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Elizabeth Gil
St. John's University, gile@stjohns.edu

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Leadership for Youth Empowerment Within a Family-Based Community Program

Elizabeth Gil

Abstract
This article examines the perceptions of students who observed their adult family members’ participation and also participated in Connection and Access through Technology (CAtT), a family-oriented community-based program that taught technology skills to adult family members of school-aged children. This qualitative study applies conceptions of empowerment, for youth and community settings, to understand how program structures promoted immigrant Latino family members’ empowerment. In CAtT, parents gained technology skills, which they applied to their daily lives and to their children’s schooling, and developed leadership skills. Students experienced a sense of belonging, agency, competence, and leadership through increasing technology skills and having opportunities to contribute to the program, including through teaching others. Witnessing positive experiences of adult family members in the program also represented possibilities for children’s personal successes. Findings suggest that leaders’ ability to recognize and employ nontraditional parental involvement that builds on families’ cultural characteristics results in fostering student empowerment. Exposure to programs such as CAtT, which empower Latino immigrant families and which have the potential to alter traditional structures, is essential in the development of leaders for social justice and culturally responsive leadership.

1 St. John's University, Jamaica, NY, USA

Corresponding Author:
Elizabeth Gil, St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Sullivan Hall, Room 520, Jamaica, NY 11439, USA. Email: gile@stjohns.edu
Much recent research underscores the need for administrators to possess the ability to serve in increasingly diverse contexts and to be able to adapt their approaches to be responsive to the populations they serve. However, studies have also found that school leaders do not feel prepared to address diversity-related issues or lack the needed supports to help them resolve these issues (Young, Madsen, & Young, 2010). Engaging with community-based organizations (CBOs) and programs may be a way for educational leaders to gain insights regarding effective ways to engage the students and families they serve. By connecting with programs and organizations in the community, administrators can learn directly about how these programs and organizations engage their members. Further, by listening to the experiences of those engaged in community-based spaces, school administrators can apply the knowledge gained to their leadership practice in order to improve schooling experiences for their students and students’ families.

Research conducted about organizations that work effectively with Latino families has shown that these organizations share several characteristics. They have a tendency to work with families as a whole, instead of viewing each member as a lone-standing individual, and provide multiple entry points for involvement with the organization. These organizations also base their agendas on the needs their members express and work with parents on developing their leadership skills (Osterling & Garza, 2004). Latino-focused community-based programs engaging families may serve as resources from which schools can learn how best to create or improve relationships with the growing numbers of Latino children and families in the United States (Ramirez, 2003). Starting from a community-based approach, schools can then weave culturally responsive approaches within the daily fabric of their schools.

This article is based on a reanalysis of data related to the child participants in a larger qualitative case study focused on understanding how participation in Connection and Access through Technology (CatT; program and individuals’ names are pseudonyms) fostered Latino immigrant families’ abilities to navigate their children’s schooling experiences in the United States. This study centers the voices of students who observed their adult family members’ participation in the program, by highlighting students’ perceptions of their adult family members’ experiences in CatT. Students described the changes they witnessed in their parents and grandparents and what messages they received as a result of their own experiences and observations within the community-based program. Students’ descriptions reflected various aspects related to empowerment, including a sense of agency and a sense of being part of a community. Understanding students’ perceptions of the community-based program’s outcomes for their parents and what lessons they took away from being in the program space can inform school leaders in developing inclusive schools. Educational leaders
can gain an understanding of what programming and interpersonal aspects create positive circumstances for Latino students. They can then consider how they can incorporate these elements in schools.

I review several strands of literature in order to examine the ways in which schools tend to view parental involvement, how Latino notions of parental involvement differ from traditional perspectives, and how CBOs engage and empower families. Finally, I review literature regarding youth empowerment.

**Parental Involvement**

Studies have established a strong association between various forms of parental and family involvement and educational benefits for children, across economic, racial, social, cultural, and educational factors (Epstein, 1995; Mapp, 2003). Research consistently identifies school, parent, and community partnerships as key elements of successful schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002). However, realities point to disconnection in terms of conceptualization of parental involvement and in association with school–community relations. Conceptions of parental involvement differ depending on people’s background experiences and culture (Pérez Carreón, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005). Schools may not be successfully connecting with families of diverse and traditionally marginalized populations (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009), especially in cases where there is a history of mistrust (Khalifa, 2012).

Widely accepted frameworks of parental involvement (e.g., Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997) tend to emphasize a home–school dichotomy, focusing on parents as actors who serve to fulfill school-identified goals (Auerbach, 2010; De Carvalho, 2014), and which stress individual student success (De Carvalho, 2014) rather than collective success. This orientation may not be suitable for Latino families when they view parental involvement as a motivation and, simultaneously, a goal-promoting opportunity for their children (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). Furthermore, where racial, linguistic, and cultural power differentials that tend to result in the voices of urban-based minority groups being less valued than those of culturally dominant groups in schools (Orr & Rogers, 2010) are not addressed, inclusive family engagement remains elusive.

