

Social and Emotional Learning with Families

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Abstract

A Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) framework was used in this study to gather and analyze the perceptions of mothers involved in a critical family literacy program designed to foster social and emotional development. Through narrative inquiry, participants discussed perceptions of their children's social-emotional development and the expanded use of existing parenting tools. Even though parents are primary agents of change, the cultural backgrounds of families has too often been a missing ingredient in both the curriculum development and participation phases of and social and emotional learning within school-based programs. Family engagement programs are particularly important for Latino parents who are recent immigrants, as they have the additional burden of contending with such stressors in school settings as race, language barriers, and stereotypes afflicting educators. All participants in this study had existing knowledge in the area of emotional development and were able to discuss the value of self-care and self-regulation with respect to parenting their children. This research contributes to studies in the fields of family engagement and popular education pedagogy besides providing the reader with an examination of the implications of effective socio-emotional curriculum in elementary school settings.

Keywords: CBPR, family literacy, *Abriendo Puertas*, CASEL, socio-emotional curriculum

1. Introduction

Families are necessary agents of change, but their voices are too often missing in curriculum development and as participants in school-based programs of social and emotional learning. This can be due to the "deficit perspectives" that are held by social and emotional researchers (Goleman, 2006) and/or educator stereotypes held toward immigrant populations (Tinkler, 2002). The cultural relevance of family engagement programs is especially important with respect to Latino parents who are recent immigrants and who must contend with such additional stressors in school settings as race, language barriers, and educator prejudice (Quezada, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2003; Ramirez, 2003). Over the last three decades, family literacy programs have worked to bridge the educational and social gaps for young children of such parents (Auerbach, 1989). Through empowerment and dialogue, "critical" or "decolonizing" (i.e., programs that build on existing family funds of knowledge) family literacy programs have begun to address the social and emotional issues of Latinos from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Reyes & Torres, 2007). Critical family literacy programs that support Latino families through a popular education framework allow parents to share their actual experiences through a humanistic approach where "learners have a right to construct their worlds" (Wallerstein & Auerbach, 2004, p. 8). Constructing one's own worldview allows participants to build on existing knowledge and share experience with their children to create social and emotional development within the family (Tatum, 2003).

2. Statement of the Problem

While mental health issues for high school students across the U.S. have been traditionally recognized, the same issues with respect to children at the elementary school level have received less attention (Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005). In particular, New Mexico schools struggle with mental health outcomes for their youngest children. The New Mexico-YRRS Survey Report (2013) found that children and youth 10 to 19 years of age experience a proportionately higher rate of death through suicide than other children their age in the U.S. (9.8 vs. 4.8 deaths per 100,000 of respective populations). The report also notes that 30.5 percent of students report feelings of sadness or hopelessness (a risk factor for depression), the fourth highest ranking among the 42

states with such statistics. While emotional literacy and coping mechanisms are often developed in the home, schools have a responsibility as well to offer solutions to mental health issues. Family engagement programs are one means by which schools can create a partnership with families to address issues of child wellness, academic achievement, and overall family support (Henderson, 2007). This support is especially valuable for groups that are marginalized in school settings (Pushor, 2007; Ramirez, 2003) through the standard curriculum (Apple, 2014), through class stereotypes (Anyon, 1980), and through racism (Weissglass, 2001; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Tatum, 2003). Emotional support is a valuable tool for all families, as parents are “their child’s first teacher” (Bridges et al., 2012).

Traditional means of addressing mental health issues in schools have included employing outside counselors or social workers, as well as applying social emotional curriculums that have been developed without community investment. A child’s emotional states of “hopelessness” or “sadness”, however, are intricate emotional responses to intrapersonal, interpersonal, and familial issues. As such, parent engagement is a necessary ingredient to an improved school environment (Epstein, 2001; Henderson, 2007). While curriculum development should be centered at the intersections of children, families, and communities (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Epstein, 2001; Clandinin et al., 2006), this has not always been the case for families of Latino or other diverse backgrounds (Parker, Villenas, & Deyhle, 1999). One of the least studied aspects of social and emotional curricula have been family literacy programs that target social and emotional development.

