# "Dream More, Learn More, Care More, and Be More": The Imagination Library Influencing Storybook Reading and Early Literacy

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# "DREAM MORE, LEARN MORE, CARE MORE, AND BE MORE": THE IMAGINATION LIBRARY INFLUENCING STORYBOOK READING AND EARLY LITERACY

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ABSTRACT: This study examined the free book giving program of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library and its influence upon storybook reading and early literacy within one county-wide setting in the United States. Family literacy and early literacy experiences are known to be critical to young children's literacy development. The study found that childre who received the Imagination Library books were statistically different from those children who did not participate in the free book giving program. This study has implications for the early literacy outcomes for young children and their families, as well as other communities who utilize Dolly Parton's Imagination Library.

KEYWORDS: Early childhood, literacy, families, communities, books

## Introduction

Dolly Parton, in speaking about her free book program – the Imagination Library, describes the books provided and reading to young children as a way for each child to discover how to "dream more, learn more, care more, and be more" (Imagination Library, 2017). What started as a community-based project in preventing illiteracy in her mountain hometown of East Tennessee has expanded into an international initiative over the last 20 years with over 10.2 million books gifted to children throughout the world. The "Book Lady", as Dolly

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Parton is so fondly called, has become a part of one northwestern Pennsylvania community. Through its leadership and the generous support of community donors, a local non-profit organization has brought the Imagination Library's books, free of charge, to all children, birth to age five, in this community. Parental involvement, in an initiative such as this, has been shown to have a tremendous influence on young children's academic success (e.g., Paratore, Edwards, & O'Brien, 2014; Sylva et al., 2011).

Young children's success in literacy and being "school ready" has been a focus of national, state, and local attention throughout the United States. UNICEF (Britto, 2012) defines school readiness as "transitions" and "gaining competencies" across the three dimensions of preparing the child, the school, and the family for formal education. Concurrently, educational initiatives, such as the Common Core State Standards, have pushed for higher educational achievement within the earliest years of schooling. Years of research has demonstrated that a child's learning begins in the home. Young children need exposure to storybook reading in the home, with family involvement around the text, that supports their development of early literacy skills and strategies (e.g., Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008; Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

"School readiness" is often complicated by factors beyond the child's control. More young children in the United States, approximately 41% of all children under the age of 18, are growing up in low-income households – with one in every five of those children identified as "poor" (e.g., Koball & Yiang, 2018). This creates a lack of access to basic resources for young children, across many communities, to thrive and succeed (e.g., Koball & Yiang, 2018). As a result, there is an evident need for equitable educational experiences for all children across increasingly diverse communities of the United States and supporting their success within the formalized settings of public education (e.g., Nieto, 2013; Delpit, 2002). Developmentally-appropriate, diverse storybooks provide a needed support to a child in the home as the transition is made to formal educational settings (e.g., Neuman, 1996; Sin & Kim, 2008).

## Purpose of the Research

This research study focused on the early literacy skills and strategies demonstrated by young children upon their entry to kindergarten across this county's elementary schools. The research interests of the study focused on how the initial impact of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL), a free monthly book program for ages birth to five, was shaping the participating young children's literacy, along with their parents/caregivers' perceptions of their children's literacy skills and strategies. This study's research questions examined the early literacy impact of storybook reading, through the books provided in the Imagination Library initiative, and how these books impacted the young children of this county.

## Review of Literature

There is intrinsic and researched evidence for storybook reading with young children. A seminal study of storybook reading showed that young children have more mastery over concepts about print when exposed to storybook reading (Neuman, 1996). Concepts about Print (CAP) are the beginning literacy skills that children acquire through book exposure and reading. These skills include such important behaviors as learning left to right (directionality in text), reading text from the top of the page to the bottom of the page, and noticing punctuation marks. These beginning literacy skills are essential for children to develop by late kindergarten or early first grade to have longitudinal success in reading (Clay, 2013). Young children who master CAP ease their transition from non-traditional storybook reading, often seen with infants and young toddlers (e.g., picture retelling; making up a story within a text), to more traditional storybook reading with preschool- and kindergarten-age children (Neuman, 1996).

