

Original Paper

Impact of Early Literacy Parent Education in Immigrant Communities on the U.S.-Mexico Border

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Abstract

This study describes the impact of an early childhood literacy development program in a low-income, immigrant community. The non-profit sponsored program serves families and child-care providers in the southwestern United States who live along the U.S.-Mexico border. A series of research activities was implemented over several years to examine the program's impact on care-givers' interactions with pre-school children in this literacy-development context. The data show a consistent positive impact in the home setting as adult participants implement early literacy learning in daily childcare.

Keywords

early childhood literacy development, immigrant family education

1. Introduction

The study takes place in Southwestern New Mexico, where language, culture, and history stem from a shared border with Mexico. Low levels of education and economic success are causes for concern. The city of Las Cruces has a population just under 100,000 and is surrounded by small villages, composed mostly of low-income families, many of whom are first- and second-generation migrants from Mexico. An unknown number, some estimate up to 30 percent, are not legal U.S. residents or they have family members or close friends who are not legal residents. These residents are most likely negotiating an unfamiliar culture, a new language, extreme poverty, little formal education, fear of immigration officials, and limited access to resources for early literacy development. Those living in remote areas or new to the community may also be unduly burdened with isolation and lack of family support while they are caring for young children.

An early literacy development program, *First Teacher/ Primer Maestro (FT/PM)*, was implemented in the region to fill a need to provide early literacy education to caregivers (parents, grandparents, older

siblings, family friends, licensed childcare providers, etc.) of children who are not receiving early literacy development services through other public or private education agencies. *FT/PM* is the only non-profit program that provides emergent literacy resources—materials, skills, and dispositions—to the region’s caregivers of children ages three to five years.

First Teacher/ Primer Maestro, a 501(c) 3 with the U.S. Children’s Reading Alliance, seeks to engage families to promote children’s literacy. *FT/PM* is a bilingual, parent-to-parent training program for families with young children. The curriculum was developed in collaboration with experts in early childhood literacy and parent advisors and is aligned with the state’s learning guidelines. Parents and/or caregivers attend six, 1.5-hour weekly workshops where they receive books and educational toys with accompanying lessons. Parents from the local community are trained and then facilitate the workshops by modeling effective use of the materials in the home setting that address various levels of child development.

Over the first six years of the program, approximately 1000 caregivers participated in the six-lesson sequence. In addition, some 54 employees from local childcare facilities (private, non-profit, Head Start programs, etc.) participated in the workshops with additional training so they could facilitate ongoing workshops with the populations they serve.

Attending preschool is associated with higher reading and math skills for immigrant children (Lee, et al.). Lynn Fielding’s (2019) longitudinal study of some 62,000 student records concluded that children who start behind in Kindergarten tend to stay behind—71 percent of students who were in the bottom 20 percent in Kindergarten were still in the bottom 20 percent by fifth grade (as measured by standardized tests).

In this immigrant setting, parents are less inclined to send their children to formal preschools. They may not be aware of, or eligible for, the public and private options. Transportation and school fees are often problematic. In addition, the cultural norm for many of the families is that the family cares for its own children. Family or friends often care for the children of working caregivers. There are existing programs to accomplish similar early literacy education; however, most are not available to families in these low-income, immigrant communities.

These lessons involved the caregivers in hands-on experiences, focused on a small set of specific skills each week, and infused concepts about children’s early developmental levels. Some of the materials and lessons addressed mathematical literacy. Healthy snacks were provided, and the facilitators sometimes arranged transportation for participants. Childcare and learning experiences were provided to the children whose caregivers attended these sessions. After participating in the lessons, families could sign up to receive a book in the mail each month for six months.

1.1 Review of Relevant Literature

Research in early childhood education identifies difficulties in early literacy development in low income, minority communities, and there is ample research to show the value of emergent literacy development.