3. Overview

This article discusses the value of family engagement in elementary school settings through critical family literacy programs, offering the perspectives of Latinos parents from diverse migratory backgrounds. Throughout the article, the term “critical family literacy” is used loosely to describe the learning context for families of the study. “Critical family literacy” refers to educational practices that resist the idea of a “deficit stance”, one which implies that parent and family programs lack funds of knowledge. For the research presented in this article, critical family literacy is defined as a set of social practices that move beyond reading and writing to address the entire student and their cultural context (i.e., all relevant social, racial, political, and emotional aspects) to develop personal and social awareness. Specifically assessed is the *Abriendo Puertas* family literacy program, one which covers a wide range of topics within and beyond literacy, including “school readiness, family well-being, advocacy, brain development, early childhood development (cognitive, language, and physical), socio-emotional development, early literacy, numeracy, bilingualism, health, attendance, civic engagement, parent leadership, goal setting, and family success” (*Abriendo Puertas*, 2016). The focus of this study is on the socio-emotional aspect of the curriculum and on parent interactions that are part of it. Before beginning a discussion of the critical family literacy program specific to New Mexico, an overview of social and emotional programs currently offered in K-12 settings is presented.

My own background to this research is as a clinical mental health counselor working in elementary schools which provide mental health services for children and their families. Personal experiences as a researcher and clinician are cited throughout the article. This paper concludes with individual narratives which demonstrate how families succeed in their objectives when parents directly transmit their knowledge and experiences to their children.

4. Social and Emotional Learning in Schools

Social and emotional learning is critical to a child’s health, ethical development, scholastic motivation, and academic learning (Elias et al., 1997; CASEL, 2016). Since 1997, the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has been the lead organization in developing, promoting, and researching socio-emotional learning for grades K-12 in public schools (Elias, 1997). CASEL has established guidelines for educators with respect to self-reflection engagement, sensory awareness, and relaxation exercises (Elias, 1997). The objective of social and emotional learning is to bridge gaps between academic performance (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Sylwester, 1995; Salovey & Sluyter, 1997) and “responsible” school behavior (Brick & Roffman, 1993). According to CASEL, “Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (2016, p. 1). The CASEL program includes five competencies which educators work to develop with students in grades K through 12:

- Self-awareness, such as knowing one’s strengths and limitations
- Self-management, such as being able to stay in control and persevere through challenges

- Social awareness, such as understanding and empathizing with others
- Relationship skills, such as being able to work in teams and resolve conflicts
- Responsible decision making, including making ethical and safe choices (p. 1)

Social and emotional competencies have also been developed for children three to five years of age. The Minnesota Early Childhood Early Learning Standards (2005) suggest that a child has healthy emotional development when he or she is able to develop his or her emotional literacy (or the ability to recognize and verbalize emotions), respond to the emotions of others, self-regulate, express emotions in play situations, and respond to praise or to the limits and corrections imposed from adults. The Minnesota guidelines are useful for creating a bridge between early childhood and adolescent social and emotional skills. These guidelines suggest that developmental expectations should be established with parents in the early childhood years (Meisels, Marsden, & Stetson, 2000), as children whose families are active in their education learn more effectively in such cases than in those where parents are not actively involved (Mueller, 2003).

The Minnesota guidelines emphasize family engagement (Minnesota Early Childhood Learning Standards, 2005), whereas those of CASEL stress educator engagement (Goleman, 2006). There is a spectrum of methods with respect to how social and emotional curriculums like CASEL are implemented and taught at public schools in the United States. Curriculums range from those purely educator led to others which are family guided. CASEL suggests that it is teachers who should primarily model behaviors. This contrasts with the perspective of other early childhood and family literacy school-based programs which have threaded social and emotional learning into a critical family discourse (see Reyes & Torres, 2007). Critical family engagement, on the other hand, tends to be found on the opposite end of the continuum and suggests that family curriculum ownership belongs to the community (Bridges et al., 2012). Best practices in school-family partnerships aim for a middle ground where families of diverse backgrounds are given as much involvement as possible (Epstein, 1996; Henderson, 2007). Family school-based involvement is necessary in this case, as families bring to the table vital linguistic, historical, political, and cultural resources of knowledge (Yosso, 2005).

