Breaking Stereotypes and Boundaries: Latina Adolescent Girls and Their Parents Writing Their Worlds

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I am Reyna. I am fourteen years old and a freshman in high school. I am a writer and many more things. I am Mexican, and currently growing up in the [US Southwest]. . . I’ve lived here my whole life and what I’ve written mostly revolves around what I listen to, what I am taught, and what I’ve experienced. Despite being fourteen, I’ve written many pieces in and out of school. Not yet a published author, but getting there. The goal is to help kids like me break stereotypes and boundaries. Remember that anyone can do anything. Good luck.

On the night of our celebration of writing, Reyna stands behind the podium and reads her author statement. As a fourteen-year-old Mexican teenager growing up in the urban Southwest, Reyna introduces herself to the world as a writer working to “break stereotypes and boundaries.” In her statement, Reyna draws upon her lived experiences and the rich knowledge and resources of her home and community, her “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), to declare who she is and who she is becoming.

For Reyna and her fellow writers, this public sharing of personal stories is a celebration honoring their voices and ways of knowing. These writers live, work, and attend school in a state in the urban Southwest with a history of anti-Latin@ and anti-immigrant policies (Abrego & Menjívar, 2011), an ethnic studies ban, and mandated English-only policies (Arias & Faltis, 2012; García, Lawton, & de Figueiredo, 2012). This celebration of writing honors youth and adult experiences, voices, and stories, and illustrates a counter space constructed with and for Latina adolescent girls and their parents to empower rather than silence and shame them.

For six weeks prior to this night, Reyna, Rocky, Blanca, and Elizabeth and their parents, Samuel, Valente, Alma, and Rose, met on the university campus to participate in Somos Escritores/We Are Writers, a writing workshop (Atwell, 2015) for Latina girls grades 7 through 12 and their parents that invites them to draw, write, and share their stories. At workshops, girls and their parents pen stories from their lived experiences that address the stereotypes, tensions, and contradictions they face at the intersections of age, gender, race, language, and immigrant status. As illustrated in Reyna’s writing, these girls and their families are working to disrupt the dominant narratives of “kids like me” and families through their writing.

For me, Somos Escritores is part of my journey from educator to doctoral student, serving as the focus of inquiry for my dissertation. Prior to my studies, I taught for eight years in Title I, K–8 schools serving culturally and linguistically diverse students and families. As a teacher, I invited my students and their families to participate as writers in after-school family writing workshops (Flores & Early, 2017). These workshops became a space to learn and grow together while strengthening relationships with my families that were built on confianza, mutual trust, (Alvarez, 2017) in which everyone, including myself, was transformed in powerful ways.

Scholars have worked alongside girls of color in intentionally designed and organized third spaces (Gutiérrez, 2008) and written about the ways girls have performed, written, and rewritten their lives (Brown, 2013; García & Gaddes, 2012; Muhammad, 2012, Winn, 2011). Across spaces, girls have been provided with time, space, and encouragement from caring adult facilitators to reflect on their lived experiences and examine their worlds through writing, reading culturally relevant texts, and engaging in a variety of performative acts. This exploration empowers girls to define and redefine themselves while learning ways to amplify their voices. Collectively, these scholars highlight the importance of rooting our curricula in the lived experiences of youth while creating brave spaces, inside and outside of our classrooms, for them to critically read and examine their lives.

In this article, I share what I discovered while writing...
alongside Latina adolescent girls and their parents in Somos Escritores.

From our collective writing and sharing of stories, I learned about what mattered most to each writer, including what motivates them to write and the type of writing they practice in their daily lives.

Before I share this learning, I will provide a brief overview of Somos Escritores workshops.

**Somos Escritores/ We Are Writers: A Space to Share Stories**

Somos Escritores was imagined and reimagined based upon my work alongside my students and their families in family writing workshops. In addition, as a second generation Chicana, I drew upon lived experiences from my own adolescent years to imagine the safe space that I needed and wish I had been provided when I was younger to find my own voice and openly share and learn with my own mother.

Somos Escritores is a “third space” (Gutiérrez, 2008) where the languages, cultures, and experiences of girls and their parents are resources for them to draw upon to explore their lived realities. Gutiérrez describes third space as a collaborative "social environment . . . in which students begin to reconceive who they are and what they might be able to accomplish academically and beyond" (148). This pedagogical space serves as an “in-between” space that works to disrupt the oppressive political context and the silencing and controlling of bodies and narratives through the act of speaking one’s truth orally, in writing, and through drawing.

These sessions consisted of six 90-minute writing workshops, including a final celebration of writing. All workshops had specific writing practices and routines that invited girls and their parents into writing. We started workshops with a reading of a bilingual text followed by discussion of the text and free-writing. Next, we introduced mentor texts (Dorfman & Capelli, 2007) that served as models and inspiration for writing. After reading and discussing mentor texts, girls and parents had an extended period of time to write. Writing time was chunked, which included time to write, discuss, reflect, and return to writing. We concluded with a writing share and a closing reflection in which girls and parents discussed their learning and addressed their lingering questions.

