

# Supporting Opportunities for All: Strategic Collaborative Partnerships to Increase Book Access for Children

Charlotte Green  
Louis S. Nadelson  
Rachelle Miller

University of Central Arkansas

Poverty can substantially limit access to books. Access to books is a significant predictor of academic success, and lack of access jeopardizes literacy development and expands academic achievement gaps. We examined an evolving collaborative effort to increase book access in a region in the southern United States. The collaborations involve a number of community and regionally based institutions working with a wide range of constituents. We also examined the relationship between poverty level and book access. We found a trend in increased book access for all in the region, including high poverty counties.

*Keywords:* Equity, Book Access, Collaboration

## Introduction

*If we wish to close the gap between the rich and poor in this nation and we know where the gap grows and widens, then it is criminal to ignore it. – Jim Trelease (2007)*

Education professionals understand the significant role that the availability of books play in academic success (Evans, Kelley, Sikora, & Treiman, 2010). Access to books is critical to becoming literate and having a successful and productive education (Brassel, 1999). According to McQuillan (1998), when poverty level is controlled, access to books is the next most significant predictor of reading achievement. However, in certain communities, the residents' access to books can be extremely limited, and therefore a barrier to literacy and academic success. According to McTague and Abrams (2011), providing access to books involves more than simply having books in the environment; access involves teaching children how to use books and interact with

text. For the placement of books in communities to make a difference, there must be a culture of reading where people develop a desire to read. Thus, if children develop a desire to read, know how to read, and access appropriate and interesting books, then the children are likely to experience higher success in their education (McTague & Abrams, 2011).

There are many variables associated with becoming a successful reader, and children acquiring the motivation to read is fundamental to their long-term success. Stutz, Schaffner, and Schiefele (2016), discuss the significant positive association between the intrinsic motivation of reading and reading comprehension. Motivation to read develops when people engage in leisure and pleasant reading (Stutz, Schaffner & Schiefele, 2016). Exposure to books at an early age increases opportunities for children to learn how to interact with books, creates a platform for leisure reading, and extends opportunities to learn about reading

from parents that can foster a motivation for reading.

Although the importance of having books in the home of infants and toddlers is known, many parents may not readily provide books to their children. In lower-income neighborhoods the ratio of books to children is one book for every 300 children (or 3.3 books per 1000 children), which is far less than the 13 books per child ratio reported in more affluent neighborhoods (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Neuman and Knapczyk (2018) report that innovative mechanisms designed to increase access to books in low-income areas, enhanced children's opportunity to learn. The impact poverty has on access to books, and the influence access to books has on opportunities to learn, provides support for examining efforts to increase the number of books in homes for children living in poverty.

Our focus is on a collaborative effort to implement the Dolly Parton Imagination Library (DPIL) program in Arkansas. The DPIL program focuses on eliminating barriers to book access for children. Of particular interest to us is the influence that collaborations have had on book access and the nature of the collaboration that have led to the successful DPIL implementation.

### **Dolly's Parton Imagination Library (DPIL)**

In 1995, Dolly Parton launched Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) to benefit the children of her home county in East Tennessee (Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, 2019). Dolly's vision was to foster a love of reading among her county's preschool children by providing them with the gift of a specially selected book each month. DPIL provides a free and age-appropriate book each month to program enrolled children between the ages of 0-5.

The books are mailed to all enrolled children in a partnering community.

The program quickly grew, becoming such a success that in 2000, a national replication effort was underway. A local Imagination Library affiliated program must collaborate with the DPIL and raise \$25 per child each year to pay for the books and mailing costs. There are no qualifying income conditions to participate in the program.

Currently, the Dollywood Foundation distributes books at a rate equivalent to one book per child every two seconds. As of October 2019, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library was mailing 125,030,397 books each month to children around the world. The large-scale program enrollment provides an opportunity to examine how collaborations among various organizations within communities are taking place and the outcomes of the endeavors.

