



An Evaluation of La Fuerza de Creer in the Community

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Executive Summary

La Fuerza de Creer is a parent engagement program created by Literacy Partners based on the telenovela mini series of the same name produced by Univision in 2019. The program consists of eight community-based workshops for Spanish-speaking parents and caregivers aiming to boost their capacity to promote their children's early learning, bilingual language development, and school readiness.

Our key findings include:

- Overall, the program is uniquely successful in comparison to similar parenting programs.
- Throughout the course of the program, parents and caregivers developed greater confidence in their ability to be their child's first teacher.
- We observed a 50% increase in talking, singing, and reading activities among participants and their children based on pre- and post- surveys.
- The program strongly supported the importance of bilingualism and having parents take pride in their native language.
- The context of bringing parents together for a series of workshops supported the development of social capital.
- Parenting messages were embedded in culturally responsive activities which supported parent empowerment.
- Providing children's literature in their native language had a powerful effect on participants' desire to read with their children.

The program recognizes that parents who are confident, proud of their culture and traditions, connected to others in their community are more likely to be empowered to become their child's first language and literacy teachers.

Because of its approach to facilitation, reliance on professionally produced video to prompt conversation and reflection, and its immediate appeal among the intended participants, we find the program has the potential to be highly scalable to groups throughout the country.

We offer several recommendations to assist the program in replicating success as it expands to more communities.

Introduction

The purpose of this evaluation was to examine **La Fuerza de Creer**, an innovative parent engagement program designed to promote positive caregiving practices among Spanish-speaking families. The goals of the program were to:

- Help parents and caregivers identify realistic strategies to promote children's early learning, social-emotional development, and school readiness skills.
- Build a supportive community of parents that is both responsive and empowering to families.
- Engage Spanish-speaking parents and caregivers "in language" and in culturally responsive activities in ways that support parents' cultural traditions and their language.

This report highlights our evaluation of two workshop programs conducted in the Fall, 2019. The evaluation was designed to provide formative feedback on the workshop lessons, the effectiveness of the workshop features including the videos and discussion questions to spark conversations, and the degree to which the workshops appeared to be achieving the goals of empowering Spanish-speaking parents to become their children's first language and literacy teachers.

Background

The purpose of this initial evaluation was to understand how the program format might promote the key objectives of **La Fuerza de Creer** parent engagement program. Using a series of telenovela-style video episodes as an anchor for lively discussions, the workshops were designed to engage Spanish-speaking families in talking about issues related to child development that might be typical among Latino/a families.

A toolkit accompanies the video episodes, and includes a set of detailed lesson plans to be used by a facilitator to spark conversations among parents and caregivers. Each workshop lesson follows a three-part outline that includes videos, discussion prompts, and specific actions and recommendations to parents to promote children's early learning and development. Time guidelines are suggested for each section of the lesson, to ensure that all phases are covered during each 2-hour workshop, for a total of 8 workshop sessions.

The structure and specific guidelines in the lessons are clearly detailed to support the implementation of the workshop with minimal training of the facilitator. Given that some facilitators are likely to be community volunteers rather than trained teachers, the structured lessons have been designed to facilitate fidelity of treatment, allowing for the intervention to be cost-effective and adaptable to many different contexts. Therefore, we used this lens to examine a) how closely the facilitator stayed on course (e.g. followed the lesson plan), and b) whether all parts of the lesson seemed to fulfill their intended purpose; and c) whether certain areas might be strengthened over others.

At the same time, it was important to examine the effects of these lessons on their intended outcomes. For example, did the telenovela episodes appear to engage parents? Did they encourage conversations that could easily be applied to the participants' own lives? Did they reflect the issues that were most important to them in their caregiving practices? These and other questions were critical to address in determining if the parent engagement program was reaching its goal.

Methodology

Sample

Our evaluation involved an analysis of two 8-week sessions of La Fuerza de Creer workshops in Staten Island, New York. Site A, Kingsley Early Head Start Learning Center, was held in a Head Start center basement, and included 10 parents. Site B, Richmond PreK Center, was held at an Early Head Start center nearby, and included 9 parents. Both workshops were headed by the same facilitator, who was well-known to the locals as a community activist. All sessions were conducted in Spanish.