- Although there is little research about the psychological and emotional needs of childcare providers, Faulkner et al. (2016) identified multiple work-related stressors. There are few support mechanisms for these caregivers, especially for family and informal caregivers. “For Latino parents of low SES, studies show that poor financial resources, low levels of education, and limited time are associated with inability to provide children with supportive language and literacy environments” (Lopez et al., 2006).
- Children from low-income families tend to enter school with dramatically weaker pre-reading skills than their higher income peers (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003). Research studies also identify beneficial practices that help provide stronger literacy development in the home setting for low-income, minority children.
- Sharing book-related activities was identified as one of the most valuable activities to promote early literacy. Yet, Salinas et al. (2017) explain that “little is known about the literacy beliefs of Mexican American families...” and “there has been little systematic research addressing the mother-child book-sharing interactions of Mexican-American dyads...” (p. 19).
- Children’s early literacy skills are stronger if they interact with others who are modeling the home language (Gunn et al., 1995).
- Academic guidance, attitude toward learning, parental aspirations for the child, conversations in the home, reading materials in the home, and cultural activities lead to improved academic achievement (Gunn et al., 1995).
- Providing appropriate children’s books and increasing caregiver-child time together in literacy activities were correlated with increased scores on an early literacy assessment instrument (Theriot, J.A. et al, 2003).
- Quiroz et al. (2010) provided picture-books and skills to facilitate language development for 50 Latino mother-child dyads and found that this book sharing practice was a predictor of the child’s vocabulary strength on a preschool vocabulary assessment.

The activities provided to families and caregivers in the *FT/PM* program incorporate research-based literacy development practices such as those described in the reports above.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

The research questions and data sources are:

- 1) How did *First Teacher/ Primer Maestro* impact the early literacy actions of parents and caregivers who attended the classes?
 - Participants’ perceptions of class effectiveness and examples of home implementation via comment cards and surveys.
 - Questionnaire to determine persistence: To what extent did the caregivers / families continue implementing the lessons learned in the program over time?

2) To what extent did *First Teacher/ Primer Maestro* impact the early learning experiences for children of those caregivers?

- Caregivers' perceptions via written comments about what they were doing differently in home-literacy activities as a result of participating in *First Teacher/ Primer Maestro*.

Much of the data that informed this report are descriptive data sets which the *FT/PM* facilitators and directors collected from the participants to help inform their practices. These data sets lack scientific controls for bias and reliability. However, the consistency of the large quantity of data from hundreds of participants contributes to validity.

The qualitative data included written comments from the participants. These comments were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glasser, 1965) in which the researcher sorts the data into incident categories and applies the incidents to each category. The categories and their properties are integrated and then analyzed to delimit and develop the emerging theory. Because of the large quantity of comment cards, a representative set of comments from each category are presented in this report.

About half of the written comments from caregivers were in Spanish and translated by the evaluator for this report.

The quantitative data are a set of surveys administered in 2015, 2018, and 2019. Summaries of the analysis of those surveys are detailed below. The first two sets of data drew from files of previous years' surveys. The evaluator worked with three of the facilitators to create and implement the 2019 survey to examine persistence. The evaluator provided training to the facilitators on how to administer the survey to reduce bias and improve accuracy.

The participants provided only their names and contact information. Caregivers were recruited in communities surrounding schools that meet USDA National School Lunch Program requirements to provide free or reduced-price lunches to all the students. Therefore, most of the families in these areas are below poverty level. The facilitators invited participants via several methods such as standing on a street corner near the school and passing out flyers or having flyers available at Head Start, early childhood learning centers, or community events. As news of the program spread in the communities, families, friends, and neighbors of previous participants joined the program. Because there is no screening of applicants, families with higher income levels may have participated.

3. Result

3.1 Data Analysis Set 1: 2015 Survey—Quantitative

In early spring of 2015, the facilitators of two series of the classes distributed a questionnaire asking parents/caregivers to respond to five questions about the quantity of time spent on experiences with their children (reading with, talking with, playing games, understanding how young children learn, and enjoying learning times with child) on a scale: 1) Less; 2) About the same as I did before; 3) More than I did before; 4) Much more than I did before.

The 40 participant responses to the five questions were tallied and graphed as shown in Figure 1.

