UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

"WHEN THE BOOKS STOPPED COMING":

LOW-SES CAREGIVERS' EXPERIENCES OF SHARED READING DURING A PAUSE AND RESUMPTION OF THE DOLLY PARTON IMAGINATION LIBRARY

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By STACI KOUTSOUKOS

Norman, Oklahoma

2026

Downloaded from SHAREOK. Persistent Handle URL: https://hdl.handle.net/11244/342420

“WHEN THE BOOKS STOPPED COMING”: LOW-SES CAREGIVERS’ EXPERIENCES OF SHARED READING DURING A PAUSE AND RESUMPTION OF THE DOLLY PARTON IMAGINATION LIBRARY

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

Dr. Hyunju Lee, Chair

Dr. Daniel Springer

Dr. Jeffrey Maiden

Dr. Ricky Munoz

©Copyright by STACI KOUTSOUKOS 2026
All Rights Reserved.

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined how low-socioeconomic-status (SES) caregivers experienced the continuity, disruption, and resumption of monthly book deliveries from Imagination Library Denver (ILD), and what those experiences revealed about shared reading, book access, and family literacy routines. Using a generic qualitative design, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 caregivers whose children were enrolled in ILD and were directly affected by a 4-month pause in book delivery. Interviews explored caregivers' experiences during periods of consistent delivery, interruption, and resumption, and focused on how caregivers made meaning of book access within their daily lives.

Guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, findings illustrate how monthly book deliveries functioned as cultural tools that supported predictable shared-reading routines, caregiver-child interaction, and emotional connection. Caregivers described the arrival of the monthly book as a valued cue that anchored family routines, fostered children's excitement and ownership, and supported caregivers' confidence in sustaining shared reading. During the pause, caregivers reported disruptions to routines, declines in children's motivation, and increased emotional strain, particularly in households facing book deserts, transportation barriers, and limited access to alternative literacy resources. The absence of communication during the pause further intensified caregivers' stress and uncertainty, underscoring the relational importance of predictability and trust in literacy-support programs.

When book deliveries resumed, caregivers described immediate relief, renewed engagement, and restored routines, highlighting the central role of consistency in supporting family literacy practices. Together, these findings demonstrate that continuity in book access, and transparent communication when disruptions occur, play a critical role in sustaining shared reading in low-resource contexts. This study contributes to early childhood literacy research by foregrounding caregiver perspectives and identifying predictability as a key mechanism through which book-gifting programs support resilience, relational connection, and early literacy development in families navigating socioeconomic hardship.

DEDICATION

To the caregivers who shared their experiences with me, thank you. It means so much that you invited me into your worlds. I am inspired by your fortitude and your commitment to keep reading, even when the books stopped coming.

To Dolly Parton, who has changed the world for so many children. I wish you could have spoken with the caregivers I had the privilege of interviewing. They have created incredible memories and built beautiful bonds with their children because of you.

To my Family, you are my *why.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I began this doctoral program, my three kids were in elementary school. This fall, two will be in high school, and one will be in middle school. We have three graduations in our house this May; 8th grade, 5th grade, and mine!

I hope I have modeled patience, endurance, and the belief that when you decide to do something, you can. Never stop learning, never stop growing, and never stop chasing your dreams.

Team K5 Forever

To my Family~

Jaxon~ When you were ten, you chose the word *"fascinating"* to describe me, and that remains one of the greatest compliments I've ever received. Your total belief in me carried me through the hardest moments, because I never wanted to let you down. I love you Forever and Ever, No Matter What!

Grace~ Your unwavering confidence in me, your positivity, and your constant encouragement pushed me across the finish line. I truly could not have done this without you, or your sweet, encouraging notes that you would leave for me. You never doubted that I could do this, so how could I doubt myself. I love you to Infinity and Beyond!

Kate~ You lit a fire under me from the very beginning. From day one, it was, *"When are you going to start writing your book?!?"* And I will never forget you telling people when you were seven, *"My mama's going to get her PhD!"* "Mommy Power" and "Kate Power" Forever. I love you to the Butterflies and Beyond!

To my husband~ Thank you for believing in this dream when I first shared it with you more than twenty years ago, and for walking beside me with such patience every step of the way. Words can't fully capture how grateful I am that we found each other, or how deeply your unwavering faith in me has carried me through this journey. I wish I could see myself through your eyes but knowing how you see me makes me a better person. This journey would mean nothing without you.

With gratitude to my grandparents, Wallace and Dean Conerly, who were avid readers and whom I think of every single day. I'm sorry you didn't get to see me finish, but Granddad, I'm grateful you got to see me start. I know you'd be teasing me by saying, *"Does a PhD really mean that you get to be called Dr.?"* Your legacy lives on through your family.

Special Thanks~

"Get PHinisheD" group, I couldn't have done it without you!

Mrs. Jamie Johnson, my children's first school librarian, who went above and beyond to nurture their love of reading. Your Poetry Slams and creative, joyful ways of inspiring kids to read, write, and think were truly life-changing, and I have no doubt you are carrying that same passion into your role as principal. Anyone who knows you is incredibly lucky, especially your students.

My dear friend Shannon Hortsmann, who has let me bounce numerous ideas off her, and who always kicked me into high gear. You have continually reminded me to keep going because Kate told everyone years ago that I was getting my PhD!

Mike Jenkins, you are such a steady, behind-the-scenes force keeping everything running smoothly. College of Ed would fall apart without you!

Lincoln Torrey, you set the standard for professionalism while always keeping a sense of humor. Your institutional knowledge is unmatched!

Dr. Benjamin Heddy, "A good dissertation is a finished dissertation."

Dr. Lindsay Stallones Marshall, one of my favorite profs from my time at OU, who modeled that academia is full of curveballs, but you just have to catch them and keep going.

Dr. Cory Peltier, for his wonderful Spring 2024 research class, which helped with this study and eased my concerns about methodology.

Dr. Christine Zabala-Eisshofer, who created a warm class environment where the entire class got to know each other and continue to cheer each other on. This is how it should be!

My committee~

Dr. Lee, thank you for chairing my committee and for guiding me through every stage of this dissertation. I made it to the finish line and can now call myself "Dr. K!"

Dr. Maiden, thank you for taking a chance on an unknown and for providing such optimistic and helpful feedback.

Dr. Daniel Springer, thank you for your wonderful prospectus class, which propelled me to the finish line and introduced me to a great group of peers.

Dr. Muñoz, thank you for representing the field of social work on my committee and for bringing a deep, professional understanding of the complex challenges caregivers face- an understanding which meaningfully strengthened this study.

Teachers, librarians, and anyone who puts a book in a child's hands, thank you for changing lives, one book at a time.

And, of course, to **Dolly Parton**, whose Imagination Library has gifted more than 300 million books worldwide since 1995. I've never wanted to meet a celebrity, except for you. Your mission to **"**Inspire a Love of Reading" is doing exactly that and changing the world in the process. I am grateful to have witnessed its impact firsthand. You truly live out your belief that "You can never get enough books into the hands of children."