Methods

We used multiple methodologies in this initial evaluation. First, we devised a survey to examine parents day-to-day literacy practices as a potential pre- and posttest test. We administered the survey to a number of participants at the orientation session, and the first session of the workshop, and found that it was too lengthy and too demanding in terms of the literacy level. As a result, most of the questions, with the exception of several literacy practices which we will review here, were dropped, due to missing data or incomplete scores. (We have since developed a questionnaire that seemed to work in a subsequent workshop we studied, which had to be concluded due to the coronavirus). The newest version of the parent survey can be found in the Appendix.

Our primary means of collecting information was through observations of all sessions. A native Spanish-speaking research assistant attended all sessions. For each session, the research assistant took ethnographic notes of all the activities in the session, the key themes and descriptions of the telenovela episodes, the time segments devoted to each part of the lesson, and the nature of the discussion, and potential lessons learned. All sessions were audiotaped, with facilitator and participant permission.

Lesson Summary and Flow

| Activity | Allocated Time |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Welcome | 10 minutes |
| Opening Circle | 20 minutes |
| Video 1 | 20 minutes |
| Group Conversation | 15 minutes |
| Break | 5 minutes |
| Video 2 | 10 minutes |
| Group Conversation | 10 minutes |
| Intro. To Partner Listening | 10 minutes |
| Closing Circle | 10 minutes |
| Moments of Connection | 5 minutes |

On the final day of the workshop, we conducted two focus group sessions. Here, we were interested in the ‘take-away’ messages of the sessions. Did they find the workshops valuable? Were there some practices that they would likely continue? If another set of workshops would be announced, would they likely join? These focus groups were designed to be casual conversations, encouraging participants to “help make the workshops better” for the next series with parents. These sessions were coded and transcribed for analysis. Themes were identified through careful coding using the MAXQDA software.

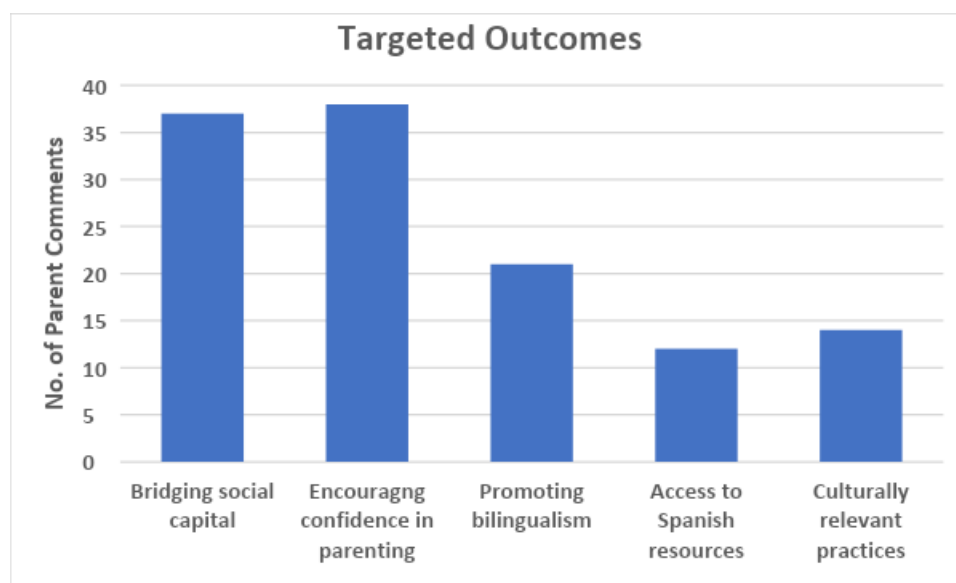
In addition, following each lesson, the facilitator was encouraged to provide feedback on how the workshops seemed to be working for the group. These forms were analyzed by our team to examine possible revisions, and adaptations that might be necessary to improve the toolkit.

Finally, we kept careful attendance records to examine parents’ commitment to the program through regular participation.