**Latino Parental Involvement**

Counter to traditional notions of parental involvement, Latino parents’ ideas of involvement may not center academics or stress formal school-based vehicles for involvement but emphasize life participation as their main channel of involvement, instead (Zarate, 2007). Involvement for Latino parents includes awareness of what is happening in their children’s lives, monitoring their children and teaching respect for others, establishing trust and communication with their children, and providing advice on life (Auerbach, 2007; Zarate, 2007). Furthermore, involvement may be seen as familial,
not only taking into consideration parents but also guardians and close family members, reflecting the importance of extended family relations within Latino family structures (Hidalgo, 1998; Jones & Fuller, 2003).

More specifically looking at the experiences of Latino immigrant families within schools, research has underscored the importance of developing families’ knowledge base and fostering relationships with and among families in school. Researchers found that once Latino immigrant families gained college planning information in a series of workshops provided in Spanish, in a welcoming space, and addressed their specific concerns, they began planning with their children and sharing information with others in their community (Fann, Jarsky McClafferty, & McDonough, 2009). Traditional modes of communication, also, may not be sufficient to engage parents. In the college planning study, parents wanted to receive communications in multiple ways, including verbally and face-to-face (Fann et al., 2009). Further highlighting the importance of parents’ feeling welcomed and their needs being addressed, researchers studying nationally representative data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99, found that immigrant parents from nondominant groups experienced more barriers to parental involvement in schools (and to a greater degree) than did native-born White parents (Turney & Kao, 2009). Foreign-born Latino parents named feeling unwelcome in their children’s schools at a rate 2½ times higher than did White U.S.-born parents. Latino immigrant parents were also 5½ times more likely to indicate that language was an obstacle to being involved in their children’s schools than were their White native-born counterparts. Scheduling of meetings at inconvenient times for parents was also a concern for Latino immigrant parents (Turney & Kao, 2009).

Research suggests that while school personnel can foster welcoming climates for diverse families, these efforts are not consistent across schools (Zarate, 2007). Schools may still hold negative assumptions based on perceptions of a lack of parental involvement of Latino immigrant families or deficit views of what these families have to offer. School officials may also not realize how important relational ties may be to Latinos with collectivist orientations (Conchas, 2001) and who value interdependence. A lack of understanding of Latino immigrant families’ needs and assets, then, threatens school officials’ abilities to work effectively with this group of families in their schools.

**CBOs**

CBOs possess certain characteristics that can result in the ability to support the growth, development, and empowerment of those who participate in the organization (Maton & Salem, 1995). Ideally, CBOs are reflective of the communities of which they are a part; those involved choose to participate because they have a shared interest in the goals and relationships with others within the organization (Murphy, 2014). The structures and norms of CBOs support collective efforts and encourage the commitment of participants to confront issues they are
experiencing (Murphy, 2014). By working firmly within communities and with knowledge of constituents’ daily experiences, CBOs become genuine centers of empowerment, as participatory, resource-providing mediating structures (Maton & Salem, 1995; Murphy, 2014). Through their promotion of “participatory safety” (Onyett, 2003, p. 197), where participants can freely express ideas, engage in information sharing, dialogue, and self-direction, and experience growth of community skills (Murphy, 2014), organizations exercise responsiveness to community members’ desires and can serve as a lever for change.

CBOs may work with constituents to raise their awareness and promote collective action in order to achieve common goals. CBOs have helped to empower parents, especially those traditionally marginalized in school settings, in order to bring about educational reforms and to make decision makers accountable to them. They also connect families to resources and help them navigate systems, including schools, as well as help educational institutions to understand the families they serve better. Increased parental empowerment fostered within community-based initiatives leads to improved experiences within the school for both families and children (Ordoñez-Jasis & Jasis, 2004).

While school officials’ expectations and deficit thinking about students’ capabilities (Cooper, Denner, & Lopez, 1999; Ramirez, 2003; Valencia, 2002) can impact schooling experiences, families’ experiences within their communities can also impact the way they can engage with schools. Community-based programs and organizations that acknowledge skills that populations with whom they work possess can continue to build on familial and community assets that tend to be ignored from mainstream perspectives (Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) identifies several intersecting strengths: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital. These are assets which resist deficit notions and “serve a larger purpose of struggle toward social and racial justice” (Yosso, 2005, p. 69) for a collective.

Research highlights how community-initiated programs enact comprehensive support for students and families, and foster participants’ aspirations, through sharing explicit information regarding college and other opportunities, where information is not necessarily provided in school settings (Gil, 2017; Jayakumar, Vue, & Allen, 2013). Community-based initiatives can also connect students to other members of their communities (Gil, 2017; Jayakumar et al., 2013), engaging social and familial capitals. Furthermore, linguistically and culturally affirming school- and community-based programs where students establish relationships with adults they trust can support students’ persistence in high school (Harris & Kiyama, 2015). When community strengths are acknowledged, therefore, they can be leveraged toward improving children’s educational experiences. Understanding what occurs in community-based settings is also important because research has found that collaborations between communities and districts can amplify educational institutions’ “social resources and expertise, particularly in reaching out to low-income Latino parents and effectively educating their children” (Ishimaru, 2014, p. 1). CBOs, further, can also address specific subgroups’ needs, for
example, those of undocumented immigrants (Yoshikawa, Kholoptseva, & Suárez-Orozco, 2013), because they are not legal entities. CBOs can play a role in bridging relationships between families and the schools their children attend, especially in cases where schools are not effectively engaging them. Additionally, central to the work of CBOs is the ability to address constituents’ needs by offering a place for participants to discuss problems and access resources (Speer & Perkins, 2002), while also recognizing their abilities to contribute within the community. Therefore, community-based initiatives can serve as vehicles to connect schools to families and can serve as effective examples for forming relationships with families they are having difficulty engaging.

