

Co-Designing Family SEL Education:  
Building on Family Expertise, Using Signature Practices

A Paper Presented at AERA 2020

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April 17, 2020

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Abstract:

This paper reports on the first stage of a 3 pronged effort of a school district in the Pacific Northwest to make district wide social-emotional learning instruction more culturally responsive. The first stage of this project was a co-design of a family SEL education night with a Latinx community education organization, district staff, and a university researcher. A first, less responsive and reflective parent education event is documented along with the design process to create a family education night that centered family funds of knowledge of SEL, expressed as “*valores humanos.*”

*Objectives*

The Brightridge School District (pseudonym) is a medium-sized, highly diverse school district in the Pacific Northwest. The district had an existing collaborative relationship with a local research university for curriculum development, as well as an ongoing relationship with Cuidamos (pseudonym), a Latinx community educational advocacy organization. Prior to the start of this project, Cuidamos had invited the SEL Department to present on SEL to parents at one of their monthly parent education nights. This year, the district’s recently formed Department of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) identified providing culturally relevant and responsive SEL instruction as one of its priorities, and sought support from its university partner. The researcher assigned to support the district’s culturally relevant and responsive SEL

goal identified a family funds of knowledge inspired approach (Moll et al., 2005) as essential to this process. This paper will report on the co-design of a family engagement event on SEL.

### *Theoretical Framework*

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is understood in the literature as learning involving 5 inter-related capacities that are essential for mental health, healthy relationships and academic learning (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2013). Evidence-based instruction in these 5 capacities: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills and Responsible Decision-Making; have been shown to not only support student social and emotional well-being but also academic success (Brackett et al., 2012; Durlak et al., 2011; Salovey & Sluyter, 1997). In spite of this evidence, many districts struggle with implementation and find it difficult to duplicate results due to myriad contextual factors (Elias et al., 2003). One factor that has been identified is the disconnect between the cultural assumptions of published SEL curriculum and those of the families and students in schools, especially members of non-dominant cultural communities (Hecht & Youngju, 2015; Hoffman, 2009).

A growing body of research is taking into account the positive roles family culture can play in promoting academic learning and wellbeing among students. Researchers and community members are identifying ways schools can partner with non-dominant families to create more culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies (eg. Olivos, Jimenez-Castellanos, & Ochoa, 2011; Palomino, 2019; Riojas-Cortez & Flores, 2009). SEL researchers are also beginning to connect SEL instruction to promoting educational equity, identifying this work as “Transformative SEL.” These researchers identify the need for more culturally responsive SEL

pedagogies that take into account cultural assets non-dominant families and students bring to their own SEL development and help students and apply SEL capacities to help students identify bias and take appropriate action (Jagers et al., 2018).

Districts and schools are also learning new ways to equitably engage with non-dominant families that require a paradigm shift from school-centered and dominant culture defined practices to a more equitable set of practices that seek to balance power and center non-dominant family knowledge and expertise through relational, reciprocal and collective practices (Ishimaru, 2017). One emerging methodology is community-based design research where families, schools and researchers collaborate to better understand and solve problems of practice (Bang et al., 2016; Ishimaru et al., 2018). Brightridge District's Department of Social and Emotional Learning is drawing on these bodies of research to guide implementation of its evidence-based social-emotional learning curriculum and PBIS tier 1 interventions to create a transformative SEL program that will promote student wellbeing and academic success.

### *Methodology and Data Sources*

Community-based design research methods (Bang et al., 2016; Ishimaru et al., 2018) were used to analyze the first district-led event and then to co-design a second parent engagement event with Cuidamos staff that would center family funds of SEL knowledge and provide information about district SEL instruction. All presentations and design meetings were fieldnoted and analyzed by the researcher, then member checked (Carspecken, 1996) with the other members of the collaboration. In keeping with the iterative nature of design research, the findings from this round are being incorporated into next year's project goals.