Each writing workshop was organized around a specific theme. Workshop themes included identity, self-perception, speaking our truths, and being a writer. These themes overlapped in intentional ways and evolved based upon our discussions and learning. In addition, to create an inclusive and welcoming space, we facilitated workshops in English and Spanish and translated all mentor texts and materials for families.

**Listening to Latina Adolescent Girls and Their Parents**

As lead facilitator, I worked alongside girls and their parents in Somos Escritores as we collectively shared ourselves, our views, and our experiences. For my inquiry, I collected, read, and coded post-workshop surveys, interviews, writing artifacts, and ethnographic field notes. After analysis and reflection, I developed one overarching category to broadly frame the findings of my work: Why We Write. In the following section, I share what I learned from girls and their parents about why they write.

**Why We Write**

Reyna, Rocky, Blanca, and Elizabeth are socially conscious girls aware of the social injustices plaguing their worlds. They are concerned with stereotypes of Latina girls, racism, climate change, immigration, and the daily uncertainties that come with living under the current administration. At workshops, girls were provided with time, space, and encouragement to speak directly to their concerns.

Rocky, a fourteen-year-old Honduran American, wrote about her concern for the way that society treats people who are viewed as “different.” “My hope for the future is that people will accept others no matter their race, skin color, and sexuality. I also hope that nobody will be judged or stereotyped,” she said.

Like Rocky, Blanca, a fourteen-year-old Latina, is concerned with the unfair stereotypes that society has of girls. In her piece titled “The Mask I Wear,” she explores her very personal experience with being judged and labeled. She wrote:

People. Random people judge me by appearance. So I wouldn’t be surprise[d] if people talk. But they don’t know me. I am part of the unknown. People see me as just a girl that gets along with boys . . . Only pretty when I wear makeup.

In these examples, Rocky and Blanca, are making sense of their personal experiences through writing. During workshops they read, discussed, and produced texts in which they named their experiences and pushed.

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back on them. Writing served as a powerful tool to speak their truths, and their motivation for writing came from the pain of living with discrimination.

Samuel, Valente, Alma, and Rose participated in Somos Escritores alongside their daughters. In their writing, they shared stories from their youth. Some parents shared these stories with their daughters for the first time.

Alma, Blanca’s mother, wrote about the hardships she had endured throughout her life and her learning from these experiences. She wrote: “Las cicatrices que llevo en mi cuerpo también impregnaron a mi alma . . . Son como memorias que me hacen recordar que no hay sol sin oscuridad.” [“The scars I have on my body are also printed on my soul . . . They’re like memories that remind me there’s no sun without darkness.”] At workshops, Alma reflected upon memories from her youth and shared them with her daughter. For Alma, writing served as a gateway to open conversation with her daughter so she could communicate to her that she was not alone in her experiences.

Like Alma, Rocky’s dad, Valente, shared a piece he drafted outside the workshop, titled “El Inmigrante.” In his writing, Valente narrated his personal experience immigrating from Honduras to the United States. He wrote: “Hola, soy Valente, un inmigrante Hondureño: Empaque un par de camisas, una gorra, unas fotos, y mil recuerdos, en una pequeña mochila . . .” [“Hello I am Valente, an immigrant from Honduras. In a small backpack I carried a couple of shirts, some pictures, and a thousand memories . . .”] In a reflection, Valente shared that he wrote this piece that is the experience of many immigrants to “let my daughter know my story and that I am here.”

Like many of the writers in Somos Escritores, Valente wrote to share his journey through struggle. He processed his experiences by writing while also hoping that his story would reach someone he loves.

Learning from Latina Adolescent Girls and their Parents

Somos Escritores is a space constructed with and for Latina adolescent girls and their parents to reflect and “bear witness” to their lives, both naming and claiming their identities, experiences, and ways of knowing in their own words. By creating space, with and for writing and sharing our girls’ and their parents’ stories, we learn about their lives, their writing practices, how they view the world, their concerns, and their hopes for their futures. This is not only transformative and empowering, it also centers their experiences and knowledge as valuable resources for teaching and learning.

There is a grave urgency to create spaces like Somos Escritores that honor our students’ voices and stories, especially as we live, learn, and teach in a political context that is continuously and increasingly working to silence and control their voices, narratives, and bodies. Our classrooms can and must be spaces where we provide students with multiple opportunities to find their voices and develop their craft, while learning how to critically examine and critique their worlds.

Somos Escritores demonstrates the powerful possibilities that exist when we open brave spaces for sharing stories and the importance of entering these spaces alongside our youth and their families as learners. The stories and insights shared orally and in writing by girls and their parents showcase the many purposes their writing serves, the many reasons why they write. They write to confront injustices, to reflect on past experiences, to make sense of their lives, to heal, and look to the future (Anzaldúa, 1999). They write to let the world know that they exist.

**CONNECTIONS FROM readwritethink**

In what way do culture, personal experiences, and history influence a poet’s work? Students will answer this question as they read and discuss in an online blog a work by a Latino poet. In this multisession lesson, students choose a Latino poet and poem to analyze. Students use online resources to gather background information about the poet and integrate that research into an analysis of the poem’s meaning, literary devices, and themes. After posting their analyses to a class blog, students then refine their writing skills as they respond meaningfully to their peers’ poetry analyses. The act of blogging encourages students to think carefully about their responses and to use good writing techniques.

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