5. Family Involvement in Emotional Curriculum and Implementation

The importance of family involvement in emotional curriculum development and implementation cannot be overemphasized. Mental health climates in schools constitute a mirror of our society. Children desperately need social and emotional tools to negotiate their world, not because of any deficiencies on their part, but rather because of the deficiencies of an environment plagued with the educational inequalities reflecting biases with respect to gender, race, and socioeconomic class (Tatum, 1997; Martinez-Beck & Zaslow, 2006; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Collins, 1998). While family involvement represents an important potential asset in our educational system, it is too often ignored by educators who reflect conventional prejudices. Latino parents have not infrequently mentioned feeling unwelcome in classrooms due to language barriers (Ramirez, 2003). Just as common have been Latino complaints that non-Latino teachers have appeared indifferent with respect to their children's education (Tinkler, 2002). Failure to attach significant importance to the family in the educational process has even characterized such leading social/emotional researchers as Daniel Goleman, who states: "As family life no longer offers a growing number of children a sure footing in life, schools are left as the one place communities can turn to for correctives to children's deficiencies" (2006, p. 279). In contrast to such assumptions, however, research has shown that the communities from which students with non-traditional backgrounds come offer rich and diverse funds of knowledge applicable for improved educational prospects (Yosso, 2005).

A partnership between families and schools can be a valuable asset in both developing appropriate social and emotional curriculum as well as in addressing those historical issues that have marginalized the involvement of parents of non-mainstream backgrounds in the educational process. One method of engaging parents with diverse backgrounds is through liberation-based pedagogy. Liberation-based education and partnership invites dialogue, storytelling, and interrogation of traditional assumptions at various levels (Hooks, 2014). Moreover, community-based participatory collaboration develops parent capacity building and "is an empowering process through which participants can increase control over their lives" (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2011, p. 9). Families and children that can develop agency and awareness over their lives in the areas of social and emotional learning have the opportunity to restore a balance between power and politics that exists in school settings (Allison, 1996; Boler, 1999).

Families are influential in shaping a child's emotional and social skills, as they are a "child's first teacher" (Bridges et al., 2012). Nurturing adults and promoting programs that emphasize parental social and emotional

support tend to be most effective in the early, formative years of childhood (Phillips & Shonkoff, 2000). Some of the skills that parents can hone are those which encourage developing a child's self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relational skills, and engagement in safe decision-making (CASEL, 2016). These skills are interconnected with mental health, as emotional development and processes of emotion regulation influence the development of executive cognitive functions, including working memory, inhibitory control, and self-regulation (Blair & Diamond, 2008; McClelland & Cameron, 2011). Early childhood education programs that connect emotional awareness and goal setting with activities to promote these developmental skills can be effective in supporting academic success in the early years (Blair & Diamond, 2008).

6. Family Engagement

The importance of parent involvement in their child's development and school settings has led to extensive study over the past several decades (Auerbach, 1989; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2000; Epstein, 1995; Ramirez, 2003; Taylor, 1983). Historically, family literacy referred to programs that provide families with opportunities to learn together such early childhood skills as reading and writing (Marrow, 1995; Taylor, 1983). More recently, research on family literacy has expanded to include such areas as literacy within the home, childhood education programs that specifically involve parents, and the influences of multiple family members in such programs (Britto & Brooks-Gunn, 2001; Handel, 1999; Wasik et al., 2000; as cited in Caspe, 2003).

