Imagination Library
School of Social Work evaluates Imagination Library program

In 1996, COUNTRY LEGEND DOLLY PARTON LAUNCHED her Imagination Library program, hoping to foster childhood literacy in her native east Tennessee. Since then, the Dolly Parton Imagination Library has partnered with over 700 communities across 43 states, sending each child enrolled in the program a book by mail every month until they turn five years old.

In 2008, the Heart of Missouri United Way, through a special partnership with the Daniel Boone Regional Library, launched the program for Columbia families. The United Way estimates some 5,000 children in Columbia receive books each month from the Imagination Library at a cost of about $150,000 a year.

Despite the program’s national prominence, researchers still know very little about whether the Imagination Library is achieving its stated goal: to increase the likelihood that kids are prepared to read by the time they hit kindergarten. Now, MU’s School of Social Work hopes to answer that question, evaluating the local program and its impact on reading preparedness in Columbia, Missouri.

“The Dolly Parton Imagination Library, nationally-speaking, is a multi-million-dollar operation with huge contracts with publishing houses and remarkably it has never been evaluated like this,” said Aaron Thompson, an assistant professor in the School of Social Work who is currently researching the program.

A former school social worker and principal, Thompson insists that given the dearth of resources available to public schools and libraries, nonprofits should be investing in childhood literacy programs that have proven results. The Imagination Library program directly to local partners to open up the program to every local family, not just those from underprivileged communities or families from a particular income bracket. As such, it’s incredibly difficult to adequately compare Imagination Library families with those who do not participate.

Last year Thompson and his research assistants gave 56 participating families a questionnaire gauging standard predictors of early literacy — how many books parents have in the home, how often they read to their child, how much television a child watches or how interested a child is in reading and books. Thompson compared the responses families of similar makeup — socioeconomic status, race and education attainment — to measure the difference the program made.

While families involved in the program showed a moderate increase in behaviors shown to improve childhood literacy, “I still felt like it was a consumer satisfaction survey,” Thompson said. “We were basically measuring opinion, which certainly biases the results,” he said. “Who doesn’t love getting free books?”

So last fall, Thompson set out to collect and evaluate student readiness data collected by local schools on children entering kindergarten — a more concrete indicator of progress, he says. By comparing to the local Imagination Library roster to determine who was involved in the program, Thompson hopes to create a so-called population-level study.

While he cautions against drawing any firm conclusions yet, Thompson calls himself a conservative critic of the Imagination Library program. “Given what I’ve seen, I’m not yet completely convinced that this is the most effective investment,” he said. “There’s no solid research that says this program works yet. If we’re going to invest over $100,000 a year, I think we should do it in a way that has the greatest possible impact.”