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction.....1

Overview of Methodology.....4

Context and Background.....6

Problem Statement.....8

Purpose of the Study.....10

Research Questions.....11

Significance of the Study……...12

Theoretical Framework……..14

Definition of Key Terms……15

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations……17

Researcher Positionality…….20

Chapter Two: Literature Review.....22

Conceptual Foundations.....24

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory.....25

Structural Inequities, Book Deserts, and Early Literacy in Low-SES Communities….28

Shared Reading and Early Childhood Literacy in Low-SES Families……...37

Impact of Book-Gifting Programs on Family Literacy Practices……...42

Service Interruptions, Pauses, and Instability in DPIL……...46

Summary of Key Themes……52

Gaps in the Literature……..54

Chapter Three: Methodology.....56

Research Design.....56

Research Questions.....58

Data Collection Methods.....60

Data Analysis……..61

Themes by Research Question……63

Connecting to Theory……..64

Ethical Considerations…….65

Limitations of the Study……..66

Chapter Four: Findings.....68

Purpose and Research Questions.....69

Overview of Participants 70

Research Question One: How do Caregivers Describe the Perceived Benefits of Monthly Book Deliveries for Their Families' Shared Reading Practices?.....71

Research Question Two: How do Caregivers Describe the Challenges They Experienced During the Pause in Book Delivery?.....80

Research Question Three: How do Caregivers Describe Changes in Shared-Reading Practices Before, During, and After the Pause and Resumption of Book Delivery?.....87

Summary of Findings……...92

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications.....94

Organization of the Chapter.....95

Discussion of Findings by Research Question.....96

Research Question One:…….....96

Research Question Two:……..98

Research Question Three:……..101

Implications for Practice……102

Limitations of the Study…….105

Recommendations for Future Research……..106

Conclusion……..107

References.....110

Appendices……..125

Appendix A: IRB Outcome Letter……..125

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter to Participants…….126

Appendix C: Signed Consent Form to Participate……..127

Appendix D: Data Collection Document for IRB……...130

Appendix E: Interview Questions……..132

Appendix F: Topical Codebook……..134

Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

A child's path to becoming a reader is profoundly shaped by their economic circumstances. For children growing up in low-socioeconomic status (SES) households, early literacy trajectories are shaped less by individual ability or motivation and more by structural differences in access to print materials and opportunities for shared reading; conditions well-documented in research on book deserts and home literacy environments (McNally et al., 2024; Neuman & Celano, 2012; Tura et al., 2023). Many of these children live in "book deserts," which are areas where high-quality children's books are scarce or inaccessible (Neuman & Celano, 2001). This absence is not merely material; it represents a profound educational inequity with lifelong consequences. Without access to books at home, language development is delayed, the school-readiness gap widens, and the "Matthew Effect" takes hold, in which early advantages compound while early struggles multiply, shaping academic and life trajectories for years to come (Hart & Risley, 1995; Reschly, 2010; Stanovich, 1986).

In response to this crisis, book-gifting programs like Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) play a vital role. By mailing one high-quality, age-appropriate book each month directly to a child's home, DPIL reduces barriers to access while cultivating a culture of shared reading. Research consistently shows that these programs increase reading frequency, improve kindergarten readiness, and foster a love of books among children and caregivers alike (Imagination Library of Tennessee, 2023; Ridzi et al., 2014). The monthly book serves as a predictable external cue, prompting caregivers and children to pause and connect over a shared story. Research underscores that the arrival of a new book increases reading behaviors in the days that follow, effectively nudging families toward consistent literacy engagement (de Bondt

et al., 2020). For families navigating the stressors of poverty, this dependable rhythm offers structure and stability, helping them sustain shared-reading routines that support language, attachment, and socio-emotional development (MacLeod & Tett, 2019; Tura et al., 2023).

Despite these promising outcomes, an essential dimension of the DPIL experience remains unexplored. Much of the existing research focuses on quantifiable outcomes such as participation rates, kindergarten-readiness indicators, and early literacy gains, while paying far less attention to the lived experiences of the caregivers who make shared reading possible. Yet caregivers are central to the DPIL model, determining when and how books are used and integrating them into the rhythms of family life amid competing demands. Their experiences reveal how literacy practices unfold in the home and how reading is sustained, interrupted, reshaped, or emotionally experienced over time. Without understanding caregivers' perspectives, our knowledge of book-gifting programs remains incomplete, because we overlook the very relational and contextual factors that determine whether a program's intended benefits can be realized.

Focusing on caregivers' lived experiences is essential because shared reading is not a neutral act; it is a relational, emotional, and highly contextual practice. Caregivers are responsible for initiating and sustaining routines, interpreting their child's cues, and integrating reading into already demanding daily lives. For families experiencing socioeconomic stress, these routines are shaped by far more than book access. They are influenced by work schedules, fatigue, housing instability, and the emotional climate of the home. Understanding how caregivers perceive, navigate, and adapt to these realities provides a deeper theoretical lens for interpreting program impact. It shifts the emphasis from viewing DPIL as simply a distribution model to understanding it as a partnership with families, one in which meaning-making, stability,

and predictability matter just as much as the books themselves. This perspective offers insight into how and why a disruption in book delivery may affect families differently, and why caregiver voices are indispensable for evaluating the program's proper function.

We know what happens when books arrive consistently, but little is known about what happens when they do not. What happens to a family's reading routine when the external cue that encourages it suddenly stops? How do caregivers interpret the interruption: logistically, emotionally, or in relation to their children's expectations? These questions move beyond program metrics and illuminate the human dimension of literacy routines, offering insight into how families navigate instability and how programs can better support them.

In the summer of 2025, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library Denver (ILD) faced a temporary funding shortfall, leading to a four-month pause in book deliveries. Participating families did not receive books during May, June, July, or August. They reported receiving no communication from ILD before the pause, during the interruption, or prior to the resumption of services. This interruption created a unique opportunity to study how families adapt when their shared reading routine is disrupted by the loss of the monthly book arrival as the external cue. The pause captured how shared reading routines within ILD-enrolled low-SES households are dependent on the continuity of book delivery and revealed how deeply routine and reliability shape the home literacy environment.

This qualitative study poses the following essential questions: What benefits do caregivers attribute to these monthly deliveries? What challenges emerge when the anticipated book no longer arrives? And how do shared reading practices change when the program resumes? These questions center on caregivers because they are the ones who translate book access into daily practice. They decide when, how, and whether shared reading occurs, and their

perceptions shape a child's experience with each new book (Bus et al., 1995; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Research consistently shows that shared reading is a relational, interactive process, and caregivers' emotional engagement and scaffolding play a defining role in how literacy behaviors develop (Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1997; Crawford, 2006). By documenting how caregivers interpret continuity, disruption, and resumption, the study provides insight into the social and emotional processes that sustain literacy routines.

This perspective is critical because the success of a program like DPIL hinges not only on the distribution of books but on caregivers' ability to integrate those books into the rhythm of family life amid the stressors of poverty (Evans et al., 2016; Tura et al., 2023). Ultimately, this study argues that for families without access to books, a dependable delivery program is not a luxury but a lifeline; one that supports caregivers in maintaining stable routines, reinforces the caregiver-child bond, and helps close the opportunity gap through consistent, meaningful shared reading (Neuman & Celano, 2001; Ridzi et al., 2014). Taken together, these conditions frame the need for a qualitative examination of caregiver experiences with delivery, disruption, and resumption in a community-based book-gifting program. The sections that follow outline the study's methodological approach, contextual background, problem statement, purpose, significance, theoretical framework, and organization.

Overview of Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology to understand how low-SES caregivers in Denver experienced the delivery, interruption, and resumption of ILD's monthly book-gifting program. A generic qualitative design was selected because it provides the methodological flexibility to explore participants' perspectives and the meanings they assign to their experiences without requiring adherence to the procedural boundaries of traditions such as phenomenology,

grounded theory, or ethnography (Kostere & Kostere, 2021; Merriam et al., 2025). Generic qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to studies that aim to describe and interpret "what" participants experience and "how" they make sense of it in everyday contexts, rather than to generate theory or analyze cultural immersion (Caelli et al., 2003; Kahlke, 2014; Percy et al., 2015). This aligns directly with the goals of the present study, which seeks to understand caregivers' reflections across three phases of DPIL participation: the months of consistent book delivery before the pause, the four-month disruption, and the program's resumption in September.

