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Your Voice is Your Weapon! Empowering Youth Through Community- Based Writing Workshops

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ABSTRACT

The Barrio Writers (BW) program bridges community and classroom by empowering teens through creative writing, higher education, and cultural arts workshops, embedded in rich urban communities. The resulting counternarratives, which dispel normative narratives associated with underserved, underrepresented urban youth, celebrate the Barrio Writers program theme, “Your Voice is Your Weapon!” The study reveals the experiences of underserved, underrepresented youth as they challenged the hierarchical, normative social identity connected with them. Themes associated with their experiences included the development of voice, the cultivation of their social identity, and the celebration of cultural pride. Implications focus on the use of this model to serve disempowered youth.

Keywords: counternarratives, culturally disadvantaged youth, experiential learning, diversity

Imagine if you got published at fifteen. What would you have gotten out of the experience in the long run? I would have learned to believe in myself before I could fathom the idea of applying to a university, before I could believe I am capable of creating change in society, before I acknowledged my fear to attempt higher education—I thought being Mexican-American meant I would never be able to afford it or be as successful as a white person. As a writer and educator of color, I still struggle with such stereotype threats and have met many youth who feel the same.

- Sarah Rafael Garcia, Founder of Barrio Writers

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Barrio Writers (BW) is a non-profit reading and writing, out-of-school program founded by Sarah Rafael Garcia in Santa Ana, California in 2009. By offering college-like writing workshops to students in underserved urban communities, Garcia (2016) writes that the program aims to create a bridge between community and classroom, empowering teens through creative writing, higher education, and cultural arts. During BW, student participants engage in workshops to build skills in reading, grammar, creative writing, critical thinking and freedom of expression through cultural arts. The resulting counternarratives, which dispel the normative, hierarchical narratives associated with underserved, underrepresented urban youth, celebrate the Barrio Writers theme highlighted in Garcia's work, "Your Voice is Your Weapon!" (p. 3). The workshop includes celebrated authors and community advocates, who serve as role models in our urban neighborhoods and support youth aspirations.

Barrio Writers uses one's cultural and ethnic influences not to stereotype the learner, but to empower disenfranchised students by asking them to explore the connection between classroom learning and their own communities. The BW program thrives through its community collaboration. The students who participate in the workshop are drawn from schools in the local community; they engage in diverse activities that present alternative forms of expression and experiences to build their social identity through local cultural arts and community resources situated in the surrounding urban community. The culminating activity is a live reading, in which Barrio Writers student participants present their counternarratives, through their writings, to the community, parents, and other stakeholders. This culminating event includes a roses-and-thorns segment, where the students articulate the best and the worst part of their Barrio Writers experience. BW student participants' final texts are included in an anthology, published yearly, titled *Barrio Writers*. One of the primary goals of the anthology is to spotlight the student participants' counternarratives, which represent the diverse backgrounds of teenagers and validates their experiences (Garcia, 2016). The anthology provides a window into the lives of the BW student participants that can help those involved in community engaged pedagogy strengthen their learning goals and outcomes for programs they initiate between schools and community partnerships.

This study examined how the empowerment of youths' voices in a Barrio Writers program workshop affected the expression of their voice as a weapon revealing social justice issues meaningful to the students.

The following research questions were studied:

- What are the experiences of underserved, underrepresented youth participating in the Barrio Writers workshop?

- How is the social identity developed in the Barrio Writers community reflective of the empowerment of expression of voice in participants' writing?
- How do the cultural texts presented in the Barrio Writers workshop inspire the development of counternarratives that address the marginalization of underserved, underrepresented youth?

Emihovich (2005) states that we can “no longer afford to live with the comforting illusion that we act upon the world in socially just ways simply by inscribing and cataloguing the many cases in which justice is absent, or that we give ‘voice’ to others by writing in our voice about their lives” (p. 306). Through developing and sharing narratives that counter the deficit perspective that underserved, underrepresented urban youth face, the BW student participants access cultural and aspirational capital defined here as the forms of knowledge that embody the power to enable social mobility (Bourdieu, 1986).

