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Promoting positive family interactions:

Evaluating a free early childhood book distribution program

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Abstract

The Dolly Parton Imagination Library (DPIL) program encourages reading among families of preschool children by mailing age-appropriate books, once per month, until the age of five. An evaluation of a DPIL program in a southern state in the U.S. was conducted to assess the impact on enrolled children. Focus groups were conducted and a survey was administered to over 100 parents of children in the program to determine parents' satisfaction with – and assessment of – the program relative to its activities and stated outcomes. To what extent the program promoted reading in the family, and children's enjoyment of reading and school readiness was explored. In addition, family communication styles and relationships were assessed relative to these outcomes. The parents reported that the program introduced more diverse reading choices, fostered their children's love of reading, promoted cognitive development and readiness for school, increased use of public libraries, and encouraged family interaction although some differences in reading activities based on family communication styles were found. As well, parents provided recommendations for outreaching to underserved children. Implications of these findings for groups that sponsor this program and for further research are presented.

Key words: early childhood; reading; book distribution program; program evaluation; family interaction

Introduction

Children who are not ready or are underprepared for school may face obstacles in their academic trajectory which may, in turn, have an adverse impact on their long-term prospects. In fact, links between low literacy levels, limited social mobility, and poor health outcomes have been established (Lunze & Paasche-Orlow, 2014). Further, parents' level of psychological distress has been found to adversely impact children's language and literacy development (Mensah & Kiernan, 2010). In contrast, children whose parents read to them at an early age experience educational benefits throughout their years in school (Gottfried, Schlackman, Gottfried, & Boutin-Martinez, 2015). In addition, children with a larger number of books in the home, demonstrate greater gains in academic attainment (as measured by years of schooling) than their peers with fewer books – particularly amongst disadvantaged populations (parents with less formal education and lower income families) (Evans, Kelley, Sikora, & Treiman, 2010). The importance of opportunities for children to engage in reading activities prior to entering school cannot be overstated. However, it is important to recognize that the quality and frequency of these activities as well as the environment in which these activities take place are salient to children's outcomes.

Literature Review

Parental involvement and their expectations have been identified as key factors for children's development and education (Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Faires, Nichols, & Rickelman, 2000; Kraft, Findlay, Mayor, Gilberts, & Hofmeister, 2001; Senechal & LeFevre, 2002; Sukhram & Hsu, 2012). Research has shown that supportive home environments establish motivation for reading including more voluntary reading by children (Bennett, Wiegand, & Martin, 2002; Kraft et al., 2001). Parent-child reading activities (e.g., subject-specific reading),

for instance, have been shown to enhance children's reading acquisition (Senechal & Young, 2008); and positive literacy outcomes have been repeatedly demonstrated as a result of joint book reading (Bus et al., 1995).

Sonnenschein and Munsterman (2002) found that children who had experienced more frequent home-based reading interactions prior to entering Kindergarten were more motivated to continue reading in 1st grade. However, the authors noted that factors that predict motivation for reading when children are in kindergarten or beginning school may differ as the child gets older. Relative to their fundamental skills, parents reading to and with their child(ren) has been found to meaningfully improve children's receptive and expressive vocabulary, literal and inferential comprehensive skills, sentence length, letter and symbol recognition, basic conceptual development, and increased interest in books (Bus et al., 1995; Faires, Nichols, & Rickelman, 2000; Mol & Bus, 2011; Senechal & LeFerve, 2002). In fact, a child's literacy skills have been predicted by parent-child reading interactions and the reading interest of the child even when accounting for differences in parent's age, the parent's level of education, family size, and the child's age (Bracken & Fischel, 2008). In addition, while Serpell, Sonnenschein, Baker, and Ganapathy (2002) found that family income or ethnic identity made no significant contribution to children's literacy skills, intimate family culture including frequency of joint literacy activities with the child, and family routines such as reading aloud did. Similarly, preschool aged children in families with supportive parents who engage in literacy activities like joint book reading have seen significant differences in language and literacy skills when compared with their peers in families that do not engage in these practices (Bennett, Weigel, & Martin, 2002).