**CBOs and Family Empowerment**

CBOs and initiatives have served as spaces where relationships among parents have led to the establishment of peer-to-peer support of individuals as well as have provided collective strength to engage with school officials where they had previously felt silenced. The relationships developed within the activities of CBOs affect participation (Warren et al., 2009) in the organization and beyond (Murphy, 2014). Parental engagement efforts that focus on relationship building among parents promote parental empowerment through information sharing, strengthening kinship ties, and leadership roles taken on by members within the community (Fann et al., 2009; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). Previous research has provided examples of how peer support and interactions within organizations have empowered parents from marginalized groups to amplify their voices beyond their community settings and into their children’s schools.

**Youth Empowerment**

Studies have found various positive developmental outcomes of empowered youth in schools and within community spaces. Students’ sense of agency increased in terms of students being able to voice their opinion and to see themselves as agents of change (Mitra, 2004) through meaningful participation (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006) and to gain a sense of leadership (Kirk et al., 2017; Mitra, 2004). Students also experienced a sense of belonging through having relationships with at least one caring adult and developed a sense of competence exhibited through being able to analyze their environments, becoming better problem solvers, and cultivating relationships with others (Mitra, 2004). Empowered students have also been found to use their skills to empower and help others and experience a positive sense of community (Kirk et al., 2017) stemming from being in safe and supportive settings (Jennings et al., 2006). Students’ opportunities to share in decision-making power is an element of youth empowerment as well (Jennings et al., 2006; Kirk et al., 2017).
Furthermore, the most powerful degrees of empowerment include the integration of individual and community-level orientations of empowerment, goals toward socio-political change, and critical reflection (Jennings et al., 2006) and awareness (Kirk et al., 2017). McQuillan (2005) names three dimensions of student empowerment: academic, social, and political. Academic empowerment is related to students’ development of cognitive skills and control in setting learning goals, while political empowerment is associated with students’ formal and informal influence within schools (McQuillan, 2005). Finally, social empowerment refers to support for students in terms of relationships with school officials as well as the support that students offer each other. The three dimensions of empowerment, also, can be “mutually reinforcing” (McQuillan, 2005, p. 664). As one feature of empowerment develops, it can play a role in the development of another.

By deeply examining student interviews and interactions in the CATT program space, this study seeks to foreground students’ voices in revealing the changes they witnessed through their adult family members’ experiences over time participating in technology skills classes. The empowerment students observed in their parents, as well as their own experiences, impacted their sense of empowerment, individually, and as part of larger communities where they lived and in their schools.

**Conceptual Framework**

This study is based in conceptions of empowerment, both at individual and collective levels (McWhirter, 1991; Sleeter, 1991). Empowerment is manifested when people believe that they have the abilities to take actions toward their goals (Sleeter, 1991). Empowering community settings develop over extended periods of time, in contexts that are important to the daily lives of those who have been marginalized (Maton, 2008). Community initiatives emphasize shared goals (Murphy, 2014), participatory environments, and free expression (Onyett, 2003). Different aspects of empowerment, such as academic, political, and social, can strengthen one another (McQuillan, 2005), and there can be an integration of individual and community empowerment (Jennings et al., 2006). Research regarding CBOs and families has shown how structures and norms in these settings nurture members’ empowerment. Literature regarding youth empowerment within schools and communities has highlighted developmental outcomes, including an increased sense of belonging and competence, as well as positive interpersonal interactions with adults and peers.

**Method**

This study investigates how students perceive their Latino immigrant families’ experiences in a community space that centers, rather than neglects, their cultural characteristics, intertwining participants’ existing knowledge and perspectives, and new knowledge. Thus, in reexamining students’ views, collected as part of a larger study, I seek to answer:
1. What aspects of empowerment are revealed by students’ discussion of their family members’ and their own experiences in CAiT?
2. How do the program structures and characteristics established by the program founder provide opportunities for the children’s development of skills and leadership opportunities?

Context

A retired local school district educator and administrator founded CAiT in 2011, offering technology skills classes in a computer lab at a community center in a predominantly Latino area of a mid-sized, Midwestern city. As a middle school teacher, Anita Padilla had promoted student empowerment and parental involvement through obtaining funding to establish an after-school program developing students’ leadership and communication skills and hiring parents to work in the program. In developing the plan for CAiT, she once again considered how students and parents could be brought together in another vehicle for education and empowerment of youth and their family members. CAiT offered free technology basics courses lasting 10–12 weeks per course, for 1½ to 2 hr per session. The initial purpose of the program was to help close the digital divide that existed for parents who did not have access to technology or who had access to technology but did not know how to use it. Program content also included discussions of how computer skills could be used by parents with school-aged children to connect with school personnel and understand the digital platforms, including report cards and dashboards, that schools were increasingly implementing. According to CAiT documents, the program’s overarching goals included teaching parents and guardians to gain basic computer skills in order to help them support their children’s academic achievement, and to connect students to their parents/guardians, while promoting positive behavior and academics. The majority of adult participants in the program were Spanish-speaking immigrant local residents with a range of English language proficiency, though a few participants were U.S. born. Child members of adult participants’ families were also welcome in the space, where they could receive homework help, use computers, and at times, participate in class sessions. The majority of Latino immigrant families that participated had been in the United States for several years.

