# The Power of Parents: A Mixed-Methods Study of Early Literacy Development at Home

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## Abstract

This study evaluated the Parent-Powered Literacy (PPL) Project, a nine-month, community-based initiative designed to strengthen parents' capacity to support early language and literacy development among children from birth to age four. Seventeen families participated in the program. Using a mixed-methods design that included surveys, literacy activity logs, structured assessments, interviews, and field observations, the study documented significant growth in both the quality and frequency of home literacy practices. Parents reported greater knowledge, confidence, and awareness of literacy resources, alongside a total of 62,629 minutes of shared reading sustained over seven to nine months. Qualitative findings further revealed enriched parent–child relationships, heightened motivation, and expanded literacy routines. Collectively, the results indicate that the PPL Project effectively enhanced home literacy environments and empowered caregivers, demonstrating its potential as a scalable and community-driven model for promoting early childhood and family literacy development at home.

Key Words: Parent-Powered Literacy (PPL) Project, family literacy, early childhood literacy, parent engagement, home literacy environment

## Introduction

Early language and literacy development lays the foundation for school readiness, academic achievement, and lifelong learning. Decades of

research underscore the critical role of the home environment, and particularly the influence of parents and caregivers, in fostering these foundational skills (Bierman et al., 2023; Galea et al., 2025). However, many families face barriers such as limited access to books, lack of knowledge about literacy development, and low confidence in their ability to support learning at home (Mad & Mohamed, 2023; Rivera et al., 2024). Recent research highlights that families' beliefs about literacy and their access to literacy-rich resources remain key determinants of children's early learning outcomes, particularly in underresourced communities (Biggs et al., 2023; Guerrero et al., 2025).

In response to these challenges, the Parent-Powered Literacy (PPL) Project was launched as a community-based initiative aimed at equipping parents of children from birth to age four with the tools, strategies, and support needed to nurture early literacy. This study evaluates the outcomes of the PPL Project, with a particular focus on changes in parental engagement, the quality of home literacy environments, and the development of early literacy behaviors in young children. By engaging families as active partners in the literacy process, the project aligns with a growing movement in early education research that emphasizes the power of family-centered and equity-focused approaches to promote school readiness and lifelong learning (Clymer et al., 2024; Ishimaru, 2019).

## Literature Review

### Building Parent Capacity to Support Early Language and Literacy

Research consistently shows that parents play a central role in the development of children's early language and literacy skills, as documented in Bus et al. (1995), Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002), Snow et al. (1998), St. Clair and Jackson (2006), and St. Clair et al. (2012). Family-centered literacy initiatives are grounded in the understanding that caregivers are a child's first teachers, and that strengthening parent capacity can significantly influence early learning. The PPL Project reflects this approach by equipping parents of children from birth to age four with practical strategies to support language development in the home.

Evidence from prior studies with migrant families provides strong support for this model, showing that parent training can lead to meaningful and lasting improvements in children's literacy outcomes. St. Clair and Jackson (2006) examined the impact of a family involvement training program designed to help parents support their young children's language development. Their findings revealed that children whose parents participated

in the training demonstrated significantly stronger language skills by first grade than those whose families did not. These results suggest that when parents are taught specific strategies for engaging in literacy-rich activities at home, children experience measurable academic benefits. This research aligns directly with the goals of the PPL Project, which similarly emphasizes building parents' knowledge and confidence to support early learning.

A follow-up study by St. Clair et al. (2012) demonstrated that the benefits of early parent engagement education extend well beyond the initial years of schooling. Six years after the original intervention, children whose parents had received training continued to outperform peers on standardized reading assessments. These findings highlight the long-term value of investing in family literacy supports early in a child's life and suggest that parent-focused interventions can have enduring effects on academic achievement.

Together, these studies reinforce the importance of the home literacy environment as a foundation for later success. Programs that provide parents with accessible tools such as strategies for shared reading, conversation, and vocabulary building help translate research on early language development into everyday practice. For the PPL Project, this body of evidence affirms that empowering families during the earliest years is a promising pathway for strengthening children's language skills, promoting school readiness, and supporting long-term educational outcomes.

## The Importance of Early Learning

Decades of research underscore the critical importance of high-quality early childhood education, particularly for at-risk children. Enriched preschool environments and strong instructional support in the early grades significantly improve academic outcomes, especially for children who enter school with limited verbal skills and phonological awareness and lower exposure to foundational literacy concepts (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2019; Clay, 2005; National Institute of Health, 2000; Snow et al., 1998). Without timely intervention, these early disadvantages often persist, leading to compounding academic challenges.

More recent studies reaffirm these findings and demonstrate that interventions that engage families early, well before formal schooling, can strengthen children's readiness and reduce literacy gaps (Bierman et al., 2023; Dahl-Leonard et al., 2025). Initiatives like the PPL Project are grounded in this research, aiming to reduce disparities before they solidify. Evidence shows that when early learning environments are intentionally designed and developmentally supportive, they can foster school readiness and long-term success (Galea et al., 2025; Guerrero et al., 2025).