Deficit Perspective, Social Capital, and Experiential Learning

The traditional portrayal in the hierarchical normative narrative that youth from an underserved, underrepresented community face is rooted in a deficit perspective. This perspective asserts that students enter school without the cultural knowledge and skills necessary to be successful students and that their parents are not involved or concerned with their learners' academic performance or aspirations (Yosso, 2005). Yet, these students bring a vast fund of knowledge with them as they enter school (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), which informs their education experience, and through developing their voices, students can gain valuable capital that counters this deficit perspective. Countering a deficit approach is crucial because youth deserve to be exposed to the resources and knowledge necessary to access and navigate the world beyond which they live.

The empowerment of underserved, underrepresented urban youth is broadly connected to the development of their social capital. This social capital must extend beyond the *familia* to include other non-family adult agents who can serve as “institutional agents” (Mwangi, 2015; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). An institutional agent, defined by Stanton-Salazar (2011), maintains “one or more hierarchical positions within a society or an institution...position of status and of authority and managing and accessing highly valued resources, exercising key forms of power and mobilizing his or her reputation in a purposive action” (p. 1075). Access to such agents, like teachers, counselors, and university faculty, expands a student's social capital by

providing knowledge and understanding as well as exposure to resources previously beyond that student's cultural domain. The institutional agents “have a range and level of involvement in students’ lives that can help open or close doors to college options and pathways” (Mwangi, 2015).

An important factor contributing to the development of what Yosso (2005) terms as aspirational capital is the development of a social identity that is not only critically conscious (Freire, 2000), but also views oneself as a college student (Mwangi, 2015). This aspirational capital persists when institutional agents engage in the purposeful action toward the empowerment of the youth. The capital fosters interactions which create a lasting relationship with students that offers opportunities to be challenged by new cultural experiences.

This identity is further developed within the experiential learning that the institutional agents engage in with the youth. Kolb (1983) theorized that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. In fact, the primary component of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) is student experience (Ewing, Clark, & Threeton, 2014). For this reason, ELT complements John Dewey’s work in schools and civil society and is situated in Constructivism (Doolittle & Camp, 1999; Threeton, Walter, Clark & Ewing, 2011). Dewey believed that students learned through an experiential education where they could interact with the curriculum, known as learning by doing (Dewey, 1916). In Constructivism, knowledge is built upon the student’s past experiences, existing knowledge, and mental organization through the reflection of the student’s interaction with others and active participation in environments and activities (“Learning Theories and Student Engagement,” 2014). Learning through experience ensures opportunity for knowledge to transfer across many conditions and circumstances to promote lifelong learning (Kolb, 1983). Additionally, the skills mastered through ELT are necessary components of workforce competencies needed to participate and compete in the ever-changing job market as well as become productive community members (Threeton, Walter, Clark & Ewing, 2011). Examples of competencies include leadership, decision-making, cooperation, presenting, creating, adapting, and organizing (Barton, 2012; Spence & McDonald, 2015). The valuable skills and knowledge formed within the Barrio Writers program, where experiential learning is the centerpiece, allow the student participants to further define their social identity through the transformative practices developed as a community of learners.

Connection of Community and Cultural Resources

A key component of the Barrio Writers program is to hold the week-long activities within the community from which the students are members. By having a location close to where BW student participants live and go to school, organizers anticipate they can learn from leaders in their community, be exposed to the resources available to them, and feel comfortable attending both intellectual and cultural programs scheduled there throughout the year. Although there are chapters across California and Texas, for the chapter in South Texas, the Antonio E. Garcia Arts and Education Center served as the workshop's venue. Established in 1993, the Garcia Center is committed to serving and celebrating families in an urban South Texas community. Through the center's programming, local families receive a vital contribution to the education and health provided to a community that is acutely susceptible to health risks and low educational attainment ("About Us," n.d.). Situating the Barrio Writers workshop at the Garcia Center enriches the already vibrant programs that include cultural celebrations, art installations, tutoring, health and wellness classes, literacy enrichment, counseling and parenting classes, and other after school programming. Since the Garcia Center's programs have historically targeted elementary age students and their parents, conducting the Barrio Writers workshop and live reading there could lead to future programs and workshops being implemented for older youth and their parents.