Through single, in-depth semi-structured interviews, caregivers reflected retrospectively on these phases, allowing for a holistic understanding of how changes in book access shaped family literacy routines and how caregivers interpreted those disruptions and transitions over time. This approach aligns with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes that learning is mediated through cultural tools and social interaction, particularly within the Zone of Proximal Development (Daniels, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). By looking closely at caregivers' narratives, the study investigates how a cultural tool, the monthly DPIL book, supports or interrupts shared reading, scaffolding, and caregiver-child engagement. In doing so, the methodological design complements the theoretical framework by illuminating the relational, contextual, and interactional processes through which literacy practices are constructed, sustained, or disrupted within low-SES households. The remainder of this chapter introduces the context and background, problem, purpose, significance, research questions, theoretical framework, definitions of key terms, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, the researcher's positionality, and the organization of the study.

Context and Background

A child's potential for literacy is not predetermined at birth but is profoundly shaped by their earliest environments (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Hart & Risley, 1995). The single most powerful activity in this formative period is shared reading (Anderson et al., 1985; Bus et al., 1995; Crain-Thoreson et al., 2001; Durkin, 1966; Funge et al., 2017; High et al., 2014; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002), which is an interactive process through which a caregiver and child co-construct meaning, connection, and joy around a book. Shared reading transforms print into dialogue, turning language into a social and developmental experience (Bus & van IJzendoorn, 1997). Decades of research confirm that these moments are far more than entertainment; they are a cornerstone of cognitive and emotional development (de Bondt et al., 2020; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010; Mendelsohn et al., 2018; Sinclair et al., 2018). Meta-analytic and longitudinal evidence links frequent, high-quality shared reading with richer vocabularies, stronger comprehension, and foundational literacy skills that predict academic success (Bus et al., 1995; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002).

These benefits extend beyond cognitive domains. Daily reading nurtures conversational turns, which are back-and-forth verbal exchanges now known to shape neural pathways related to language (Leung et al., 2020; Romeo et al., 2018) and promotes social-emotional security through routine and connection (Crawford, 2006; Martin et al., 2022; Sinclair et al., 2018). Shared reading is not a single act of literacy but an ongoing relational practice that builds language, empathy, and stability in children's earliest years.

This developmental foundation is not equally accessible. For children in low-SES households, the very resources that nurture early literacy are often limited or absent. Researcher Susan Neuman described these environments as "book deserts," communities where children's

books are rare and access to literacy materials is severely restricted (Neuman & Celano, 2001). The disparity is staggering; in some low-income neighborhoods, most children may own as few as one book, while in nearby higher-income communities, children own an average of 13 books, with many owning dozens (Neuman & Moland, 2016). This gap compounds the challenges caregivers face as they balance economic instability, time poverty, and limited institutional support (Evans et al., 2016; Lee, 2009). Without consistent access to books, many families struggle to establish literacy routines, which create gaps that appear on the first day of kindergarten and often persist throughout elementary school, reinforcing the "Matthew Effect" (Reschly, 2010; Stanovich, 1986).

It is within this context that DPIL intervenes. The book-gifting program mails high-quality, age-appropriate books monthly to children from birth to age five, transforming access to literacy resources by reaching directly into homes. Research consistently finds that DPIL increases shared reading frequency, enhances kindergarten readiness, and strengthens the home literacy environment, particularly among families experiencing economic hardship (Canfield et al., 2020; Prahl, 2023; Ridzi et al., 2014). Its impact appears strongest among families who face barriers of access, time, and resources, who are least likely to engage in shared reading without external support (Lonigan et al., 2009; McNally et al., 2024).

The success of the program lies not only in the provision of books but also in the predictability of their arrival. For families navigating the cognitive and emotional load of poverty, each book functions as a reliable external cue; an event that prompts shared reading and restores routine. This consistency reduces the cognitive demand required to sustain positive habits amid instability (Di Santo, 2012; Ridzi et al., 2014). The monthly delivery acts as both a resource and a behavioral nudge, encouraging the social interaction that Vygotsky identified as

central to development within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Daniels, 1996; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). The book serves as a cultural tool, while the delivery itself becomes the trigger that sustains caregiver-child interaction and literacy growth.

Continuity is not a logistical detail but the core mechanism of the program's success. When that continuity is interrupted, as occurred in Denver, the break represents more than a gap in materials; it is a disruption in a routine and an interruption in the scaffolding that supports literacy development. The Denver pause offers a unique lens through which to examine how reliability, or the loss of it, influences shared reading routines in families already navigating resource constraints. The challenge of early literacy in low-SES communities is both a crisis of resources and a crisis of routine.

Programs like DPIL stand out because they address both dimensions simultaneously, delivering not just books but structure, predictability, and opportunity. The unplanned pause in Denver's book distribution provides a rare natural setting in which to study what happens when that scaffolding is removed. It explores how families re-establish, modify, or lose shared reading routines when continuity returns. The pause in monthly deliveries occurred without advance notice to participating families, creating an unanticipated disruption to a program many caregivers had come to rely on as a consistent literacy support.

Problem Statement

Children in low-socioeconomic-status (SES) communities face persistent barriers to early literacy development, including limited access to books and reduced opportunities for shared reading at home. Research on book deserts illustrates that children growing up in resource-constrained neighborhoods encounter far fewer high-quality print materials, which contributes to early vocabulary gaps, lower kindergarten readiness scores, and widening achievement

disparities over time (Neuman & Celano, 2001; Tura et al., 2023). Shared reading is one of the strongest predictors of early language and literacy growth, yet families experiencing economic hardship often struggle to maintain consistent reading routines due to time scarcity, financial stress, and limited institutional supports (McNally et al., 2024; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). These conditions create a structural disadvantage in which young children's literacy trajectories are shaped by access rather than ability.

Community-based book-gifting programs such as DPIL aim to address these inequities by mailing high-quality books directly to children's homes each month. Existing research shows that these programs increase reading frequency, strengthen home literacy environments, and improve school readiness outcomes (Canfield et al., 2020; Dorman & Fair, 2021; Ridzi et al., 2014; Samiei et al., 2016). Monthly book deliveries also function as reading cues; external prompts that remind, motivate, or reinitiate shared-reading behaviors within the home. However, most published studies examine quantifiable outcomes, such as reading frequency or kindergarten readiness scores, rather than the subjective experiences of the caregivers who implement these routines and make shared reading possible. As a result, caregivers' perspectives on the emotional, practical, and relational processes involved in integrating the program into their daily lives remain largely absent from the scholarly literature.

This gap becomes especially pressing in the context of a disruption. The recent four-month delivery pause by ILD created an unexpected natural experiment that exposed the vulnerability of shared reading routines when continuity of access is interrupted. Although research documents that the arrival of each monthly book functions as a behavioral cue that prompts shared reading (de Bondt et al., 2020), the existing research is limited on what happens when that predictable cue disappears: how caregivers perceive the interruption, how routines

change, or how children respond to the loss of expected materials. Because these cues were temporarily removed, families may have experienced disruptions to their routines, motivation, and reading frequency, underscoring the importance of examining how caregivers made sense of the pause.

The potential consequences of such a disruption are significant. For families living in book deserts, a missed delivery is not simply an inconvenience; it may represent the loss of the primary literacy resource entering the home. Interruptions may reduce reading frequency, weaken emerging routines, or heighten caregiver stress during an already challenging developmental period (Evans et al., 2016; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2016). Without qualitative insight into caregivers' experiences, the field lacks a complete understanding of how continuity itself functions as a stabilizing force in early literacy development.