In contrast, children whose home environment does not support reading have fewer opportunities for acquiring knowledge and skills pertaining to books, and are at greater risk for

reading difficulties (Bennett et al., 2002). Having access to books is part of creating a richer reading environment; and not surprisingly, access to books in the home is important when encouraging in-home reading by parents (Clark & Akerman, 2006; Kraft et al., 2001).

Moreover, books in the home can improve children's reading skills if parents engage in frequent reading with the child (Sonneschein & Munsterman, 2002).

Dolly Parton Imagination Library

The Dolly Parton Imagination Library (DPIL) program is a “free” U.S.-based book distribution program that encourages reading among families of children by mailing age-appropriate books, once per month, until the age of five (Conyers, 2012). Families pay no fee to participate in the program. Instead, the cost of purchasing and mailing the books (approximately 25 USD per child per year) is typically assumed by local and regional governments and community-based organizations. These groups must demonstrate the need and provide a funding plan to become a “local champion” of the program. Once approved, the Dollywood Foundation provides technical support and promotional materials to help these groups outreach to and enroll local, eligible children and mails books to participating families (Imagination Library, 2016).

Raised in a relatively impoverished, rural, eastern Tennessee community in the United States, Dolly Parton earned success as a popular American singer-songwriter and actress. As a philanthropist, Ms. Parton leveraged her wealth to launch the Imagination Library program in 1995 to help children like her who have limited opportunities to read while growing up. By 2016, the program reported that it had distributed close to 74 million books, and was delivering books to over 915,000 children each month in approximately 1,600 communities in the U.S., Canada, the UK, and Australia (Imagination Library, 2016). The books are chosen by early childhood experts and provide increasing complexity to enhance a child's reading skills as they

prepare to enter their first year in school. In addition, many of the books are delivered with instructions for caregivers to help engage the child in reading (Conyers, 2012). As well, Spanish bilingual titles, audio versions, and books available in braille have been introduced to better meet the diverse needs of enrolled families and children (Imagination Library, 2016).

The DPIL program has been found to increase the frequency of daily reading activities regardless of a child's or parent's demographics (e.g., age, gender, race, income, or level of education) (Ridzi, Sylvia, & Singh, 2011). Parents have reported that their children enjoyed reading more, read independently, increased their vocabulary, and were better prepared for Kindergarten as a result of their participation in DPIL (Gordon, n.d.; Lelle, 2011). Furthermore, parents have reported that books from DPIL include those that parents might not otherwise select, and in addition to DPIL books, the sizes of their libraries have increased. For those whom purchasing books may be cost prohibitive, parents report that the program has been a cost effective means to build their child's library (Gordon, n.d.; Lelle, 2011). As a corollary benefit, parents who have participated in the Imagination Library program have observed that their family's participation in the program has had positive impacts on family interactions (Lelle, 2011). Ultimately, children who participate in the program have realized positive gains in math and language development (Samiei, Sell, Bush, & Imig, 2013). These children, on average, are more school ready than peers who have not participated in the program.

As central figures in the implementation of the program – particularly in the early years of a child's literacy development – it is critical to understand parents' views regarding the effectiveness of early reading programs like the Dolly Parton Imagination Library program. Therefore, parents of children participating in an Imagination Library program in a south central state in the U.S. were invited to participate in an evaluation of the program.

Methodology

A logic model has utility for outlining the interrelationships between an agency’s resources, its activities and output, and the outcomes expected for program participants and the program’s broader impact on the community. It also offers a framework for evaluation (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004). Figure 1 outlines a simple logic model for the Dolly Parton Imagination Library.