Barrio Writers Workshop

The Barrio Writers (BW) pedagogy, established by Garcia (2016), "integrates reading, writing, critical thinking, and freedom of expression while cultivating diversity, community building and presentation skills" (p. 1). The workshop is open to all youth, regardless of socioeconomic or cultural background, between the ages of 13 to 21 years. Situating the workshop in underserved communities helps ensure the youth are representative of the culturally rich urban landscape. Barrio Writers consists of a five-day, college-like workshop, culminating in a live reading on Saturday. Garcia writes, "Although the Barrio Writers pedagogy solely integrates readings written by writers of color, the level of impact these cultural texts make rely significantly in the delivery of the curriculum" (p. 1).

As an educational model developed by Garcia (2016), the Barrio Writers program "teaches the importance of writing counternarratives that include cultural pride" (p.3). Barrio Writers encourages youth to use their own words and voices: Your

voice is your weapon! One of the goals of the Barrio Writers program is “to build a community through reciprocity by empowering each other” (p. 3). Aligned with the teaching methods of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) and bell hooks’ “decolonization of ways of knowing” (hooks, 2003), the Barrio Writers program guides youth toward freedom of expression that is not governed by the strict rules found in the context of most academic settings. Garcia (2016) writes of the connection between the Barrio Writers pedagogy and its overlap with the work of sociologist Claude M. Steele in challenging stereotype threats. BW relates to what educator Marc Lamont Hill defines as Hip-Hop pedagogy by empowering youth to express themselves through their own rhetoric, which promotes knowledge production outside of formal schooling contexts (Steele, 2011; Hill, 2009).

While the pedagogy follows a workshop format that is common across all the chapters, the writing advisors of the South Texas Barrio Writers chapter, who delivered the workshop, determined the content in Table 1. The themes and activities drawn from the cultural texts are a collection of writings that are not representative of a school curriculum but represent counternarratives intended to inspire the participants of the Barrio Writers workshop to explore their own voices. To create a community of participants, the Barrio Writers program seeks to deconstruct stereotype threats and explore how to change society’s view of teens through readings of authors who have fought to share their experiences.

The writing advisors and the guest author, Diana Lopez, presented these texts to the student participants. With these texts as a foundation, writing activities and free writing offered a rich knowledge base for the students to develop their identity and connect with others who, like themselves, struggle in a world that views them from a deficit perspective.

Table 1: Cultural Texts and Resources Used for Barrio Writer’s Workshop, 2016

Theme	Cultural Text	Author	Writing Activity
Deconstructing Oppression	“My Mother’s English”	Amy Tan	Free Writing: Throw Up On Paper!
	<i>Booked</i>	Kwame Alexander	
	“Because the Animal Has Always Been Human To Me”	Malcolm Friend	
Cultivating Diversity	<i>The House on Mango Street</i>	Sandra Cisneros	Prewriting: Blueprinting
Using All Language in Writing	excerpt from Evita	Evita	Free write about the power of language
	Video: Selena - Mini Biography Video	Selena	
	Video: Hamilton - A Founding Father Takes to the Stage	Hamilton	
Relating to Youth: Perspective & Representation	<i>On</i>	Bob Kaufman	Thoughts, Feelings, Memories
Culture & Identity/ Art-Writing	<i>To Live in the Borderlands</i>	Gloria Anzaldua	Free writing on identity
Infusing Culture & Identity into Writing	“Put Attention” “How I put Myself Through School”	Lori Ann Guerrero	Shell Narrative Group Activity
Opportunity: Surviving or Thriving?	<i>Nothing Up My Sleeve</i>	Diana Lopez	Revision: The Adverb is Not Your Friend

Methodology

The design for this ethnographic study seeks to understand the range of experiences of underserved youth participating in a culturally responsive reading and writing workshop in South Texas. During the week-long summer Barrio Writers workshop, the research team served as institutional agents who observed and facilitated the writing workshops. The research team also collected field notes to capture the nuances of the activities and recorded various group as well as one-to-one dialogues. The BW workshop resulted in numerous student-authored pieces of writing, which we examined along with student survey data. This research seeks to understand the participants' perceptions of self, development of social identity, and expression of voice.