## The Critical Window: Brain Development and Language Acquisition

Infancy and early childhood represent a sensitive period of rapid brain development, when children are particularly responsive to language-rich and emotionally supportive interactions. By age three, the brain has undergone significant growth, laying the foundation for later learning (Kuhl, 2004; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Neuroscience and developmental research affirm that early experiences shape neural architecture with lifelong implications.

Research on language acquisition indicates that the process begins even before birth. For instance, Minai et al. (2017) found that fetuses can distinguish between languages based on rhythmic cues, highlighting the critical role of early auditory and verbal exposure. By the time children reach preschool age, much of the foundation for language, cognition, and social–emotional development has already been established (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Dickinson & Tabors, 1995; Neuman & Dickinson, 2011).

Regarding reading development, experts have long recognized that the skills necessary for reading begin to form prior to kindergarten. Recent research from the Harvard Graduate School of Education suggests that these skills may start developing as early as infancy (Turesky et al., 2025). These findings underscore the importance of interventions before formal schooling begins.

Additionally, studies on early language interaction indicate that shared reading and conversational engagement in early childhood can enhance not only vocabulary but also cognitive flexibility and emotion regulation, skills closely linked to later literacy success (Bierman et al., 2023; Heider et al., 2025). Collectively, this research emphasizes the value of early, responsive engagement and makes a compelling case for early intervention programs.

## The Role of Parents in Early Learning

Parents, especially mothers, are their children's first and most influential teachers. Their language use, responsiveness, and engagement directly shape their children's early literacy development. Parental involvement is often a stronger predictor of academic success than formal schooling alone (Froiland et al., 2013; Sawyer et al., 2014). Both mothers and fathers were encouraged to participate in the project, as the impact of both parents reading and being engaged in early learning and development activities with their children can have a greater influence on the children and lead to better success in preparedness for not only academic achievement but also for general life success.

Projects like the PPL recognize and build on this foundational role. By equipping parents with knowledge, strategies, and support, such initiatives enhance the quality of the home learning environment, an especially critical factor in underserved communities (Guerrero et al., 2025; Rivera et al., 2024). Research consistently supports family-centered approaches, showing that educational outcomes improve when parents are actively involved and supported in their child's learning journey (Clymer et al., 2024; Dahl-Leonard et al., 2025).

Scholars agree that the quality of a child's home literacy environment is closely linked to early literacy development (Biggs et al., 2023; Brown et al., 2013). These environments can vary widely, depending on factors such as family demographics and socioeconomic status. Elements such as the number of books in the home and the frequency of shared reading experiences are positively associated with the development of literacy skills (Froiland et al., 2013; Galea et al., 2025). One of the most influential components of the home literacy environment is the amount of time children spend being read to and reading with others. Multiple studies have demonstrated a strong relationship between reading frequency and early literacy outcomes (Bierman et al., 2023; Sawyer et al., 2014). Children exposed to rich literacy experiences at home tend to develop stronger reading skills and are more likely to begin reading at an earlier age, which in turn provides them with greater opportunities for literacy development over time (Breit-Smith et al., 2010; Guerrero et al., 2025).

### Investing in Early Learning

It is well established in research that the early years are a decisive period for shaping children's cognitive, linguistic, and emotional development. Investments in early childhood programs that prioritize both high-quality instruction and parental empowerment can produce meaningful, long-term benefits (Bierman et al., 2023; Dahl-Leonard et al., 2025). The PPL Project exemplifies this dual focus, positioning families as active participants in fostering early literacy and supporting emerging evidence that family literacy initiatives can improve both parental self-efficacy and child outcomes (Clymer et al., 2024; Guerrero et al., 2025).

## Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrative theoretical approach that draws from three key frameworks: the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family–School Partnerships (Mapp & Bergman, 2019), Equity-Centered Family Engagement (Ishimaru, 2014, 2019), and the Critical Application of

Cognitive Flexibility Theory (Edwards et al., 2019, 2023). Together, these frameworks inform an understanding of how schools can meaningfully collaborate with families and community-based organizations to support early literacy development and promote equitable educational outcomes.

The Dual Capacity-Building Framework (Mapp & Bergman, 2019) posits that sustainable family engagement requires the development of essential capabilities among both educators and families. These include not only knowledge and skills but also relational trust, shifts in beliefs and attitudes, and the confidence to collaborate. Engagement, within this model, is not a unidirectional transmission of information from schools to families but rather a reciprocal and iterative process that fosters mutual growth and capacity-building.

Building on this perspective, Equity-Centered Family Engagement (Ishimaru, 2014, 2019) challenges traditional, school-centric models of parent involvement that often marginalize families from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This framework emphasizes the need to recognize and elevate the knowledge and experiences of families, disrupt existing power hierarchies, and co-create engagement strategies with families as active agents in their children's education. It positions schools as integral parts of a broader community ecosystem, rather than as isolated institutions.