Participants

This article is based on data related to the child participants in a larger qualitative case study that focused on understanding the experiences of Latino immigrant families in CAiT. The larger study included participant observation in the program for an extended period of time of over 1 year, document analysis, and interviews with adult program participants, program volunteers, and children whose adult family members had taken at least one semester of CAiT classes. The five children interviewed ranged
in ages from 10 to 14. At the time of the formal study period (2015–2016), two of these students were in elementary school, one attended middle school, and two were in high school. Two of the child participants had attended the CAiT program with at least one of their parents for 5 years. Two other children attended with their mother 2 years prior to the formal study period, and one had occasionally attended the program with her mother. This child also was familiar with her grandmother’s participation in the program and shared her impressions about both of these family members’ participation.

Data Collection

The data used for this study were collected as part of a larger study examining how family members’ participation in CAiT built on and fostered Latino immigrant families’ community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) in order to increase their abilities to navigate their children’s schooling experiences. This study focuses on the voices of students and their perceptions of their adult family members’ participation in the community-based technology skills program as well as on their own experiences in CAiT. I interviewed five students in Grades 4 through 10, representing three families that participated in the program at different times and in different ways over a span of 5 years. These children attended schools in three different local school districts during the time of the study. Data collection included semi-structured interviews and participant observation in the lab space where classes took place and at additional community events. After obtaining institutional review board approval, and prior to conducting interviews, I obtained assent from each of the child participants. Their parents also signed the assent forms and were adult participants in the larger study. Interviews took place in various locations, depending on the availability and wishes of family participants. Two interviews were conducted in the CAiT lab space, one took place in the home of one of the families and two of the interviews took place in a café within a local bookstore. Parents were nearby during all of the interviews. I advised all participants that they could discontinue participation at any time without any consequence to them and maintained confidentiality by separating any identifying information from data and maintaining all data under secure conditions. As previously mentioned, all names within this article are pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an iterative process, stemming back to larger study data focusing on children’s participation outcomes, which were reflective of elements associated with youth empowerment, children’s descriptions of CAiT, and their experiences in the program, including their relationships with other children and what skills and messages were learned in the program. I also examined directly what parental outcomes the children mentioned and connected to their adult family members’ involvement in CAiT classes. Once these segments were pulled from the overall data, I further categorized the interview data to reflect this study’s questions. Beyond interview data,
I was able to follow up with child participants when I needed clarification. I also was a participant observer in the lab space where classes took place and saw some of the children at community events, where I had opportunities to talk and to interact with the children and their family members.

**Findings**

In seeking to answer questions regarding how students experienced empowerment as a result of their families’ and their own participation in CATT, I found that witnessing positive experiences for their parents represented possibilities of success and fostered empowerment for the children and potentially for others. Program structures helped children develop skills and provided opportunities for empowerment. Students’ descriptions of what they witnessed when their parents’ participated in CATT highlighted how the program supported parents’ abilities to persist as they learned new skills. Students also expressed that being in the CATT space with adults taking computer classes led to their own improvement in technology skills, offered opportunities to help adults in the program, and promoted the development of their own identities as knowledgeable and competent among their peers. For one student in particular, CATT’s approach provided a positive environment that contrasted how schools interacted with parents and also led him to recognize himself as an active agent in the shaping of his family’s educational trajectories.

**Student Perceptions of Adult Family Members’ Experiences**

Students’ descriptions of the program indicated that CATT was a supportive and positive space where their family members could learn and grow. Angel, the 14-year-old eldest child from a Mexican immigrant family that remained involved in CATT since its inception, talked about the volunteer instructors and technology mentors, mostly college undergraduate and graduate students, who worked with the adult family members:

> like the volunteers that went, they had like a feeling that they talked to them [adult participants] about anything, so like they had like a lovable approach and like they’ll ... tell you step by step and they’re like willing to be there, to help you, to get through the whole thing.

Where using computers was initially intimidating for many of the adults in the program, some of whom had never turned on a computer before, the volunteers were patiently ready to walk through any needed information with the adult students. As the adult participants became more comfortable with the technology content, they helped one another. At one point in the program, the children saw some of their parents teach sessions to other participants, as they were prepared to lead class sessions.
In talking about the program’s bilingual nature, Angel made reference to one of the instructors who was an immigrant and who had lived in the United States for about two decades. He felt that her presence was additionally important because his parents and other adults could relate to her and because she had had similar experiences as theirs when she arrived in the United States.

...it was good to have, like the bilingual teachers...teaching in Spanish. So let’s say you say something in English and they didn’t get it; they wouldn’t know and they’ll be stuck on that problem for the rest of the time. So having the bilingual teacher, it was able to help them and she was able to connect with them, too. Like “I had the same problem, too, when I was, when I was like you.”