Storybook reading has been shown to have a powerful effect upon young children's literacy knowledge and subsequent achievement of measures of early literacy skills/strategies. The National Early Literacy Panel highlighted the key literacy skills and strategies that young children can acquire from storybooks. For example, alphabetic knowledge and rapid automatic naming of letters is associated with strong conventional literacy for a

child's later literacy development (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008). This is often improved through a child's exposure to and reading of various types of texts. Additionally, CAP (including print knowledge and visual processing) and letter knowledge (including alphabetic recognition) were shown as two key variables predictive of later literacy achievement for both preschoolers and kindergarteners (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). This research demonstrates a clear need for young children, from birth through their formal schooling experiences, to be exposed to print and texts to set them on a trajectory for successful literacy learning.

Beyond the academic benefits, storybook reading has also been shown to support parental involvement within the home setting. It is well documented and widely accepted that parental involvement is essential to a child's academic and social success (Paratore, Edwards, & O'Brien, 2014). A research synthesis by Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that parents/caregivers who demonstrated high levels of involvement had children who were regularly in school, while achieving better grades and test outcomes as well as graduating high school and often continuing to post-secondary education.

The cost of high-quality storybooks for young children can often be cost prohibitive to families, limiting the opportunities for access to text and stories. Research has also found that public libraries, particularly for diverse, rural, or impoverished young children, can be difficult to access, even when factors of income and education are considered (e.g., Sin & Kim, 2008). Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, through the turnkey resources of the Dollywood Foundation and the financial support of "Local Champions," works to provide a free, developmentally-appropriate book to children from birth to age five (Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, 2017). Each book is shipped monthly from the Imagination Library, directly to the attention of the child at their home address. Award-winning children's literature titles, such as *The Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Pena, as well as classic titles, such as *The Little Engine That Could* by Watty Piper, are used within the program (Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, 2017). It provides up to 60 free storybooks to all children within eligible communities, regardless of household income.

Previous research has examined Dolly Parton's Imagination Library as a book distribution program increasing parental reading, educational policy considerations as it began within a community in England, and its impact on a kindergarten readiness in Tennessee (Hall & Jones, 2016; Ridzi, Sylvia, & Singh, 2014; Samiei, Bush, Sell, & Imig, 2016). This limited research to date provides initial insights to greater potential of this program's influence on storybook reading within the home and, more importantly, its broader impact on early literacy skills for young children entering kindergarten and beyond.

## Theoretical Framework

Interactions with young children, particularly while sharing a story, have shown to have short- and long-term implications for academic and social success. These interactions take place within nested experiences for each child, their ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1994). This system of interaction shapes the child's development and interactions within varied worlds and experiences. These ecological interactions are of interest within this current study in considering the impact of community-sponsored literacy interventions like Dolly Parton's Imagination Library.

The free books provided by the Imagination Library to the young children in this study also have a potential to shape shared reading experiences within the home between the parent/caregiver and the child. The parents/caregivers scaffold the children's reading through interactions around text (e.g., reading aloud books) (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). These purposeful interactions have the potential to shape the child's educational, social, and emotional responses and outcomes in reading (literacy).

## The Research Study

### The Research Questions

This research study examined the impact of storybook reading through Dolly Parton's Imagination Library on young

children's early literacy skills and strategies upon entry into kindergarten. The research questions for study were:

1. What are the early literacy skills and strategies possessed by children who participated or did not participate in DPIL;
2. What are the perceptions of parents/caregivers as to the early literacy skills and strategies possessed by their child/ren who participated in DPIL; and
3. What are perceptions of parents/caregivers as to the contributions of DPIL to their home literacy practices for their child/ren who participated in DPIL.

These research questions were developed using the sponsoring organization's project goals as well as the existing research literature on storybook reading for young children along with previous research conducted on the Imagination Library.

## *Methodology*

DESIGN

This study followed a mixed-methods design, utilizing quantitative and qualitative methodologies. It examined early literacy skills and strategies possessed by young children upon their entry to school – kindergarten. "Early literacy skills and strategies" are defined in this study as the developmental precursors to reading and writing, the socializations to literacy (reading and writing), and the environmental supports (e.g., parental interactions with children around books) that lead to children's development in literacy (Evangelou, Sylva, Kyriacou, Wild, & Glenny, 2009; Sylva et al., 2011; Whitehurst et al., 1999; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2003). This includes all literate behaviors exhibited by young children around their use and interactions with texts, print and oral language, and conversations with others. Later reading achievement may be predicted by using assessments of early literacy skills and strategies (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008).