To support this dynamic and responsive approach, the study also incorporates the Critical Application of Cognitive Flexibility Theory (Edwards et al., 2023; Spiro et al., 1987). This theory encourages educators to adaptively respond to the complex and evolving contexts of family–school engagement. By accounting for how identity, power, and access shape these interactions, it equips educators to draw on prior knowledge and community assets in ways that are both culturally responsive and contextually relevant. The theory's emphasis on power, positioning, and accessibility underscores the importance of critically examining educators' roles within broader social systems and designing engagement efforts that are inclusive and just.

Collectively, these frameworks advocate for a school–community model of early education in which schools function not solely as academic institutions but as collaborative hubs rooted in equity, trust, and adaptability. The PPL Project is community-based in its focus on outreach and engagement with families within a specific school district's population, drawing parents in the school's community base to become engaged partners with the school district well before their children reach school enrollment ages. Building relationships with these families helps establish trust and helps

parents become comfortable with their role in their child's education from birth. It also helps the school district support parents through offering parent education that teaches the families about early development and the science behind the need to be actively engaged with their child's literacy and other development, and also enhancing connections with community-based resources which parents may not be aware of that can support their roles with their children.

The school district that partnered in the research had a Parent and Family Engagement (PFE) coordinator who focused on encouraging and supporting family engagement, playing a vital role in the PPL Project. The PFE coordinator opened a facility for meetings; arranged for vetted childcare so that parents could feel confident about attending, knowing their children would be safe and securely cared for during the parent meetings; and played an active role in the ongoing outreach by sending meeting reminders and other communications between meeting dates. The PFE coordinator also took an active role in planning the meetings and engaging with the parents each month to continue building a trusting relationship with the families enrolled in the project.

Community resource organizations were invited to participate in the project, and parents were introduced to a wide variety of community organizations, such as the local public library, a local pediatrician, an organization that provides additional services to parents to connect them with professionals that can help meet special needs they may have, and so on. These groups and individuals provided guest speakers, handout materials, and other information to parents to fill gaps in the parents' knowledge about their communities and how the organizations could further support the parents' role in early cognitive and literacy development, as well as other needs. A local children's author was also invited to speak with the parents, who further emphasized the importance of reading with their children and using the time spent with them to engage in other literacy-building activities. Such partnerships have the potential to transform how families and educators co-construct learning environments that support children's development from the earliest stages (Edwards et al., 2023; Guerrero et al., 2025; Ishimaru, 2019).

## Method

This study examined the effectiveness of the PPL Project in enhancing parental engagement, enriching home literacy environments, and supporting early literacy development in young children, offering insights into

scalable, community-based solutions for early learning. It uncovered how parent-focused interventions, such as the PPL Project, enhance parental capacity to promote early language and literacy development at home and how these enhancements influence young children's literacy outcomes. The project was designed to empower parents as their children's first teachers, fostering enriched home environments that support school readiness from birth to age four.

## Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was employed, incorporating quasiexperimental, observational, qualitative, and quantitative methods to evaluate both the implementation and outcomes of the PPL Project. The initial study cohort included 34 families with children aged 0–4 years, recruited from a local independent school district located in East Texas. Due to attrition, 17 families remained engaged through most or all of the nine-month program. Participants were recruited through collaboration with the school district, outreach events, local media, and other community engagement efforts.

The study occurred in three phases:

1. Recruitment Phase: July–August 2024
2. Implementation Phase: September 2024–May 2025
3. Evaluation Phase: Summer 2025

## Program Structure

Participants received three tiers of support:

1. Orientation Session: A two-hour introduction to the program and its goals.
2. Monthly Parent Classes: Ninety-minute sessions focused on building parental knowledge and skills related to early literacy. These sessions occasionally featured guest speakers covering topics such as read-aloud strategies, child nutrition, and family engagement.
3. Ongoing Online Support: Parents accessed digital resources and consultations via the Canvas learning management system.

The Orientation Session was held at an elementary school campus, where all subsequent parent meetings also occurred. Parents who missed the orientation meeting were contacted and highly encouraged to come to the next meeting. Parents were also asked to meet with a member of the research team individually to receive more information about the project, receive content information from the first meeting, and pick up the provided parent literacy materials to help them get started with the project as soon as possible.

Participants received literacy materials including *Mem Fox's Reading Magic*, *Jim Trelease's Read-Aloud Handbook*, and one children's book each month. Parents were encouraged to apply learned strategies daily with their children (20–30 minutes per day) and track efforts in a reading log. Logs included descriptions of activities, time spent, and children's responses.

The monthly parent classes were held at the same elementary campus with the parents meeting in the school library and the children meeting with childcare supervision provided by the school in an adjacent art room. The meetings were led by the primary researcher and the project coordinator, with support from the school district's PFE coordinator. The parents were encouraged to get to know each other, to share ideas, and to share stories with each other, which resulted in group cohesion and relationship building that strengthened the project's overall success. The project coordinator and principal researcher collaborated on the development of the educational content through discussions and ongoing meetings throughout the project duration.

The monthly meeting structure was set up to follow a similar pattern for consistency, as outlined in Table 1.

