking in a single file with his homeboys. When I called out to him, "Hey, how are you doing?," he just stared right through me. That same afternoon, *Sureños* fired at *Norteños* while driving cars along the route of the parade, and a week later, Elvin shot five *Sureños* in revenge. Soon afterwards he was convicted with a long jail sentence. Elvin's brother, Julio, had taken a different route. He preferred to participate in "tagging crews," groups that paint graffiti on walls. Julio cut classes, ran around the in halls, and stole from stores. But he didn't kill.

In a public television program on the LA uprisings, writer John Edgar Wideman wisely noted, "If people just took the time to talk to these kids, they'd see that they are operating within a very logical framework." I wanted to know: What was the logical framework of these kids, my own students?

Purpose of this Study

This last question became the focus of my doctoral dissertation: to help solve the puzzle of why teenagers from marginalized ethnic communities were increasingly involved in neighborhood gangs and how schooling potentially contributed to that involvement. During ten years of teaching middle school in Bahía from 1984-1994, I noticed that each year more of my students were becoming turned off to school and attracted to gang membership. Gangs have existed in these communities since the 1920s, but in the 1990s children were joining gangs at increasingly younger ages and using weapons of greater danger. What were these youth seeking that drove them to take such high risks? What forces were operating within school that pushed them out of school?

In 1992 I was fortunate to have the same group of students assigned to my ESL class for the third consecutive year and, consequently I got to know them very well. Four of these students - all Central American - stopped coming to their assigned classes in the spring of their eighth grade year. Instead they would show up at odd times and seek me out during my free period. They started telling me stories - detailed, intimate narratives of their lives away from school. One boy was kicked out of both parents' homes, fending for himself and his girlfriend. He ended up living with gang members for food and protection. Each time we had a conversation, I found myself wishing I had a tape recorder with me. I felt that these stories needed to be heard by other teachers and educators to gain a deeper understanding of why these kids were so alienated from school, a place which seemed trivial and boring to them in comparison to their neighborhood alive with high drama.

Given my concern, I decided to focus my doctoral dissertation for the Graduate School of Education at UC Berkeley on issues related to my Latino students' perspectives of schools and gangs. The following year a number of students in my seventh grade ESL class were coincidentally the younger brothers or sisters of the students I had taught for three consecutive years. I conducted a year-long ethnographic case study of eight of these students; seven were first- or second-generation immigrants from Central America and one was from Mexico. Through interviews and observations, I examined how these students were searching for a positive cultural identity as Latinos at school, but felt thwarted in this search by negative, stereotypical perceptions by both peers and teachers. Consequently, they chose to look to their communities for the source of their cultural identity and interacted with neighborhood gangs.

My purpose was to suggest ways educators could maximize opportunities for youth to achieve a positive sense of identity and possibly minimize the chances for youth to engage in self-destructive behavior. I recognize, however, that schools exist within the confines of society, and that fundamental change in the lives of our youth can take place only with a deep reorganization of social structures and values.

Theoretical Framework

Adolescence is a unique stage of life, floating between childhood and adulthood, a time in which human beings particularly in the West are struggling to determine their place in the sun, often for the first time. Youth of color in a heterogeneous society, such as the US, face daunting challenges in that they must figure out their place within the mainstream as well as within their own racial or ethnic group. Their search for identity involves negotiating among three aspects of identity: social, cultural and ethnic (Ferdman, 1990, p. 192).

In a multiethnic society, all three aspects are tightly interwoven. When the images of success valued by the dominant culture are not accessible to members of other cultures, these members struggle to discover a positive identity for themselves within the dominant culture. As a result, they must search within their own ethnic groups or peer subgroups for a positive identity. These groups may, in turn, be organized in opposition to the images of the dominant culture precisely for the purpose of creating a positive ethnic identity for its members.

The complexity of an ethnic identity results from the fact that any definition of ethnicity within a heterogeneous society contains both internal and external meanings. An internal definition of ethnicity includes how people within an ethnic group perceive themselves as well as other members of the group. For example, how one Nicaraguan family describes another Nicaraguan family involves an internal definition of ethnicity. In contrast, an external definition includes how people outside the ethnic group perceive those within the ethnic group (Adams, 1989). How the US media depict Haitian immigrants involves external definitions of ethnicity. In a society riddled with racial and ethnic discrimination, these two definitions often come into conflict.

Anthropologists are beginning to critique the common practice of basing the definition of ethnicity exclusively on "cultural features." As Adams (1989) writes:

Of course, cultural features are characteristic of ethnic groups; but to use them to define an ethnic group is unworkable in the long run. The reason for this apparent contradiction is that the central issue at stake in identifying ethnicities is not a

configuration of cultural features, but the reproduction of the internal identity. In contrast, external definitions of an ethnicity can only be expressed in terms of external features. The outsider has no alternative but to give an external, or categorical, definition; he or she cannot ever really "know" the nature of the internal identity that may exist in the minds of the members (p. 6).

Those outside a particular ethnic group recognize members of that group by their shared "cultural features" (e.g. style of dress, food, dance). Consequently, outsiders are much more likely to form ethnic stereotypes, resulting from an external view of group membership. Those within the group have a much more sophisticated and subtle understanding of what involves membership; they grasp the complexity and mixed feelings about those same cultural features. Internal definitions center on self-identity, adaptive and mutable according to historical context (Adams, p. 12).