Early parent engagement programs did not use a humanistic approach that incorporated existing family funds of knowledge (Pushor, 2007). In some cases, curricula actually worked to erase existing knowledge and replace it with mainstream ideology (Auerbach, 1995). Culturally rooted family literacy programs that resisted outside practices of mainstream literacy became known as "critical" or "de-colonizing" family literacy programs (Reyes & Torres, 2007). Critical family literacy programs that focus on existing family partnerships between schools and homes have boomed in the past decade (see Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001; Panofsky, 2000), especially in cases of programs specific to Latinos (Bridges et al., 2012; Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Gaitan, 2004). Many of these programs have used popular pedagogy or liberation-based education as a guide for curriculum development (Bridges et al., 2012).

One critical family engagement program has received particular national attention through the National Summit for Hispanics on Early Learning for its community-driven focus. The *Abriendo Puertas* program was developed in 2007 in California for low income Spanish speaking Latino parents of children up to five years of age. It emphasizes liberation-based education and parent involvement for Latinos of diverse backgrounds (Bridges et al., 2012). The goal is to improve educational outcomes through parent-child advocacy and overall social development (Bridges et al., 2012). The program has proven to be successful and has created an evidence-based curriculum that was "developed by and for" Latino parents (Bridges et al., 2012). The curriculum was developed through popular educational techniques that emphasized Paulo Freire's pedagogical tools that encourage learning through real life situations and a shared critical dialogue. Parents are instructed through informal lessons and activities that are culturally rooted, such as *loteria* (bingo). The *Abriendo Puertas* program uses a Friarian model of popular education that "encourages people to teach and learn from each other about issues that matter most in their lives ... to organize together for social change" (Girls Action Foundation, 2016). Group learning involving facilitators and parents is necessary to encourage critical thinking for families (Becher, 1984; Beckett, Glass, & Moreno, 2013), an approach missing from most current social and emotional curricula. Programs such as *Abriendo Puertas* have been effective because they work to retain cultural knowledge and create opportunities for parent participation in school settings.

In New Mexico, most families participating in *Abriendo Puertas* are Spanish speakers and first generation immigrants. The model uses a "two generation" approach which encourages parents to train other parents after participation in the eleven week program. This form of parent training is offered at 18 public schools throughout New Mexico.

7. Partnership within a Community-Based Participatory Framework

7.1 Study Partnership(s)

Partnerships between communities and researchers are the basis for effective community research and for the development of community advisory boards (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Since 1990, the Partnership for Community Action (PCA) has been a leading supporter of political advocacy with respect to the development of early childhood centers which focus on positive, research-based educational outcomes. In 2008 the national *Abriendo Puertas* curriculum was adopted in New Mexico, leading to the development of a unique educational model in which Latino immigrant parents act as facilitators of the program's curriculum. The program's

successful results with respect to parent empowerment (Bridges, Fuller, & Cohen, 2012) have included an evidenced-based curriculum that encourages parents who have undergone the program to, in turn, train other parents with respect to civic engagement, advocacy, early childhood practices, and social and emotional competencies. The program relies heavily on parent facilitation to promote a simple philosophy: “Everyone teaches; everyone learns” (Freire & Macedo, 2005, p. 1). Whereas PCA fostered initial implementation of the *Abriendo Puertas* program in New Mexico, it has since relinquished financial and administrative control of the program to an agency named *Cooperativa Korimi*. *Korimi* uses the business model of a U.S. cooperative and is run by former *Abriendo Puertas* facilitators. *Korimi* continues to train parent facilitators and to provide professional opportunities in the field of early childhood development.

For this research project, members of the PCA and *Korimi* teams, as well as individual facilitators, comprised the community advisory board which guided the research agenda.

7.2 Community Research Using Aspect of a CBPR Framework

A Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach encourages researchers to work “with” the community rather than “on” the community or “in” the community with the goal of producing research which “bridges the gap between science and practice through community engagement” (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010, p. 1). The Kellogg Foundation’s Community Health Scholars Program (2001) defines CBPR research as:

... a collaborative approach to research that involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community with the aim of combining knowledge and action for social change (Minker & Wallerstein, 2008, p. 6).

CBPR methodology involves building capacity at every stage of the research design and implementation (Minker & Wallerstein, 2008).