This study addresses the problem by centering caregivers' voices and examining how they experienced book delivery, interruption, and resumption during the ILD pause. Through a generic qualitative approach, it illuminates how continuity in book access sustains family literacy routines in low-SES homes and what occurs when that continuity is lost. In doing so, it fills a critical gap in early literacy scholarship and advances understanding of how book-gifting programs operate within the lived realities of families they aim to serve. Research illustrates that predictable access to books is essential for sustaining reading routines, particularly in households navigating economic stress, limited time, and constrained access to literacy resources.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how low-socioeconomic-status (SES) caregivers experienced the delivery, interruption, and resumption of monthly book deliveries through ILD. While existing research illustrates that book-gifting programs increase access to

books and support early literacy outcomes, far less is known about how caregivers themselves interpret and navigate these programs within the daily realities of family life. This study seeks to address that gap by examining (a) the benefits caregivers perceive from receiving regular monthly deliveries, (b) the challenges they encountered during the four-month service pause, and (c) how shared reading routines changed across the phases of delivery, disruption, and continuation.

Guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), the purpose of this study is not only to document behavioral changes in shared reading but to illuminate the relational, emotional, and contextual dynamics that shape these routines. Because caregivers are the mediators who transform book access into learning opportunities, understanding their lived experiences is essential to interpreting how continuity, or its absence, affects literacy engagement in low-SES households. By centering caregiver perspectives, this study aims to deepen insight into how external supports like DPIL function within families' everyday routines, how disruptions alter those patterns, and what these experiences reveal about the mechanisms that sustain early literacy in resource-constrained environments.

Ultimately, the purpose of this research is to generate knowledge that can strengthen book-gifting programs, inform policy and community-based initiatives, and contribute to a more robust understanding of how continuity of access supports early literacy development. The study offers practical and theoretical insights for scholars, practitioners, and program designers seeking to foster literacy equity in communities facing structural barriers to reading.

1. Research Question 1: How do caregivers describe the perceived benefits of the monthly book deliveries for their families' shared-reading practices?

2. Research Question 2: How do caregivers describe the challenges they experienced during the pause in book delivery?
3. Research Question 3: How do caregivers describe changes in shared-reading practices before, during, and after the pause and resumption of book delivery?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses an overlooked dimension of early literacy research: the lived experiences of low-SES caregivers participating in community-based book distribution programs when service is disrupted. While existing studies consistently demonstrate that book access improves young children's language development, reading frequency, and kindergarten readiness (Canfield et al., 2020; Ridzi et al., 2014; Samiei et al., 2016), much of this research focuses on quantifiable outcomes. Far fewer studies examine how caregivers themselves experience these programs or the ways they integrate monthly book arrivals into the rhythm of family life. As a result, the voices of caregivers, who ultimately determine whether shared reading occurs and how literacy routines are sustained, remain largely absent from the scholarly conversation.

Understanding continuity is vital because programs designed to support families experiencing poverty often face instability, funding uncertainty, and service interruptions. Research in social work shows that disruptions in services for low-income families can weaken engagement, reduce the effectiveness of interventions, and destabilize routines that caregivers rely on to support their children (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2013; Font et al., 2019). Existing DPIL studies confirm that consistent book access increases reading frequency, but they do not examine how caregivers interpret or respond when that consistency is lost. Given that DPIL's design relies

on predictable monthly engagement, understanding the role of continuity and its consequences is essential.

The recent four-month pause in ILD's book deliveries created an opportunity to explore these issues directly. By documenting caregiver perspectives across the three phases of delivery, interruption, and resumption, this study examined how families make meaning of continuity and disruption, how shared-reading practices shift in response, and what this reveals about the supports families need to sustain literacy routines. Exploring caregivers' experiences with a temporary service interruption also contributes to broader research on early childhood program stability, as existing literature suggests that disruptions to early learning supports can destabilize family routines and disproportionately affect low-income households. These insights move beyond outcome measures and illuminate the relational, emotional, and contextual dynamics that shape early literacy in low-SES households.

This study contributes to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it strengthens the application of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) to contemporary literacy interventions by illustrating how access to cultural tools interacts with family routines, guided participation, and caregiver-child meaning-making. Practically, it provides valuable evidence for early literacy organizations, funders, educators, and policymakers. Understanding how families experience continuity and interruption can inform program design, improve communication during service changes, and guide efforts to reduce the barriers that low-SES caregivers face in maintaining shared reading routines.

By bringing caregivers' voices to the forefront, this research underscores that predictable book delivery is not simply a logistical feature of DPIL but is a developmental support. For families living in book deserts and navigating the daily pressures of poverty, consistent access to

books serves as a stabilizing force, reinforcing literacy habits, strengthening the caregiver-child bond, and promoting equity in early learning opportunities. This study contributes to a broader conversation about literacy equity, arguing that predictable book delivery functions as an essential form of support for families navigating economic and structural disadvantage.

Theoretical Framework: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) provides a powerful lens for understanding how caregivers support children's early learning through shared reading. At its core, Vygotsky proposes that cognitive development occurs most effectively through social interaction with a more knowledgeable other (MKO) (Vygotsky, 1978). The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) defines the space between what a child can do independently and what they can achieve with guided support (Bruner, 1983; Rogoff, 1990). Shared reading exemplifies this process: caregivers scaffold their child's understanding by modeling, questioning, and co-constructing meaning within that interactive space.

Within this framework, books are cultural tools, or artifacts, that mediate learning and transmit cultural and linguistic knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). The DPIL program, by consistently delivering these tools, increases caregivers' opportunities to engage children in socially mediated literacy activities. Vygotsky emphasized that tools alone are insufficient; their power is realized only through interaction. When caregivers and children share a story, they do more than decode words; they negotiate meaning, build language, and strengthen emotional bonds through joint participation.

The continuity of DPIL book deliveries supports this sociocultural process by creating recurring opportunities for scaffolding within the home. Each delivery serves as an external cue that reactivates interaction within the ZPD, ensuring that learning moments remain frequent and

relational. When deliveries pause, those opportunities may diminish, interrupting the cycle of engagement and joint meaning-making. Conversely, resuming deliveries can restore this rhythm, underscoring how access to cultural tools interacts with family routines to sustain literacy development.

Applying Vygotsky's framework to the ILD pause highlights that literacy growth is not only a matter of materials but of mediated social interaction. The consistency of book-delivery structures shapes the environment in which learning occurs, supporting the dynamic interplay among caregiver guidance, child engagement, and environmental stability. By viewing continuity of access through this theoretical lens, the study extends Sociocultural Theory into the contemporary context of early literacy intervention, revealing how external structures, such as predictable book delivery, facilitate the social processes that drive cognitive and linguistic development in early childhood. Within this framework, shared reading is understood as a guided, interactive routine in which books act as mediating cultural tools that structure caregiver-child engagement and support the development of early literacy skills.

Definition of Terms

Book Desert: A geographic or socioeconomic area where children's books are scarce or inaccessible (Neuman & Celano, 2001).

Book-Gifting Program: A community-based intervention, such as the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, that regularly delivers free, high-quality books directly to children's homes to foster literacy.

Caregiver: An adult responsible for a child's care and development, including parents, guardians, or relatives.

Continuity: The consistent and uninterrupted provision of monthly book deliveries through the Imagination Library program.

External Cue: A specific, predictable stimulus that triggers a behavioral routine. In this study, the monthly arrival of a book serves as a cue for shared reading (Neuman, 1999; Ridzi et al., 2014; Vygotsky, 1978).

Family Reading Routine: Refers to a predictable, recurring pattern in which caregivers and children engage in shared reading at regular times, often daily. These routines provide stability, warmth, and consistency within the home literacy environment (Sonnenschein et al., 2012).