Each meeting began with sign-in, welcome, collection of reading/activity logs, and quick conversations about any questions the parents had at the beginning of the meeting time. The children were gathered to the art room before the program began. The meetings focused on parent education and utilized guest speakers, question and answer times for the parents, and modeling of read-alouds and other related literacy activities. Parent discussion was encouraged and was deliberately figured in to several of the meetings so that their own valuable experiences and learning were shared among the group, and parents quickly became comfortable with sharing ideas and asking questions of each other in these discussions. These planned interactions built on the parent education component of the project, resulting in further development of suggestions, ideas, and shared experiences that parents could use.

Most of the sessions were held in person but were also offered in an online live format as well, so parents who signed into the meetings virtually had access to the full range of information provided at each meeting. Parents were asked to attend in person or online live, if possible, and recordings of the meetings were published on the online site for viewing by those parents who missed a meeting. Viewing tracking was enabled on the recordings to provide data about which parents viewed the recordings as one method to track their ongoing engagement with the project. Parents meeting via the live online format also took an active role in discussion, asking questions,

contributing ideas, and engaging with the parent group consistently. Two of the monthly meetings were conducted in an online-only live format, and parents engaged in discussion, observed read-aloud modeling, and discussed additional strategies to use at home.

Table 1. Abbreviated Monthly PPL Meeting Schedule Overview

| Month | Speaker | Education Focus |
|---|---|---|
| Sept. | PPL Project Team; Award-Winning Children's Book Author | Parent orientation: project information; consent; science of reading and brain development presentation; project materials overview and use |
| Oct. | PPL Team; Executive Director, Early Childhood Agency | Importance of reading aloud; do's & don'ts for parents; developmental milestones & screening |
| Nov. | PPL Project Team | Beginning/ending read-aloud activity; stages of reading aloud; early cognitive development; the connection to reading; early literacy skills assessments |
| Dec. | PPL Project Team | The magic of reading aloud; read-aloud modeling & strategy discussion; parent discussion questions |
| Jan. | PPL Project Team; Pediatrician | Print, language, general knowledge, & how these fit together; development; nutrition; parent Q&A |
| Feb. | PPL Project Team; Read Aloud Handbook Author | Presentation about research related to parent engagement with reading and its significance; read-aloud activity |
| March | PPL Project Team | Sustained silent reading; dads & reading; print at home, in school, and in the library; read-aloud activity and parent discussion |
| April | PPL Project Team; Youth Librarian | Discussion of optional assessments and end of project goals; presentation on library services, library cards, programming for families and children |
| May | PPL Team; School District Team | Presence of books at home, TV & what to do about it, & how to troubleshoot reading difficulties (handouts with brief overview); parent activities that celebrate reading; read-aloud activity; children's craft and reading-related activities; and a celebratory meal |

Ongoing online support was provided through a website, where meeting recordings were posted, along with copies of any materials provided to the parents in person. The data collection forms were all available online as well, and parents were able to submit their ongoing reading/activity logs through the online site each month. The online site included additional resource materials, such as reading tips by age, reports and research related to early literacy development, and a discussion section for parents to share ideas and favorite books. Additional materials were added as the project year progressed, so parents had access to current information on an ongoing basis throughout the project year.

## Data Collection

Data were collected using a set of complementary methods, including a parent questionnaire, parent-completed reading activity logs, a home literacy environment checklist, a parent literacy knowledge assessment, semi-structured interviews via Qualtrics, and field notes from both in-person and online sessions. A brief description of each method is below.

1. *Parent Questionnaire.* A locally developed questionnaire was used to collect information on parent and child demographics (e.g., gender, educational level), children's observed literacy behaviors at home, and parental engagement in literacy activities such as reading to or with their children.
2. *Reading Activity Log.* Parents used this form to record daily reading activities with their children. The log includes details such as the type of activity (e.g., reading to or with the child), the amount of time spent on each activity (e.g., 30 minutes), and the child's response or attitude toward the experience (e.g., enjoyed, did not enjoy, other observations).
3. *Home Literacy Environment Checklist* (Whitehurst, 2001). This checklist was used to assess the presence of key supports for early language and literacy development in the home. It examines children's access to books and writing materials, family reading routines, opportunities for rich conversations, and adult modeling of reading behaviors.
4. *Parent Literacy Knowledge Assessment.* Parents completed a self-assessment designed to measure their knowledge, understanding, and confidence related to early language and literacy development. Using a 0-to-5 scale, parents rated their knowledge of the role of parents in supporting literacy, the science and value of early literacy exposure, awareness of available resources, and comfort with participating in the program. Responses provided insight into parents' perceived growth and engagement through the initiative.