Angel also commented on what he saw as a major difference between school and the CAT setting:

if you walk into a school building, like they have set goals for people and let’s say someone didn’t get it, they’ll kinda like move on without them. Like in [CAT], they would, they would wait for that person, too, and then they all move on as one, one group and they’ll learn. And if one person didn’t know, another student can help them learn.

Because of the supportive nature in CAT, no one was left behind. They would get help from the volunteers or from their classmates and would all have an opportunity to succeed in completing the task at hand.

Students echoed the adult participants’ mentions of the program being like a second home. Emilio, in middle school when he attended CAT with his mother and younger brother, described CAT as a “really helpful ... really nice environment.” He recalled the fun that class participants had as they learned skills. Most of the children talked about how new skills their family members learned made them able to look for information they needed, leading to a sense of independence and ability to provide for their own needs. After attending CAT classes, Emilio helped his mother “less than I used to.” Additionally, these adult family members also were able to help their children with some technology-related school activities. Emilio stated that “Any time I need something that I don’t know how to use, like email...she helps me.” His mother was also able to help his younger brother David with a presentation for class because she had learned to use PowerPoint at CAT. Whereas Emilio would usually help him, David now had an additional family member who could help with assignments on the computer. Angel and Janeth, his younger sister, also noted their parents’ new abilities to use the computer to conduct searches and connect with others online. Janeth described that with their “computer at home...now, they don’t have to ask me... ‘How do you get to here? How do you get to there?’ They just know how to get there.” Angel recalled that
before, [his dad] didn’t want to get on the computer but when he went to the class, he got more involved... and actually started using it more... He actually got more social, too, over the computer... He opened a Facebook account and got in touch with his relatives back in Mexico.

The technology skills learned by adult family members led to their being able to connect on their own to desired information and to connect with others, as well, while also being able to support their children with their schooling.

All of the children spoke of the fact that classes were offered in Spanish as an aspect of the program that helped their adult family members. Both Emilio and Angel felt that their schools did not always understand their parents’ language needs and proficiency. Emilio said that, when they went to his school, he thought his parents felt “nervous because they don’t speak English that well and I translate for them.” His brother David also thought his parents felt “nervous” because “They don’t understand, like most of the words.” Xenia, an elementary school student whose mother and grandmother participated in CAT, spoke about the way participants in the program could learn to speak English at CAT “and that’s actually very good...because a lot of people here in the United States speak a lot of English. Not many people here are bilingual. So that’s actually good.” She also added that for those who “don’t... know how to write in Spanish, they learn how to write in Spanish by typing instead of writing.” With CAT classes being taught in Spanish and with most volunteers and all instructors being bilingual, language was not a barrier for program participants.

Angel talked about how the adults in the technology lab and the volunteers in the program talked about many different topics. One important component of CAT, during which all present participated, was the end-of-session “convivio,” a time of fellowship when participants shared what they learned, but also shared information with one another. Anita had seen fellowship work as a unifying aspect within the community and at church and integrated it into the structure of every CAT session. As those present ate food brought by class participants as a thank you to CAT volunteers, one of the volunteers described that everyone sat around the lab “just like you would be at a Latino household” (Gil, 2017, p. 79). During this time, there were laughs and storytelling, but this time also provided an opportunity for community members to problem-solve, give and take advice, and exchange information about anything from schools, to legal and housing issues.

**Students’ Experiences Within CAT**

All of the children interviewed expressed that CAT’s environment was welcoming and warm, not only for their parents but for themselves as well. Angel identified the program as “A lovable place where you can talk about anything. Some, someplace to call home.” For him, being in the CAT setting since he was 9 years old showed him that the space was an open, accepting one. He felt heard within that space and described his interactions with the adults in the space as “comfortable to sit next to
them because like you have that feeling, like of a family... they’re all welcoming to you... like you’re able to share with them what you think” (Gil, 2017, p. 81). Aside from being a time when people could talk about anything, for Angel, convivio was also a time when he learned about diversity across different Latino nationalities. He stated: “It brought diversity... to say that not everyone’s the same and it brought something from their custom.” During this time, Angel recognized similarities and differences in how dishes were prepared and how, with all of these differences, all of the different flavors could be enjoyed, and recipes exchanged.

Janeth noted the pleasant surprise she experienced when she saw that at the end-of-course ceremony, when adult program participants received certificates, “we get something, too.” This gesture of inclusion was “thoughtful, ‘cause, like, the class is for... adults, so like we’re not part of it.” The program recognized students’ presence in the CAiT space when their parents attended, even if the course content primarily was not targeted toward the children. During one semester of the advanced technology course, however, Angel participated along with the adult students taking an advanced technology course and voted on class topics as any class participant would. The children in the program also had opportunities to help adults practice their technology skills. Emilio also completed his Junior National Honor Society service requirement at CAiT by serving as a volunteer technology mentor.