Habit Formation: The psychological process by which a new behavior becomes automatic through repetition and consistent contextual cues (Wood & Neal, 2007).

Lived Experience: The subjective, firsthand perceptions and understandings of individuals, which qualitative research seeks to capture and interpret (van Manen, 2016).

Low-Socioeconomic Status (Low-SES) Caregiver: An adult from a household meeting criteria for economic disadvantage (income ≤ 200% of the federal poverty line or enrollment in assistance programs) who is responsible for a child's care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2023).

Natural Experiment: An empirical study in which individuals are exposed to experimental and control conditions determined by nature or policy changes, rather than by a researcher (Dunning, 2012).

Service Interruption/Disruption: A temporary halt in the provision of a service; in this study, the four-month pause in book deliveries by ILD.

Shared Reading: Interactive reading between a caregiver and child that includes discussion, questioning, and engagement beyond decoding text (Bus et al., 1995; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002).

Definition of Terms: Theoretical Framework

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Cultural Tool: An artifact, symbol, or system (such as a book) that mediates learning and development within a sociocultural context (Vygotsky, 1978).

More Knowledgeable Other (MKO): A person who has a better understanding or higher ability level than the learner on a particular task, process, or concept; in this study, the caregiver (Vygotsky, 1978).

Scaffolding: The supportive guidance provided by a More Knowledgeable Other to help a learner accomplish a task within their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): The distance between what a learner can do independently and what they can accomplish with guided support from a More Knowledgeable Other (Vygotsky, 1978).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

This study operates under several foundational assumptions that guide its design and interpretation. First, it is assumed that caregivers can accurately recall and reflect upon their experiences across the phases of delivery, interruption, and resumption. Because the study relies on retrospective accounts, it assumes that participants' narratives provide meaningful access to how they understood and navigated changes in book delivery. Second, it is believed that the

descriptions offered by caregivers genuinely reflect their shared reading practices and their perceptions of how continuity, or its absence, shapes family routines. Third, the study assumes that the chosen qualitative methodology is well-suited to capturing the complexity of caregivers' lived experiences, yielding rich, contextualized insights that cannot be obtained through quantitative measures alone.

Finally, consistent with qualitative inquiry, the study assumes that knowledge is co-constructed between participants and the researcher. The researcher's background as a literacy advocate may sensitize data interpretation toward issues of access and caregiver resilience; however, it is also assumed that reflexive practices, including journaling and peer debriefing, help ensure that interpretations remain grounded in participants' voices. These assumptions provide the conceptual foundation for understanding how the study's findings, while context-specific, can offer transferable insights into similar communities and programs.

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. The qualitative design and small sample size, while well-suited for generating rich, in-depth insights into caregivers' lived experiences, mean that the findings are not statistically generalizable to broader populations. Because the study was conducted within a local ILD affiliate, the findings are constrained by the specific sociocultural and programmatic conditions of this community. As a result, the conclusions should not be assumed to represent all DPIL sites or all low-SES families nationwide. The study also relies on retrospective self-reporting, which may be influenced by the natural limitations of memory, perception, and interpretation. In addition, the researcher's positionality as a literacy advocate is acknowledged as a potential influence on data interpretation, despite the use of reflexive practices to maintain analytic rigor.

At the same time, qualitative studies aim for transferability rather than generalizability, and the insights gained from this research may still be valuable to practitioners, policymakers, and communities with similar characteristics, such as those experiencing book deserts, economic instability, or disruptions in early literacy programming. By clearly describing the study context and participant experiences, this research provides information that others may thoughtfully apply to comparable settings.

Delimitations

The scope of this study is intentionally bounded to enhance depth, contextual clarity, and analytic focus. First, the study is delimited to caregivers enrolled in ILD who directly experienced the four-month pause and subsequent resumption of book deliveries in 2025. Caregivers from other DPIL affiliates, other early literacy programs, or geographic regions were not included, as the aim was to understand this phenomenon within a single, clearly defined context. Second, the study focuses exclusively on caregivers' perspectives and does not include children's assessments, observational data, or quantitative measures of literacy outcomes. This aligns with the purpose of capturing the subjective meaning caregivers attribute to continuity, disruption, and resumption in book-gifting programs.

These delimitations reflect purposeful decisions that shape the study's contribution. By narrowing the context and participant group, the research provides a detailed, situated account of how continuity functions within one community's family literacy routines. While the findings are not intended to be generalized statistically, they offer transferable insights for programs and communities that share similar characteristics, such as serving low-SES families, operating in book deserts, or experiencing instability in service delivery. Clearly articulating these boundaries

ensures that readers understand both the study's focus and the contexts in which its insights may be meaningfully applied.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

My professional work in social services and community-based literacy initiatives has deepened my understanding of the structural and emotional pressures that low-resource families navigate daily. As a literacy advocate, I enter this study with a deep-seated belief in the transformative power of shared reading. As a former provider for parents living in poverty, I have insight into the challenges faced by low-SES caregivers and the profound commitment they demonstrate in supporting their children's learning. This experience allows me to approach the topic with insight into the complexities of poverty, family routines, and the barriers that shape literacy engagement. At the same time, I acknowledge that these experiences may sensitize me to issues of access, caregiver resilience, and equity, which could influence how I interpret the data.

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, I engaged in ongoing reflexive practices throughout the research process. These practices included maintaining a journal to document my assumptions, reflecting on potential biases, and participating in peer debriefing with my dissertation advisor. My goal was to use my positionality as a strength; to build rapport with participants and honor the realities they described, while rigorously centering their lived experiences in the interpretation of findings.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the study by anchoring the problem of early literacy inequity within the broader context of socioeconomic disparities and book access. It established shared reading as a central developmental activity and framed Dolly Parton's Imagination Library as a vital intervention that provides both material access and behavioral consistency for families. The

discussion emphasized that the program's success may hinge not only on the presence of books but on the predictability of their delivery, which serves as an external cue for shared reading and a stabilizing force within low-SES households. By situating the study within evidence on shared reading, book access, and program stability, this research builds on a well-established understanding of how predictable literacy supports shape early learning in low-SES contexts. The unanticipated service pause by ILD provided a rare opportunity to investigate how continuity shapes family literacy practices. The problem, purpose, and research questions were developed using Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory as the guiding framework. Definitions, assumptions, limitations, and the researcher's positionality were also outlined to establish transparency and rigor. Together, these elements form the foundation for the chapters that follow. The next chapter presents a comprehensive review of literature on early literacy development, shared-reading practices, socioeconomic disparities in book access, the role of book-gifting programs, and the effects of service interruptions, establishing the conceptual groundwork for this study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Children's access to books profoundly shapes early childhood literacy, the routines families create around reading, and the structural conditions that either support or constrain these opportunities. An estimated 32.4 million American children lack access to books in their homes (Reach Out and Read, 2024). For families residing in low-socioeconomic-status (SES) contexts, these conditions often include limited transportation, financial stress, scarce community resources, and the daily pressures of balancing work, childcare, and basic needs. Hauser and Prosser (1997) found that living in low-income households is among the most adverse conditions for a child's well-being. Decades of research show that consistent access to developmentally appropriate print materials can play a decisive role in promoting early literacy, strengthening shared-reading practices, and supporting children's school readiness (Bus et al., 1995; High et al., 2014; Neuman & Celano, 2001). Yet access to books remains inequitable, and many children, particularly those living in book deserts, begin school without the foundational experiences that support early reading success (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010). These inequities contribute to long-standing gaps in early literacy outcomes, with children from low-income households typically entering kindergarten with significantly fewer literacy experiences and lower vocabulary exposure than their higher-income peers (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Book-gifting programs such as Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) attempt to reduce these inequities by mailing free books directly to children each month. These predictable deliveries offer families a stable source of literacy materials and support the development of shared-reading routines that might otherwise be difficult to sustain (de Bondt et al., 2020; MacLeod & Tett, 2019). For many low-SES families, these books represent not only literacy

resources but moments of connection, emotional bonding, and opportunities for joy amid demanding circumstances. The arrival of a monthly book can serve as a cue, or external reminder, that prompts or reinforces reading routines (de Bondt et al., 2020), which is especially meaningful in homes where time, energy, and structural supports are limited.