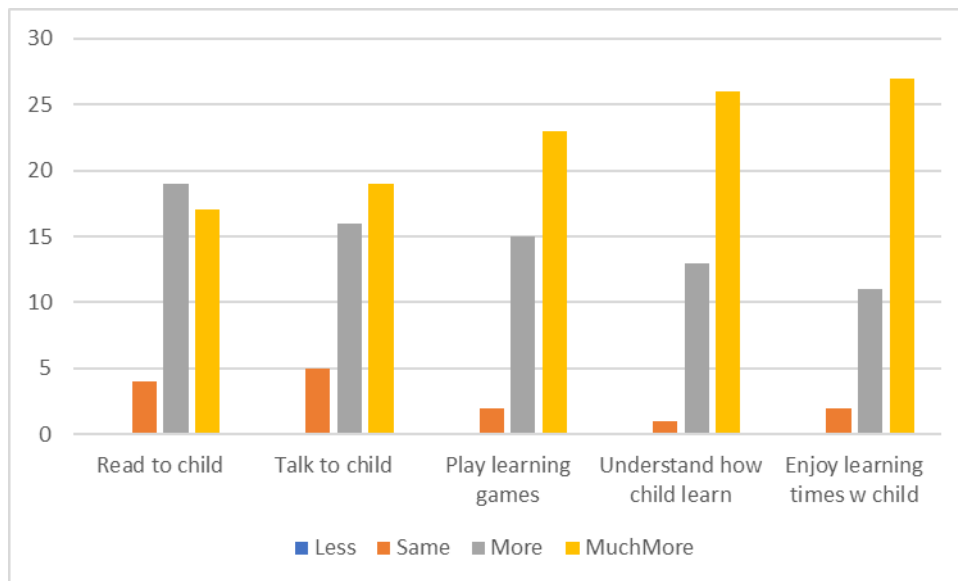


Figure 1. 2015 Survey Responses Indicating Change in Quantity of Literacy Time with Children

Note. N=40.

3.2 Data Analysis Set 2: 2015 Survey—Qualitative

All but two of the 40 participants wrote one or more comments on the bottom of the survey sheet, and all were positive. Most comments described specific examples of being more involved with their children's learning, and every comment indicated that these classes resulted in improved literacy experiences for the children.

- We aren't just reading; we are really studying the pictures of the books. I feel re-energized when I leave, like I can conquer this all!
- (From a father) I feel like I've been shaken awake! I'm seeing my role change and it feels like I can work smarter with my child. This program changed our lifestyle. Thank you!
- [We are] coming more together, united, making reading more fun and exciting. We are not bored any longer.

3.3 Data Analysis Set 3: 2018 Workshop Survey—Quantitative

In 2018, the facilitators conducted seven sessions (of the six-class sequence), reaching a total of 111 caregivers. According to the sign-in sheets, these 111 caregivers attended most sessions in the series. The facilitators distributed the same survey as the above 2015 survey to each caregiver at the end of the final class. Those responses were tallied and graphed.