Results

In the following section, we describe the results in a series of key findings, providing examples from the data to support these statements. Following these results, we describe several recommendations for the future implementation of the program.

Key Finding: *La Fuerza de Creer* embeds parenting messages in culturally responsive activities which supports parent empowerment.



The graph above highlights the number of comments made by participants during the eight workshop sessions. For this purpose, we have eliminated the comments about the telenovela episodes, though clearly at times, they were primed by them. This analysis demonstrates that the program was well-targeted to its stated goals: participants made numerous comments during the workshop sessions that reflect their engagement in issues related to social capital, building confidence in their ability to parent effectively, promoting bilingualism, gaining access to Spanish children's books, and engaging in culturally responsive activities with their children.

Unique to this parent engagement model was the extent to which the conversations were embedded in the cultural traditions of the participating Hispanic parents. Frequently, the facilitator would describe ways in which traditional holidays might serve as opportunities to sing Spanish songs with their children or to read Spanish books, bridging their traditions with mainstream developmentally appropriate practices to support children's school readiness. Throughout the workshops, "empowerment" seemed to be the most common overriding theme, encouraging parents to become "active" in their children's learning and development. Together, this suggests that the program was effective in promoting comity among its participants, as all helped to uplift one another.

Key Finding: The context of bringing parents together for a series of workshops supported the development of social capital.

The workshop format created social bonding among parents. In a classic study, sociologist Mark Granovetter described this type of social bonding as "the strength of weak ties," a well-established principle that helps to understand how information flows through a social network. In

contrast to strong friendships, people from different contexts may form interpersonal relationships that are personally beneficial to them as well as to the group as a whole.

Parents in these workshops began to develop these social networks that strengthened their ability to parent more effectively. For example, during the mid-session break, parents would cluster together and talk about their children, or about how to get their husbands to be more engaged in parenting. In one case, a parent brought tamales to the session, and they all sat around and talked about the different or similar plates they had in their own country. These informal conversations added to the atmosphere of acceptance, and appreciation of different aspects of their lives. As one woman put it, “We need to keep doing this. We need to keep seeing each other.” And in another exchange,

“Sharing things made me feel liberated. I can evolve and start changing now.”

Adds another,

“When you share your problems, everyone empathizes. Step by step, I am finally living my present.”

And still another,

“It is good to know that you’re not alone.”

Toward the end of the sessions, one woman indicated, “I just want to say that I’m taking a bit of each one of you with me. I was able to solve a problem I wasn’t seeing. I thought it was going to be more difficult, but it worked.”

Many of these parents continued to meet outside of the regular sessions, going to the library together, the playground, and the grocery store with their children, providing important support systems to one another as they continued to grow and enjoy their parenting times together.



Ex. Participants engaged in a pair and sharing during the workshop.

Key Finding: Parents developed greater confidence in their ability to be their child’s first teacher.

Initially reticent to talk about their feelings, parents’ confidence grew substantially throughout the sessions. The telenovela segments sparked conversations which the facilitator often skillfully used in directing participants to consider their own parenting practices. Two areas of growth were particularly noted:

1. parents became increasingly comfortable providing greater social emotional support to their children; and
2. they began to feel more confident in promoting early language and literacy skills with them as well.

In terms of emotional support, parents repeatedly mentioned that having patience with their child was often difficult, and something they wanted to work on in the parenting workshops. Often feeling burdened with many household tasks, they recognized that they often failed to listen to their child, or engage in activities with them. During the closing circle in which the facilitator would ask what they wanted to work on at home, parents would say “patience.” For example, responding to a telenovela segment, one parent indicated:

“I think that the biggest problem here is the attention, or lack of care, lack of attention to the emotional part of a child. Because in the video [the segment they just watched], the girl wants the mother to play with her but the mother is only looking at her cell phone.”

And toward the end of the workshop, one parent said, “I have a strong personality, but this workshop was useful for me, as it taught me to be more patient [with my children].”