This study utilized a normed early literacy achievement measure, Clay's (2013) *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement,* and a parent/caregiver survey to answer the research questions of interest. This assessment was used to

determine a child's print awareness and book handling skills, including book concepts, text directionality, concepts of letters and words, and concepts of punctuation. This assessment was first developed in the 1970s as one of the first assessments of emergent literacy (Clay, 2013). It is important to note this assessment does not assume formal literacy, but rather looks at a young child's pre-reading and pre-writing skills/strategies. This assessment was selected due to its well-established use in understanding young children's conventional and non-conventional literacy knowledge (Neuman, 1996). For this study, each assessor utilized a probe sheet for letter identification and a full color text for the CAP probe questions with each child who participated; these are untimed assessments in letter identification and CAP (Clay, 2013).

Several kindergarten cohorts were recruited throughout this community. Participants recruited for this study consisted of 394 kindergarten students (188 boys, 203 girls, average age= 5.80 years, age range: 4.96–6.96 years) from six schools located within this northwestern Pennsylvania community, representing the diversity of rural, suburban, and urban populations. These assessments were administered in fall 2015 to kindergarten-age children during their first few months of formal schooling. A convenience sampling approach was taken for this study. Several elementary schools were asked to participate in the study and evaluations were conducted at the schools responding to the requests.

A testing procedure or protocol was established by the researchers for each participating school site. Human subject research approval was secured prior to working with and collecting data from the participants. The first part of the study involved the assessment of kindergartener's early literacy skills and strategies. Each kindergarten child participated at his/her elementary school site, unless his/her parent/caregiver did not grant permission. It took approximately 7 min to assess each child. To begin, the researcher would gain assent from the student (child) by asking if s/he would "help me read a story together and answer a few questions." If the student agreed to help, the evaluation would begin with the Letter Identification task using the methods instructed in the text. This assessment

included 54 alphabet letters, including upper and lowercase letters. The child read aloud each letter name, an acceptable sound for the letter, or gave a word with the same initial letter (Clay, 2013). This took approximately 3 to 5 min to complete per child. The evaluator would then proceed to the CAP task, following the instructions provided from the text. This assessment involved a probe book, *Follow Me, Moon* by Clay (2013), and 24 task items relating to that probe book. These items included early and conventional literacy skills for young children. The child turned the pages of the book and used it to answer the items (questions) posed by the evaluator. This assessment is designed for children ages 5- to 7-years-old, approximately kindergarten through second grade (Clay, 2013). When the evaluation was over, the student was escorted back to class and the evaluator would call for the next student on the list. The data collected through this first part of the study were coded using random number assignment and protected for anonymity. Following the evaluations, score sheets were graded and entered in Microsoft Excel and SPSS. To indicate if a student was in the DPIL program, the list of students who were evaluated was compared to a database of known participants in the Imagination Library that was provided by the sponsoring organization. There were 114 participants in the Imagination Library (DPIL) located within the broader sample of 394 kindergarteners assessed for this study.

The second part of the study involved the parents/caregivers' perceptions of the Imagination Library. The parent/caregiver surveys given to DPIL participating households gathered perceptions of storybook reading within the home and the early literacy skills and strategies possessed by their child. The questions within the survey focused on such topics as number of books within the home, the frequency of reading to their child within the home, the number of visits to a public library, and the importance of reading to their child. Demographic characteristics, such as household income and ethnicity, were also asked within the survey. A total of 69 surveys were distributed and 27 responses were received—a response rate of approximately 39%.