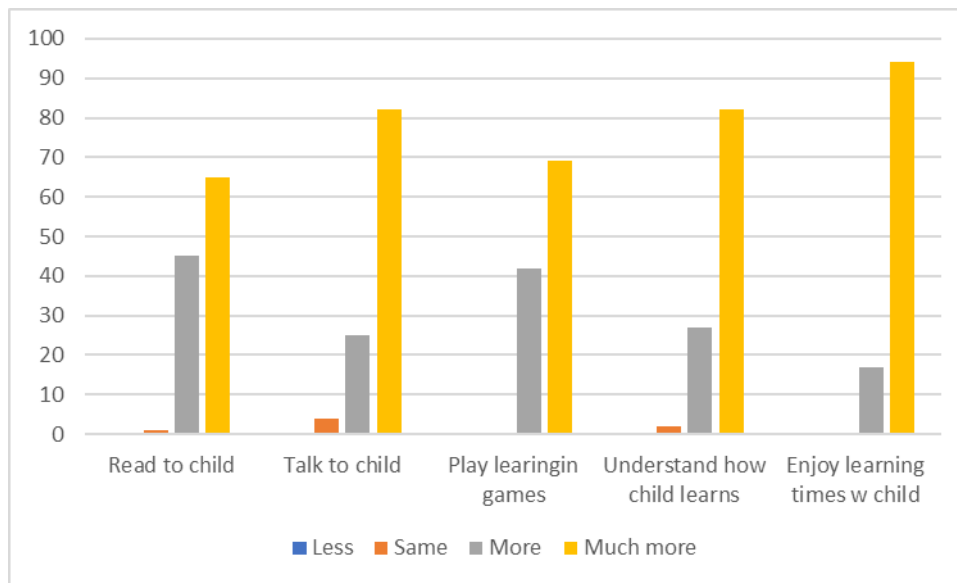


Figure 2. Caregivers' Perceptions of Changes in Time Spent Learning with Children

Note. N=111.

3.4 Data Set 4: 2018 Workshop Surveys—Qualitative

The facilitators invited the participants to write comments at the end of the survey. Every participant wrote a response. The major categories that emerged from the constant comparative analysis were:

1) Enjoyment and appreciation of the workshops and the materials—every one of the 111 participants mentioned appreciation and enjoyment of the experience.

2) Forty of the participants provided examples of how the lessons and materials from the workshops were implemented in the home, such as:

- I sing the song about the book before I read it.
- I know so many ways to help my son practice counting and reading numbers.
- He loves the alphabet song.
- I know how to help my daughter understand lower case and capital letters.
- The Billy Bully book helped us when my son told us about what someone said to him.
- She uses more vocabulary now.

3) Thirty participants described improved family communication and increased quality time such as:

- My children now have a routine that every night we read a book. For example, “I say, let’s go to bed.” And my daughter says, “Yeee! We are going to read a book.” She sits in the bed and waits to read her book. She is even more excited when she sees a new book. Also, I tell her that we are going to sing like Carlos, and we look for shapes and figures in the book. Every class I learn more to do with my children.
- I incorporate my son more into the daily tasks, let him help. I know I am helping him even just talking with him.

- I appreciate the fact that, at night we had to fight so much to get them to go to sleep. Now, with the song, it is a great idea. My children don't argue when I call them and start singing; they know that it is time to read and sleep.
- My son was not familiar with books, and now he asks every night that I read a book to him. Now I see his interest in learning. I have learned how to do this in a way that is more positive and that I learn from my son also.
- She is using the phone less and physically playing with the materials and games.
- We are learning Spanish as a family because the books are bilingual.
- As a family, we sit down and read together every Thursday when we get the books.

3.5 Data Analysis Set 5: May 2019 Focus Group

In May 2019, the *FT/PM* director and two of the facilitators along with the evaluator, created a questionnaire to be administered to caregivers who had completed the workshops at least one year prior to December 2019. The purpose of this questionnaire was to gather information about persistence: Are the families or in-home childcare providers continuing to use the materials and lessons from the classes over an extended time? The Director brought together a group of 13 parents / caregivers who had participated in the workshops during early 2019. Those attendees piloted this new questionnaire. Thus, these caregivers in the pilot group had finished the six classes at least two months, but not more than five months previous to the focus group meeting.

The questionnaire consisted of six questions asking if they had continued doing any of these activities learned in *FT/PM*: 1) involving child in daily activities, 2) child continuing to play with *FT/PM* toys, 3) continuing family reading, and 4) continuing positive experiences and building confidence. Twelve of the 13 participants answered 'Yes' to each question and then continued writing comments related to each question resulting in 72 responses. All responses described a positive early literacy experience. One participant did not write comments.

1) As a result of *FT/PM* classes, have you talked more with your child during daily activities? = 12 positive responses such as:

- We talk a lot more in the car, at the store.
- My son now creates some of our activities.
- We make our daily activities more exciting – counting, [finding] colors at the grocery store. We have food that begins with the letter of the day.

2) Since the last *FT/PM* class, has your child played with the books and toys you received at the classes? =12 positive responses such as:

- My husband and I read them to the children at least two times per day.
- Every day!
- She likes to use the counting bears to put on boats and she can see that not all fit, so she is comparing which boat can fit more or less.