Latino Identity: Conflicts between Internal and External Definitions

The identification "Latino" means something very different in Latin America than it does in the United States. In Latin America, one's identity is foremost national: one is Salvadoran, Guatemalan, or Mexican. Each national identity embodies a distinct history, geography and culture. Even within Central America, the difference between Guatemala with 80% indigenous people and Costa Rica with only 5% is striking. The term "Latino" is too broad to be truly significant.

Migration to the United States changes the ways Latin Americans define themselves and the ways others define them. A girl growing up in El Salvador may have a strong sense of her national history and land. When she emigrates to the United States, she is suddenly called "Latina" or "Hispanic" by school officials, government workers, classmates. For the first time in her life, she becomes a "minority," a term meaning "less than," the victim of racial and ethnic discrimination.

Arriaza (1995) describes how migrating from Guatemala to the US as an adult affected his sense of identity:

But the host culture labeled me "Latino" and pushed me into a larger group of the "brown" population. I resisted this massifying of my Guatemalan culture, but deep in my mind I already knew that certainly, and after a while, I would end up appropriating the ascribed values - whatever they were - of being "Latino." I only hoped that I would have the time and the room to define such values on my terms, and not those designated by the host culture. Although the historical me is Guatemalan, from my perspective I now am first Guatemalan and then Latino. However, in the school where I teach the African-American kids define me as Mexican, and my colleagues as "Latin." In some instances I am in the position Indians are today in Guatemala... I found myself, for the first time ever, on the side of the target culture, in terms of my ethnicity. Not even in Guatemala I had felt more Guatemalan than I felt in the States for a while. The first years living here I found a sorely needed refuge in a growing pride for my Spanish and Maya ancestry (pp. 20-21).

In this way, Latino ethnic identity in the US is not just shaped by members of the ethnic group itself; it contains both internal and external definitions. External definitions are not value-free, but develop within a social and historical context. When external definitions are created within a heterogeneous society, where all ethnic groups are not equal, those definitions may be used to categorize people along a hierarchical structure. In this way, external definitions may result in negative stereotypes.

What happens when those stereotypes, created for historical and political reasons, become commonplace conceptions of what it means to be "Latino" or "Hispanic"? After the 1992 L.A. uprisings, my students composed their own versions of a poem entitled, "Just Because I'm Black." A Salvadoran girl wrote the following poem:

Just because I'm Hispanic
I don't eat burritos
I don't eat tacos
I'm not from Mexico.

Just because I'm Hispanic
I don't have an accent
I'm not a gangster
I don't hate other races.
Just because I'm Hispanic
I'm not better than you
You are not better than me
We're not stupid.
Just because I'm Hispanic
I'm not a prostitute
I'm not going to be a prostitute
I'm just a normal person.
(Weinberg, 1992)

The same negative images repeated themselves over and over again in my Latino students' poems. Latinos were supposedly stupid, gang members, thieves, prostitutes. These were the perceptions which the students believed others had of them, undoubtedly very painful perceptions to accept. The students were faced with several choices: 1) They could internalize these negative images of their ethnicity as part of their cultural identity. 2) They could reject these negative images and build upon the positive associations created within their own ethnic group. 3) They could resist the stereotypes by turning them on their heads and slapping society's faces with them. They could say, "Yeah, I steal. Wanna see how much more money I make than you?" Or, "Yeah, I get bad grades. Wanna see how much more I know about life than you?" In this way, the students created an alternative cultural identity.

In reconstructing a cultural identity at the group level, language is possibly the most important symbolic element involved (Ferdman, 1990). Language includes not only the ways in which people within a culture speak and write, but also the signs which they use to communicate (Williams, 1977). In this sense, graffiti represents much more than an act of defacing property; it is an act of secret communication among group members. When youth "tag" (spray paint their code names on walls), they are using names for themselves that only group members can understand, creating a sign that means

belonging. This study incorporated this sense of language in identifying how elements of gang culture were manifested within the classroom.

Research Questions

Given this theoretical context, I identified key spheres involved in the students' construction of their cultural identity: peers at school, teachers at school, and groups in their neighborhood. I explored the students' own perspectives on peer groups at school by interviewing them about their friendship choices. I asked them questions about what role ethnicity and language played in both their selection of friends and in becoming a privileged group at school. I interviewed teachers about their perceptions of the students and compared these with the students' perceptions of the teachers. I also asked the students about their views of gangs in their neighborhood and about their associations with these gangs. Finally, I examined what symbolic elements, such as language and literacy, shape their sense of cultural identity and to what extent those elements relate to being Latino.

Methodology

School

This study took place in Coolidge Middle School in Bahía School District. Bahía, located in Northern California, is representative of the current trend in urban education. Of its 64,000 students (1990-91), 75% were from homes in which languages other than English were spoken and 28% were Limited English or Non-English Proficient (NEP/LEP). Within Bahía was Coolidge Middle School, with 1400 students, located in a middle-class Asian and European-American neighborhood. Due to a court order to desegregate in 1983, Coolidge received about 300 students who were bussed in from both the Latino district and one of Bahía's African-American neighborhoods. Both of these targeted areas were approximately 30 minutes away by bus.

