

Mom, Read Me A Story

Copyright (c) 2000 Los Angeles Times

Los Angeles Times

Tuesday March 7, 2000

By RENEE TAWA, TIMES STAFF WRITER

Maria Izquierdo reads with Marco, right, and Guadalupe. One copy of the book is in English, the other Spanish; the tape recorder assists with the English version. Not so long ago and not so far away, in a Mexican village with streets of cobblestone, the girl would sneak out of school. What could this girl tell her teachers? That she was running home to frijoles?

The girl's grandmother sold tortillas to buy beans so the family could eat. The girl was the daughter of field workers and one of six kids. She had to stir the beans, add water, make sure they didn't burn. One day, the girl tripped and fell and . . .

The girl in this parable--don't forget that the heroine always rises--was Maria Izquierdo's mother. When 39-year-old Izquierdo grew up in San Mateo Texcalyacac, families had no money for books. Instead, the rich oral histories of her parents and grandparents became her bedtime stories.

While such a storytelling heritage is precious, education experts say, it can undermine a basic tenet of early literacy--that parents must read to their children.

Now, in Los Angeles, Izquierdo, who works in the garment district ironing clothes for minimum wage, is building a new storytelling tradition with her children, Marco Canales, 6, and Guadalupe Canales, 5. Under the auspices of a huge federal research project on literacy, Izquierdo has learned to read to her kids.

"I am living now in their time," the petite, soft-spoken Izquierdo says through a translator. A time in which storybooks have a place alongside the ancestral lore. One night, in their two-bedroom apartment, Izquierdo cradles what she calls the family library in two hands, as if she were holding a hope chest--two upright cardboard file boxes, the kind used to store magazines, filled with a dozen or so storybooks in English or Spanish.

Says Guadalupe, in English, with a dazzling grin: "I like it when Mommy is reading. I hear it beautiful."

The Izquierdos check out several children's books at a time for free from Para Los Ninos. This is what bounces the hearts of USC researchers, who are part of a national team studying early reading across the country. USC's group hopes to learn how to build a culture of literacy in disadvantaged communities while respecting storytelling traditions, says David B. Yaden Jr., an associate professor of learning and instruction. Yaden's team has targeted Spanish-speaking preschoolers and their immigrant parents in high-poverty inner-city areas.

The idea started as a simple one: Get books to families and help them read. And along the way, researchers found, the books exerted a magic on families beyond what they ever dreamed.

Reaching Kids at a Young Age

USC's project is one of 33 coordinated by CIERA, the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement, based at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The aim of CIERA--funded by a five-year, \$17-million grant from the U.S. Department of Education--is to figure out how to solve reading problems before students finish third grade and to get answers to policymakers and others who can make a difference.

The families working with USC are clients of Para Los Niños, a nonprofit social services agency on skid row in downtown Los Angeles that serves a population of mostly single mothers and their children.

In January 1998, USC researchers started a book loan program and literacy workshops at Para Los Niños. They found that most of the 4-year-olds lacked even the most basic reading tools--the children did not know which direction to flip pages nor how to follow print. Nor did they grasp the difference between words and letters, and words and pictures. Part of the confusion, researchers surmised, comes from parents who cannot read well. The parents may open a book in the middle, for instance, point to a picture and then make up a story.

At the workshops, researchers show parents how to point out the title on the cover, turn the pages and track printed words on a page with their fingers. They encourage parents to put drama into their voices and ask children questions about the stories as they go along.

The researchers didn't want families to feel pushed into reading and writing English (out of sensitivity to the political turmoil stemming from the forced end of bilingual education in California). So at one workshop, the team helped some parents, in Spanish, write down songs, poems and stories from their home countries that had been passed down through the generations in oral form only. For instance, one by one, parents recited a nursery rhyme, "La Planchadora," about a funny mouse that irons, a story that resonates with many mothers who work in the garment district. The material was compiled in handmade books, copies of which are available at Para Los Niños for families to check out.

USC's team knew that these parents tended to shy away from public libraries, so the researchers bought 800 books in English and Spanish, including fairy tales, ABC readers and stories about farm animals.

The book loan program fits into the schedule of parents such as Izquierdo, most of whom do not have cars. Izquierdo can dash into Para Los Niños after work, get a quick recommendation from bilingual researchers who know each family's tastes and abilities, and then head home with the kids. There are no fees for late or damaged books, a relief for financially struggling parents.