While the bilingual environment and use of adult participants’ native language facilitated their technology learning, it also benefited the children. Anita believed that when children in the program heard the university students speaking Spanish, it might encourage the younger students to be less hesitant to speak Spanish or to feel pride about being bilingual. Perhaps seeing college-aged bilingual role models who wanted to maintain their bilingualism could influence the children’s attitudes about speaking Spanish. Within the program, there were also discussions about how bilingualism could expand opportunities, such as getting jobs due to having language skills. Angel expressed a positive identity as a bilingual.

I feel like being bilingual is good... let’s say someone that only speaks English [tries] to speak to someone that only speaks Spanish; they would never connect. So you need someone that speaks both languages to translate. So I feel like I’m kind of like a connector to both worlds, kinda. (Gil, 2017, p. 88)

Angel’s reference to himself as a bilingual person with the ability to be a “connector” indicates the significance, for him, of the setting being a bilingual space and his being bilingual.

**Students’ Personal Growth in CAiT**

Within CAiT, the children grew in their own technology skills, knowledge, and leadership and also grew in terms of what they believed they could accomplish. Emilio talked about how as he helped one adult in particular, as a technology mentor, “I
learned how to use PowerPoint and Microsoft Word more, which helped me with school.” Children also practiced typing skills and gained a more thorough understanding of technology skills and concepts. In school, Janeth used computers “just to, like, look up some things.” While she already had some familiarity with “some things about the computer” before attending CATT, being in the setting “showed me to . . . go deeper” (Gil, 2017, p. 85) and increased her interest in using technology. She described how sometimes during the classes she would stop what she was doing and would listen to the lesson being taught to the adults. The children applied their technology learning to their schoolwork and found themselves ahead of their peers. The children helped their peers, using their advanced knowledge, and reported that their peers recognized them as knowledgeable in technology skills. As Janeth described, her classmates would tell her, “You’re very tech savvy,” and as a result, “I grew somewhat confident in those areas.”

CATT was also a place for several of the children who were interviewed to practice leadership skills within the program. Angel and Janeth, the two students who spent several years attending CATT, shared their thoughts about how they were able to contribute to the program and personally exercise leadership. Angel associated being a leader with helping others: “a person . . . willing to help you, who has that characteristic to help others succeed in the field they’re in or to just in general . . . You just have to have the, the commitment and the willingness to help others.” He considered himself a leader in CATT when he helped others get to a website they wanted to look at. In describing how he helped, he used much of the wording that he had used to describe how other CATT volunteers helped the adult participants: “walk them through” and “step by step.” He also stressed that his approach was “not just me clicking . . . the URL and then like, yeah, that’s good . . . I helped them understand . . . what’s the process of doing it and how they could do it themselves. That anyone could do it.” He also referred to “mutual . . . community leadership” that arose among the children in the program when they were learning to do something. Just as the adults in the program did, when the children were unsure, they would ask one another and others and “eventually we will find someone who does know and will help all of us.” This approach was one that he carried over into his schoolwork, describing that he and his friends helped each other in a similar fashion in math class.

Janeth felt that she exercised leadership when “some new children came along, like I told them the drill, what we usually do, and like how we usually manage . . . the etiquette.” She would tell them to help people if they asked for help and to be polite to everyone. She also named several ways that she felt that she contributed to the program. She felt that she contributed to the program when she helped one of the students or “whenever . . . I helped with the setup” or the clean up before and after convivio, the shared meal, and reflection time. She also recognized the importance of helping to “put the projector away, and then, like turning on the computers and turning them off” when necessary, so that computers could go through their system updates. Janeth recalled how she had “different membership roles” over time, initially “just sitting there with my mom,” but over time, Anita “asked us . . . me and my brother, to start
helping out.” Aside from these opportunities to exercise leadership, Janeth recalled that as a fourth grader, she “had to do a presentation... but I was the one who started off using PowerPoint and some... were wondering ‘How did you set that?’, so I helped them out and I felt like, very, like ‘I’m the leader of PowerPoint. I’ve got this.’”

Just as Janeth grew in confidence because she learned skills that she could teach others, Xenia, in fourth grade when she was interviewed, received positive messages from seeing both her grandmother and mother receive recognition at the program’s closing ceremonies. She stated how

It felt good because it was part of my family. It felt, it made me feel like my family were... it means they can succeed and it makes me feel like, that, that since my family could succeed in anything, so could I. (Gil, 2017, p. 95)

For Xenia and for others, seeing the adults in their lives celebrated at the CAiT graduation ceremony inspired self-efficacy, pride, and belief in children’s own possibilities for success and for working toward the completion of a goal. Similarly, Angel experienced the “culture of possibility” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78) fostered within his family and further supported in CAiT. Angel was not certain what area of study he would pursue, but he planned to attend college. He identified himself as “the first child and my parents didn’t go to college so I want to start the cycle... so that we could all get a better education and... do the same thing for like the next generation that comes” (Gil, 2017, p. 85). Angel’s contact with students pursuing higher education had come primarily through his interactions with college volunteers in the program. Identifying himself as a future first-generation college student and the first in his family to attend, he saw his college attendance as the start of a new educational pattern for his family. He would be the first, but certainly not the last.