5. *Parent Interview Protocol.* Parents completed an online interview via Qualtrics, accessed through a link sent to their email. The semi-structured interview aimed to explore parents' experiences supporting their children's reading and literacy development at home. Questions focused on several key areas: (1) parents' descriptions of their child and their child's reading interests and habits; (2) the parents' perceived roles in supporting literacy development, including typical activities and routines; (3) parents' confidence in supporting their child's reading, challenges encountered, and resources used; and (4) examples of successful and less successful experiences in fostering literacy at home.
6. *Field Notes and Observations.* Field notes were used to document participant interactions, comments, and expressed needs during both in-person and online sessions. Observations focused on parent engagement, children's participation, and the overall dynamics of reading and literacy-related activities. Notes captured contextual details such as the setting, tone of interactions, and any challenges or notable behaviors observed. These records provided qualitative insights into participants' experiences and complemented data collected through interviews and activity logs.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (e.g., means, frequencies) and basic inferential statistics to examine trends and changes over time. Cluster analysis and longitudinal comparisons were conducted to identify common trajectories in participation, engagement, and behavior change. Qualitative data, including parent interviews and field observations, were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were first transcribed and coded to identify recurring patterns, themes, and variations in experiences related to program implementation, parent–child interactions, and engagement with reading and literacy activities. Codes were iteratively refined through constant comparison, and themes were developed to capture both commonalities and unique perspectives across participants. Integration of qualitative and quantitative findings allowed for a richer understanding of program outcomes and the factors influencing engagement and behavior change.

## Results

As part of our effort to understand the impact of the PPL initiative, we analyzed a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. This included

a Parent Questionnaire, which captured demographic information, home literacy practices, and levels of parental engagement; a Literacy Activity Record, which documented weekly logs of literacy activities, duration, and children's reactions; and a Home Literacy Environment Assessment, which evaluated the presence and quality of literacy-supportive elements in the home. We also conducted parent interviews to explore their experiences and perceived changes in their ability to support literacy. In addition, field notes and observations were collected to document participant interactions, comments, and needs during both in-person and online sessions.

### Participant Demographics

Participants were recruited from a local independent school district in East Texas. Of the 34 families initially enrolled, 17 remained engaged and completed most or all components of the nine-month program. Recruitment strategies included outreach events, local media campaigns, and partnerships with schools and community organizations.

Table 2 provides demographic information on participating families, including parent age, ethnicity, education level, and number of children. The study included 16 children aged 1.0–4.9 years. Age distribution was balanced, with approximately one-third in the 1.0–1.9 years (31.2%) and 3.0–3.9 years (31.2%) ranges, one-quarter in the 2.0–2.9 years range (25.0%), and the smallest group in the 4.0–4.9 years range (12.5%).

Parents represented diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds: 45.0% White, 30.0% Asian, 10.0% Black/African American, 10.0% Other, and 5.0% Hispanic/Latino. Annual family incomes ranged widely, with most families reporting incomes above $65,000. Parental education levels were generally high. Among mothers, 30.0% held a bachelor's degree, 30.0% a master's degree, 20.0% a doctoral degree, 15.0% had a high school diploma, and 5.0% had an associate's degree. Fathers' education was more varied, including high school (26.3%), doctoral (21.1%), master's (21.1%), associate's (10.5%), bachelor's (10.5%), and other (10.5%). Overall, the sample reflected diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, income levels, and educational attainment, with children primarily in early toddler to preschool ages.

Table 2. Participant Demographic Variables Including Parent Race/ Ethnicity, Family Income, and Educational Levels

| Demographic Variable | Category | Count | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Parent Race/Ethnicity | White | 9 | 45.0% |
| | Asian | 6 | 30.0% |
| | Other | 2 | 10.0% |
| | Black/African American | 2 | 10.0% |
| | Hispanic or Latino | 1 | 5.0% |
| Family Income (Annual Estimate) | More than $80,001 | 7 | 35.0% |
| | $65,001–$80,000 | 6 | 30.0% |
| | $45,001–$65,000 | 5 | 25.0% |
| | $20,001–$45,000 | 1 | 5.0% |
| | Less than $20,000 | 1 | 5.0% |
| Mother's Highest Education | Bachelor's degree | 6 | 30.0% |
| | Master's degree | 6 | 30.0% |
| | Doctoral degree | 4 | 20.0% |
| | High School | 3 | 15.0% |
| | Associate's degree | 1 | 5.0% |
| Father's Highest Education | High School | 5 | 26.3% |
| | Doctoral degree | 4 | 21.1% |
| | Master's degree | 4 | 21.1% |
| | Associate's degree | 2 | 10.5% |
| | Bachelor's degree | 2 | 10.5% |
| | Other | 2 | 10.5% |
| Child Age Distribution | 1.0 – 1.9 years | 5 | 31.2% |
| | 2.0 – 2.9 years | 4 | 25.0% |
| | 3.0 – 3.9 years | 5 | 31.2% |
| | 4.0 – 4.9 years | 2 | 12.5% |
| Total Unique Children | | 16 | 100.0% |

## Reading Activity Records

We collected weekly reading logs from all 17 participating families over the course of the initiative. Although not every family reported data for each reading activity, the records submitted offer meaningful insights into patterns of parental engagement in home-based literacy practices.