As evident in Table 1, the Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) Program was predominantly Asian and European-American; the Special Education Program was disproportionately African-American. Over one-third of the Latino students at Coolidge were enrolled in either ESL

or Special Ed. These figures show why Coolidge was characterized by educators in Bahía as "apartheid."

Table 1
Coolidge Middle School

Entire Student Body: 1400	Latino: 140 (10%)	Other**:
Asian*: 500 (38%)	Afro-American:	160 (11%)
European-American: 400 (30%)	170 (12%)	
GATE Program: 450	Latino: 5 (1%)	Other:
Asian: 195 (43%)	Afro-American:	25 (5%)
European American: 220 (49%)	6 (2%)	
ESL Program: 150	Latino: 43 (26%)	Other:
Asian: 86 (53%)	Afro-American:	27 (16%)
European American: 7 (4%)	0 (0%)	
Special Ed. Program: 76	Latino: 9 (12%)	Other:
Asian: 10 (13%)	Afro-American:	7 (9%)
European American: 14 (18%)	36 (47%)	

* induces Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino.

**includes Native American, Indian, Middle Eastern, Samoan, S.E. Asian, and other non-whites

Moreover, the ESL Program was housed for ten years until 1992 in portable bungalows, minutes from the main campus. Teachers in the halls frequently told the ESL students, "Speak English! You're in America!" and their native English-speaking peers often teased them for their foreign accents or customs. However, when students tried to "exit" the ESL program and enter the mainstream, they encountered roadblocks. The district's Bilingual Office discouraged moving the students unless they met the difficult criteria for exiting, based upon standardized test scores and length of time in the US. The school administration also claimed the "regular" classes had no space. Thus, many ESL students remained in the program for all their years at Coolidge, even if they were born in the US and spoke English fluently.

Community

Seven of the eight participants lived in Las Palmas, the Latino section of Bahía. (The eighth focal student lived in one of the African-American neighborhoods.) Las Palmas was distinct from other barrios in California in that this section was predominantly Central American, not largely Mexican or Chicano (Córdoba, 1989). One-third

of Latino youth (ages 12-17) in this area lived below the poverty level, as compared to 20% of Latino children in the city overall (1990 census). From 1992 to 1993, 24 gang-related shootings were reported city-wide (Ferris, 1992).

In 1993, approximately seven Latino gangs (called *clicas*) operated within Las Palmas, many named after the streets in which they functioned. Each *clica* had from twenty to sixty central members, with many more peripheral members called "taggers" (those who did graffiti) or "wannabes" (those who "want to be" in a gang and are awaiting acceptance). Of a total of 16,700 youth in the barrio from ages ten to seventeen, about 200-500 were affiliated with gangs. Most members were male, but female gang members existed as well (Ross, 1993).

Most of the gangs in the barrio were associated with either the *Norteños* or the *Sureños*, two arch rival statewide networks. *Norteños* and *Sureños* distinguished themselves by nationality, culture and language. The *Norteños* consisted mostly of Central Americans, primarily spoke English, and blended Latino and African-American cultures. They "claimed" [used] the color of red to show their association with the Bloods. In contrast, the *Sureños* included Mexicans exclusively, spoke Spanish only, and maintained elements of traditional Mexican culture. *Sureños* were linked to the Crips, "claiming" the color blue.

Participants

Students. Four male and four female Latino students served as focal subjects. All were enrolled in the intermediate-level ESL seventh grade class throughout 1992-1993. They were selected on the basis of several criteria: 1) The four girls and the four boys had naturally formed same-sex friendship groups within the class. 2) All lived in neighborhoods with high gang activity. 3) All were considered "at risk," as defined by grades of mostly Ds and Fs.

The focal students were affected by neighborhood gangs through personal connections. All of the boys and girls had either siblings, relatives, or close friends in gangs. They were bussed into Coolidge from their community where gangs were prevalent. They had scored below 26% on CTBS and were designated as "Limited English Proficient," with Spanish as their native language. Seven families

immigrated from Central America (Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala); one came from Mexico. Four students spent all their school years in the US.

Table 2
Background Information Chart

<i>Name</i>	<i>Homeland</i>	<i>Entry in US</i>	<i>1991 CTBS *R M</i>	<i>1992 CTBS R M</i>	<i>1993 CTBS R M</i>	<i>Gang Members in Family or Friends</i>
Julio	Guatemala	Birth	12 18	1 1	13 14	Brother
Hector	Nicaragua	1983	-- --	12 6	8 3	Brother
Ruben	El Salvador	1986	8 8	1 3	1 5	Friends
Eduardo	Nicaragua	1989	19 43	1 11	11 24	Cousin
Veronica	Mexico	Birth	2 5	4 1	19 1	Brother, Sister, Uncle
Alicia	El Salvador	Birth	2 40	6 10	25 24	Brother
Karla	Nicaragua	1985	24 33	20 15	33 21	Brother
Elena	Nicaragua	1990	13 49	22 12	20 16	Friends

*R = Reading; M = Math

Data collection

Data were collected to investigate students' perspectives of their place within the school, their relationships with other ethnic groups, and their position within their community. To tap student perspectives, I collected varied kinds of data. The process of data collection took seven months and occurred in several stages. During the first stage of five months, I documented oral and written responses to curriculum projects related to gang membership and ethnic identity. I conducted daily observation and weekly audiotaping of class discussions about these issues. I kept field notes daily by writing records of classroom events at the end of the school day or at home in the evening. In addition, I collected and xeroxed student journals every two weeks. In these

journals, students wrote down their reflections about activities at school and in their lives.