Participants

The convenience sample, which utilizes a readily available population, was drawn from the youth who volunteered to engage in the workshop, and while there were no exclusion criteria, participation was determined by parental consent and student assent to participate. All students and their parents consented to participation in the research related to the Barrio Writers workshop. The students were recruited by the research team through information sessions held at the local high school and middle school close to the Garcia Center.

The participants were between the ages of 13-17. Eleven of the participants (N=13) indicated their ethnicity as Hispanic/Latino/Chicano; of the other two, one chose not to identify himself and the other identified as white. There were nine female and four male participants. Pseudonyms are used for all participants in this study. The convenience sample was suited for this study as the researchers sought to understand the group characteristics and behaviors through the cultural beliefs, practices and social behavior that were evident throughout the workshop.

Data Collection

The collection of data was embedded as part of the structure of the Barrio Writers workshop. Each of the participants completed a pre- and post-workshop survey that was part of the Barrio Writers curriculum, which established their view of writing and the experiences they have had in school settings as writers. Throughout the workshop, the writing advisors recorded the students as they shared their writing and participated

in Cafe Hours, which was a time at the end of each day's workshop when the participants met one-to-one with the writing advisors. Each participant was required to attend at least one Cafe Hour. In addition, the writing advisors, interacted with students in writing through the daily journals that were a part of the syllabus. Student journals were regularly collected and photocopied during the writing workshop. The Barrio Writers workshop's culminating event included the production of a polished piece of writing by the participants, which was presented at public reading as the final interaction for the workshop. This final piece was submitted for publication in the *Barrio Writers Anthology*. As a follow-up to the workshop, each participant was asked, via email, to share a final reflection on their personal roses-and-thorns experience in the Barrio Writers workshop. Reflections on roses-and-thorns were a regular engagement throughout the workshop that allowed participants to reflect and connect with their own feelings of empowerment, community, and sometimes emotional confusion through the transformative workshop.

Data Analysis

We began our analysis with a research meeting to discuss the observed experience of the week-long workshop. During this meeting, we sought to draw connections between the interactions with the participants, both in conversation and in writings, while noting the impact observed on their social identity, development of a counternarrative voice, and the connection to college knowledge for this underserved population. Triangulation of our analysis and member check was conducted with the director of the Garcia Center since she was not part of the research team, yet present during the workshop. She shared her observations of interactions and the live reading. While identifying patterns in the Barrio Writers student participants' works, the research team connected the individual student's responses from the pre- and post-survey with field notes and the final writing products selected by the youth for publication.

Findings

In contrast to what the selected youth in this BW article stated about their perception of others outside their community, the student participants' final writing reflected hope, pride, and a desire to be bigger than the stereotype of their lived experience. During the BW workshop, cultural texts were infused with cultural arts to broaden the student participants' experience and connect them to not only the institutional agents,

but also the community and the university.

Experiences of Barrio Writers

The experiences across the week supported and challenged the student participants, helping them grow and develop new relationships with others outside their cultural group who might serve as role models. Their recognition of themselves as agents of change and their voices as weapons provoked new feelings and perceptions. Jenessa shared, “I was so worried about the reading because my family has never seen that side of me and it was both relieving and embarrassing afterwards.” This statement was reflective of many of the student participants, ten of whom indicated on the survey that they had “very little experience” speaking in public.