Parents gained more confidence in teaching their children a skill, but this was less evident than their growing confidence in providing emotional support. Most defined their desire to do more activities with the child, such as taking them to the library, museum or the zoo. However, while some parents gained a concrete idea for a specific literacy-rich activity, others were less sure of specific activities such as engaging their children in math or science experiences. For example, take this exchange:

Facilitator: “But what specific ideas did you talk about? What things can you do?”

Parent: “With my daughter... when I take her to the supermarket... I have noticed that she likes fruits and vegetables. I think we could compare the vegetables, their colors. And the same with flowers.”

But, others responded more like this parent: “Read... Science...”

These conversations, even those with rudimentary ideas, seemed to provide evidence of their willingness to take some steps toward teaching their children some skills. At the same time, their closing comments revealed their highest priorities: showing love and positive support to their children.

Facilitator: “Say something you are good at”

“I have two children and I am good at helping them get up when they have to go to school.” (Laughter.)

“I am good at giving them love.”

“I help them however I can.”

“The most important thing for me is the emotional part of them ... this is what I care most about.”

This finding reflects the balance the program is trying to strike: starting from, and being respectful of, what parents already know and their identified strengths while creating the opportunity for participants to learn new skills in relation to promoting early learning, literacy development, and ultimately school readiness in a targeted way. Given the foundational importance of nurturance, parental responsiveness and attachment to cognitive development, the emphasis here seems appropriate.



Ex. Participants watching the Telenovela in one of the sessions.

Key Finding: The program strongly supported the importance of bilingualism and having parents take pride in their native language.

This parent engagement program gave great emphasis to the importance of maintaining one's native language with their children. For example, using a lesson from a telenovela scene, the facilitator asked them to recall the advantages of being bilingual. One parent answered, "Speaking two languages makes you smart." Another added, "Speaking Spanish will help my child have more job opportunities."

Helping to maintain children's Spanish language skills while developing skill in their second language, English, was often described as an ideal goal. Yet parents recognized the tensions between the two different worlds: The language of interaction in the home, and the language in school. As one parent put it, "I really connected with Rafael and Leo's story [in the telenovela]. "At home my mom doesn't understand my children when they speak in English. Yet I realize that it's a beautiful thing to speak Spanish."

Further, while acknowledging the importance of bilingualism, participants often noted its complexities. For example, one parent explained that in her case, there is a difference between siblings who haven't grown up in the same place, and whose native language is not the same. Others, as well, talked about communication difficulties. For example, "I have my son at home. He only speaks English, the middle one. But he understands me in Spanish. We must not think that if they speak English it means they do not understand us. If we assume that... we will put them aside and we won't pay attention to them."

The facilitator frequently emphasized the benefits of being bilingual and honoring their native language. Raising the issue in one session, she asked, “How many of you think it’s important to speak to your child in Spanish? Only half of the group answered yes. Others recognized its importance adding, “It’s our culture. And it’s the places that we come from. But then, someone added, “I know that we’re supposed to talk Spanish with our children. I know it’s important. But sometimes me and my friends, we shut ourselves and we don’t feel comfortable talking in Spanish. It happens to everyone.”

For many, it might be a matter of confidence. For example, as one woman said, “My children know how to speak Spanish. But then they get to high school, and they will have to write in Spanish. And then they will need us.”

Parents acknowledged that it was often difficult to strike a balance between the home and school. The workshops gave “voice” to help them discuss these complexities, the difficulties of negotiating in two worlds: to appreciate their home culture and to be open and accepting of their new culture.

Key Finding: Providing children’s literature in their native language had a powerful effect on reading to their children.

Parents appreciated receiving children’s books in their native language, often bilingual with English, and this was reflected in their use at home. In some cases, fathers who were not English speakers, read to their children. Reported one mother, “My husband was afraid to read with my child, because he doesn’t speak English, but with the bilingual books he reads the Spanish text, my oldest son reads the English, and they both read with my youngest. I just love seeing that.”