The data were analyzed during spring 2016. Data analyses included statistical analyses using SPSS and qualitative analyses

of survey responses. Independent-means *t*-test analyses were selected for this study as there were two conditions, the participants within DPIL and non-participants within DPIL, within the sample and analyses using the data inputted in SPSS were completed. This was to determine observable differences within and across the conditions for the data collected in this study (Field, 2009). Using the research questions and questions of the survey, qualitative analyses were completed from pre-existing analytical categories (which were reflected the questions from both sources) as well as descriptive statistics generated from question responses (frequency of responses) into inductive methods of obtaining information, such as the open-ended responses of the survey. This is the dynamic process needed in forming grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 2009). There were also conceptual and practical relationships between the quantitative and qualitative data sets within this study, guided by the theoretical framework and research questions.

### Findings

#### Part 1: Assessment of Kindergartener's Early Literacy Skills and Strategies

The first part of this study focused on the assessment of early literacy skills and strategies for young children upon their entry into kindergarten. Each child was assessed in a one-on-one setting using Clay's (2013) CAP and Letter Identification tasks from *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Third Edition). These assessments were essential in answering the first research question of this study: *What are the early literacy skills and strategies possessed by children who participated or did not participate in DPIL?*
    Results from the current study showed that young children entering kindergarten who had participated in the Imagination Library (DPIL) were significantly different in their early literacy skills and strategies when compared to their peers who had not participated. Of interest are two key analyses to support these findings:

1. Participants in the Imagination Library (DPIL) performed better on Clay's Letter Identification task when compared to those who did not participate in DPIL ($p < .01^*$); and

2. Participants in the Imagination Library (DPIL) performed better on composite variables (categories of items Clay's *CAP Task*) of early literacy skills and strategies (i.e., text and illustration orientation: questions #7 & 10; word and letter concepts within text: questions #21–24) than those who did not participate in DPIL ($p < .01^*$).

   *Note: $p < .05$ is the accepted level of statistical significance for findings in educational research.

It is important to note, before discussing the analyses of the variables of interest, that participant gender and pre-school/PreK experiences were known and controlled for in additional statistical analyses (e.g., t-tests). In these analyses, no statistically significant differences were found between the control group and the treatment group, those participants who had received the Imagination Library books. This is an important distinction to note as other seminal studies in early literacy (e.g., Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000; Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008) have established the importance of pre-school/PreK experiences in early literacy achievement. Yet, in the case of this study with its research questions, the participation in the Imagination Library and receiving these free books served as the key statistical difference between participants.

An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare overall Letter Identification scores between students in the control group and students enrolled in the Dolly Parton Imagination Library (DPIL) group. Results indicated a significant difference between the control group ($M = 36.13$, $SD = 17.89$) and the DPIL group ($M = 41.55$, $SD = 15.22$); $t(237.92) = -3.03$, $p < .01$. The Letter Identification task (see Figure 1) demonstrated that children who participated in DPIL had stronger letter knowledge than their peers who did not participate. For example, the children were given upper and lowercase letters to identify by name, sound, or familiar words, which had the same initial letter. This list of letters displayed the 54 iterations of upper and lower case letters that young children would commonly read or write within their own literacy experiences. Previous research on storybook reading and letter identification has demonstrated a child's exposure to print will
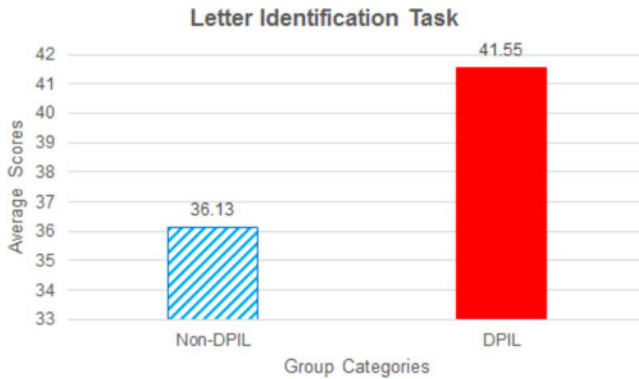
**Letter Identification Task**