The BW workshop offered exposure to key forms of power that are held by the writing advisors who delivered the workshop. Student participants found such an influence profound. One student participant shared this exposure as a highlight of the workshop stating, “Being able to speak with so many talented writers was definitely my rose. ... I wish there were more programs like Barrio Writers because in this world art isn't always taken as seriously as science.” The student participants realized, by the end of the workshop, the shift in their social identities toward something bigger, “as the youth can change the community just through paper and pen.” This experiential learning workshop fostered the growth of a more critical consciousness and fueled the desire to write narratives that reflected their true self instead of the stereotype that was imposed on them.

Social Identity and Finding a Voice

The cultivation of social identity was an intended outcome of the South Texas BW workshop and served as a central theme for the analysis of the Barrio Writers experience. For many of the participants, this workshop was the first time during which they felt empowered to share thoughts and emotions that were not predetermined by the cultural norms of school and society. The BW workshop began on the first day with an exploration led by Sarah Rafael Garcia, asking student participants to discuss who they felt they were expected to be as teens in today's society. In figure 1, the words they used to describe themselves were overwhelmingly negative including, “misunderstood,” “trouble” and “immature.” On the last day, students were introduced to the workshop's overarching theme, #yourvoiceisyourweapon, wherein they were encouraged to use as a way to tag their

ideas and feelings about the workshop on social media. With the writing advisor's guidance, participants revisited stereotype threats (i.e. gangs, not smart, criminals) from day one by redefining terms associated with Barrio Writers. The outcomes consistently include positive terms (i.e. community, leaders, poets).

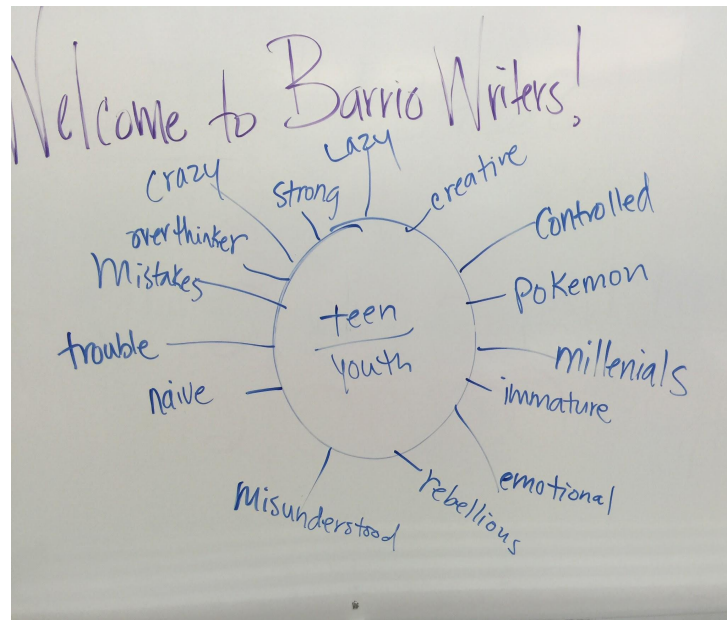


Figure 1: Barrio Writers Impression of Self

On the first day of the workshop, the Barrio Writers were challenged to deconstruct the oppression they face in their daily lives and to instead celebrate and embrace their own diversity. In order to start the growth toward owning their own voice, the participants needed to come face-to-face with how they have been affected by the discrimination that they may not yet recognize consciously. One participant shared,

I think my favorite piece we read would have to be "My Mother's English". It was our first piece but it really set the tone of the rest of the week. I never experienced that situation but it was something my mother experienced, something I saw my friends experience. The feeling of color and culture being a barrier from the rest society, something I experience now in college. The piece tore open that anxiety minorities often feel in places apart from our communities and it was important to know we are not alone in that.

This recognition of barriers placed on the student participants by society was also evident in the poem, *Past Diversity*, by Ariella, a teen who describes herself as being “viewed as Odd.” Her writing focused on her experiences with cultural, familial, and economic diversity, yet asserts from the first verse, that as a minority, she has not succumbed to the prescription of “pain, sorrow and hard times” that are ascribed to youth from her background. As a foster child who was bounced between her own Latino family and that of her middle-class white foster parents, Ariella maintained a defiant attitude in her writing of her diversity. She identified herself through a deficit lens, but she claimed her diversity as part of her identity, as the fabric that made her the strong person she has become.