These books were effective in bridging language differences among the children and their parents. For example, one mother mentioned that her daughter knows more English than Spanish. “So, when we read the book [you’ve given us] she learns Spanish and I learn English.” It was the opportunity to learn language, Spanish and English, that attracted parents’ attention the most. It gave them a purpose to read to their child. These wanted resources to help them teach, to scaffold children’s learning of language more naturally than formal teaching. As one mother reported,

“My children really liked very much the one with numbers because they are trying to learn Spanish. My child is five years old and he understands Spanish, but he doesn’t speak it. He repeats. He repeats colors. Numbers. The easy things. The first language he spoke was English. At the beginning I didn’t teach him Spanish very much because he had language difficulties. I didn’t want to burden him. And I didn’t want to confuse him. Step by step we are doing it. Some time ago he was not able to say anything in Spanish. Now when we are walking, he asks me: ‘mum, how do you say this in Spanish?’”

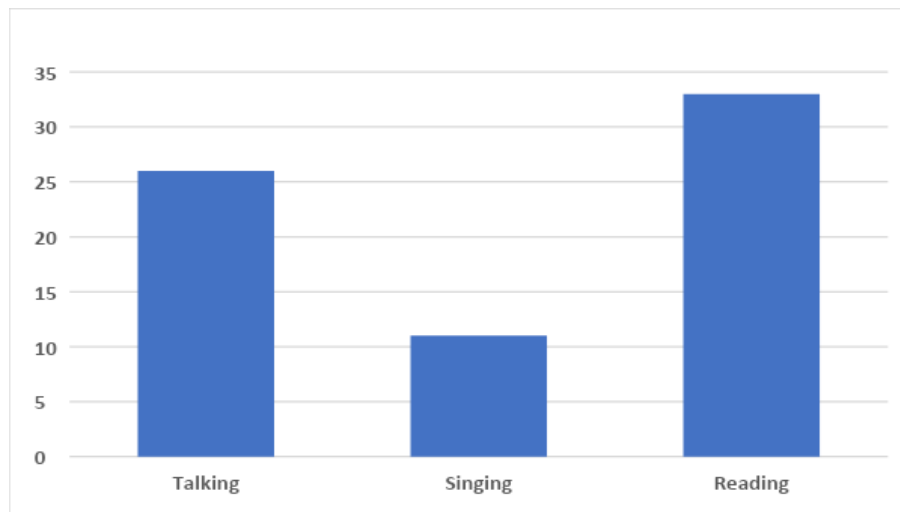
Therefore, the provision of books in Spanish (and sometimes Spanish and English), more than tip sheets, was a successful motivator to parents, providing opportunities to engage in many of the behaviors at home that were discussed throughout the workshops.



Ex: Participants reading to their children at home with the books given to them from the program.

Key Finding: The program strongly supported talking, singing, and reading with their children, evidenced by a 50% increase in talking, singing, reading activities on pre-post surveys of participants.

Number of Parent Comments on the Importance of Talking, Singing, and Reading with their Children



(vertical axis: No of comments)

Within the context of culturally responsive activity, parents' comments reflected their developing understanding of the importance of talking, singing, and reading with their children. In contrast to a didactic message, the workshop provided many instances for parents to see talking, singing, and reading in a context that was meaningful to them. For example, instead of reminding parents about the importance of talking to their child, the materials highlighted the benefits of conveying to children their own personal stories, and their history and culture. "Talking" about one's feelings, struggles, and conflicts was a way to not only get closer to their children but to help them learn.

The facilitator often skillfully used the telenovela segment to help parents share their feelings. For example,

Facilitator: "Anything you saw in the telenovela made you think about your lives?"

There was a long silence.

The facilitator waited.
(after a few seconds)

Parent: "Sometimes it has happened to me that when I don't want to talk about a feeling, and I keep it to myself, and I hold on to it, it is dangerous for your health. Because it gives you anxiety. And you feel like you need to eat something sweet, something like that, but you are not really hungry. It will bring you other problems. It is important to talk to somebody."

Another parent: "Sometimes I ask my daughter how her day in school was... sometimes she tells me her classmates don't want to play with her. And I feel sad because she is sad. It's hard to talk about that."

Here, the facilitator adds: "But the fact is that if I don't talk about something... it does not mean it won't exist. Right?"

Parents collectively agree, but one parent adds, "sometimes children don't talk about their feelings, but we can let them draw about it."