**FIGURE 1** Letter identification task- DPIL and Non-DPIL.
*Note: Range is from 0 to 54.

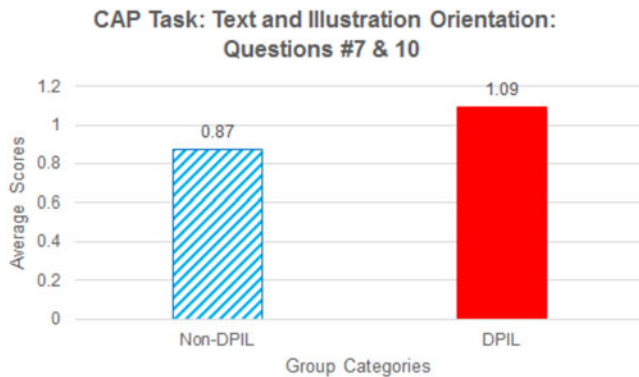**CAP Task: Text and Illustration Orientation: Questions #7 & 10**



**FIGURE 2** *CAP* task cluster: text and illustration orientation, questions #7 & 10- DPIL and Non-DPIL.
*Note: *CAP* range for this variable is 0–2.

increase a child's letter knowledge (e.g., Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008). This same result is seen within this study.

For the CAP task, an independent-samples *t*-test was once again conducted on the data to generate these results. Although the DPIL group did have a slightly higher mean score, there was no significant differences between the control group ($M = 10.70$, $SD = 4.68$) and the DPIL group ($M = 11.43$, $SD = 4.49$); $t(392) = -1.41$, $p = .60$. Yet, there were differences within and across task items for the *CAP* task (see Figures 2 and 3). This is not surprising as the CAP task is designed for administration to
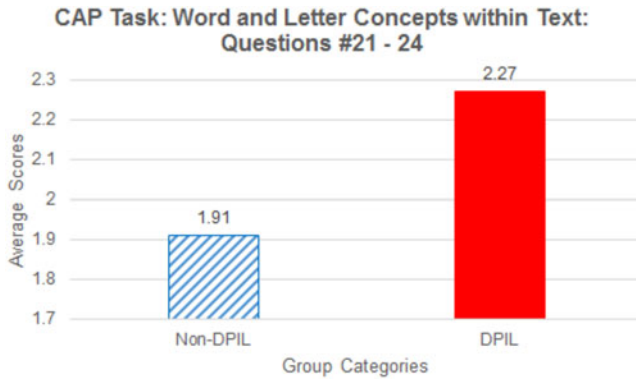
CAP Task: Word and Letter Concepts within Text:
Questions #21 - 24



**FIGURE 3** *CAP* task cluster: word and letter concepts within texts, questions #21-24- DPIL and non-DPIL.
*Note: *CAP* range for this variable is 0 to 4.

track growth from children in kindergarten through second grade (Clay, 2013). This task covers a wide span of conventional literacy skills and strategies across these grade levels. It was important then to analyze the children's responses using clustered variables of interest – using specific questions to focus on early literacy skills and strategies as appropriate for the beginning of kindergarten with children who are five to seven years of age. For example, young children typically learn to identify a letter within words and sentences or acknowledge where a sentence begins and ends. In reviewing applicable educational literature (e.g., Clay, 2013; Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008), task items #7 & 10 and #21–24 aligned as items assessing the early literacy skills and strategies of beginning kindergarteners. Subsequent analyses, using these clustered variables, showed that DPIL participants performed better on task items of early literacy skills and strategies when compared to their peers who did not participate in DPIL (see Figures 2 and 3). Taken together, children who participated in the Imagination Library had stronger letter knowledge and improved CAP.

### Part 2: Parents/Caregivers' Perceptions of the Imagination Library

It was important to understand the perceptions of the Imagination Library within the parents and caregivers of the

participating children. A survey, consisting of predominantly Likert scale items, was administered to collect these perceptions. The items within the survey focused upon the early literacy skills and strategies possessed by the children as well as the home literacy practices for their child/ren. The questions for the survey were generated through the review of relevant research literature, the previous studies of storybook reading with young children, and from the research questions for this study.

The survey was administered to the parents/caregivers during early spring 2016 after all participants in DPIL were identified from the Imagination Library databases. The surveys were distributed through the elementary school sites. Sixty-nine surveys were distributed and 27 responses were received, a 39% response rate. This response rate meets the acceptability standards for survey instruments used for this study's research questions (Baumann & Bason, 2004). This sampling represented a diverse group: the median household income for approximately 75% of the sample was no more than $75,000 total and a significant percentage (22%) made less than $25,000 (Survey Results, 2016). Their educational levels were most frequently some college/associate's degree or a bachelor's degree (Survey Results, 2016).