*Results: Learning about Latinx family strengths, values and practices in teaching social and emotional learning and bridging family expertise with school-day practices through a family SEL education night.*

Cuidamos (pseudonym) is a local non-profit whose mission is “To foster academic success for every Latino child through parent and community involvement.” (Cuidamos, 2019) Cuidamos hosts monthly parent education nights on topics that parents request. One topic parents at Cuidamos requested was on social and emotional learning. Following their direction, Cuidamos director Dr. Rodriguez (pseudonym), invited district SEL director Dr. Richards (pseudonym) to give a presentation on Social and Emotional Learning just as this project was beginning. In January 2019 Cuidamos Dr. Richards (pseudonym) presented about the district’s efforts to support student social and emotional learning. He spoke in Spanish though the slides he had were in English. In the presentation, he explained PBIS, and CASEL’s 5 competencies and the RULER Approach. The researcher was able to observe the presentation and take notes on participation.

The event’s emotional tone was warm and welcoming. There was a delicious pot of tortilla soup as well as side dishes, and Dr. Rodriguez and lead parent educator Ms. Montoya greeted each parent on arrival with hugs and questions about how they and their children were. 5 Teen volunteers were on hand to help with set-up, distributing handouts and assisting with childcare. There were 18 parents there, including 3 dads and 2 grandmothers. Soon a rhythm emerged with Dr. Richards introducing topics from his slide bank and Dr. Rodriguez adding context and inviting parents to discuss the ideas. Some concepts were more confusing in translation from English to Spanish than others. Mothers readily understood the concept of

“warm demander” but the concept “*emotional intelligence*” was very difficult to translate. For these families, the Spanish word “*inteligencia*” was something never paired with emotions, but is a word reserved for rational, academic topics. Thus “*inteligencia emocional*” while being a direct translation, failed to convey a meaning parents could relate to, even as their nuanced accounts of how and why they hug their children demonstrated a deep capacity for what English speaking researchers term “emotional intelligence.” After the talk, parents filled out exit cards with requests for topics for upcoming sessions that included requests for more SEL information.

Following this request, Dr. Richards, Dr. Rodriguez, Ms. Montoya and Mr. Benner met in February and March of 2019 to plan this presentation. They recognized how much expertise families already bring to supporting their children’s social and emotional development, and that their culturally grounded ways of expressing this expertise needed to be centered in the next presentation. Dr. Rodriguez also recommended parents be more active in contributing content in the next event, with more opportunities to share ideas and learn from one another. In the first meeting on February 7, there was a tremendous brainstorm of ideas. However, the parent questions about “*inteligencia emocional*” resurfaced. Dr. Rodriguez and Ms. Montoya identified the concept “*valores humanos*” (human values) was a more culturally relevant expression of this idea of emotionally skillful and responsible living expressed in the idea “emotional intelligence.” This felt like a better starting point for further learning. As the first session’s discussion on hugging made clear, these parents had deep funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) related to social and emotional learning and Mr. Benner advocated for centering this knowledge in the second session. The focus of the workshop became identifying existing

strengths and knowledge the parents had in teaching “*valores humanos*” and finding ways parents might find components of RULER helpful in teaching their *valores humanos*. In the time between meetings, Dr. Richards and the SEL Department had been working to adapt Oakland Unified School District and Washoe Co. School District’s 3 Signature SEL Practices (Oakland Unified School District, 2016; Washoe County School District, 2017) for every classroom in Brightridge. In the second meeting the team decided to apply these signature practices (Welcoming Rituals, Engaging Practices, and Optimistic Closure) to the structure of the workshop as a way to model what children are experiencing in school. The following is a description of the second family SEL night at Cuidamos.

**Overview:** The event was held in the same building and room as before on March 8<sup>th</sup> 2019. The turnout for this regularly scheduled event was smaller than expected, with 5 parents, their children and the teen volunteers and youth organizer participating. The teens and children joined the activities during the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the workshop. The workshop was held primarily in Spanish, with some parts in English with Spanish interpretation by Dr. Rodriguez.