The cumulative reading time reported across all families totaled 62,629 minutes (approximately 1,043 hours). On average, each family reported 3,684 minutes (or 61.4 hours) of reading during the study period. Reported reading times varied widely, ranging from a low of 220 minutes to a high of 7,335 minutes, reflecting differences in individual family engagement levels, available time, and interest in the reading activities.

These logs not only provide a quantitative measure of time spent on reading, but also offer indirect evidence of parental commitment and consistency in supporting their children's literacy development at home. Despite some gaps in reporting, the overall volume of reading activity suggests a strong level of participation across the cohort.

### Home Literacy Environment Assessment

Consistent with prior research highlighting the strong connection between a child's home literacy environment and their literacy development, we examined whether there were measurable changes in the home literacy environments of participating families before and after completing the PPL program. Specifically, we aimed to determine whether families had key literacy-supportive elements, such as the number of books in the home and the frequency of shared reading, and whether these elements improved following program participation.

Data from our participants reveal that home literacy environments varied considerably, influenced by factors such as family demographics and socioeconomic status. Despite these differences, notable outcomes emerged. Overall, there was a 44% improvement in home literacy environment scores. Additionally, parents reported increased confidence in supporting their children's literacy development.

Table 3 presents the pre- and post-program differences in Home Literacy Environment scores. The data indicate that the PPL program effectively engaged families from diverse backgrounds, with an emphasis on prioritizing reading over screen time. Parents shared overwhelmingly positive feedback, describing the joy of reading with their children and the empowerment they felt in taking an active role in their children's learning.

Data presented in Table 3 show significant increases in encouragement for using resources such as TV programs and computer-based learning, while some decrease in singing the alphabet with children, which may reflect perceived mastery of basic alphabet knowledge. The increase in average scores indicates enhanced literacy engagement and environmental support across participating households after the program.

Table 3. Pre- and Post-Test Differences in Literacy Engagement and Environmental Support

| Item | Item Description | Pre-Mean | Post-Mean | *t*-Statistic | *p*-Value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Q1 | Encourage child to watch beginning reading shows on TV or tapes. | 0.65 | 1 | -3.199 | 0.0047 |
| Q2 | Encourage child to play alphabet-related computer games. | 0.5 | 1 | -4.359 | 0.0003 |
| Q3 | Help child sing or say the alphabet. | 1 | 0.75 | 2.517 | 0.021 |
| Q4 | Help child name letters of the alphabet. | 0.8 | 1 | -2.179 | 0.0421 |
| Q5 | Help child write letters of the alphabet. | 0.45 | 1 | -4.819 | 0.0001 |

## Parent Knowledge and Confidence

We assessed families' background knowledge and confidence levels in supporting their children's literacy development at home. Our goal was to determine whether parents' understanding of literacy teaching practices and available resources improved following participation in the PPL program.

Findings showed clear improvements after the program. Overall, parents demonstrated a significant increase in their knowledge of early literacy teaching and learning strategies, as well as in their ability to create engaging home environments that support literacy development.

One key outcome was a statistically significant increase in parents' Awareness of Resources scores, from 2.75 (pretest) to 4.44 (posttest), with a *p*-value of 0.0166, indicating meaningful growth in this area. Table 4 presents the pre- and post-program differences in Parent Knowledge and Confidence scores. The data suggest that the PPL program effectively equips participating parents with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to support their children's literacy development at home.

The data presented in Table 4 show that the program significantly boosted parents' awareness of literacy resources while showing consistent improvement across all knowledge areas. High comfort levels were maintained throughout, with no declines observed, indicating a supportive and effective program design.

Table 4. Pre- and Post-Test Differences in Parent Knowledge and Confidence in Supporting Literacy Development at Home

| Area of Knowledge/Confidence | Pre-Test Mean | Post-Test Mean | *t*-Statistic | *p*-Value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Knowledge of Parent's Role | 3.50 | 4.33 | 4.231 | 0.0642 |
| Science of Early Literacy | 3.50 | 4.00 | 1.088 | 0.3193 |
| Value of Early Literacy | 4.25 | 4.67 | 1.923 | 0.193 |
| Awareness of Resources | 2.75 | 4.44 | 7.971 | 0.0166 |
| Comfort Participating | 4.50 | 4.78 | 0.516 | 0.4876 |

## Parent Interviews

We conducted interviews with participating parents to explore their experiences and perceived changes in their ability to support their children's literacy development at home. The interviews sought to gather insights on several areas:

- Their child's reading habits and interest in books
- The parent's perceived role in their child's reading development
- Their confidence in supporting reading at home
- The challenges they encountered
- Moments when they felt particularly successful or unsuccessful in their efforts

Findings from these interviews, as well as from researcher-solicited and unsolicited parent reflections, revealed three key, intersecting themes: bonding moments, motivation through joy, and challenges and growth.