### **The Dolly Parton Imagination Library and Literacy Success**

As the children enrolled in DPIL started entering kindergarten, teachers and administrators noted higher levels of kindergarten readiness and grade level reading achievement. In their investigation of the relationship between student enrollment in the program and the students' kindergarten readiness, Samiei, Bush, Sell, and Imig (2016) reported significantly higher levels of language and mathematics readiness for students who had enrolled in the program when compared to their non-enrolled peers. Samiei et al. (2016) controlled for income and prekindergarten experiences in their analysis, and there were no significant differences by age, gender, or race between the groups.

The Dolly Parton Imagination Library has collaborated with an initiative that provided free books to high-need families,

connected families to libraries, and provided the families with literacy resources and activities. The outcome of the collaboration that combined literacy enhancing intervention for parents with the book distribution of the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, improved the overall literacy environment in the participants' homes (Center for Early Education Evaluation at High Scope, 2015). The collaboration led to more families reading books together and more children initiating interactions with books. The collaborative project also increased the oral language skills of children at 4 years of age (Center for Early Education Evaluation at High Scope, 2015). Thus, collaborations with the Dolly Parton Imagination Library project expanded the reach of the initiative, resulting in shifts in the culture of reading.

Ridzi, Sylvia, Qiao, and Craig (2017) explored the outcome of DPIL on the participating learners' school readiness. Ridzi et al. (2017) found the duration of families' enrollment in the DPIL positively correlated with the likelihood of reading to their children. Given the results, there is warrant to continue to explore the implementation of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library Initiative.

### **Addressing Social Barriers to Literacy**

Families are encouraged by community leaders to participate in the Dolly Parton Imagination Library without any qualifying conditions. Not requiring any proof of income maximizes the access of children of low-income families, since having to provide documents and paperwork can discourage even qualifying families from participating (Davis, 2014). Social and cultural barriers may prevent learners from accessing assistance programs that have participant enrollment criteria. The barriers may include the social stigma of having to

apply for assistance, inability to provide documentation, and lack of understanding the process of applying for assistance. Literacy assistance programs that require participant enrollment criteria may limit program enrollment and the support needed to help children learn to read (Davis, 2014). Thus, the design of the DPIL works to alleviate the contradiction of enrollment criteria program in which people who are actually eligible for the service may not participate due to program access barriers.

In recognition of the potential for barriers, the Dolly Parton Imagination Library does not have enrollment criteria and, therefore, participation is open to all interested individuals. The program can even be more effective when multiple institutions and community leaders collaborate to reach a wide range of possible participants.

### **Arkansas Imagination Library**

The Arkansas Imagination Library (ARIL) is a statewide organization that works with local affiliates to distribute books to children age 0-5 years old (Arkansas Imagination Library, 2019). As a licensed partner of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL), ARIL embraces the goal to increase literacy in Arkansas by ensuring that all young children across the state may participate in DPIL. ARIL worked with local counties to expand from 54 to 74 Arkansas counties, increasing children monthly book delivery from 16,700 in 2017 to 32,138 in the fall of 2019.

With 26% of Arkansas children living in poverty (Aspire Arkansas, 2018), there are many Arkansas children in danger of not having access to books. By providing books at no cost to families, the Arkansas Imagination Library program increases childhood literacy rates by reducing barriers

that have historically served as a hindrance to providing children with quality books.

### **Question, Method, and Population**

The primary goal of our project was to determine the nature of the collaborations taking place in the Arkansas Imagination Library project, and the influence on the distribution of books. Specifically, we wondered if a strategic implementation of the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, with a collaborative focus, could help increase the number of books distributed to children living in high poverty counties. To answer the question, we examined the collaborative partnerships formed and implemented to support the project; we also analyzed the enrollment in the Arkansas Imagination Library over three years of implementation.