This study used aspects of CBPR to lessen the power differentials between the researcher and the community (Nyden & Wiewel, 1992) and to produce results of value to community participants (Schulz & Ervolder, 1998, 2005). A principal focus of the study was on dialogue and capacity building. Feedback loops in these areas were created through ongoing meetings with the advisory board, as well as through classes for facilitators and advisory board members on the topics of research and ethics.

With input from the community advisory board, I developed interview questions which reflected both the guidelines of the Minnesota early learning standards and those of CASEL. The interview questions focus on child emotional development, with the assumption that this is a valid proxy for “readiness” (McClelland et al., 2008). Participants were recruited by PCA through word of mouth spread among active members. Six parents volunteered for interviews. All participants had completed the *Abriendo Puertas* program and had served as parent facilitators for the eleven week curriculum. All were Spanish speaking Latinos of Mexican ancestry. One participant requested the interview be conducted in English. The participant data is presented in a bilingual format and has been edited with respect to grammar.

8. Research Question(s)

“What are parental perceptions about the program and their children’s social and emotional development as a result of their participation?”

This research question informed the open-ended interviews. Other interview questions concerned child social and emotional development. Sample interview questions included: “As a result of the program, do you feel that your child can label their emotions?”; and, “Do you feel your child can use words instead of actions (kicking or hitting)?” During interviews, participants were asked to speak about their child’s skill with respect to the following: labeling emotions, using words, responding to others, self-regulation when upset, range and means of expression, and response to limits. The interviews focused on gathering narratives and context (Patton, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 2005, 1985). Bilingual myself, I left the choice of modicum (Spanish or English) to the participant.

9. Data Analysis

Data was compared against participant and program artifacts (e.g., participants’ life maps of key struggles, focus group discussions, and the family literacy curriculum). All data was coded in Spanish and then translated to English after coding was complete. Bilingual community partners from the family literacy program and/or PCA reviewed all transcripts with respect to translation accuracy. Community advisory board members and members of the research seminar classes were invited to analyze the data and help shape findings, as suggested in a CBPR approach (Minker & Wallerstein, 2008). Upon reviewing transcriptions, recordings, and researcher notes, the data

was compared to existing literature before coding (Merriam, 1998). The data was coded thematically (Braun & Clark, 2006) and through keyword analysis (Bernard & Ryan, 2009) of participants' narratives.

10. Findings and Discussion

Abriendo Puertas is abreast of both contemporary early childhood curriculum and how it relates to the social and emotional engagement of families. The organization aims to promote family stress reduction through self-regulation, to foster emotional awareness (e.g., asking how children feel), and to emphasize the importance of building upon existing parental knowledge. These aspects of the curriculum are important in good parenting (Sanders & Mazzucchelli, 2013) and in modeling emotional health (Gerull & Rapee, 2002). The *Abriendo Puertas* program in New Mexico addresses issues of partnership, critical dialogue, and parental engagement in such a way as to overcome the findings of research literature which suggest Latino parents feel unwelcome in school settings (Pushor, 2005; Ramirez, 2003). In addition to these benefits, participants report that involvement in the program allows them to transmit new skills to their children, including that of self-regulation through identification of their own emotions. Self-regulation is also part of one's self-awareness, social awareness, and ability to self-manage, all areas of competency present nationally in school social and emotional curriculums (see CASEL, 2016).

10.1 Self-Regulation and Parent Modeling

The ability of a parent to self-regulate their own behavior is a "fundamental process underpinning the maintenance of positive, nurturing, non-abusive parenting practices that promote good developmental and health outcomes in children" (Sanders & Mazzucchelli, 2013, p. 1). Moreover, an adult's ability to model behaviors is a powerful skill in shaping child behavior (Bandura, 1961, 1973). The following narrative speaks to potential self-regulation skills that parents can transmit to their children and which can be acquired in critical family literacy programs that offer social and emotional components.