Together, parents agreed that talking with their child, even when the conversations addressed difficult issues, was an important aspirational goal which they learned through the workshops.

Similarly, the workshops used parents' desires to share their culture to promote singing with their child. To illustrate, in one session, parents learned and sang, "Un elefante", a cumulative children's song in Spanish. Describing songs and music as a stress reliever, the facilitator encouraged parents to try singing at home. As one participant found,

“My grandson suffers anxiety [...]. He doesn’t live with his father [...]. Music is very important to him as a tool. I started singing and, after a couple of minutes, he wasn’t sad anymore.”

Reading to your child, however, represented the most concrete goal for these parents. Armed with a new book in each session, it gave parents an ‘assignment’ to read to their children each week. As reported in their opening and closing remarks for each session, it was apparent that parents took these instructions to heart. Parents reported reading more to their children, even at times, discussing the details of these sessions in the workshops themselves. As one parent put it,

“I read at night, before bed. I’ve managed to make it part of the routine, so now we always read before bedtime”. [They all agreed].

And another, “I try to involve his dad, but he doesn’t like reading, so he only read a couple of pages at first, but we are improving. Now he is able to last for four or five pages.”

Given that a number of the books celebrated traditions in Spanish culture, they provided parents with valuable background knowledge to convey to their children. For example, after the facilitator distributed a book about Día de los Muertos, parents talked about how it is celebrated in their countries. Following the discussion, the facilitator concluded, “Stories are so important to your child. Tell them about your indigenous traditions.” “All cultures have things to tell, and the more we talk to our children, the more they develop communication skills.”

In one final session, the facilitator handed out the book: *DJ’s Busy Day / El día ocupado de DJ*, a bilingual story book to parents. Holding it closely, one parent said, “it looks beautiful, this little book.” Together, parents stood proudly holding the book in their hands. It was a moment to remember.



Ex. Participants and the facilitator proudly holding up their books they had received from the program.

Summary of Findings

These initial results suggest that La Fuerza de Creer was highly successful in promoting parents' engagement in topics that were culturally relevant and important to these families. Parents talked candidly about the many challenges they faced, both in their community as well in the society at large. Literacy-related activities were richly embedded in contexts that were meaningful to these families. As a result, it provided a powerful forum to discuss the more complex issues of bilingualism, and cultural pluralism in a safe, evaluation-free, and supportive context. Parents increasing confidence was evident through their active participation in the program. In short, this program represents a far different model of involving parents than other extant programs: it adheres to a constructivist approach, recognizing that reality is shaped by the experiences of the learner, and that culture is integral to understanding and developing knowledge about children's development.

Facilitator's and Observer's Feedback on the Toolkit

This evaluation was also designed to examine how the toolkit functioned in these sessions. Based on both the facilitator's feedback, as well as our observers, our results indicated that it was an integral part of the program and served to keep the focus of the lessons on the stated goals. The toolkit was well-organized, with lessons flowing well from one task to another. Sessions ran smoothly and seemed very well-timed, even though the time allotments for various portions of the lessons varied, depending on the extent of the conversations on a particular topic.

The telenovelas served as an effective tool to spark conversations about sensitive topics. However, the facilitator indicated that a number of episodes were less engaging than others. Our observers found that it served as a successful way to prime discussions, and added variety to what otherwise might feel like a long workshop session. Coupled with the telenovela, and a coffee break in the middle, the two-hour sessions seemed to fly by. It was rare for a parent to leave before the session concluded.

In addition, the circle of support at the beginning and ending of each session was a very clear opportunity to build social capital among the participants. It created a supportive context for intimate, and important conversations. It also appeared to hold participants accountable for particular actions. For example, the facilitator could remind parents that they agreed to read a particular book to their child. In the following session's opening circle, those intentions were once again introduced with requests for follow-up. Based on pre-post surveys, many of these intentions were fulfilled. Parents reported a 50% growth in talking, singing, and reading activity with their child compared to pretest surveys.

Consequently, with minor shifts (e.g. discuss in the recommendations), the toolkit seemed easy to implement. Lessons were clear, well-focused, with discussion question prompts helpful to extend conversations among participants.