3) Since the last *FT/PM* class, have you read more often with your child? = 12 positive responses

including comments such as:

- If we don't read to him, he thinks he is being punished.
- Before the class we rarely read. We didn't really think about how important it is to make time to read. But now we read almost daily because she asks me or her dad or grandparents to read to her.
- About five hours a week on reading activities. Bedtime seems best.
- Two or three books at naptime.

4) Since the last *FT/PM* class, have others in the family read more often with your child? = 12 positive responses (seven from fathers, three from grandparents, and three from siblings).

- We read to the children. Grandpa does not read to them, but he asks what the story was about.
- My husband, after accompanying me to some of the classes, has been more involved in the activities to have quality time.

5) Since the last *FT/PM* class, have you had more positive experiences with your child? = 12 positive responses including comments such as:

- Yes. He was finally potty trained given that there was more connections and communications.
- Yes. I learned to slow down and interact with her when she is ready and willing to learn.
- It is fun watching the older grandson read to the younger one and his baby sister. I feel a little jealous that he captures that attention in a sweet way.
- I am an abused man. My wife goes to bed and I have to stay up and read these books to the kids.

[Laughter]

6) As a result of the *FT/PM* classes, do you feel like you are more confident as your child's first teacher? = 12 positive responses including comments such as:

- Yes, now I know how to make it more enjoyable. If you don't know it, make it up, use your imagination.
- Their best example is us.
- There are so many ways to keep his interest and most times he doesn't realize that he is actually learning.

3.6 Data Analysis Set 6: 2019 Survey to Determine Persistence over Time

In November of 2019, three facilitators attempted to contact every participant in the five *FT/PM* sessions that occurred in 2018. There were 165 participants in these sessions, and the facilitators were able to contact 81. No facilitator called the participants from any class that she led. The facilitators assisted the evaluator in honing the questions from the May focus group so that they would be most appropriate for the audience. Because some participants had undocumented family members, these modifications were necessary as they may be afraid to communicate with people they do not know, and they resist any communication that might identify them publicly. Therefore, the normal statement for informed consent was modified to, "Do you mind answering a few questions?", and the facilitators did not record the interviews. Therefore, the exact wording of the participant responses may have been compromised. The facilitators provided good faith effort in quoting the responses. All who answered

their phones agreed to participate, and they were informed that their responses would remain anonymous.

Responses for Data Set 6:

Question 1. In the First Teacher classes, we talked about communicating with your children in daily activities. Are you continuing to do this? Could you provide examples?

81 positive responses

--24 mentioned that they had more conversation about daily activities.

--12 mentioned talking about what they did in school.

--15 mentioned talking more while using the First Teacher materials.

- After I take him to wash his hands to eat, he tells his Papa, "I took a bath."
- The parents talk with him in English. Grandparents in Spanish.
- My son was on the phone a lot. Through this program I saw the error I was making. Now we have more dialogue, and we play more.
- I ask questions about what he reads. We establish a conversation. I do it like they showed me in class.
- My six-year-old is starting to read on his own. His teacher says he is advanced.
- They get very creative and add and do math a little bit.

Question 2. Did these activities help you have a more positive relationship with your children?

81 positive responses

There were 28 specific statements and examples of improved relationships such as:

- Because I give him my time.
- It helps him with his self-esteem.
- Share games, reading books, and what we saw in class.
- In the class we learned to listen...motivated me more to give myself more time to change with my children.
- At first he rejected me, but now he talks more and hugs me.
- Learned to listen to the child, something that I did not have the habit for. It is improving the family a lot.
- We have good conversations -- without them getting mad at me.
- My daughter-in-law was distant from me. I asked her if I could take the grandchildren to the *FT/PM* class with me. I shared all the materials and what I learned with her. Now she lets the grandchildren stay with me and we do the lessons together.
- Well, I never imagined how in these classes I learned so much about how parents can be involved in the activities with my children in school and at home.
- They see me as their little teacher.

Question 3. Do your children still use the material that you were given in First Teacher?

75 positive responses; 35 mentioned at least one of the materials specifically.

Reasons for negative responses were:

- I don't have the materials now.
- I gave them to a relative.
- They are bigger.
- Don't have time.