**Discussion**

The children in CAiT offer examples of experiencing various aspects of empowerment, for their adult family members and for themselves, both in terms of their own development and as part of a community. They developed technology and interpersonal skills and exercised leadership, while empowering others by teaching them. As they described their family members’ experiences and increases in skills and confidence, the children also revealed personal growth in terms of their own technology and leadership skills, which were recognized by their peers in school, and which hinted at future possibilities.

Children saw their parents become more independent in their usage of computers, and even saw some of them teach their other adult classmates, as they were prepared as class leaders of sessions they wanted to teach, elements of community-based initiatives that work effectively with Latino families (Osterling & Garza, 2004). The students also felt encouraged within the CAiT environment. Angel illustrates various
dimensions of what Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, and McLoughlin (2006) call critical youth empowerment. His descriptions of CAT’s volunteers’ support of his parents and the other adult participants in the program highlight the reinforcement he observed his parents receive, resulting in their ability to successfully complete the program. In turn, he offered the same kind of support to adult participants. Further, he and his sister embodied social empowerment (McQuillan, 2005) when they helped peers or engaged in mutual support with classmates. The welcoming environment, where Angel felt as comfortable as the adult program participants were made to feel, is described by the authors as key to enabling youth (Jennings et al., 2006).

Several of the students also had opportunities to participate meaningfully in the program, helping adults in the program by serving as a junior technology mentors. Angel also sat along with the adults taking class, feeling that he could express himself, and be heard as any other member of the class, helping to direct what content would be addressed in class. The input that the class participants provided also was indicative of authentic relationships with parents who helped to shape the agenda of the program (Auerbach, 2010) rather than CAT’s founder and coordinator, Anita, being the sole determiner of the program’s trajectory.

As Angel discussed his own identity, including being a bilingual person and a future first-generation college student, he did not refer these only as pertaining to himself but as related to his being part of a larger community (McWhirter, 1991). Being bilingual meant that he could help to connect English and Spanish speakers. As a first-generation college student and eldest child, he would begin a “new cycle,” indicating the importance of his attending not only for his individual success but for the advancement of his family (Gonzales, 2012), and that he could be a change agent in terms of his family member’s educational trajectories (Mitra, 2004). These descriptions illustrate how Angel’s individual sense of empowerment through recognition of his skills and context align with the idea of different levels of empowerment being intertwined. Further, his sense of empowerment led him to be able to help others (Mitra, 2004) and possibly empower them as well (McQuillan, 2005). While Angel did not explicitly refer to sociopolitical change goals and understanding of sociopolitical forces, being interviewed may have offered a space for critical reflection that hinted at some understanding of how language and education might position individuals.

Further, in their descriptions of being included as full members of the CAT community and in developing relationships with the adults in the program, the children brought to light how CAT reflected the important aspect of empowerment related to youth establishing caring relationships with adults (Mitra, 2004). Emilio connected with one of the adult community members, in particular, when he served as a technology mentor. Janet interpreted the recognition of children as a part of the program during the end-of-course ceremony, even though the focus of the program was really the adults, as thoughtful. She also spoke of the different roles she had over her years in CAT.
The structures put in place when CAatT was established in 2011 were supportive not only of the adult participants in the program but of their children as well. Being present in the CAatT setting while their parents were learning, the students were able to hear what the adults were being taught. The children also received support from the college-aged volunteers present, who would help with homework or with the children's own computer questions. The supportive learning environment for parents who were nervous about using technology in some cases led to their ability to successfully complete the technology skills classes, sending messages of persistence and, as Xenia noted, that she too could succeed because she'd seen her mother and grandmother succeed. In this sense, Xenia felt a sense of self-efficacy through seeing close family members flourish.

Participants in CAatT also witnessed and exhibited development of leadership skills, an aspect of empowerment within community organizations (Maton & Salem, 1995). Children observed their adult family members be resources for one another and become added resources for them in terms of technology usage, both during class and when some of the adults prepared to co-teach certain lessons. The program coordinator and instructors also encouraged participants to take on teaching roles as they became more knowledgeable and confident in their abilities, an aspect illustrative of a commitment to members’ personal growth and leadership development (Maton & Salem, 1995). Adult family members also, on occasion, co-constructed program content in selecting what topics they wanted to learn. The program had been adjusted over time based on participant feedback, indicating that the program’s agenda was not only directed by the program’s formal leader. This aspect of CAatT countered Angel’s depiction of what he saw in schools—the school as the goal setter that might leave some people behind. Moreover, parents exhibited leadership through coordinating the meal for the very important convivio time, where group members’ relational ties were further strengthened through building familial and social capital (Yosso, 2005).

Because the program enlisted children in the program as junior technology mentors who could help the adults, and because there was not a rigid idea of who were the holders of knowledge, youth and adults in the program could be learners and teachers within a given moment, depending on the topic or skill. Within the CAatT community, adults and children could take on leadership responsibilities, even in small ways, emphasizing that leadership was a matter of accepting a responsibility within the group rather than holding a formal position (Maton & Salem, 1995).