During the second stage of data collection of two months, I conducted audiotaped interviews of students and faculty. I interviewed the eight focal students and three faculty members who taught the students. The teachers included a European-American woman and a Filipino woman in the ESL department as well as a Mexican-American man in physical education.

Data analysis

I conducted the analysis of my data in several stages. After developing individual files for each student, I color-coded each piece of data according to my original study questions and created portraits of each student. I then organized the data into themes, including Issues of Identity: Social World of School Lives with Teachers, Issues of Identity: Social World of School Lives with Peers, and Issues of Identity: Social Sphere of Neighborhood Gangs.

Findings

All the focal students chose other Latinos as their closest friends. They unanimously believed that Latino students experienced the greatest discrimination from teachers and peers: Latinos were the ones blamed for wrongdoings, the ones associated with gang violence, the ones condemned to school failure, and the ones invisibly categorized as "Mexicans."

In general, the teachers perceived the focal students as "discipline problems." Some felt relief when the students were absent; others habitually sent them out of the classroom. The adults did not have a hopeful view toward the future of these students, predicting they would become gang members or drop out of school. While the students agreed they were trouble-makers at school, they had confidence in their ability to survive in life with or without academic success. The students all stated that they did not intend to become "gang-bangers," viewing gangs as too dangerous. Even though they had close association with gang members, they claimed that they did not feel pressure to join. On the other hand, they felt pressure from their parents to not join, given the dangers faced by their older siblings.

The focal students perceived Asian-American students as the most privileged group at school. They felt that Asian students were the ones consistently chosen for leadership positions. The symbolic elements of this group were: Asian-American ethnicity, high grades, polite behavior in class, use of Standard English without slang in speech, use of school penmanship in writing, neat dress and hairstyles.

In contrast, the symbolic elements of the focal students' friendship group were: Latino ethnicity, low grades, getting in trouble in class, street slang in speech, stylized handwriting, oversized T-shirts and sweatshirts, sagging pants, yarn necklaces with crosses, long hair for girls with top section piled up high into a rubber band, short hair for boys with some parts of head shaved. Their roots were not from the culture of school but from the culture of the streets, as represented in "gangsta rap." These symbolic elements delivered the message: "We are not like you. We don't want to be like you."

The students' cultural identity related to being Latino in that they saw being "Latino" as a marker of a minority group which was oppressed in this society. They viewed themselves as distinct from other groups, especially Asians. They wore woven crosses around their necks, icons of their Roman Catholic religion. Otherwise, the symbolic elements of their cultural identity drew more from North American urban life than from Latin American civilization. They had little connection to their homelands in Central America nor much interest in developing that connection. They did, however, resent when others assumed they were from a nation other than their own. The students were expected to assimilate at school.

The students who either were born in the US (Julio, Alicia and Veronica), or who arrived before the age of five (Hector), had the most difficulties at school in terms of academics and behavior. This finding confirms other studies on immigration and academic performance in the US. Research in bilingual education has shown that older learners acquire a second language more rapidly and fully than younger learners, due to their greater proficiency in their native language and intellectual maturity. Age on arrival to US positively correlates with mastery of English and other subjects taught in English (Cummins, 1981). Perhaps struggles with the language contributed to Julio, Alicia and Hector's

academic problems, but this explanation does not answer why their performance declined over the years.

Assimilation can result in a loss of ethnic identity and the creation of a new cultural identity to take its place. As Darder (1992) writes, "To be a good US citizen, students of color have been expected to assimilate to 'American' standards and values and in so doing, discard the values of their primary culture, breaking free of all bonds to a cultural or ethnic identity" (p. 2). My focal students were supposed to do the same. Most did "break free" of their ties to their ethnic identity in many ways: they had lost their Spanish, they knew little about their national histories, and they did not listen or dance to Latin music. On the other hand, mainstream US culture did not exactly welcome them with open arms. Consequently, they developed a new cultural identity which drew its source from urban American pop culture of resistance, or "gangsta rap."

In their interviews, the focal students revealed that they felt discriminated against by both teachers and other students at Coolidge Middle School. The students believed that they were perceived through the confines of stereotypes and were not accepted as individuals. Consequently, they turned to each other for support and formed their own tight-knit and exclusive peer groups, which provided them with an alternative cultural identity.

Alicia angrily commented in her interview, "They [teachers] think that most of the Latin people are in gangs, and they try to put them down." Ironically, none of the focal students expressed a desire to join a gang, stating that they thought gangs were a negative force. They all spoke about the destructive nature of gang violence and mourned the loss of friends or acquaintances killed as a result of that violence. However, all did want to affiliate with some kind of "posse" - some kind of group which would provide friendship, support and cultural identity.

Focus on Julio Cortez

To show how the findings of this study came alive in the day-to-day experiences of the focal students, I will provide an in-depth look at one of those students, Julio Cortez. I chose Julio because he was the most

outspoken and the one most grappling with gang membership, largely due to the involvement of his older brother.