Recommendations for Future Consideration

Our results suggest that the program was highly effective in achieving its goals. Nevertheless, there were some areas that could use additional support, as the program scales up to other communities. They include:

- There were a number of 'technology glitches' throughout the sessions. Although a number of technology problems are always likely to occur, it might be helpful to include very specific guidance on how to access the telenovela segments, as well as some tips on troubleshooting. Pictorial guidance at the beginning of the toolkit might also be helpful to those facilitators who are uncomfortable with technology.
- The facilitator plays a key role in shaping the direction of the conversation, and in helping the discussions stay focused. While the facilitator in our evaluation was comfortable in this role, others might not, and might benefit from a training guide. This might include some very simple Q and A's, placed on the Literacy Partners website that could be revised as new experiences or issues arise.
- Providing children's Spanish-language books in these sessions is important, and enables parents to practice what they have learned in the workshops. Yet it would be beneficial for the toolkit to include specific information on how to read to their children. For example, the facilitator might have parents in pairs pretend to read a book to their child. At the same time, the facilitator might model strategies for reading aloud, especially for parents who might not feel proficient in reading (in either Spanish or English). In addition, we would recommend that the book distribution take place in the middle of the session, and not at the end, when parents are running off to other things.

In addition, future evaluations should consider:

- A simpler pre- and post-assessment questionnaire to determine the extent to which parenting practices have changed as a result of the workshops. Although qualitative research can provide richly detailed descriptions of participant interactions, quantitative evidence in terms of evidence of change is important. We have included a questionnaire which we developed in preparation for a third workshop for further consideration.
- Additionally, understanding how parents use what has been learned in daily practice is important. The groups we studied had formed “WhatsApp” group chats and posts to this forum could be examined from a qualitative lens to determine home-based practices.
- Supporting parents’ involvement through active engagement is a primary goal in this parent model. It would be beneficial to examine the extent of ‘serve and return’ comments to measure parent participation.
- Print exposure is known to be a powerful predictor of parents’ involvement in children’s early literacy development. Future evaluations should consider a measure of print exposure which we have included here in the Appendix.

La Fuerza de Creer is a unique parent engagement program that has the potential to be highly scalable to groups throughout the country. In this initial evaluation, it has shown to promote parents’ understanding of language and literacy strategies for children in a culturally sensitive model. In doing so, it recognizes that parents who are confident, proud of their culture and traditions, connected to others in their community can be empowered to become their child’s first language and literacy teachers.

Appendix

Parent Questionnaire

Directions: For each question below, choose **ONE** response that best answers the question. Also, please answer these questions with your **child aged 0-5** in mind.

1. I think I can help my child learn by:
 - Visiting the library
 - Going on trips
 - Reading books
 - Watching TV
 - Teaching good manners
 - Being respectful of others
2. I enjoy spending time with my child:
 - Singing a song
 - Having a conversation
 - Playing video games
 - Cooking
 - Doing errands
 - Relaxing together
3. I read to my child:
 - Every day
 - A few times a week
 - Once a week
 - Not at all
4. With my child, I like to:
 - Sing
 - Play games
 - Read stories
 - Run errands
5. It is most important to me that my child learns to:
 - Read in Spanish
 - Tell stories in Spanish
 - Write in English
 - Speak in English
6. I have learned how to raise by children from my:
 - Parents
 - Husband
 - Friends
 - Church

- Doctor
 - Workshop
7. It's important that children learn to:
- Respect their elders
 - Learn to read
 - Be kind and considerate with others
 - Get good grades
8. It's most important for my child to learn to:
- Read and write in English
 - Speak another language
 - Read and write in both English and Spanish
 - Write in Spanish
9. I like to talk to my child about:
- Cooking
 - Cleaning/chores
 - What they did at school
 - Feelings
10. I like to sing with my child at:
- Church
 - Home
 - Gatherings
 - Playground

Title Recognition Test

Instructions: Below is a list of 15 titles. Some of them are book titles and some of them are not. Please put an (X) next to the ones that you know for sure are book titles.



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