### **Collaborations**

The collaborations taking place to implement the Arkansas Imagination Library have evolved over time. Initially the collaborators limited number of school districts and local business partners, which resulted in many children who already had access to books getting more books. The program has matured, and the collaborations have expanded to include banks, healthcare providers, state government, and chambers of commerce. This has resulted in increases in enrollment, advocacy for the program, and parent education. The collaborations also expanded to involve churches, resulting in additional access opportunities in minority communities with higher poverty rates, and provided platform for parent conversations about the importance of reading and reading tips. In Table 1, we provide details of the collaborative activities by organization for the three years of implementation of the Arkansas Imagination Library.

Table 1

*Collaborators, Description of the Collaboration, and Related Activities Over Three Years of Implementation*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Collaborators</b>	<b>Description of the Collaboration</b>	<b>Collaboration Activities</b>
October 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Some school districts</li> <li>● Some local business partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● No statewide collaboration</li> <li>● Not strategic</li> <li>● Local Leadership and volunteers</li> <li>● Based on community capacity and engagement</li> </ul>	Schools proving those with books were getting more books

---

October 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Regional banks</li> <li>● Hospital/regional healthcare provider</li> <li>● State government</li> <li>● Chambers of Commerce</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Statewide collaboration</li> <li>● Strategic partnership</li> <li>● Build community capacity throughout the state</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Banks: funding and mechanisms for enrollment (1 year)</li> <li>● Hospital: conversations with new moms, provide funding, enroll for 3 years</li> <li>● State: Seed money to build capacity in communities lacking programs</li> <li>● Chambers: Advocate for program, build awareness and provide funds</li> </ul>
September 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Regional banks</li> <li>● Hospital/regional healthcare provider</li> <li>● State government</li> <li>● Churches</li> <li>● Arkansas Department of Education</li> <li>● Chambers of Commerce</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Statewide collaboration</li> <li>● Strategic partnership</li> <li>● Build community capacity throughout the state</li> <li>● Data collection to monitor student outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Banks: funding and mechanisms for enrollment (1 year)</li> <li>● Hospital: conversations with new moms, provide funding, enroll for 3 years</li> <li>● State: Seed money to build capacity in communities lacking programs</li> <li>● Chambers: Advocate for program, build awareness and provide funds</li> <li>● Dept. of Ed: Student level data for achievement</li> <li>● Churches: Parenting classes to increase interactions and child enrollment and funding</li> </ul>

---

### **Collaborative partnership with Chambers of Commerce and businesses**

Economic development is the primary priority for chambers of commerce, and Chambers of commerce are committed to supporting early childhood programs that may influence economic development. Chambers of commerce recognize the benefit of the Arkansas Imagination Library and engage in forming partnerships to promote the program. Chambers of commerce promote the program through annual contributions and awareness events

that highlight the importance of early childhood literacy. Collaborating with local Imagination Library programs, various chambers of commerce throughout the state have committed to annual fundraising to secure the resources to enroll children in their community in the Imagination Library program. Chambers also provide venues, such as festivals and other community events, for the organization to talk about the importance of early childhood literacy and enroll children in the program. In addition to the chambers of commerce endeavor,

some banks have joined the efforts as collaborators to support the program. The largest bank collaborator, First Security Bank of Arkansas, has 78 branches throughout the state. Families can enroll their children in the program at any of the 78 bank branches in the state, and the bank pays for the first year of enrollment. The bank provides annual funding, and bank tellers are encouraged to tell the parents about the importance of reading at home to children and provide information about how to enroll in the program.

#### **Collaborative partnership with churches.**

To address the African American achievement gap, our initial church collaboration project targeted churches with majority African American members. The churches are commonly situated in communities with significant academic achievement gaps. The churches have agreed to collaborate in the Imagination Library program by participating in the *Catching up from the Starting Line* initiative. The idea of the initiative is to provide children with early learning opportunities to minimize achievement gaps by discussing effective parenting styles and raising awareness of the importance of literacy in the home for preschool age children. The church initiative started with collaboration from the leadership from the county chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 2019). The leaders of ARIL and the NAACP worked with four African American churches. After conversations with the pastors, the pastors invited the collaborative leadership team into the churches to discuss achievement gap, the power of reading, and parental interaction during early years. The meetings provided opportunities for parents to share thoughts on the African American achievement gap and enroll their children in

the Imagination Library program. The church leadership encouraged church members to donate money to help fund enrollment of children, who attended their church, in the Imagination Library program.