Julio was born in Bahía, one year after his family arrived from Guatemala. He was the middle son of three and turned 14 in late summer of 1993. With his short stature, Julio could have passed for years younger. He normally was dressed in loose pants, sagging on his hips, and oversized T-shirts or sweatshirts. In warm weather, he wore big shorts which fell below his knees. His huge tennis-shoes and heavy socks gave the impression that his feet were the largest part of his body. Circling around his neck was a string of black yarn, ending with a cross. His brown hair was stylishly cut, nearly totally shaved in the back but long in the front.

As I previously described, Julio's older brother, Elvin, was a leader of a major Norteño gang in Las Palmas. Despite his own devoted membership, Elvin refused to let Julio participate in gang activities. Julio and Elvin's father had recently died in the summer of 1992, but their parents had already divorced. The two boys were living with their mother and her second husband, a Chicano who owned a salsa nightclub. Their mother was a teenager when she gave birth to her sons, and she told me she was quite overwhelmed about how to help them. Her husband believed Elvin was a lost cause, but he expressed faith that Julio could turn around with strict discipline.

Issues of Identity: Social Sphere of School

School history. Julio attended a bilingual Spanish program in elementary school. He was bused to this school since it was located in a Chinese neighborhood far away from the barrio. He did very well in upper primary level, scoring 96th percentile in math computation in third grade. While his first grade teacher expressed concern over his absenteeism, his report card until fifth grade showed almost all Bs or Cs, with some As.

The bilingual resource teacher at that school completed the testing and paper work to redesignate him as Fluent English Proficient, since he met the state criteria of attending school in the United States for over seven years and receiving grades of C or above. The school principal and his mother approved the redesignation in writing, which meant he would be placed in "regular" classes permanently. However, the bilingual department of Bahía School District sent back the forms with a

rejection, claiming his writing sample was not passable. Julio was categorized as Limited English Proficient and placed in ESL classes, where he stayed for his subsequent years of schooling.

Once at Coolidge Middle School in the ESL program, Julio's academic record deteriorated. His CTBS scores sunk to the first percentile in all areas in sixth grade, rising slightly to 13% in Reading and 14% in Math in seventh grade. He received nearly straight Fs in both sixth and seventh grades. Two weeks before the end of seventh grade, the head counselor informed him that he would not be promoted, even if he attended summer school. She suggested he repeat the grade at another school. He cut nearly all of his classes, except for language arts and math. While he did go to those particular classes, he almost never did assignments. When he did attend his science and social studies classes, his teachers kicked him out for misbehavior.

Ironically, even when he was suspended from school several times during the year, he would still go to his language arts and math classes. He would beg me, his language arts teacher, to allow him to stay in the class even when he could legitimately leave for home. Ultimately, however, Julio flunked the year for his poor attendance. On one hand, Julio seemed attached to school in that he wanted to stay even when suspended; on the other hand, he was resistant, as evidenced in his cutting. His counselor explained this contradiction by describing him as a stubborn and spoiled kid, trying to set his own terms. My own sense was that he was desperately attempting to gain some control over his life within a school system which had rendered him powerless.

Julio's academic performance was in sharp contrast to perceptions of his natural quickness. In conversation, Julio seemed to some adults and many students as extremely alert. His sense of humor was well-honed, razor sharp. He was the most talented "capper" (master of sarcastic put-downs) in his seventh grade class. His peers commented that he could have a successful career as a stand-up comic. His favorite activity in my class was to get up on the tables and perform raps, which he made up spontaneously. He noticed and remarked on almost every interaction among adults and students, showing keen observational skills. Julio was able to correctly complete a vocabulary quiz - without ever studying - faster than anyone in the class by considering context clues. He had been known to give other students the answers to spelling

tests but, then, refusing to do the test himself. He prided himself on never taking a book home. In short, Julio seemed to be trying to control his life through resistance of school norms.

Ethnicidentity. Although Julio did not express much interest in his homeland of Guatemala, he showed a strong desire to identify himself as Latino. He organized a group at school called "Respect Latin People" (RLP), and he chose Latinos as his closest friends. Being born here, he never experienced himself as a *Guatemalteco*, but as a Latino in a broader sense. Moreover, Julio spoke of the necessity of Latino-Black unity. Interestingly, he allied himself with the street gang (*Norteños*) which was not exclusively Latino or Spanish-speaking, in contrast to its rival (*Sureños*).

Friendships. In the class Julio's closest friends were Eduardo, Ruben, and Hector - all Latinos. At times, he expressed disdain for Hector because he took acid and acted stoned at school. Julio did smoke marijuana, but he was too cool to reveal it in his actions or appearance. His closest friend among the three was Eduardo, with whom he occasionally argued and fought. His group, RLP, included Latinos of both sexes. But gender rivalry prevailed over ethnic solidarity when RLP fell apart as the seventh grade boys and girls started feuding in the middle of the school year. Instead of writing love notes to each other, as they did in the beginning of the year, the boys and girls refused to speak to each other, except for insults. As Julio stated: "We're going to bust those ho's." ("We're going to get those girls in trouble.") His analysis was that the friction between the seventh grade Latino girls and boys was due to envy:

Julio: They think I like Claudia [eighth grade girl], right?