Past Diversity

A minority is viewed to be
the suppressed people who’ve
been through pain, sorrow, hard times.
Not Me.

A mother who was single
with her second child
with still no marriage.

A father who attempted
Murder of his unborn child
and beat his newly pregnant girlfriend
who Still wants me dead.

Foster parents who me and my younger brother
visit monthly or as often as we can
for they were my legal parents for
only a short time before
I was allowed to return to my
caring mother at home

Raised in a “bad” neighborhood,
that can be called the slums.
raised on Food Stamps, CHIP, and Medicare
worried about how late my mother would be
from her work as a “Favor” to our landlord
who happens to own this apartment complex

Living with Tejanos, African-Americans,
Mexicans, the under-class, for most of
the month and then a Caucasian Family
that's middle upper-class.

I Know Diversity.
past diversity.

Through the discussion of discovering who they were as writers, and where they fit in today's society, the students began to identify as a part of the Barrio Writers community. They learned to recognize the value of their individual voice as well as the collective voices Barrio Writers provided.

Counternarratives That Celebrate Cultural Pride

A key to the development of the counternarratives was the presentation of the works of authors of various ethnicities and backgrounds who used the power of their voices to bring attention to the common experience of being part of an underrepresented population. BW student participants read the texts, "Put Attention" and "How I Put Myself Through School," written by Laurie Ann Guerrero, the 2016 Poet Laureate for the state of Texas, to connect to the theme of *Infusing Culture and Identity into Writing*. As a community, they produced poems based on this theme during the group activity on the third day of the BW workshop. In this untitled piece, three of the youth collaborated to develop a poem that spoke against their perceptions of self, which they had shared during the first day of the workshop. The students characterized themselves as smart, creative, motivated, and wise. This characterization was significant because they began to voice the positivity they felt about themselves instead of the negative characterizations of society they voiced the first day.

Untitled

I am who I wanna be
An artist, a musician, a photographer,
A designer, a writer, a preacher,
A jeweler, a carpenter, a businessman,
A hippie, a futurist and I can call
myself a futurist
I am who I wanna be.

I am who I wanna be
I'm shy and I don't talk a lot to people
But my writings say everything for me that
You need to know, when you really got to know
Me I'm goofy, I love too much, I never focus
On one thing and I can never stay still
I am who I wanna be.

I am who I wanna be
Sharp and pointy, my only protection
Curly and different, no explanation
It's hard to be open, but I'm
Recognizable, just a little, here
I am who I wanna be

I am who I wanna be
I can tell you the Pythagorean theorem before
I remember my age I haven't done a
Ton of self-exploration except for
Morals maybe my mind is always
Preoccupied with school or the next
Extracurricular but I can't complain
Cause I am who I wanna be.

The valedictorian of her high school, Jenessa, wrote a poem to address her place in this world. In her poem, *Pennies*, she addresses her struggle not only with finding a place in society, but also with gender issues within her own community and finding self-worth. In the line, “so here’s a penny for your thoughts, to think and think/ one by one” it is as though she is trying to buy a fresh perspective, asking the world “to think and think.”

Pennies

The world turns with no rhythm or rhyme
And some people just don't have the time
To give and take what once was mine
It's these days that remind me that I have no change to give away
Because this change isn't dollars and cents I found astray.