Despite widespread evidence on the benefits of book access, little is known about what happens when a book-gifting program is interrupted. Program pauses, defined as temporary interruptions in otherwise predictable book deliveries, may affect reading routines, motivation, and the emotional climate surrounding shared reading in the home. In the case of Imagination Library Denver (ILD), the pause examined in this study occurred amid funding instability within the layered state-local partnership that supports ongoing book delivery. While the benefits of DPIL participation have been widely documented, few studies have examined to date how caregivers experience interruptions in DPIL book delivery or how these disruptions influence shared-reading behaviors. This is particularly important in Colorado, where resource disparities, transportation barriers, and vast differences in community infrastructure contribute to significant inequities in early childhood literacy (Colorado Department of Education [CDE], 2023; Early Milestones Colorado, 2021). DPIL has become an essential and often irreplaceable source of literacy support for many Colorado families. Although any DPIL affiliate may encounter challenges that result in a pause in book deliveries, the impact of these service disruptions has not been explored.

This study addresses this gap by exploring how low-SES caregivers in Denver, Colorado, experienced the continuity, interruption, and resumption of book deliveries through the Imagination Library Denver (ILD). Understanding these experiences requires engaging with research on book access, early childhood literacy, family reading routines, book deserts, and the

importance of predictable literacy supports. The purpose of this chapter is to synthesize the existing literature on these topics and to establish a clear conceptual foundation for the study's qualitative exploration. This literature review examines (1) the sociocultural foundations of early literacy and the role of books as cultural tools; (2) shared-reading practices and factors that influence them and the ways inequities in book access and the realities of book deserts are woven throughout these areas, including research specific to Colorado; (3) the impact of book-gifting programs such as DPIL; and (4) evidence related to service disruptions, program pauses, and the consequences of instability in early childhood services. These strands of literature also intersect with sociocultural perspectives that view shared-reading interactions as guided participation and books as mediating tools that shape children's learning within caregiver-child relationships.

By organizing the literature around these interconnected areas, this chapter establishes the rationale for examining a delivery pause. It situates the study within broader research on literacy equity, family shared reading practices, and the structural conditions shaping early reading experiences. Together, these bodies of scholarship illuminate why predictable access to books matters deeply for families, and why understanding the effects of disruption is essential for strengthening literacy initiatives in underserved communities. This review not only situates the present study within the broader early literacy landscape but also clarifies how the existing research informs and aligns with the study's guiding research questions.

Conceptual Foundations

Understanding how caregivers experienced the continuity, interruption, and resumption of book deliveries from the Imagination Library Denver (ILD) requires grounding the study in theoretical perspectives that explain how children learn within relationships and how family literacy routines develop. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) provides the

central conceptual framework for this study, emphasizing the importance of cultural tools, caregiver-child interactions, and predictable routines in supporting early learning. Using books as cultural tools helps structure children's opportunities to engage with language and meaning-making (Bruner, 1990), while caregivers act as the more knowledgeable other (MKO) who guide and scaffold these experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). This framework is well-suited to examining how predictable literacy resources, such as monthly ILD books, shape, sustain, or constrain shared-reading practices within families.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky (1978) proposed that children learn through social interaction, internalizing knowledge as they participate in guided activities with more knowledgeable others (MKO). Within family literacy contexts, caregivers play a central role in scaffolding children's early literacy development (Schmitt et al., 2011). Shared reading becomes a primary building block for this scaffolding, as caregivers and children co-construct meaning, build oral language, and develop routines that strengthen comprehension and engagement. Books serve as mediating tools within this process. When they are consistently available, they provide structure for learning interactions and create opportunities for conversation and emotional connection. For families managing economic stress, unpredictable schedules, or limited access to literacy materials, the steady presence of a new book each month can offer both stability and an anchor for routine. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) deepens this understanding of how learning unfolds within relationships. The ZPD represents the space between what a child can do independently and what becomes possible with guidance from a more knowledgeable other. In this framework, learning is not viewed as an isolated task but as a collaborative activity in which adults scaffold emerging skills and gradually support children

toward greater independence (Margolis, 2020; Danish et al., 2020; Shvarts & Bakker, 2019). Within early literacy, this scaffolding often occurs during shared reading, when caregivers pause, explain, point, ask questions, and invite children into the meaning-making process.

Book-gifting programs align naturally with these sociocultural principles. The consistent availability of high-quality books provides children with opportunities to explore text on their own while also inviting supportive interaction from caregivers. Research shows that when developmentally appropriate books are readily accessible, children engage in early forms of inquiry such as handling texts, noticing letters, and attempting to follow stories, while caregivers provide the scaffolding that transforms these moments of curiosity into deeper learning (Ihmeideh & Al-Maadadi, 2020; Neuman et al., 2020). In this way, monthly book deliveries supply the very cultural tools through which ZPD-based interactions can unfold. Sociocultural Theory foregrounds the relational, interactive, and routine-based aspects of literacy learning that are central to understanding the experiences of ILD caregivers. It provides a valuable lens for interpreting how the presence and temporary absence of predictable literacy resources shape the development and maintenance of shared-reading routines. Building on these sociocultural foundations, scholars have examined how specific literacy tools, such as children's books, mediate learning in caregiver-child interactions.

Books as Cultural Tools in Early Literacy Development

Books support early literacy development by providing exposure to language, narrative structures, and opportunities to engage with print. Research consistently shows that children who participate in regular shared reading develop stronger vocabulary, emergent literacy, and early comprehension (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 2002; Bus et al., 1995; High et al., 2014; Mol & Bus, 2011). These outcomes arise not simply from the presence of books, but from the interactions

they facilitate. Within a sociocultural framework, books function as shared objects that organize caregiver-child interaction. They offer conversations and support emotional bonding, both of which contribute to children's meaning-making processes. For low-SES families, who often face structural barriers to accessing literacy resources, book-gifting programs can play a vital role by ensuring that these cultural tools are reliably present. Consistent delivery helps families establish and maintain routines that support learning; conversely, interruptions may weaken these routines, temporarily removing the scaffolding that predictability provides.

Reading Cues and Their Role in Shared-Reading Routines

A central concept relevant to this study is the role of reading cues, also known as external prompts, cues, or signals that trigger or reinforce a reading routine. In their examination of book-gifting programs, de Bondt et al. (2020) found that receiving a new book can operate as a powerful "nudge," motivating families to initiate or re-engage in shared-reading activities. This effect is significant among households experiencing stress or time scarcity, where sustaining routines may be challenging. For many caregivers, the arrival of a monthly ILD book served as such a cue, signaling that it was time to pause, reset, and read together. From a sociocultural perspective, the cue functions through mediated action: the book itself becomes the tool that anchors the routine (Di Santo, 2012). The concept of reading cues also helps explain why a pause in book delivery may be particularly disruptive. When the key mediating tool disappears, the routine associated with it may weaken or temporarily lapse (Vygotsky, 1978).