<i>Resources/ Inputs</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>Outputs</i>	<i>Outcomes</i>		<i>Impact</i>
			<i>Short-Term</i>	<i>Longer-Term</i>	
<i>Dolly Parton Foundation Sponsoring agency staff Donors (individual, business, corporate givers)</i>	<i>Fundraising Outreach to and enrollment of prospective families with children under 5</i>	<i>Distribution of DPIL books to enrolled children</i>	<i>Increase in enrolled children’s interest in/ motivation to/ engagement in reading Increase in positive family interactions</i>	<i>Increase in rate of Kindergarten-ready children</i>	<i>Increase in rate of literacy</i>

Figure 1. Logic model for Dolly Parton Imagination Library Program

At the request of the sponsoring agency, the researchers focused on two areas for its program evaluation. The agency was interested in gathering information from participating parents about its outreach and enrollment efforts (i.e., a subset of its activities) as well as participating parents’ perspectives about whether the program was realizing its short-term outcomes – to increase enrolled children’s interest in, motivation to, and engagement in reading in addition to increasing positive family interactions.

Specific to evaluating the program’s short-term outcomes, four research questions drove the inquiry: To what extent 1) Does the DPIL program promote early reading in the home, children’s engagement, frequency of reading, and enjoyment of/love for reading? 2) Do parents

perceive that the DPIL program promotes their children's reading readiness to enter kindergarten? 3) Are family interactions related to DPIL outcomes? And 4) Do parents perceive that the DPIL program promotes relationship building within their family?

A mixed methods approach was used to explore these research questions. The agency and the researchers worked closely together to design and implement an evaluation that included online surveys and in-person focus groups of parents of children enrolled in the program.

Selection of Subjects

Survey. Selection criteria included parents of children who were enrolled in the program and who had participated in the program for at least three months. Depending on the contact information available in the sponsoring organization's database of DPIL participants, eligible parents were 1) emailed an invitation with a link to a consent page and the survey; 2) were called by a research assistant to invite them to participate in the study, provide their verbal consent if they agreed, and completed the survey over the phone; or 3) they were mailed an invitation, survey, consent materials, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope to return the completed survey and signed consent form to the researchers. Participants who completed a survey were given the opportunity to provide contact information to enter a gift card drawing. This information was kept in a separate database not connected to their survey responses.

Focus groups. To recruit subjects for the focus groups, parents who met the eligibility criteria as described above, and who also were residents in the two counties in the sponsoring agency's service area with the greatest number of participating children were emailed an invitation by the agency to participate in a focus group. As an incentive for their participation, parents were informed that they would be entered into a drawing for a nominal gift card to a local retail establishment upon completion of the focus group.

Instrumentation

Survey instrument. The 42-item survey instrument contained demographic information including household composition and the parent's educational level. Questions about the child participating in the program included age, gender, and length of time in the program.

Respondents were asked to rate how much time they spent reading with their children and going to the library both before and after becoming a participant in the program (on a five-point Likert scale from Never to Everyday). There were a series of questions to rate their level of agreement (on a five-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) regarding how their child had responded to reading (e.g., interest, enthusiasm, and comprehension) as a result of his or her participation in the program. Sample questions included "My child is enthusiastic/excited about books," and "My child frequently asks to be read to." In addition, parents were asked to indicate whether their child "is/was adequately prepared to enter Kindergarten." They were also asked to rate the overall value of the program and their overall satisfaction on a five-point Likert scale. As well, parents completed the 10-item FACES Family Communications Scale (Olson, 2010). (Items on this scale are scored on a five-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.) Communication "is measured by focusing on the family as a group with regard to their listening skills, speaking skills, self-disclosure, clarity, continuity tracking, and respect and regard" (Olson, 2000, p. 149). The maximum score possible on the scale is 50, and a higher score indicates that a respondent has more positive feelings about their family communication style (Olson, 2010). According to Olson (2000), more positive communication skills are generally found in families in which family members maintain healthy relationships with each other. Finally, there were three open-ended questions to capture the parent's perspective about how much the child and family as a whole had gained since being in the program, and also any

suggestions for changing the program. (This last area provided data for evaluating the program's activities as previously outlined.)