It's the revolution and reunion of people who suffer to this day,
But my pockets lie empty because I have no change to say.
So I'm stuck sucking at the tit of a mother who was only taught to love her
sons.
Taught to be submissive from very young
But look, I found a penny
It's simply one of many.
Not a nickel, not a dime,
It's a change in due time.
Nothing near the trillions we need but better than none.
So here's a penny for your thoughts, to think and think
One by one.
They say the penny costs more to make than to take
So it's worth nothing to someone who's never heard of a slum.
So the levee breaks and it breaks
And they take and they take
And what are we left with?
We're left with none.
Why were we born a daughter?
And not a son?
Why were we born for footnotes?
While they were born for a front page read?
Why is our skin tinted a muddy brown?
And not the shining porcelain that only hate seems to breed?
Now I can't take all the world's problems and turn them into a rhyme,
People are dying while I just take my time
Black boys are getting beaten for "looking like a suspect"
Women are getting stabbed for not showing enough "respect"
People are killed for loving in a different aspect.
Jon Stewart once said that, "Evil is relatively rare but ignorance is an
epidemic."
Here we have all the right wings
That think everything they say is the right thing.
BOOM. CRASH. BANG.
That's the sound a chandelier makes when gravity is too heavy to take.
BOOM. CRASH. BANG.
Is the sound of a simple car ride turning into a ride to their own wake.

Boom, crash, *bang*.
Is the sound it takes to see the light in a young boy's eyes slip away.
People who are trying to make a change are being mocked and ridiculed for
thinking a different way
And don't tell me I'm wrong
Now don't think I'm mean,
I just trying to live the American dream.
You know, the one where only the rich & white can succeed.
Check my history book if you don't believe,
Things were hard to wrap my head around, even for me.
Hate, genocide, greed.
Now don't think the world's gone to shit,
Even I have to admit,
Even though ignorance and hate reign to this day,
Look at the change they're giving away.
Not dollars and dimes, but mere sterling's from ancient times.
They're outdated and old,
Not to sound cold.
But maybe it's time to switch to a different currency,
One used more currently.
Not one that forbids knowledge of our natural pulses
Or one that forbids shorts because of male impulses.
Believe whatever you believe but as long my actions don't hurt anyone or me,
Please allow me my space to breathe and be free.
Do we let freedom ring?
Or is the caged bird the only allowed to tweet?
When we live off pennies, are we allowed to speak?
So the message to you is to save up your pennies turn them into dimes
Crescendo up to time where you give the world it's rhythm and rhyme
Turn the copper into gold,
Wrap it into coils where they tried to wear down your soul
Sit on the fortune of change you have to give to the world,
Give It to the starving, homeless, and sick, make the message stick.
Your change may be small but it's not nothing at all
And when people laugh and judge your efforts.
You say, it may be a penny but it's simply one of many.

The culminating event, a live public reading, allowed the students to share with their community the work they developed during the week and ultimately submitted to the anthology for publication. One of the participants, who indicated he is only a little comfortable sharing his writing with others, felt the sense of community by being in something “much bigger” than himself. He continued by saying, “We as youth can change the community through paper and pen...it would have been nice to see many more faces” as a part of the Barrio Writers workshop. In his responses about creating change through writing, he expressed that teamwork and patience are part of what it takes to “shape the image of we want the world around us” to see. After participation in the workshop, this young man said, “the power of youth is incredible” and through the development of youth programs, he feels he can impact his community moving forward. Yet another participant shared, “I really enjoyed how the workshop was able to take a community of kids from different crowds of people and bring them to all to be one group I can honestly say we came as strangers and left as family.” Although these are celebrations of a positive experience, they are also counternarratives to what the student participants experience in their academic settings on a daily basis, especially with their writing and sharing.

One student participant wrote the following poem in response to the final free writing activity of the BW workshop. The prompt asked the student participants to think about what their older self, ten years from now, would say to them today. This student wrote that she wanted to remind herself that she was “strong and not weak like many see her because she is young and Latina. She could do anything and be anything she wanted to be.”

The Time Ahead

Prom, check.

Graduation, check.

College, check.

Doctorate, check.

Career, check.

Remember the time when you told mom,

“I don’t want to go to stupid prom.”

That was for me.

Remember the time you told dad,

“I graduated for you.”

That was for me.

Remember the time you finished college and told grandma and grandpa,
“I came this far for you.”

That was for me.