Tara is one of the leaders during meetings and training sessions of facilitators. Apart from her role as a facilitator leader, she is the mother of two boys, ages nine and ten, in elementary school. She has facilitated family literacy programs for eight years. She first came to the program hoping to learn more about her children's education. She is now a staff member at *Korimi*, where she manages meetings for facilitators, develops the curriculum, and recruits new schools for the family literacy program. While she does not favor the spotlight, the team of parents she leads looks up to her with pride and compassion. Reflections on the part of this participant are presented below.

[translated text: "I believe since no one teaches us how to be mothers, then we have to go on learning through the process. But I believe *Abriendo Puertas* has been a very, very important tool."] Original text: "Yo creo que como nadie nos enseña ser mamás entonces tenemos que ir aprendiendo sobre la marcha pero *Abriendo Puertas* yo creo que ha sido una herramienta muy muy importante."

She felt that the ways in which parents respond to the needs of their children was important: [translated text: "In the [family literacy] classes we talk about how to react or respond. [For example] we, the parents, don't always react to the situation, [like] when the child screams/cries, we get upset, we [as parents] don't really respond in the best way to meet the child's needs."] Original text: "En las clases hablamos de cómo reaccionar o responder. Entonces nosotros, los padres, no siempre reaccionamos a la situación, si el niño grita nosotros nos alteramos y no respondemos realmente a lo mejor a la necesidad que está teniendo el niño entonces."

She also believed that changes in child behavior start with parental behavior. [translated text: "[I learned] if I could change so many of my issues, I can make those changes come true for my children. And all one has to do is to prepare oneself first for these shifts and much of these changes we make ourselves."] Original text: "Que si yo cambie, si yo pude cambiar. Tuve tantos problemas. Puedo hacer para ellos [los niños] también y claro verdad vienen también otras etapas en los niños y todo uno tiene que prepararse primero para esas etapas y muchos de esos cambios que hacemos nosotros."

[translated text: "[In the family literacy class] the aspects that we most work with parents on is 'no one can give what they do not have'. That be self-regulation, self-esteem or a vision of their own family. The parents leave the program with this seed."] Original text: "Las partes en las que más trabajamos con los padres 'nadie puede dar lo que no tiene'. Ya sea self-regulation, autoestima o una visión de su propia familia. Los padres salen del programa llevándose esa semilla."

10.2 Affirming Knowledge and Learning

Participants in the study felt the curriculum encouraged them to continue building upon and improving their parenting skills. “Well, the truth is I ... we’ve always had in my home good habits with that. I’ve always taught my children to express themselves and to recognize their emotions when they feel sad, when they feel lonely, when they feel angry...” [Original text: “Pues la verdad yo siempre en mi casa siempre hemos tenido unas buenas habilidades con eso, yo siempre he enseñado a mis hijos a expresarse y a reconocer sus emociones cuando se sienten tristes, cuando se sienten solos, cuando están enojados.”] (Participant 1, personal communication, June 7, 2015) Participants’ existing knowledge substantiated the findings of previous studies that have suggested families of working class Latino students have rich funds of knowledge that can strengthen community identity and student motivation in school settings (Gonzalez, Moll, Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzales, & Amanti, 1995; Yosso, 2005). Though this is not to say that all parents do not have room to deepen and question the ethics behind their own parenting ideologies, Reyes and Torres (2012) discuss the need of Latinos specifically to challenge unhealthy mores surrounding their concept of parenting. *Machismo* is an issue in Latino culture, one which can make corporal punishment of children acceptable. Such precepts as *machismo* should be noted and challenged in a safe space where both the educator and students are not vulnerable (Hooks, 2014).

Study participants reported finding value in the early childhood developmental research to which they were exposed, as well as in implementing new skills which encourage increased reading time for children and family discussions of children’s feelings. One participant explains [translated text]: “I began to implement some changes—to put into practice what was taught to me in the classes. ... Later, since I’m a facilitator, each time I facilitate, I learn from the parents’ new suggestions. And I am always trying to put into practice everything that I learn.” [Original text: “Empecé a poner mis cambios, a poner en práctica lo que me estaban enseñado en las clases, luego cada como soy facilitadora, cada que yo facilito aprendo de los padres sugerencias nuevas y siempre estoy tratando de poner en práctica todo lo que yo enseño.”] These findings echo surveys that suggest that Latino families can engage their children in a variety of skills that enhance their developmental growth (Mamedova, Redford, & Zukerberg, 2013) and find value in learning from other parents with similar backgrounds (Reyes & Torres, 2012).