- *Bonding Moments.* Many parents described reading as a cherished time for emotional connection with their children. Reading together was not just an educational activity but a relational one—an opportunity to share warmth, laughter, and affection. One parent reflected, "Reading became our joyful bonding time on couches, beds, and cozy corners," highlighting how reading rituals often took place in relaxed, intimate household settings. These moments provided more than literacy benefits; they fostered a sense of closeness and security that extended beyond the reading experience. Parents frequently emphasized that these shared experiences nurtured both their child's love of books and their own enjoyment of family time.
- *Motivation Through Joy.* Parents frequently linked their children's enthusiasm for reading with the sense of fun and creativity they brought to the activity. As one parent explained, "Using fun voices and making up stories turned reading into our favorite part of the day." This play-

ful approach transformed reading from a chore into a mutually enjoyable adventure, helping sustain engagement over time. Parents spoke of laughter, imagination, and shared excitement as key motivators, with some noting that this joy translated into a growing eagerness to explore new books and stories. The emphasis on enjoyment and togetherness, rather than obligation, appeared to play a crucial role in building sustained motivation for literacy learning in the home.

- *Challenges and Growth.* Despite their enthusiasm, several parents acknowledged initial uncertainty about how best to support their child's literacy development. One participant admitted, "At first I didn't know how to help with phonics, but now my child and I are learning together." This reflection captures a recurring theme: early hesitation gradually transformed into confidence through hands-on engagement and the structured support of the PPL program. Another parent shared, "I used to feel unsure, but now I'm confident and even excited to support my child's learning," illustrating the empowering effect of practical guidance and community encouragement. Parents often described this growth process as personally meaningful, with one noting, "This project kept me reading more! I'm so grateful—it's made a real difference." Across these stories, the data suggest that parents not only developed new skills but also deepened their sense of agency and pride in their role as their child's first teacher.

In summary, the interviews underscore how the PPL program not only improved parents' capacity to support literacy but also enriched family dynamics, turning everyday moments into meaningful learning opportunities.

### Field Notes

Throughout the PPL program, we collected field notes and observational data to document participant interactions, comments, and emerging needs during both in-person and virtual sessions. Our objective was to gain deeper insight into how the program was influencing parents' understanding of literacy practices, their awareness of available resources, and their overall perceptions of the program.

These anecdotal field notes support and enrich findings from other data sources, including the initial parent questionnaire, ongoing literacy activity logs, the pre- and post-program Home Literacy Environment assessments, and parent interviews. Collectively, the field observations confirm several key outcomes:

- Increased time spent reading with children
- Enhanced home literacy environments

- Notable shifts in literacy behaviors and engagement among both parents and children

Observations consistently revealed that parents felt empowered, more confident, better informed, and well-supported in guiding their children's literacy journeys. These qualitative insights illustrate how homes have been transformed with more books, established daily reading routines, and increased creativity in how families engage with literacy. Parents noted that their children are becoming more curious, engaged, and better prepared for school and lifelong learning.

The impact of the PPL program is clear: through interactive workshops, practical resources, and a strong focus on early literacy, families across the community are experiencing meaningful and lasting growth. In alignment with landmark studies like the Perry Preschool Project (Heckman & Karapakula, 2019), the PPL initiative adds to the growing body of evidence that investment in high-quality early literacy programs yields powerful results. These benefits extend beyond immediate academic gains to include enhanced parent engagement, stronger family dynamics, and long-term social and educational outcomes. Moreover, the data suggest promising intergenerational impacts, laying the groundwork for broader personal and societal advancement.

## Discussion

The results of the PPL project provide compelling evidence of the transformative impact that targeted, family-centered literacy programs can have on both parents and children. Drawing from a diverse range of data sources, including surveys, reading logs, structured assessments, interviews, and field observations, our evaluation reveals that the PPL program significantly strengthened the home literacy environment, deepened parent knowledge and confidence, and fostered more engaged, joyful, and sustained literacy practices within families. These outcomes align with recent studies emphasizing that home-based literacy interventions and family engagement programs can meaningfully enhance children's early language and literacy development (Biggs et al., 2023; Galea et al., 2025; Guerrero et al., 2025).

### Increased Engagement and Home Literacy Practices

The cumulative reading time of over 1,000 hours across 17 families reflects a strong level of commitment to literacy engagement. The wide variation in reported reading times suggests that while families face differing

constraints and capacities, the program was accessible and flexible enough to support various levels of participation. This adaptability is critical for reaching and retaining families with differing socioeconomic backgrounds and schedules, a finding echoed by Dahl-Leonard et al. (2025), who highlight that successful family literacy interventions must accommodate family diversity and resource variability. Similarly, Schiele et al. (2025) found that flexible, technology-supported literacy tools can sustain family engagement by meeting parents where they are, both literally and developmentally.

***Strengthened Home Literacy Environments***

The 44% improvement in Home Literacy Environment scores demonstrates measurable progress in the presence of books, reading routines, and literacy-supportive interactions within the home. These findings are consistent with Rivera et al. (2024) and Mad and Mohamed (2023), who found that parents' literacy beliefs and access to literacy resources strongly predict the richness of the home learning environment. Notably, parents reported prioritizing reading over screen time, signaling a cultural and behavioral shift in the home environment—one that mirrors recent evidence that family-led book-sharing practices enhance both literacy and socioemotional development (Bierman et al., 2023; Galea et al., 2025).