**Welcoming Rituals:** Just like the prior session, Dr. Rodriguez and Ms. Montoya welcomed parents as they arrived with warm greetings and hugs. They introduced them to the researcher and Ms. Angel, and invited them to get dinner. The smaller group allowed parents and presenters to gather around the same table to talk. The presentation began with a brief description of the topic and then an activity for parents: “Cuales son los valores humanos en su

familia?” (“What are the human values in your family?” This question served as a foundation for later discussions of SEL. Parents identified the following *valores humanos*:

Respeto y amor (love and respect)

Ser amables y amistosos (being friendly, able to share love)

Humiles/humildad (humility)

Canelizar energía (channel energy in positive ways- especially with teenagers)

### **Engaging Practices:**

After sharing their *valores*, Ms. Montoya asked the group the following questions as part of a turn and talk conversation:

“¿Cuáles son sus esperanzas y sueños para su familia y sus niños en términos de habilidades socio-emocionales?” (What are your hopes and dreams for your family in terms of social-emotional abilities?)

¿Cómo está enseñando estas habilidades en casa? (How are you teaching these abilities at home?)

¿Qué le gustaría aprender más?” (What more would you like to learn?)

Sitting around a single table encouraged more sharing across the group, and soon parents were sharing stories of their homes and how they teach their children how to get along, or to deal with frustrations like learning to tie shoes. Dr. Rodriguez connected this conversation to how social and emotional learning supports education, from preparing for kindergarten through navigating college.



With their *valores humanos* in mind, parents viewed a Spanish-language video from CASEL about social and emotional learning ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xz\\_aCbDI9uk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xz_aCbDI9uk)). Mr. Benner framed SEL not as a new program, but as a continuation of the kinds of instruction families and teachers have always provided. In the conversation that followed the video, parents connected with capacities like teaching self-control and being able to talk about their feelings.

Ms. Angel introduced the RULER Approach and the Mood Meter as tools their children are using in their classrooms. She explained the design of the mood meter, that it is a way to describe emotions from unpleasant to pleasant (X axis) and low to high energy (Y axis). Parents broke into pairs and each took a quadrant of the mood meter. They worked together to brainstorm feeling words in Spanish and put them where they thought they belonged. At the end of the activity, each pair shared their quadrant's words. Parents stood together and put their words on the large Mood Meter poster on the wall as they shared. Next Ms. Angel introduced the Feeling Words Curriculum component of RULER, and explained that each year as part of the curriculum, their children would be introduced to 12 new feeling words and then gave the lists of the words to the parents for the second activity.

Each parent picked 3 of these words from the list, defined it for themselves and as they put it on the mood meter, they talked about how they might talk about this emotion at home. The next activity had parents think together at the Mood Meter poster about common events in their child's life, "Como te sientes cuando..." (how do you feel when). At this point children in childcare joined their parents for the rest of the workshop. When they came in and saw the Mood Meter one child exclaimed, "That's in my school!" The children modeled how they use

the mood meter “Yo estoy en el verde.” Parents and children worked together coming up with feeling words for the different situations and putting them on the Mood Meter. Ms. Angel introduced the Emotional Literacy Charter tool. The children recognized it from their classrooms. After reviewing how the charter worked, Erica invited children to teach their parents how the charter is used in their classrooms. Next parents and children talked about how they might use a charter at home.

### **Optimistic Closure**

As the evening came to an end, parents were given exit cards and the following questions:

¿Cómo se siente ahora? (How are you feeling?)

¿Con quien le gustaría mantener contacto después de esta reunión? (Who do you want to stay in contact with after this meeting?)

¿Qué aprendió nuevo esta noche? (What’s something new you learned tonight?)

¿Qué le gustaría aprender más? (What would you like to learn more about?)

¿Cómo planea poner en práctica lo que aprendió? (How will you put into practice what you’ve learned?)

Parents filled out the exit cards and gave them to Ms. Montoya and Dr. Rodriguez to use for their planning of future events. Unfortunately these cards were not available when this paper was written.

### **Significance of this work**

While many of the activities parents did in the second workshop (using the mood meter, talking about using a charter at home) are recommended in RULER implementation materials

for family engagement nights, they are presented in a culture-blind and culture neutral way that neglects non-dominant families' ways of being and knowing. By grounding the second event in parent experience and culturally relevant expressions of SEL concepts, their *valores humanos*, parents were able to use their prior knowledge, learn from one another and take the concepts of the RULER Approach in an additive way. This work has informed the further implementation of RULER at Brightridge, with *valores humanos* examples incorporated into teacher professional development on SEL and in 2020, Mr. Benner will facilitate a similar project with Vietnamese speaking families in Brightridge.

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