Aspects of the program that centered participating families’ cultures also led to empowering the children because culture was viewed as a positive element within the CAatT community rather than something to be overcome. Much of the empowerment developed in the program was related to language and its integration with culture. Study participants referenced language and communication styles as part of Latino culture, referring to joke- and storytelling. During convivio, participants had the opportunity to share in many ways and to strengthen their interpersonal ties through laughter, but also through serious conversation. Because the program founder was familiar with the cultural characteristics of the immigrant parents, and because
volunteers’ identities were reflective of the community in terms of shared culture, this program was able to understand and address issues program participants were experiencing (Murphy, 2014) as well as to encourage participants to be active in helping each other to problem-solve. The program leader’s decision to address families as a unit was culturally responsive because it recognized constituents’ collective nature (Conchas, 2001). Designing the program in a way that did not address technology skills separate from the way the adults could apply those skills daily, and to support their children’s schooling, exemplifies a way that community-based initiatives work effectively with Latino families, as well.

Explicitly talking about the importance of bilingualism was also an intentional choice within the program structure. Anita and another volunteer expressed that children lived in environments that did not value families’ native languages and that this context led children in the program to be hesitant to speak Spanish. By highlighting the language skills of college-aged role models, the program leader and others hoped to instill pride in bilingualism in the children. All of the children recognized the importance of the use of Spanish for their adult family members’ learning. Both Angel and Emilio recognized that the schools they attended did not necessarily understand their families’ language circumstances and that this lack of knowledge could inhibit parents’ ability to communicate and could negatively affect their comfort level in the school. As a result of being in the CatT setting, some of the students also recognized the importance of being bilinguals themselves, with Angel being most explicit and indicating a sense of agency as a “connector” for those who might only speak English or Spanish, while he was capable of speaking both.

Implications

These findings suggest that populations of parents, including immigrant parents, who have been marginalized by traditional school structures of parental involvement, need leaders in their children’s schools to recognize nontraditional, yet powerful ways to support family and student empowerment. Educational leaders can work with and emphasize parents’ ability to be leaders and can open up opportunities for students to act as leaders as well. They can also enact relational approaches that recognize the importance of interdependence and mutual support, working to build networks among families, but also intergenerationally.

Anita Padilla’s vision for the community-based CatT was a continuation of the perspective she enacted when she was a middle school teacher. At that time, she obtained funding to support her belief that student and parent empowerment and leadership development were essential in education. Padilla’s leadership illustrates the importance of “optimism and clear vision for the school as a transformative force” (Kirk et al., 2017, p. 833) and the power of the leader to “set the tone and invite certain types of participation” (Auerbach, 2010, p. 751). In the case of CatT, the invitation to participate was well aligned to the characteristics of the constituents of the program. Parents and students were able to participate together and to display their leadership
skills in different ways. Exposure to examples of initiatives, such as CAiT, that empower Latino immigrant families and that have the potential to alter traditional structures (McQuillan, 2005) is essential in the development of leaders. As Auerbach (2010) notes, learning about such examples can be part of preparation programs. Courses can include panels comprised of community program and family members (adults and children, together) who can share their experiences. Preparation programs can also embed field experiences into their courses, and school leaders can include community and family member dialogues within their professional development plans. Community program leaders such as Anita Padilla can also be invited to speak with pre- and in-service leaders.

Finally, educational leaders should not underestimate the power of what students witness as their family members’ experiences. In schools, their parents might feel “nervous” due to language barriers, and schools might “move on without” people who do not meet predetermined goals. In CAiT, however, children saw people work together so that everyone could succeed. Children watched as their adult family members formed trusting relationships with one another and with volunteers and the program founder over time. As the children in this study demonstrated, they recognized the positive changes in their family members as a result of participating in CAiT, a welcoming and supportive setting. They also observed how their parents’ growth supported them in their own schooling and found inspiration for themselves in their families’ successes as well as in their direct learning and skills development within the program. The time that family members and all involved in the program shared during convivio was also powerful in providing time to connect with and help one another with issues unrelated to class content. As a result of the positive interactions observed and experienced, the children saw value in CAiT and felt a connection to the program. In terms of family–school relationships, if schools were able to parallel such associations as the ones nurtured in CAiT, with sustained network- and relationship-building, they too could experience an increase in connection between their students, families, and institutions of learning.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to center the voices of K–12 students witnessing their adult family members’ experiences in a community-based technology skills program. While adult family members benefited from the program, the children did as well, both directly and indirectly, as they saw the skills developed within the program and outcomes experienced by their adult family members’ participation and developed their own technological and interpersonal skills as well. CAiT built on the foundation of Latino immigrant families’ cultural characteristics (Gil, 2017), leading to greater empowerment of adult participants and of the children in their families. Students’ comments reveal how the culturally responsive foundation established in this community space fostered parents’ and students’ sense of agency, belonging, and competence (Mitra, 2004). Educational leaders can better advocate for their students if they
understand how to build on these strengths. As leaders learn how culturally responsive spaces for Latino students are cultivated, they can also incorporate practices that foster student empowerment within schools.

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**ORCID iD**

Elizabeth Gil https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5308-6931

**References**


Author Biography

Elizabeth Gil is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Administrative and Instructional Leadership in the School of Education, St. John’s University in New York City. Her research centers issues of equity and inclusion. Her research interests include understanding the experiences of diverse families in schools, leadership and teaching for serving culturally and linguistically diverse student populations, and community engagement and public voice.