The study aimed at understanding parents’ perceptions of social and emotional behaviors in their children. All six participants reported that their children met the criteria for competency in social and emotional skills with respect to the five areas outlined by CASEL, as well as with respect to those set by Minnesota’s early childhood-specific standards (see Minnesota guidelines). The participants expressed a desire to continue learning and building upon their parenting skills. They noted the program had afforded them social and emotional skills which had allowed them to assume the role of family “guide”. Of particular relevance, they noted such techniques as breath control in self-regulation of behavior. All participants acknowledged that their children’s behavior has changed as a result of their enhanced parenting skills.

10.3 Challenges and Strengths

This study had challenges with respect to its CBPR framework and participant capacity. The study was not a “pure” CBPR project in the sense that knowledge was not always created in partnership with the community at every stage of participation (Minker & Wallerstein, 2011). The community partners were not involved in several phases of the research, including the development of the study protocol, the collection of data, and writing of the final report. The specific methods, epistemological approach, and qualitative nature of inquiry which characterized the study all preclude generalization of the study’s findings to other Latino family engagement programs.

In spite of the limitations mentioned, this research study is an important addition to the body of academic literature which suggests that families bring valuable assets to school settings (Moll et al., 1992). The study’s results further challenge the notion that families and children are “deficient” (Goleman, 2006, p. 279) in addressing their educational needs. Families that were engaged in the critical literacy program reported engaging in dialogues with other Latino parents concerning issues of language, culture, and advocacy, as well as to transferring new skills of emotional regulation to their children.

11. Conclusion

Throughout New Mexico public school districts there is a core group of Latino parent leaders who promote critical family literacy. These leaders have taken the national *Abriendo Puertas* curriculum (modified by PCA) and encouraged parental ownership of the program by training parents as facilitators. The *Abriendo Puertas* critical family literacy program continues to grow, now being part of the curriculum of 18 schools in three New Mexican counties. Program management has been assigned to a cooperative (*Korimi*) which continues to offer professional development to parents and to forge relationships with new school partners. The facilitators meet monthly to discuss effective pedagogy and review literature with respect to early childhood development. The themes of the monthly meetings are selected by the parent facilitators and are often centered on interpersonal and intrapersonal communication. These facilitator meetings help create a community of parents who are now learning how to facilitate and to develop social and emotional tools with which to work with other parents. In short, the Freirean teaching philosophy (“Everyone is teaching and everyone is learning”) is being realized.

Despite the efforts of family literacy programs to address the social and emotional aspects of child development and parenting (*Abriendo Puertas*, 2016; Reyes & Torres, 2012), partnerships between families and schools remain largely underdeveloped (Henderson, 2007). Social and emotional curricula in schools do not have a solid footing in the realities of family life. Such curricula (e.g., CASEL) tend to emphasize the roles of teachers in transmitting social and emotional learning to children, largely ignoring the social and political fabric of emotionality (Alison, 1996; Boler, 1999).

Participants in this study explained that parents have to calmly negotiate their own needs with respect to self-care and self-esteem while correcting and mediating the behavior of their children. Parent perspectives and insights are needed in developing curricula in schools (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Epstein, 2001). Emotional curricula should not be divorced from the social spheres of power (Boler, 1999), which, in turn, shape the emotional experiences of families and children in school settings. Accordingly, this study contributes to an actual perspective of Southwest U.S. immigrant Latino families whose children attend schools with family literacy programs in which they engage.

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“I know that self-regulation, self-esteem, and our own vision is important for one’s family”. [Original text: “Ya sea self-regulation, autoestima o una vision de su propia familia.”] (Family literacy participant, 2015).

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