Rationale for Sociocultural Theory as the Study's Theoretical Framework

Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) aligns closely with the study's purpose and research questions because it emphasizes the relational nature of shared reading, the role of cultural tools such as books in structuring literacy interactions, and the importance of routines

and predictability in young children's learning. Within this framework, shared reading is understood as a collaborative meaning-making process in which caregivers and children jointly construct understanding through repeated, emotionally grounded interactions. Predictable access to books supports this process by anchoring routines, shaping the emotional climate of reading, and providing a stable mediating tool through which literacy learning occurs. These principles align directly with the findings discussed in Chapters Four and Five, which illustrate the stabilizing role of ILD books in families' literacy routines, the motivational and emotional significance of predictable delivery, and the disruptions that emerged during the temporary pause. Through this lens, Sociocultural Theory offers a coherent structure for interpreting caregivers' experiences of continuity, interruption, and resumption in book delivery. While Sociocultural Theory explains how literacy learning unfolds within caregiver-child interactions, these interactions do not occur in a vacuum. Families' ability to sustain shared-reading routines is profoundly shaped by the structural conditions that determine access to books and other literacy resources.

Structural Inequities, Book Deserts, and Early Literacy in Low-SES Communities

Understanding how families experience shared reading requires recognizing the broader structural context in which literacy routines develop. While low-SES caregivers share the same desire for their children's success as those with higher incomes, they must focus on the family's survival (Evans et al., 2016). Caregivers may feel disempowered if they cannot provide educational opportunities that higher-income families can, including time for shared reading and new books (Lee, 2009; Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012). Book deserts, affordability concerns, transportation barriers, and chronic stress intersect to influence when and how families engage with literacy practices. These challenges are well documented in national research and are

particularly relevant in Colorado, where significant disparities in early childhood opportunities persist (Kids Count Report, 2022).

Socioeconomic Status and Early Literacy Disparities

Socioeconomic status plays a decisive role in shaping children's early learning experiences. These factors contribute to persistent achievement gaps, particularly in reading proficiency, that remain visible across the United States (Paschall et al., 2018; Rowe et al., 2016). Children from low-SES homes score lower on academic assessments and school-readiness scores when administered at the start of kindergarten (Beckett, 2012; Tennessee Board of Regents, 2008). Recent research suggests that the income-based achievement gap in reading does not get smaller across the elementary years (von Hippel et al., 2018). McCall (1981) found that the association between socioeconomic status and cognitive performance begins in infancy. Developmental psychologists Hart and Risley (1995) studied language acquisition skills in young children. Their seminal longitudinal study revealed vocabulary discrepancies between lower and higher-SES peers. They found that those from lower socioeconomic circumstances heard 32 million fewer words at age four than their higher-income peers. These differences in language acquisition create school-readiness gaps, which in turn lead to achievement gaps, as language is the basis for reading, and reading is necessary for school success (Durkin, 1966; Evans et al., 2010; Golinkoff et al., 2019; Sloat et al., 2007).

Understanding the roots of these disparities is essential for improving early literacy instruction and outcomes. The literature shows that reading and literacy skills are critical for success in society (Snow et al., 1998). Adults who struggle with reading proficiency make up a large portion of those who drop out of high school, struggle with employment, live in poverty, or are incarcerated (Blumberg & Griffin, 2013; Vacca, 2004). Illiteracy and limited literacy skills

continue to affect millions of children and adults nationwide. Ninety million Americans lack adequate reading skills, and two-thirds of children in the United States read below grade level (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). These challenges carry lifelong implications, as reading proficiency is closely tied to academic success, employment opportunities, and broader measures of well-being (Perie et al., 2005).

Children enter kindergarten with wide variations in language exposure, early literacy skills, and prior learning experiences, differences often shaped by access to books, early learning environments, and family resources (Anderson et al., 2019b; Neuman & Moland, 2019). Despite large-scale federal policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), achievement gaps have persisted (Paschall et al., 2018). Much of the literature highlights disparities between children from low-income and higher-income households (Paschall et al., 2018; Rowe et al., 2016). These patterns reinforce the need for interventions, such as book-gifting programs, that expand literacy access and help mitigate resource-based inequities before children enter formal schooling. These disparities underscore the structural nature of book access and highlight why external supports such as book-gifting programs are often essential in low-income communities.

Book Deserts and Inequitable Access to Print Materials

Susan Neuman's foundational research revealed stark disparities in children's access to books based on neighborhood income, demonstrating that children in low-income communities encounter fewer literacy resources than their peers in more affluent areas (Neuman et al., 1993; Neuman & Celano, 2001; Neuman & Moland, 2016). Book deserts are defined not only by the absence of bookstores or libraries but also by broader patterns of community disinvestment, such as fewer high-quality early childhood programs and neighborhood school closures (McNally et

al., 2024; Shrider & Creamer, 2022). More recent international research reinforces this pattern. Fikrat-Wevers et al. (2021) found that socioeconomic disadvantage significantly restricts families' access to literacy materials, while Tura et al. (2023) reported that families with fewer books in the home experience greater difficulty establishing consistent reading routines, even when they value literacy. These findings underscore a consistent theme across decades of research: inequitable access to print is primarily driven by structural and economic conditions, not caregiver disinterest (Evans et al., 2016; Shulman & Trabucchi, 2023). Children's early literacy development is among the most critical predictors of school success (Evans et al., 2016; Reschly & Christenson, 2006).

Affordability, Transportation, and Time Barriers for Low-SES Families

Families living in low-SES contexts encounter multiple overlapping constraints that limit their ability to obtain books. The cost of children's books alone places them out of reach for many low-income households, making it difficult for caregivers to build or sustain a home library (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Neuman & Celano, 2012). Even when public libraries offer free access to books, families often face significant barriers that hinder regular visits. Transportation challenges, inconsistent or inflexible work schedules, limited library operating hours, and concerns about fines or borrowing limits can all make library visits difficult to manage (Fikrat-Wevers et al., 2021; Tura et al., 2023). Together, these financial, logistical, and time-related constraints illustrate how structural conditions, rather than caregiver disinterest, frequently impede access to print materials. These realities help explain why book-gifting programs such as DPIL, which deliver books directly to homes, are uniquely impactful in low-SES communities. By removing both financial and logistical barriers, these programs make it more feasible for families to engage in regular shared-reading practices. Although these patterns

appear across national and international contexts, they take on particular significance within specific local environments, such as Denver, where families navigate intersecting economic and structural challenges.

Colorado's Early Childhood Landscape and Systemic Inequities

Colorado-specific research mirrors national patterns while also highlighting persistent inequities across the state's early childhood landscape. Reports from Early Milestones Colorado (2021) documented significant disparities in access to early learning opportunities, family supports, and community-based services, particularly for low-income and multilingual families. Similarly, statewide evaluations from the CDE (2023) and analyses conducted by the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Kallman-Wegner & Klopfenstein, 2023) revealed ongoing gaps in kindergarten readiness, early literacy achievement, and access to high-quality preschool and early learning resources. These disparities shape the context in which Denver families experience literacy opportunities and underscore the importance of examining book access within ILD, especially for households navigating structural barriers to early learning.

Early Childhood Disruptions and Disparities in Literacy Resources and School Readiness in Colorado

Early Milestones Colorado (2021) documented widespread instability in early childhood services during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Colorado families experienced reduced early learning capacity, staffing shortages, closures of community-based programs, and diminished access to family supports. These disruptions disproportionately affected low-income communities and widened gaps in early literacy development. The CDE (2023) report highlights ongoing economic disparities in kindergarten readiness, early literacy benchmarks, access to quality preschool, and availability of culturally relevant children's books. Rybinska et al. (2021)

found that Colorado families experiencing economic hardship reported significantly lower access to early learning materials and fewer literacy resources at home, consistent with national research on book deserts.