Hector: They get jealous.

Julio: And, like, they get jealous if I hug her. They get jealous and Alicia don't talk to me. And I say, "Fuck it!" They say, "She's our friend and we'll let you talk to her." And I don't care.

Ruben: You guys will still talk to them.

Julio: I won't talk to them. Yo mama.

Even though the war between the sexes was raging, Julio and the other Latino students were still focused almost exclusively on each other. Their frame of reference was Latinos. They might not have been talking about each other with words of sweetness and light, but it was each other that they were talking about. In other words, they were acting like what they were - adolescents. Julio said it best: They were going through puberty.

Ethnic relations. Ethnic identity was achieved partially through creating distinction with others. For Julio, the line of demarcation was between the Chinese students and the Latinos. The labels of "Chinese" and "nerds" were synonymous in his mind. When I asked the boys, "What groups do you see as having power in school?," Hector immediately said, "The nerds." Julio clarified: "The Chinos." A bit later, in response to the same question, Ruben answered, "Chinese." Julio affirmed, "Fuck yeah."

Julio spoke in a condemning way about students who were academically successful ("nerds"). Yet his resentment was mixed with keen awareness of their privilege and his perceived inaccessibility to that privilege. His attitude was clear in these two excerpts from my field notes:

On Thursday, Julio came into the library. He saw a GATE [Gifted and Talented] class come in and said, "When I see those kids, something goes on inside of me that makes me want to fight." I asked what it was, and he said it was that they were "wannabe's." I asked what it was about them that made him feel that - their hair, clothes, what? He just said it was what they were like. He said we better hold him down because he wanted to fight them. (11/16/92)

I was showing students the University of California Academic Talent Development Program yearbook from last summer to encourage them to apply for this year. Julio said he wanted to go, but when he looked at the yearbook, he threw it down: "No Latinos. They're all white and Chinese." He was absolutely correct. (1/21/93)

Julio's attitude toward African-American students was different. He befriended African-American males, especially those he knew were involved in "tagging" or illegal activities. In discussing the L.A. uprisings in May 1992, he called Latino-Black unity, "sick" (meaning, "cool"). His way of talking was clearly influenced by his contact with African-Americans, employing features of what linguists call "Black English Vernacular."

Cultural Identity: Creating an Alternative with Language

*So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language.
Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity - I am my language.*
(Anzaldúa, 1990, p. 206)

Oral Performance Style

The oral performance style of Julio as well as the other students exhibited a use of street slang, laced with humor, and little evidence of Spanish. Mastery of street slang for these native Spanish speakers was, in many ways, like learning a third language.

Use of street slang. Julio's speech was a synthesis of Chicano and African-American street dialects, very urban American. His talk was influenced by the jargon of "gangsta rap" (the music of contemporary inner city rap artists), as evidenced in the frequent use of these terms such as "yo mama," "hella," "nigga" for "boys," and "ho's" or "bitches" for "girls."

Of all the students, Julio's oral performance style displayed the greatest use of African-American street slang. He successfully mimicked the oratorical style of Malcolm X in presenting an oral rendition of a Greek myth to the class. Both in and out of class, he often talked in rap-like rhymes, both spontaneous and prepared. When he performed his raps, he gestured animatedly, to the delight of his classmates.

Use of humor. Julio showed his enjoyment in playing with word meaning and tone. Julio's oral performance style with peers was based on sarcastic humor, as in this interview example in which he was competing for the biggest laugh:

SW: How come in elementary school you got really good grades?

Julio: 'Cause I was sick [cool].

SW: And what happened?

Julio: I went through puberty.

Eduardo: He got horny.

Julio also took delight in the use of imitation:

SW: When you were in elementary school, were you in a bilingual class that was in two languages?

Julio: Frankly, my dear, I have to think about this [imitating Rhett Butler in *Gone with the Wind*]. What did you say?

Use of Spanish. Interestingly, Julio used more Spanish in the classroom than other male students even though he was born here and the others had come more recently. Publicly, Julio seemed to use Spanish mostly for insults (like calling a teacher "*vieja*" - old) or curse words ("*chinga tu madre*"). Since Julio used Spanish words in his day-to-day vocabulary, he would have had difficulty relating to non-Spanish speakers. On the other hand, much of his lexicon was street slang, so he would have had more barriers with students who did not speak that language. He looked down on *Sureños* (who spoke only Spanish). In other words, Julio would have more difficulty communicating with a Spanish speaker newly arrived to US who had no mastery of street talk than with speaker of street slang who had no knowledge of Spanish.

Written Language

Use of nicknames. Vigil (1988) writes that nicknames are "the adolescent's way to capture and caricature peer quirks, and by the naming make them accepted and normal; it's as if poking fun publicly works to destigmatize a funny or odd personal quality" (p. 113). In this

vein, all the focal boys and girls had original nicknames, which they used almost exclusively in written but not oral communication. Julio's nickname was "Mini," making fun of his shortness. Julio always used his nickname for his signature, as did the oilier students. For Julio and the others, their nicknames became their "tags" - their labels, their signs to the world - displayed on their personal stationery or on building walls.