Focus group interview guide. The interview guide included eight questions. Because the guide was semi-structured, the researchers were able to ask additional, follow-up questions as warranted in response to parents' commentary (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Two facilitators (the co-principal investigators on this project) conducted the focus groups. As one facilitator asked questions and recorded responses on a flip chart for participants to observe, the second facilitator recorded exact responses on a computer for later analysis. Focus group participants were asked questions about the length of time their child or children had been enrolled in the program and what their experience had been like. They were asked about the gains their child had made as a result of their participation in the program, as well as the family. In addition, they were asked to consider if participating in DPIL has sparked their child's interest in reading and helped improve their cognitive skills. A question about the effect of reading had on family bonding was also included. Additionally, the researchers asked if the child was more engaged in reading and interested in learning since being enrolled in DPIL. Finally, the parents were asked to provide suggestions for improving the program. (As with the survey, this last area provided data for evaluating the program's activities.) No identifying information was recorded with responses.

Protection of Human Subjects Approval Process

This study was approved by the researchers' Institutional Review Board (IRB). The participants in the online survey read a consent preamble prior to completing the survey and indicated their consent by completing the survey. For parents who completed a survey over the phone, the consent form was read by a research assistant and parents provided their verbal consent. Parents who completed a mailed survey, signed the consent form and returned it with

their survey. Focus group participants were provided with, reviewed, and signed written consent materials prior to beginning the focus group.

Whether completing a survey or participating in a focus group, consent materials indicated that participants did not have to answer any questions which made them uncomfortable, that participation was voluntary, and that their answers were confidential. They were also informed that their choice to participate or not participate in the research would have no bearing on the eligibility of their child to continue in DPIL.

Results

Three one-hour focus groups were conducted between July 2014 and November 2014. A variety of attempts were made by the sponsoring organization to increase participation, including reminder phone calls, and the focus groups were held in two different counties and at different times to try to accommodate different schedules. Unfortunately, only six ($n = 6$) parents participated. The low response rate was unexpected; however, the researchers assert that valuable information was gleaned from those who did participate. Therefore, their responses were included in the qualitative analysis.

The online survey was distributed between November 2014 and March 2015. One-hundred ($n = 100$) parents participated in the survey. Due to the sponsoring agency's policy on confidentiality, the researchers did not have direct access to the agency's complete database of parents to verify the original sampling frame. Therefore, it was not possible for the researchers to confidently determine a response rate for the study. In addition, it should be noted that because the surveys were completed anonymously, it is not known whether any parents who participated in a focus group also completed a survey.

Sample

The sample for the survey consisted of single parents ($n = 11$) and married parents ($n = 81$) (8 parents did not indicate their marital status). The racial composition of respondents was 82% white, 5% nonwhite, and 13% who did not respond. The most prevalent language spoken was English (92%), and participants' level of education ranged from high school (16%) to some college to master level degree ($n = 21\%$). The most frequently occurring was Bachelor's degree (27%). It should be noted that due to the small number of parents who participated in a focus group, no demographic data was collected from these participants. This was done to assure participants that their identities would remain anonymous.

Data Analyses

Quantitative findings. Parents reported highly favorable opinions regarding the DPIL program on the survey. They indicated that they both valued the program ($M = 4.68$, $SD = .53$, $n = 91$) and were satisfied with the program overall ($M = 4.71$, $SD = .50$, $n = 91$). (Both questions were based on a 1-5 scale with 5 being Most Valuable or Most Favorable.) In addition, as a result of their child's participation in the DPIL program, parents reported a significant increase in their time spent reading together, $t(90) = -3.53$, $p < .001$. Before the program, the mean was 4.35 ($SD = .91$, $n = 95$); and since being involved in the program the mean was 4.59 ($SD = .67$, $n = 91$). There was also a significant difference reported in time visiting the public library with their child, $t(88) = -2.71$, $p < .05$. Before the program, the mean was 2.21 ($SD = 1.05$, $n = 94$); and since being involved in the program the mean was 2.39 ($SD = 1.06$, $n = 89$). Parents also reported that their child's participation in the DPIL program had a positive impact on a variety of factors related to their child's reading, preparation for Kindergarten, and other educational activities in the family. (See Table 1 for a summary of these items.)