Question 4. Do you still read with your children? About how much?

75 positive responses

Most stated that they could not read every day, but they did read with their children regularly.

- When I can.
- When they come to my house (grandparent).
- More than 20 minutes four times a week.
- I read a lot to them. Each month when the books are sent to me. But they are only in English so my son of seven years translates them into Spanish.
- I have to work, so about two times per week. They get the books and start looking at them and making their own stories.
- About an hour a week. We are always so busy, but we do talk a lot more.
- Honestly, I can't say I read every day, but I am trying. There are days when I can't find time...but when I can I try to make it very interesting.

Question 5. Do others in the family read with your children?

75 positive responses (six mothers said they were the only ones reading with child)

-- 70 brothers, sisters, cousins

-- 26 fathers

-- 16 grandparents

-- 9 mentioned that all the family reads together

Question 6. Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

70 volunteered responses that were positive and appreciative

- They made us stay active and put us in the role of teacher which is something that I did not understand...how to bring to the home an early education with the children.
- I think it really helped me understand it is important to talk to and read to babies.
- It was nice that we got to go as a family.
- It was a good program. We need more programs like these.

4. Discussion

Information about the impact of the *First Teacher/ Primer Maestro* program was gathered over four years via multiple data sources. Analysis of the large quantity of data provide a consistent message of participant satisfaction and sustained use of the materials and information. A summary of the four major data sources and analysis is provided below.

1) In 2015, 40 participants responded to a questionnaire about the quantity of time spent on experiences with their children as a result of their participation in *First Teacher/ Primer Maestro*. A significant majority marked the option, “much more,” for reading to the child, talking to the child, playing learning games, understanding how children learn, and enjoying learning times with the children. Most (38) of the 40 participants added positive comments supporting their high rating on the questionnaire scale.

2) A 2018 survey of 111 participants in the *First Teacher/ Primer Maestro* classes asked the same questions as the survey described above. The responses were also significantly positive with the highest positive response in “enjoying learning time with their children.” Most of these participants provided specific examples to support their rating on the questionnaire scale.

3) In the summer of 2018, 13 caregivers attended a focus group where they commented on their experiences since participating in the *First Teacher/ Primer Maestro* classes several months previously. These caregivers responded to six questions asking if they had continued doing any of the activities learned in the classes: 1) involving child in daily activities, 2) child continuing to play with toys, 3) continuing family reading, 4) continuing positive experiences and confidence. Twelve of the 13 participants answered ‘Yes’ to each question and then continued writing comments related to each question resulting in 72 responses. All responses described a positive early literacy experience.

4) In November of 2019, three of the *First Teacher/ Primer Maestro* facilitators called caregivers who had participated in the classes 12-18 months previously. Of the 165 participants, the facilitators were able to contact 81. Participants were asked to reflect on the time since their participation in the program and reply to five points: if they had communicated more with their children; if they thought they had more positive relations with their children; if they were still using the materials; if they were reading regularly in the home; and if others in the home were reading to the child or children. They were also invited to provide open comments. Responses were 100 percent yes on the first two questions. Over 90 percent stated that they are still using the materials and that they read regularly with their children. Most stated that others in the family also read with the children. The comments about appreciation for the program were overwhelming.

4. Conclusion

Data were gathered over four years resulting in 317 written comments at the end of the *First Teacher/Primer Maestro* sessions, plus multiple comments from 81 caregivers who replied to a phone survey more than one year after their participation. The analysis showed overwhelming consistent positive messages indicating that the participants enjoyed and appreciated the *First Teacher/Primer Maestro* program and that they were indeed using the materials and the lessons learned with their children. All but three of the 81 survey participants said that they still used the materials or the lessons learned one or two years after they participated in the classes.

The families reported that they were increasing the quantity and quality of early literacy activities in their homes. Caregivers reported that, because of the program, relationships in the family were stronger

and literacy learning for children and caregivers was ongoing.

The evidence indicates that *First Teacher/ Primer Maestro* has provided a program that was appreciated and impactful, and that the lessons learned about improving early childhood emergent literacy in the homes of these participants was sustained.

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