Remember receiving your doctorate degree and saying,
“I finished this degree for my kids.”

That was for me.

Remember when you got your dream job?

That was for me.

Remember when you said being successful in 10 years was for me?

That was for you.

These feelings of empowerment were part of the discussions that took place each day between student participants during the BW workshop.

In reflection upon the whole experience, one participant shared that building a community with others is how change can happen, “being a part of something much bigger than I am. To know that we as the youth can change the community just through paper and pen.” His voice and those of his peers can make a difference in changing the way society views youth. His voice is his weapon!

Many of the students shared on the first day that they attended this writing workshop because they did not feel as if their words were valued in the traditional school setting and they wanted a way to write more and share more. By the last day, through the Barrio Writers workshop experience, they realized that their words did have power and could affect change both in their school environment, their neighborhoods, their community, and beyond.

Discussion

The BW workshop helped to inspire the development of counternarratives, which addressed the marginalization of underserved, underrepresented youth by providing a platform to explore, challenge, and articulate their voice. Through the counternarratives showcased in their writing, student participants challenged stereotypes and created writing that celebrated their cultural pride. The youth participating in the BW workshop in South Texas represented a historically marginalized population. The research questions investigated sought to understand the

counternarratives created by a group of underserved, underrepresented youth. Participation in this BW workshop enabled the students to develop counternarratives that expressed a cultural identity and articulated personal experiences, which served to challenge the attribution of an individual's achievement to cultural factors alone, without regard to individual characteristics. The transformative experience for the students was rooted in the cultural texts that inspired the writings of the students. As a community, Garcia (2016) reiterates that BW “bridges the gap between the youth, their cultural pride, and higher education opportunities” (p. 5). She goes on to state that “through collaboration, the Barrio Writers program cultivates diversity in and out of the classroom, raises role models, and offers a new voice in literature” (p. 5).

The participants in the South Texas chapter cultivated their social identity through the BW community. Their reading of cultural texts, exploration of cultural role models, and reflective writing served to empower the expression of their voice as a weapon while developing their aspirational capital. In collaboration with the teaching and writing community, the BW experience inspired a diverse group of selected South Texas youth to move beyond the workshop, embrace their social identity, and challenge normative narratives. Through the power of voice, participants expressed a deeper sense of community pride, perseverance, and recognized the endless possibilities for themselves and later generations.

Implications

The collective experience of the cultural community of the BW may inform other educators and the larger community about the experiences of youth and impact the choices educators when cultural texts are included in curricula, text that reflect and help develop identity and/or offer new knowledge for diverse students. The development of a community-based, experiential writing workshop that empowers disempowered youth serves as a good model for addressing the importance of spotlighting culture and community in cosmopolitan classroom settings.

Application of the BW model and used in this study is valuable to practitioners who work with students from historically marginalized and oppressed communities. The findings may be utilized to identify practices that help connect informal, out-of-school experiences to more formal, traditional school settings. The reach of this model remains small, due to resources and to the stereotype threat that such a program presents. Future development of the curriculum used by writing advisors in the South Texas chapter might expand beyond the culturally bound group to include other marginalized communities such as students with disabilities. The model, and the

resulting published counternarratives, speaks to a generation of students who do not feel they have a voice in society today. The BW program model offers a collective “weapon” in a time when the challenges underserved youth face are greater than ever. This model offers initiatives and ways to better meet the needs of diverse learners.

Conclusion

The transformation taking place in the Barrio Writers workshops across the country is counter-intuitive to traditional educational experiences in formal schooling. Barrio Writers is a platform where educators, students, parents and community collectively create innovative educational experiences, which bridge into the community of learners. The student-authored counternarratives reflected the lives of urban community members and the nuances so often associated with that way of life, which are largely under-utilized in the traditional educational experience. Students infused their understanding, their struggles, and their issues into their writing. What resulted was a quantum leap of progress in not only their personal writing skills, but also in their self-conceptualization of the world around them and the social issues surrounding their everyday lives.

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