#### **Collaborative partnership with school districts.**

School district collaboration was a multiple level implementation process with involvement of local school districts and the state Department of Education. Arkansas State Department embraces the importance of early and sustained access to books. Dolly Parton's Imagination Library was recognized as a solution for increasing early learners' access to books. The recognition created a platform to grow the involvement of local school districts. School boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, preschool directors, and PTOs members became involved in recognizing and supporting the program. This involvement created parent nights at the school, which focused on early childhood brain development, strategic parent interactions, and parenting styles. Because Imagination Library serves children ages 0-5, some school district partnerships included allocating funding for younger siblings of their students to enroll in the program.

#### **Collaborative partnership with hospitals.**

One of the first Dolly Parton's Imagination Library collaborators, was a hospital in her hometown of Pigeon Forge, TN. The partnership involves delivery nurses talking to new moms about the importance of reading, and provides families with enrollment information so they can enroll before they leave the hospital. Because of the early enrollment of infants in the hospitals, the collaboration is essential to the success of children having optimal access to books. Continuing the success of the initiative, the Arkansas Imagination

Library program has gained the collaboration of a hospital network to enroll children at birth and pay the fee for newborns to receive books for three years.

### Access to books

To examine the number of counties and families enrolled in DPIL at three time points: January 2018, April 2019, and August 2019 we generated an array of descriptive statistics. We also compared enrollment growth in high poverty (i.e., at least 20% of the county's population at poverty level) and low poverty counties (i.e., less than 20% of the county's population at poverty level). Poverty levels were pulled from the United States Census Bureau.

We found the number of counties enrolled increased over time: from 47 counties in January 2018 to 69 counties in August 2019. The number of families enrolled in DPIL also increased from 20,087 in January 2018 to 30,452 in August 2019. To compare growth over time, we used enrollment proportions (i.e., each county's enrollment divided by the county's population). Our analysis revealed enrollment increased in low income and poverty counties. However, low poverty

counties trended a higher enrollment growth over the three periods. Figure 1 illustrates the enrollment proportions (number of people enrolled per 1000 in the county) over time.

### Results

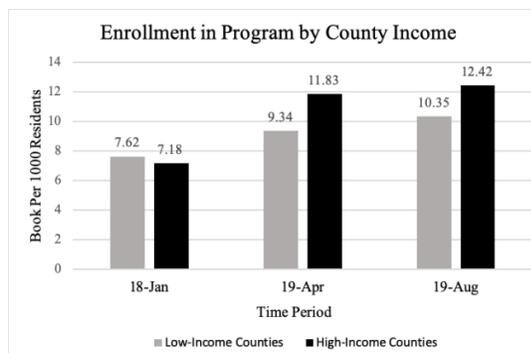
The results from this study indicate that the collaborations of the Arkansas Imagination Library increased book access to children in low-income counties, which can influence efforts to close the academic achievement gap between children in low-income and more affluent counties. There has been a shift in the ratio of children living in poverty to books from 3.3 books per 1000 residents (Neuman & Celano, 2001), to a ratio of 10 books to 1000 residences, which we attribute in part to the collaborative and intentional efforts of the ARIL. Our data indicate the evolving collaborations of the ARIL has expanded book access which can influence reading success (Ridzi et al., 2017) of children from low-income demographics and could lead to increased levels in their academic achievement (McTague & Abrams, 2011).