Use of stylization. Julio's style of handwriting was as critical to him as his speech, if not more so. When Julio wrote, he used graffiti lettering. In fact, he claimed he no longer could write otherwise. (However, I had a sample of his handwriting in sixth grade which was school-style penmanship). He also used stylized misspellings, as in "krushed" for "crushed" (a term referring to doing lots of graffiti) and "kry" for ("cry"). Figure 1 is an example of his "tag," which he illustrated during a class period:

Figure 1
Julio's Tag



Handwriting was the single-most important entry into tagging crew membership. As a result, students who wished to join tagging crews practiced their writing constantly to master the style. Julio once asked me if I could get him a lettering book which had Old English-style letters in it. I took him to the library, and we made xeroxes of these pages. He copied this alphabet for days. This book became the most popular item in the class. Other students, including the Latinas,

approached me for copies of the Old English alphabet. Julio was trying to come up with an original graffiti style which combined *cholo* (style of Chicano street gangs) and Old English writing.

Language and literacy provided ways in which students were trying to take control over their lives by communicating in their own style. Graffiti and tag names represented forms of critical literacy, reshaping written language for one's own purposes. To understand the meanings embedded in graffiti, one must be a member of a particular literacy community. Not everyone can "read" graffiti; you must be taught by an insider who can decipher the codes - the nicknames, the acronyms, the use of Roman numerals.

In these ways, Julio and the other students brought the streets into the classroom. They expressed much alienation from school as an academic world. They did not want to read any books that were linked to school in any way, even if a former gang member wrote them. To gain a place for themselves in school, the students created an alternative cultural identity. This identity was based on oral and written language forms from the streets, the world in which they felt included.

Cultural Identity and Gang Membership

What happened when the students left school at the end of the day? It was not difficult to understand why youth in Las Palmas would want to join a gang. They had the natural desire and need to belong to a group. An ex-gang member turned poet, Luis Rodríguez (1993), wrote in *Always Running* that teens in a gang want just what children in an established organization like the YMCA or Little League want: respect, sense of belonging, and protection.

Need to Belong/Nothing to Belong to

Schools in California once provided after-school activities, such as clubs or sports teams, which offered opportunities to belong to a group. However, budget cuts, beginning in the 1980s and growing ever since, have severely restricted those activities. In addition, busing in Bahía has made participation in the few remaining activities nearly impossible. For example, at Coolidge, the students from Las Palmas got a free bus ride home school immediately after the school bell rang. If they stayed

later, they were forced to take public transportation, which was both expensive, time-consuming, and potentially dangerous. Bus stops near their own neighborhoods were not safe places to be in the dark. These students were, in essence, discouraged from belonging to official school groups.

A further difficulty was that many "legitimate" community groups, like the Boy or Girl Scouts, fraternities or sororities, lacked credibility because they either did not exist in barrios like Las Palmas, or else had a history of racist practice. Consequently, the only neighborhood group accessible for urban youth to join was one distinguished by its illegal or antisocial activities - a gang.

Julio's Brother, Elvin

Julio's brother, Elvin, was a prominent leader of the largest Norteño neighborhood street gang until he was sent to a juvenile detention program. Years earlier, Elvin had graduated from elementary school with a good school record. His CTBS scores in 1991 were high enough that his school counselor recommended him in sixth grade for a program at Coolidge to prepare African-American and Latino students for honors classes. This counselor said that Elvin turned down the opportunity. When I asked Elvin, he said he had never heard of this recommendation; in fact, he acted surprised to discover that he had been considered for the honors program. Julio, present when I mentioned this, smirked: "My brother? Honors?"

Although Elvin left Coolidge in the fall, his former classmates frequently recounted and discussed his gang activities for the rest of the school year. In fact, students greeted each other many Monday mornings with, "Did you hear what happened to Elvin this weekend?" Stories of the bullet wounds in his leg from a drive-by shooting or his arrests or his stays at the local youth detention center circulated in the classroom. His gang involvement clearly had an impact -upon not only Julio, but the other students who knew him well.

People in the mainstream often speak of gang members as "immoral" or "lacking values." However, Elvin clearly was operating within his own (as well as his gang's) system of ethics. He was single-mindedly committed to protecting his own gang. He was willing

to put his life on the line to avenge an injury or death of one of his "homeys."

Elvin's Influence on Julio

Julio gave the external impression of being a "gang-banger" (gang member) with his style of dress and talk. Although he had previously joined a gang, he was no longer a member at the time of the study. He said he did not feel under pressure to join: "They come up to you and say: 'Do you want to get in?' 'No.' 'Well, fuck you, then'." He "knew a lot of gang-bangers," including some who had been killed. "I had hella (many) friends that died," he proclaimed. He said that if he were sent to Juvenile Hall, he wouldn't worry about being attacked because he knew most of the inmates.

Julio's friendship and neighborhood networks were influenced by those of his brother Elvin, yet distinct from them. While he did engage in activities, such as "tagging" (graffiti writing) and robbery, which were illegal, he did not participate in gang violence which involved assault. In fact, Elvin told me that he prohibited Julio from joining his gang, taking the role of the protective older brother, or the paternalistic "man of the house." He didn't want his mother to suffer from having two sons involved in such risky behavior.

