Abstract

This paper highlights the challenges youth faced as they transitioned to high school in a community characterized by high rates of gang violence. Studies of youth gangs have focused on the gang members themselves. However, all youth living in a community with a gang problem are impacted in various ways and can have an impact on their educational trajectories. Using a qualitative design drawing from multiple sources of data, most of which come from The Student Life in High Schools Project (SLP), a longitudinal study of the transition to high school, thirty-two Mexican origin students attending predominately Latino schools were interviewed over the transition to high school. The Extended Case Method (ECM) grounded in a Chicana feminist epistemology was employed for the analysis of the qualitative data. Using a borderlands perspective and social identity theory as the theoretical framework, results indicated that the school response to the youth gang problem directly impacted students’ educational experiences, how they were viewed by staff, and how they negotiated these social categorizations. Some students drew on their cultural and family resources to persist in school despite serious obstacles such as those posed by the presence of gangs in the school and community and the school response to this presence. An understanding of the importance of teacher relationships and family and cultural supports may provide a starting point for discovering solutions that can help students develop positive academic identities consistent with their perceptions of themselves as Mexican origin students.