### Limitations and Future Studies

There are limitations to our research that should be considered when interpreting our results. The results from our study indicate increased enrollment in the Arkansas Imagination Library, which may or may not transfer to other locations. Although DPIL is available in multiple states, each state has different partners and collaborators who assist with their efforts. In future studies, we will expand our research to consider long-term influence of the program on academic performance and the collaborations of institutions taking place in the program implementation in other states.

Figure 1

#### *Enrollment in Program*



*Note.* The Arkansas DPIL proportion enrollment proportion (out of 1,000) of Arkansas DPIL enrollment in low poverty and high poverty counties.

## Conclusion

Dolly Parton created the Imagination Library to increase access to books for children 0-5 years of age. The implementation of the program relies on collaborations between and among community organizations and institutions. By removing qualification criteria that creates barriers, the program is more likely to engage lower income families. The Arkansas Imagination Library has increased access to books in the participating counties, which in part, can be attributed to the collaboration of multiple key institutions. As the program matures, it is essential to keep monitoring the collaborations and influence of the endeavor.

## References

- Arkansas Imagination Library. (2019). *Arkansas Imagination Library*. <https://www.arimaginationlibrary.org/>
- Aspire Arkansas (2018). *A project of Arkansas community foundation*. <https://www.aspirearkansas.org/families/children-living-in-poverty>
- Brassell, D. (1999). Creating a Culturally Sensitive Classroom Library. *Reading Teacher*, 52(6), 651–653.
- Center for Early Education Evaluation at High Scope. (2015). *Results to the innovative approaches to literacy project*. High Scope.
- Davis, J. (2014). Library of Congress literacy awards 2014: Best practices. Washington DC: Library of Congress.
- Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (2019). *Dolly Parton's Imagination Library*. <https://imaginationlibrary.com/>
- Evans, M. D., Kelley, J., Sikora, J., & Treiman, D. J. (2010). Family scholarly culture and educational success: Books and schooling in 27 nations. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 28(2), 171–197.
- McQuillan J. (1998). *The literacy crisis: False claims and real solutions*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- McTague, B., & Abrams, B. (2011). Access to books: a scaffolded program creates readers. *Reading Improvement*, 48(1), 3–13.
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (2019). *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*. <https://www.naacp.org/>
- Neuman, S.B., & Celano D. (2001). Access to print in low-income communities. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36, 8–26.
- Neuman, S. B., & Knopczyk, J. J. (2018). Reaching families where they are: Examining an innovative book distribution program. *Urban Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085918770722>
- Ridzi, F., Sylvia, M., Qiao, X., & Craig, J. (2017). The Imagination Library Program and Kindergarten readiness: Evaluating the impact of monthly book distribution. *Journal of Applied Social Science*, 11(1), 11–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1936724416678023>
- Samiei, S., Bush, A. J., Sell, M., & Imig, D. (2016). Examining the association between the Imagination Library early childhood literacy program and kindergarten readiness. *Reading Psychology*, 37(4), 601–626.
- Stutz, F., Schaffner, E., & Schiefele, U. (2016). Relations among reading motivation, reading amount, and reading comprehension in the early elementary grades. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 45, 101–113.
- Trelease, J. (2007). Is the “summer setback” the smoking gun in the “reading gap” between rich and poor?

[http:// www.trelease-on-reading.com/summer-setback.html](http://www.trelease-on-reading.com/summer-setback.html)

**Dr. Charlotte Green** is an Assistant Professor at the University of Central Arkansas. Dr. Green's research interest includes: education equity, school readiness, school leadership, community partnerships, achievement gaps, social system dynamics, disruptive education, and microaggressions.

**Dr. Louis S. Nadelson** is the Department Chair and Associate Professor at the University of Central Arkansas. Dr. Nadelson's research interest includes: leadership, mindsets, identity, makerspaces, STEM education, organizational change, empathetic curiosity, equity, innovation in education, and conceptual change.

**Dr. Rachelle Miller** is an Associate Professor at the University of Central Arkansas. Dr. Miller's research interest includes: education equity, culturally responsive teaching, arts integration, and gifted education.