Table 1

Parents' Assessment of Impact of Child's Participation in the Imagination Library Program

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
My child enjoys listening to stories	4.56	.78	85
My child can look at pictures and tell stories about them	4.52	.68	66
My child enjoys reading	4.65	.51	63
My child is/was adequately prepared to enter Kindergarten	4.32	.81	38
My child is enthusiastic/excited about books	4.66	.63	85
My child frequently asks to be read to	4.53	.76	75
My child understands that stories have helpful messages	4.17	.86	65
In addition to reading with him or her, I spend time with my child engaged in other educational activities	4.51	.71	79

The relationships between parents' reports of their family communication styles and how they viewed the program and its impact were also explored. In general, parents' scores on the FACES scale were high. In other words, they indicated that they felt positive about their family's communication style ($M = 43.04$, $SD = 6.3$, $n = 88$, Cronbach Alpha = .93, Range = 10-50). For analysis, these scores were split at the median ($Mdn = 44$), and the sample was divided into two groups, those above and those below the median (i.e., high communication versus low communication groups). Independent samples t tests were run to determine whether communication style was related to variables including parents' overall value of the program, children's enjoyment of reading, reading together, preparation for kindergarten, asking to be read to and time engaged in other educational activities. The means were higher, though not significant, for the high communication group in all areas except for enjoying reading, on which the means were the same. (See Table 2 for a summary of these items.)

Time engaged in other educational activities was significantly higher for the group scoring high on the FACES scale, $t(70) = -2.51$, $p < .05$. This was also true for time spent

listening to stories, $t(76) = -1.97, p < .05$. Thus, families with more positive communication styles reported significantly more time engaged with their children in reading and other educational activities than those families scoring lower on communication.

Table 2

Family Communication Styles and Program Impacts

Item	Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Overall value of the program	FACES Score Below Median	4.58	.59	39
	FACES Score Above Median	4.72	.50	43
Child's enjoyment of reading	FACES Score Below Median	4.67	.47	28
	FACES Score Above Median	4.65	.48	29
Reading together	FACES Score Below Median	4.54	.79	39
	FACES Score Above Median	4.66	.59	44
Preparation to enter Kindergarten	FACES Score Below Median	4.26	.79	15
	FACES Score Above Median	4.47	.77	19
Asking to be read to	FACES Score Below Median	4.37	.94	32
	FACES Score Above Median	4.66	.53	36
Time engaged in other educational activities*	FACES Score Below Median	4.28	.89	35
	FACES Score Above Median	4.70	.46	37
Listens to stories*	FACES Score Below Median	4.42	.85	38
	FACES Score Above Median	4.72	.45	40

* Significant at the .05 level

Qualitative findings. Seventy-six parents ($n = 76$) provided written commentary about the most important thing their child had gained as a result of his/her participation in the DPIL program as well as the most important thing their family had gained as a result of their participation in program. And six parents ($n = 6$) who participated in a focus group discussed their perceptions regarding the effects of DPIL on their children's interest in reading, frequency of reading, and family interaction and engagement around reading.

Qualitative data from the survey and the focus groups were analyzed together using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data were sorted

into preliminary categories based upon similarities and patterns: parents' assessment of the effects of the program on their children, reading activities, and the program's impact on the family. These categories were then expanded, refined, or eliminated as needed and were then confirmed by the research team. Exemplar quotes from focus group participants [FG] are presented alongside parents' written comments on the survey to highlight the consistent themes that emerged from both datasets.

Fosters children's love of reading. Twenty-seven parents ($n = 27$) indicated that the program built their child's anticipation and excitement about reading. For instance, one parent wrote, "We are very excited when we get a new book in the mail. We open it and read it immediately!" While another parent with a younger child in the program enthused that "there is something about getting that tangible book. . . . opening it and seeing the pictures and colors" that excited her child [FG]. In addition, thirty-two parents ($n = 32$) expressed that the program increased their child's motivation and enthusiasm for reading. As one parent wrote, "This program has helped instill the love of reading in my child."