Julio spent much of his time with his tagging partner, Rafael, who was a high school student. He had been arrested with Rafael for breaking into the high school and some corner stores in the barrio. Below is his description in his journal (spelling left as original, punctuation added) from March 1993:

Dear Julio

On Friday night I left my house and stad [stayed] up all night Saturday. Broke in Las Palmas High and police came and then we got cout [caught] at gun point. Then I was sent home Then I went to Rafy's hous [house] and I got cout at some store we broke into. Narcs had us on gun point. Then we went to 250 Burbank [juvenile hall]. Got fingure print tuke [finger prints taken]. Went to Juvie. Then I ate went to my room and went to school and saw hella people [people] and this time I ain't playing. was dieing to get out and I got out back on the

street. Went straight home and sed [said] I will try to do good in skewl [school] - so it's cool to kry but alone and cry. Later well I rote [wrote] this because I wasn't crying but I felt like because they were gana [going to] give me two mons [months] with no visitors.

Well By.

While Julio distinguished himself from Elvin, he frequently recounted his brother's activities. He treated Elvin as a war hero, defending the territory. On October 16, 1992, Julio came in early in the morning to tell me a secret. He said that Elvin had been shot in the leg and was in an intensive care unit in the local hospital.

Then on May 11, 1993, Julio came into my classroom to tell me that the police (nicknamed "5-0") came to his family's house at 4 am, Sunday morning, to inform them that Elvin was locked up, but they couldn't reveal any more information. The next day, Julio said the charge was attempted murder. On May 13, Julio cut school. I told him on May 14 that the attendance office called his mother, but he said his mother wasn't home since she had gone to see Elvin in jail.

Inevitably, Elvin had a huge impact on Julio. He was simultaneously worshipful and terrified of his brother. He was excited by the degree of danger in his brother's life, and yet personally witnessed the destructive consequences. His mother and stepfather spoke of Julio as "bad," but not "as bad" as Elvin. This characterization seemed to describe his general role in the minds of adults in his community and in school.

His overall assessment of gangs was that they were not positive. Ironically, in a minimum standards writing test, Julio wrote about the dangers of gangs and drugs. The prompt was to select a major problem in the US today and to propose solutions. This was Julio's example:

Gangs and Drugs

To help the city you have to stop graffiti, drugs and no sale on weapons stop all gang members cause it will stop the people dying cause of drugs and gang members and it will stop people not to be afraid to come out there house. So scared they have to be packed with a nine millimeter or a twelve gage [gauge] that is worse. It's better to enjoy life the way it is not

the way the gang and drugs make it. It's better to enjoy what talent you got not wot [what] you want.

At the end of the school year, Julio failed seventh grade at Coolidge because of absenteeism and was referred to an alternative public school for students involved in gang activity. In the following year, he came to visit, informing me he never attended the school and was flunking out. He told me that he spent his days on the streets. Two months later, I saw him on a Las Palmas street corner, gesturing dramatically while talking to friends circled around him. All I noticed was the color of his oversized T-shirt: red.

Conclusion

Recently in the fall of 1996, I encountered Julio at the same corner. Now age 16, he had just returned to Bahía after being sent to a juvenile detention camp in Arizona on charges of attempted murder. Spontaneously he gave me an update on all the focal students. Julio himself is now regularly going to classes at his alternative school and is aspiring for admission to the local university. He wants to be a writer, particularly of filmscripts so he can capture the Bahía gang scene. His brother Elvin is in a federal penitentiary for murder. Of the four boys, only Eduardo is not gang-banging. Veronica has been in and out of a gang, and Karla is pregnant and has been in and out of school. Julio's news created a picture in stark contrast to three years earlier.

At the time of the study in 1992-1993, none of the students was a gang member even though gang activities were pervasive in their lives. All of them were 12, 13 or 14 years old - the critical age for 1990s youth to join gangs. They were seriously weighing the pros and cons of gang membership, but they seemed to land on the negative side, mostly from having seen the destructive consequences within their families and friends. While writing about the dangers of gangs, the boys particularly also romanticized the adventures of gang members like Elvin.

On the other hand, all the students dressed in the "gangsta" style of sagging, baggy pants and oversized sweat shirts, and they talked the "gangsta" talk. They were indeed influenced by their older siblings or immediate family members. In this sense, all acted like "wannabes." Perhaps intimately knowing gang members and personally witnessing

their arrests, wounds and stays in emergency rooms or jails discouraged them from joining at that time.

In 1994, I wrote:

However, the combination of their school experiences, ranging from marginalization to flunking, along with neighborhood peer pressure might push them to join in later years. Clearly, they were at a very vulnerable moment of their lives in this regard, a moment which could determine their futures. (Weinberg, p. 138).

Those words proved to be prophetic.

Luis Rodriguez (1993) clearly speaks for my students:

I've talked to enough gang members and low-level dope dealers to know that they would quit today if they had a productive, livable-wage job. You'll find people who don't care about who they hurt, but nobody I know wants to sell death to their children, their neighbors and friends.

If there was a viable alternative, they would stop. If we all had a choice, I'm convinced nobody would choose la vida loca, the "insane nation" - to "gang bang." But it's going to take collective action and a plan (p. 251).

As educators, we need to listen seriously to the words of Rodriguez and youth like my focal students. They would not choose a life of violence if they had the choice. It is time we all work together to build other options, and soon, before we lose an entire generation.

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