The survey yielded important findings about the home literacy practices within this sampling of the Imagination Library's participants. The survey found:

1. Over 88% of the participants surveyed had 20+ books for their kindergarten child; and
2. Approximately 44% of the participants surveyed never visited a public library ($n = 12$*) and another 48% of the homes only visited a public library one to two times per month ($n = 13$*) (Survey Results, 2016).

    *Note: $n$ equals total number of participants.

It is important to note that the "20+ books for their kindergarten child" includes approximately 12 to 24 books received from the Imagination Library. These findings demonstrate a clear need for texts and reading practices within the homes of young children of this community. This Imagination

Library had filled a clear need by providing books to children that may not have otherwise been available.

Additionally, the survey found parents/caregivers of Imagination Library participants valued early literacy skills and strategies within their children:

1. When provided with books, approximately 85% of the parents/caregivers surveyed reported reading to their child at least 3–4 times (37%) and some (37%) up to 7+ times a week; and
2. Approximately, 93% of the participants surveyed found reading to their child as "very important" (Survey Results, 2016).

These findings demonstrate an apparent belief in the importance of early literacy skills and strategies through storybook reading with young children. The parents/caregivers of the Imagination Library participants saw a clear value in exposing their child to literacy through read aloud interactions. Overall, the results of the survey demonstrated a clear need and benefit of the early literacy work within this community.

## Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate the importance of this community's Imagination Library program and its impact upon young children. This study demonstrated the initial, positive impact of storybook reading on the first cohorts of children graduating from the Imagination Library. The assessments of these young children and the survey of their parents/caregivers demonstrate the clear benefits of early literacy initiatives in storybook reading, particularly opportunities to support home-based literacy with young children. Previous studies of the Imagination Library have demonstrated similar positive outcomes for young children when exposed to storybook reading (Imagination Library, 2017). This study adds to the literature by expanding the researched link between strong letter knowledge and strong CAP knowledge in children who are read to within the home setting (e.g., Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008; Paratore & Edwards, 2011). This study contributes new findings to the Imagination Library's research base in assessing

children's CAP and letter identification knowledge using Clay's (2013) tasks in Letter Identification and CAP. Clay's (2013) assessments were selected for their well-established use and psychometrically proven results with early literacy learners. This study contributes to literacy research for the efficacy of improving early literacy achievement through storybook reading with young children (e.g., Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008; Neuman, 1996).

Several recommendations can be implemented from this study. First, it is important to support the parents/caregivers of Imagination Library participants in their literacy work with their children at home. This local organization had supported this type of work in several initiatives while implementing DPIL. It is important to explore other community partnerships (e.g., daycare/preschool sites) that may support work like this in other communities to encourage the full benefit of storybook reading within the home. Research is well established in how parents and caregivers can benefit from the guidance of others in helping their child with literacy in the home (e.g., Paratore & Edwards, 2011; Paratore et al., 2014). Second, future research studies will need to be conducted to prove the continuing effectiveness of the Imagination Library project. It is recommended that a similar study of this nature be conducted in this same community within 3 years to look at the impact of DPIL across children who entered the program at birth and completed it at age five. The current study captured kindergarten-age children who only received 1–2years of books through DPIL. This is a limitation within this study. This is the result of the program only existing for 2 years within this community at the time of this study. It would be important for a future collaboration to analyze both participants and non-participants within the Imagination Library as well as discovering additional implications from storybook reading with diverse groups of children. This is another limitation in the study. Further analyses on the implications of diversity, socioeconomic conditions, and educational levels within the home settings and how this may influence a book program such as Dolly Parton's Imagination Library.

Early literacy achievement in young children is paramount in their lifelong literacy success (Clay, 2013; Lonigan &

Shanahan, 2008). Community initiatives like Dolly Parton's Imagination Library provide a vital resource to children, their families, and their communities. The current study demonstrated that early literacy achievement was improved by children's participation in and exposure to storybook reading through the Imagination Library. When young children possess strong knowledge of conventional literacy (i.e., they know how to read and how books work), these children are more likely to be successful in their later literacy achievement (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008).

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