Promotes children's cognitive development. Twelve parents ($n = 12$) indicated that the program increased their child's reading comprehension with one parent stating that "The program has helped with language and cognitive development. Reading helps because she hears more words than she normally would" [FG]. Five ($n = 5$) reported that the program helped to develop their child's imagination and curiosity. For instance, one parent stated that a benefit of the program was that, "The books help use the imagination and the excitement. I wanted my daughter to lose [herself] in a book and grow that imagination piece" [FG]. And, seven parents ($n = 7$) explicitly noted that the program helped prepare their child for Kindergarten. As one parent noted, the program "helped spur . . . mental growth to get ready for Kindergarten" [FG].

Encourages family interaction. Fifty-two parents ($n = 52$) cited the program as promoting bonds with their children. For instance, one parent noted that the program “has allowed my family to spend quality time together reading and teaching my children to read/understand books,” one noted that the program was “nurturing” [FG], and another observed that focusing on a book together “reinforc[es] family time” [FG]. Five parents ($n = 5$) commented on the impact of the program on the bonds between their participating child and his or her siblings. As one parent observed, “My [seven] year old loves that my daughter gets these books because then he can read them to his sister and it helps him learn to read better . . . she now loves receiving them even more.” Seven parents ($n = 7$) cited the program as helping their families. For instance, one parent stated that, “It has helped bring the focus [on reading] in our home which we may not have had without the program” [FG].

Helps build a family’s library. Eighteen parents ($n = 18$) reported that the DPIL program introduced more diverse reading choices for families. For example, one parent observed that “She has more of a selection of books that otherwise we would have missed out on.” And eight parents ($n = 8$) reported that the program saves families money. As one parent reported, “We cannot afford to purchase books. We had only a few given to us before Imagination Library.”

Program recommendations. Parents were interested in promoting broader participation in the program. Thirteen parents ($n = 13$) commented on the need for the sponsor agency to target its outreach to reach more families. One parent noted that the organization should “Expand the service area, pick up the missed counties” [FG], while another expressed the importance of “see[ing] the word get out more to low-income families.”

Six parents ($n = 6$) also recommended that the sponsoring agency increase its efforts to better engage participating families. For instance, one parent suggested that “It would be nice if

there were more children story times in our city - maybe [the sponsoring agency] could sponsor story time at the library or [at a local book seller].”

Discussion

Consistent with the Dolly Parton Foundation’s vision to promote early childhood literacy and “foster a love of reading” (Imagination Library, 2016, Our Vision section, para. 1), children and families enrolled in the Imagination Library program in the service area of the sponsor agency appeared to be realizing the foundation’s aims. Parents reported a significant increase in their time spent reading together and visiting the public library with their child as a result of their child’s participation in the DPIL program. And corresponding with other findings (e.g., Gordon, 2010) parents highly valued their children’s and family’s participation in the Imagination Library program reporting that their children were better prepared for Kindergarten. As well, as a secondary benefit, parents reported that the program promoted positive interactions and relationship building within their families. This latter finding corresponded with Lelle’s (2011) observation that an additional benefit of the program was its positive impact on family interactions. In this study, parents reported a strengthening of the bonds between siblings and between parents and their children. Literacy aside, the act of families spending time together in reading activities appeared – at least based on the reports of parents in this study – to promote family cohesion. Taken together, the program appeared to be achieving its short-term outcomes to increase enrolled children’s interest in, motivation to, and engagement in reading as well as increase positive family interactions.