***Improved Parent Knowledge and Confidence***

The statistically significant increase in parent awareness of literacy resources—from a mean score of 2.75 to 4.44—points to the success of the PPL program in equipping parents with practical knowledge. Parents not only gained a better understanding of early literacy development but also reported feeling more capable in applying this knowledge at home. This aligns with extensive research showing that parental self-efficacy is a key predictor of consistent and effective involvement in a child's learning (Clymer et al., 2024; Dahl-Leonard et al., 2025). Guerrero et al. (2025) similarly found that online, bilingual family literacy programs can enhance parents' confidence and knowledge, particularly among Latino families, suggesting that digital and culturally responsive approaches can amplify outcomes across diverse populations.

***Emotional Impact and Family Bonding***

The qualitative findings from interviews and field notes deepen our understanding of the program's impact. Parents described reading as a joyful, bonding experience—"couch time," "bedtime stories," and "cozy corner moments" that went beyond educational outcomes to strengthen emotional ties within the family. These relational aspects of reading time may further reinforce learning by creating positive associations with books and literacy,

an effect documented in several recent studies linking shared reading with emotional security and language growth (Bierman et al., 2023; Heider et al., 2025).

## Navigating Challenges and Encouraging Growth

While some parents expressed initial uncertainty around teaching specific literacy skills such as phonics or rhyming, many highlighted a sense of growth and empowerment by the end of the program. This transformation was attributed not only to the content and materials but also to the supportive community and consistent encouragement provided by the program. These findings resonate with the Dual Capacity-Building Framework (Mapp & Bergman, 2019) and Equity-Centered Family Engagement (Ishimaru, 2019), which emphasize that effective engagement requires relational trust, reciprocal learning, and shared power between educators and families.

Initiatives such as the PPL Project also face other challenges that are not as easily overcome. The challenges that came up with parent participation were related to three primary areas: parents' schedules and conflicts with meeting times, parents' understanding of the purpose of the project, and individual family situations that required major changes in their availability to participate. Parents are busy people, often having multiple jobs and other obligations in their schedules that can interfere with consistent attendance and engagement—findings echoed in family literacy evaluations by Clymer et al. (2024) and Dahl-Leonard et al. (2025). Other families had a slight misunderstanding of the purpose of the project, thinking it was meant for preparing their children to become better readers rather than to prepare parents for their own role in supporting their children's literacy development. A few families had unexpected family circumstances arise that changed their availability, and they opted not to continue the project.

Considering these challenges has helped the researchers evaluate what can be done to mitigate attrition in future iterations of the project, and plans have been put into place. These plans include more specific parent education about the project's purpose, their roles as participants, and adjustments in the ongoing communication with project participants. Research on family engagement underscores the importance of transparent communication and scaffolding parent learning to build lasting capacity (Edwards et al., 2023; Ishimaru, 2019).

## Implications and Broader Impact

The outcomes of the PPL initiative echo findings from longstanding early education studies, including the Perry Preschool Project, which

emphasized the long-term and intergenerational benefits of investing in early childhood education. Like those landmark efforts, the PPL program shows promise not only in improving school readiness for children but also in enhancing parental agency and strengthening community-wide literacy culture. These results contribute to a growing body of research advocating for equity-centered, family-powered approaches to literacy (Guerrero et al., 2025; Rivera et al., 2024). By positioning parents as powerful, capable agents of change in their children's education, the PPL program leverages an often-overlooked resource in the fight to close literacy gaps—families themselves.

## Limitations and Future Directions

As with any community-based intervention, this study had several limitations. The sample size was relatively small (17 families), and participation varied in consistency, which may limit generalizability. Additionally, the absence of a control group makes it difficult to isolate the program's effects from other factors influencing home literacy practices. Self-reported data, such as reading logs and survey responses, may also be subject to bias. Despite these limitations, the PPL Project offers valuable insights into how targeted, culturally responsive support can empower parents as literacy leaders in their homes.

Future iterations could explore strategies to increase retention, such as digital engagement tools, flexible workshop formats, or peer mentorship models, approaches supported by Guerrero et al. (2025) and Schiele et al. (2025). Expanding the program to include fathers, grandparents, and nontraditional caregivers may also enhance reach and impact. Moreover, integrating formal assessment of child outcomes (e.g., vocabulary development or emergent literacy skills) could help more clearly link changes in home environments to developmental gains (Galea et al., 2025). Partnering with local schools, libraries, and pediatricians may also help embed the program within broader early childhood systems of support.

In conclusion, the PPL Project demonstrates that when families are supported with the right tools and encouragement, they can create rich, literacy-focused environments that foster lifelong learning from the very beginning. This community-driven approach holds promise for replication in other settings, especially those seeking to close equity gaps in early literacy (Edwards et al., 2023; Ishimaru, 2019).

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