Izquierdo's days are long, starting at 5 a.m. so she can get herself and the kids ready in time to catch the public bus to Ninth Street Elementary School and then to work. On the bus, she points out letters and words on billboards and signs, the way USC's team taught her to do.

Tests Show Positive Results of Program

Now, two years into USC's four-year program, Para Los Ninos' preschoolers are starting elementary school reading at or above grade level, according to early test results, compared with other children of immigrant families who typically enter kindergarten behind their peers. Also, initial results show, the students are scoring higher on standardized reading tests than Spanish-speaking children from other area preschools. By the end of this year, 150 of Para Los Ninos' children will have participated in the program.

Yaden, who hopes to track the children at least through the second grade, is happy about the results but happier still about the way parents have taken to their roles as storybook readers.

"I can give the children tests, but . . . the unexpected result is I didn't know there was so much power when children get interested," he says.

The team observed a boomerang effect: While the children are learning to read, just as critically, their parents' literacy is edging up as well.

"When I hear [Izquierdo] talk about the program, it makes me feel very humble," says Yaden, who heads the project for USC's Rossier School of Education. "I want to say, 'Maria, it's as much what you bring out in your children's [reading] performance as what we're providing.'

"When [parents] feel invested in literacy themselves, that gets passed on to the children and passed on through the generations."

Family Creates a New Tradition

Izquierdo is literate but never had the patience to read to her kids. She didn't know how to tackle bedtime stories and keep the kids from fidgeting. And she didn't dare try to read to them in English when theirs was so much better than hers.

After work, Izquierdo picks up the kids from a Para Los Ninos latchkey program, and they get home by bus about 6:30 p.m. They have a kitchen table, a work table and beds; the decor includes photographs of the children on the wall and the kids' crayon drawings on the refrigerator that say, "I love you, Mom."

Every night after dinner and homework, Marco and Guadalupe rush to put on their pajamas, then tail their mother while she tries to clean up in the kitchen. "Mama," they will call, waving a book at her, "read this one!"

They read together, plopped on the floor of their living room, which has no couch. Izquierdo remembers what she learned in the USC workshops about looking for details in stories. If an illustration shows a mutt in the distance that isn't in the story, for instance, she urges the kids to imagine what the dog might be doing.

She remembers to vary her voice, as if she were in a play and acting out all the parts. If she doesn't know a word, she will ask the kids if they know it or they will look it up in her Spanish-English dictionary. To help them with English, they also listen to audio books.

Through the USC program, Izquierdo's kids have learned to think of books as treats. If Marco acts up, his mother knows how to get him to stop: Settle down, she will tell him, or I won't read to you tonight. Always, he settles down.

Marco is her quiet kid, a first-grader who likes to play soccer. He wants to be a police officer when he grows up to "catch the bad guys." What he likes best about books is "my mother's voice."

Guadalupe is outgoing, a kindergartner with so much energy that her Winnie-the-Pooh backpack is always bouncing. Someday, she wants to become a teacher.

Why a teacher?

"I will read books to the children," she says.

Izquierdo is having a blast. She likes the stories about Clifford the big red dog and Pocahontas as much as the kids do.

And she still tells them stories about the one-room, stone-walled school house that she used to attend in Mexico, and how she can still hear the voice of her mother in her head, mesmerizing her with what happened on the old streets of cobblestone--like the day she fell, banged her knee and still ran home to stir the beans, then back to school.

Their story time is not just about getting a leg up in school, Izquierdo says. It's about family, a way for a tired mom to reach her kids and cuddle with them at the end of the day. This makes her happy, and then it doesn't matter so much that she is raising the kids alone.

She didn't expect this to happen, for the three of them to pull together, when she signed up for the program on reading.

Izquierdo crosses her arms to make an X over her heart. "It makes us become a family," she says of their reading time.

"Solidaridad." Solidarity.

For information on the federal literacy project, which includes USC, check the Web site: <http://www.ciera.org> or call (734) 647-6940.

For information on Para Los Ninos or how to volunteer or donate: (213) 623-8446.

Renee Tawa can be reached at renee.tawa@latimes.com

PHOTO: Maria Izquierdo reads with Marco, right, and Guadalupe. One copy of the book is in English, the other Spanish; the tape recorder assists with the English version.

PHOTOGRAPHER: BOB CHAMBERLIN / Los Angeles Times

PHOTO: The Izquierdos check out several children's books at a time for free from Para Los Ninos.

PHOTOGRAPHER: BOB CHAMBERLIN / Los Angeles Times