It may have been that families who enrolled in the Imagination Library program were already predisposed to encouraging reading in their homes, may have been more familiar with the resources in the community available to them, and/or may have been in a better position to

take advantage of these resources. In addition, parents who participated in this study generally reported healthy relationships in their families (i.e., positive communication styles) and were more likely to engage with their children in other educational activities as a result of their participation in the program than those with less positive communication styles. In other words, there may have been a qualitative difference between the families who enrolled their children and those who had not. Moreover, families in low-income, geographically isolated, and/or more transient communities may not have had access to or may have been unaware of the program. In fact, citing the benefits of the program for their families, some parents suggested that the sponsoring agency make a more concerted effort to outreach to families not currently enrolled in the program – including low-income families. Given Evans, et al.'s (2010) finding that children – particularly those from low income families – who live in homes with a large number of books demonstrate greater gains in academic attainment, this suggestion appeared to be on point. While the Imagination Library does not specifically target vulnerable populations, this recommendation may be of interest to agencies that sponsor this program in their area.

Perhaps related to this, parents reported a significant increase in the family's use of the public library as a result of their participation in the Imagination Library program. Of course, a child's library does not have to be limited to the books s/he receives from the Imagination Library program. Public libraries provide an additional option for parents to complement the Imagination Library books their child has received. Moreover, because some parents may not have the material resources to continue building their child's personal library after he or she graduates from the program, public libraries can offer a low-cost or cost-free alternative for these families. If program participation fosters greater connection to this public service, otherwise resource-poor families may be afforded the opportunity to continue encouraging their child's

love for reading following separation from the program.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, while the actual participation rate was unable to be determined, it was assumed that the number of parents who participated in this program evaluation was small relative to the total number of families in the service area with children in the program. Second, the parents who volunteered to participate in the program evaluation self-selected into the study. For this reason, these parents may have held stronger views about the program (whether positive or negative) than those who chose not to participate. This is important in that the parents who did not participate in the study may have differing opinions than those who did. So there is some question whether the sample is representative of all parents of children participating in the program in the sponsor agency's service area. However, the results from this study – at least with respect to parents' perceptions about the program improving children's reading ability and preparation for Kindergarten – are consistent with findings from other program evaluations of the Imagination Library program implemented in other areas. For this reason, the researchers feel confident that the findings from this program evaluation are representative of the total population of participating parents in the program.

Implications for Further Research

The Dolly Parton Imagination Library program appeared to be having a positive impact on children and families in the area studied. However, while parents reported that their children were better prepared for Kindergarten (than they would have been otherwise), neither the agency nor the researchers had access to the Kindergarten-readiness data being collected by the state's department of education. Therefore, there was no way to corroborate parents' assertions that their children were better prepared than they would have been if they had not enrolled in the

program. Comparative data (between children enrolled versus those not enrolled in the program) would be critical for evaluating the longer-term outcome (increased rate of Kindergarten-ready children) and impact of the program (increased rate of literacy). Therefore, when possible, sponsoring agencies and researchers should conduct comparative studies to investigate whether participating children differ from their non-participating peers in terms of their readiness for Kindergarten. Embree (2009) found, for instance, that there were no mean differences in the reading levels of children enrolled in the program versus those who were not. However, the researcher's sample was small. Thus, further exploration is warranted.

In addition, the type of parental involvement in reading activities with their children has been found to differentially influence literacy outcomes (e.g., encouraging parents to read to their children is less effective than parents teaching specific literacy skills to their children (Sénéchal & Young, 2008)). Therefore, consideration of the extent and quality of parents' involvement when reading with their child should be included. Further, beyond literacy and kindergarten readiness, it is suggested that longitudinal studies be conducted to explore the impact of the program on family interactions over time including those factors that inhibit or enhance the positive outcomes reported here.

Conclusion

For parents who participated in this study, the Dolly Parton Imagination Library program provided an indispensable resource to them and to their children. As Gottfried, et al. (2015) have found, children whose parents read to them at an early age experience educational benefits throughout their years in school. These parents sought to provide such a foundation for their children. And, not only was their child's love for reading fostered, positive family interactions were also promoted. Dolly Parton would likely agree that this is "the magic that books can

create” (Imagination Library, 2016, Our Vision section, para. 1).

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