

“No Sabo Kids” A Narrative Inquiry into Spanish as Access, Authenticity Policing, and Identity Formation Among Heritage Speakers

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Abstract:

Spanish Heritage Speakers in the United States come from diverse national, regional, and familial language backgrounds. Their Spanish reflects different histories, migration patterns, home practices, accents, and cultural meanings. Yet, these differences are often collapsed under broad categories such as Latino, Hispanic, or simply Spanish- speakers. While these categories create a shared identity, it also flattens histories and language varieties that shape heritage speakers' experiences.

While educational settings often frame Spanish Heritage Speakers through the language of inclusion, culturally responsive pedagogy, and recognition of students' linguistic repertoires, forms of linguisticism continue to persist in practice which create a process of linguistic sorting in which heritage speakers learn early in their educational journeys which forms of Spanish are valued, legitimized, and which are rejected. In family and community contexts, however, these same speakers are often valued for their English because they often help relatives navigate institutional systems such as schools or health care systems. Yet, while their English is valued as a resource for institutional access, their Spanish is often judged, mocked, or dismissed for not meeting community expectations of accuracy, fluency, or legitimacy. This creates a contradiction: While English helps them provide access to institutions, Spanish functions as access to family stories, cultural memory, intergenerational relationship, community participation, and, most of all, belonging. As a result, they are placed between two expectations: English as institutional access and Spanish as cultural and community access.

Using *pláticas* within a narrative inquiry design, this study draws on ethnolinguistic Identity and Social Identity Theory frameworks to examine how Spanish operates as both a pathway to belonging and a boundary through which belonging is measured, questioned, or denied. *Pláticas* created relational and conversational spaces where Spanish Heritage Speakers shared how community expectations about proficiency, fluency, and legitimacy affect their identity and confidence. These judgements operate as a form of authenticity policing, where Spanish proficiency becomes a measure of whether heritage speakers are recognized as legitimate members of the Latino community. The preliminary re-storying of these narratives revealed that participants wanted these conversations to happen within their own community. They desired community support, greater understanding of their linguistic experiences, and a reduction of labels such as “no sabo kids,” which position them as incomplete or not Latino enough.

Although some Spanish Heritage Language scholarship has explored community-based and service-learning projects, much of this work remains centered on university students already enrolled in Spanish heritage courses. This reveals a limitation: conversations about language ideologies, linguistic shame, often reach only those who make it to college. I propose that these conversations should instead be introduced throughout student's educational journeys, especially through K-12 family engagement and community spaces. These spaces usually bring schools, families, and communities together to share resources, strengthen relationships, and support the well-being of students and their communities, they can be revitalized to include meaningful conversations about language shift, linguistic shame, and Spanish as access. Involving the broader community can expand the advocacy needed to support Spanish Heritage Speakers within schools and beyond them.

Keywords: no sabo kids, linguistic shame, Spanish as access, *pláticas*, ethnolinguistic identity,



authenticity policing, language ideologies, family engagement, Latino communities