Colorado's Imagination Library: Statewide Evaluation

State partnerships have become a powerful way to strengthen family literacy by combining public and private resources. Colorado exemplifies this approach through its collaboration between the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) and the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab at the University of Denver, which evaluates Imagination Library Colorado (ILCO) (Kallman-Wegner & Klopfenstein, 2023). The partnership prioritizes early literacy and family engagement, ensuring ILCO aligns with Colorado Department of Education learning standards and assessing its impact in communities that previously lacked access. In 2021, Colorado prioritized underserved counties, enrolling nearly five thousand additional children (Colorado Department of Early Childhood, 2021). Guided by evidence-based decision making, integrating research findings, community needs, and practitioner expertise, the program is tailored locally to amplify impact.

A recent 2025 report by the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab found that the ILD successfully reaches its target demographic: 63% of surveyed families live at or below 200% of the federal poverty level, and 76% identify as racial or ethnic minorities (Kallman-Wegner & Klopfenstein, 2023). Critically, the evaluation provides robust evidence of the program's benefits: 91% of caregivers reported that their child requests shared reading more frequently because of the Imagination Library books, and 87% stated that the program has helped them create a reading routine with their child (Kallman-Wegner & Klopfenstein, 2023). Furthermore, 93% of caregivers reported that their child views themselves as a reader, and 89% agreed that

their child's vocabulary has improved as a result of the program. These findings, resulting from the state's evidence-based approach to program evaluation, validate the investment and provide a model for other states. Skibbe and Foster (2019) emphasize that investing in early childhood reading interventions, such as shared reading, can be one of the most economically sound investments a community can make. Public policy that allocates funding, promotes partnerships, and evaluates programs lays the foundation for sound, evidence-based support for state and local literacy initiatives. These findings situate the current study within a broader statewide effort to ensure equitable access to early literacy supports.

Colorado's Context for the Present Study

Denver caregivers experienced the ILD delivery pause within a broader statewide landscape marked by persistent structural barriers to early learning. Colorado families continue to navigate financial pressures, transportation constraints, food insecurity, housing instability, and substantial variation in neighborhood-level access to literacy resources (Wolanske, 2018; Kids Count Report, 2022). These contextual conditions illustrate that continuity in book access is not simply beneficial but an essential support for families already managing systemic inequities. Understanding the effects of a delivery pause requires situating caregiver experiences within the broader environmental factors shaping their daily routines, stressors, and opportunities to engage in shared reading.

Economic and structural barriers are widespread among low-income households in Colorado. More than 40% of low-income families experience unstable or unpredictable work hours, including evening, night, or rotating shifts, which complicates efforts to maintain consistent routines such as shared reading (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2023). Additionally, 32% of low-income workers in Colorado lack paid sick leave, making it more

difficult to balance childcare responsibilities and learning routines when illness or unexpected disruptions arise (Colorado Department of Labor and Employment [CDLE], 2024).

Housing instability further shapes the conditions under which caregivers attempt to support early literacy. Each year, more than 10,000 Denver students experience homelessness or unstable housing, including doubling up with relatives or living in temporary accommodations (Colorado Department of Education [CDE], 2023). Financial pressure also affects the broader caregiving environment: over 45% of Denver renters are rent-burdened, spending at least 30% of their income on housing (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). These factors collectively create stressors that can make sustained shared-reading routines more challenging.

Economic hardship is also reflected in child poverty rates. In Denver County, 14.1% of children under age 18 lived below the federal poverty line in 2023, underscoring ongoing financial strain among local families (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis [FRED], 2024). Public school data mirror this trend: during the 2024-2025 school year, approximately 72% of Denver Public Schools students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, a standard indicator of low household income (Denver Public Schools, 2025).

Food insecurity compounds these challenges. Statewide, 14.3% of Colorado children were food insecure in 2023 (Feeding Colorado, 2023). In Denver, nearly 15% of residents reported experiencing food insecurity in 2024, reflecting broader economic instability that affects caregivers' ability to meet basic needs (Denver Department of Public Health & Environment [DDPHE], 2024). Local data highlight the direct impact on children: 7% of Denver parents reported reducing their children's meal sizes due to financial constraints, and 4% reported that their child skipped meals because there was not enough money for food (DDPHE, 2024). Among

families using food pantries, the hardship is even more severe; one in five parents reported that their child went an entire day without food due to lack of resources (DDPHE, 2024).

These pressures were intensified by instability in federal benefits. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the nation's most extensive food assistance program, provides monthly benefits that help low-income households purchase groceries and reduce food insecurity (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2024). SNAP benefits have been shown to significantly stabilize household budgets, particularly for families with children (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities [CBPP], 2023). However, in November 2025, a nationwide administrative delay in SNAP disbursements caused millions of households to receive benefits late, disrupting food purchasing cycles and forcing families to rely on food pantries, credit, or skip meals while awaiting funds (Feeding America, 2025; CBPP, 2025). Advocacy organizations reported sharp increases in demand for emergency food assistance during the delay, with many low-income caregivers describing heightened financial strain and difficulty maintaining consistent nutrition for their children (Feeding America, 2025). This temporary interruption in essential public benefits illustrates how even brief disruptions can destabilize already fragile household routines.

Together, these indicators illustrate the substantial and intersecting barriers that shape caregiving in Denver. Financial strain, unstable work schedules, housing insecurity, food scarcity, and instability in public benefits all influence caregivers' capacity to establish and maintain shared-reading routines. These contextual realities underscore why book delivery continuity matters deeply for families enrolled in ILD. For many caregivers, the monthly book represents not only access to a literacy resource but a stabilizing force within an environment marked by chronic instability.

Significance of Local Context

Understanding early literacy practices requires careful attention to the local conditions that shape families' daily lives. In Denver, caregivers navigate a landscape marked by substantial variation in neighborhood resources, economic stability, housing security, and access to early learning supports. These structural conditions influence not only whether books are available in the home but also how they can engage with them. The ILD program operates within this complex environment, where predictable access to books may carry heightened significance for families facing ongoing barriers to stability. The local context matters because caregivers' experiences with shared reading and their responses to a delivery pause are embedded in broader realities of transportation challenges, rising housing costs, food insecurity, and limited time. Understanding these contextual factors strengthens our ability to interpret how ILD books function in families' everyday routines and why a temporary disruption may have disproportionate effects in communities already managing systemic inequities. By grounding this study in the lived conditions of Denver families, this research captures not only what shared reading looks like but why continuity in book access matters so profoundly in this area.

Shared Reading and Early Childhood Literacy in Low-SES Families

Shared reading is widely recognized as one of the most powerful early literacy practices available to caregivers, particularly during the first five years of life (Bus et al., 1995). In many households, shared reading functions as both an academic and relational routine, one that builds connection, strengthens communication, and nurtures children's early understanding of story, print, and language. The landmark 1985 report from the National Institute of Education stated that the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for success in reading is reading aloud to children (Anderson et al., 1985). Sénéchal et al.'s (2002) longitudinal study

found that shared reading at home was closely associated with vocabulary growth and reading success in elementary school. For low-SES families facing structural barriers to education, shared reading offers a pathway to enriching early learning experiences even when formal supports are limited. However, consistently engaging in shared reading requires time, access to materials, and stable routines. These conditions are not always available to families navigating economic hardship, unpredictable work schedules, and material constraints.

Benefits of Shared Reading for Children's Language and Literacy Development

Research shows that one of the most critical activities a caregiver can do with their child is daily shared reading, which improves language and literacy development and prepares children for academic success (Pelatti et al., 2014; Sénéchal et al., 2008). Decades of research demonstrate that shared reading supports vocabulary growth, language acquisition, print awareness, and emergent comprehension skills (High et al., 2014; Mol & Bus, 2011). Shared reading involves a caregiver actively engaging with a child while reading a book (Durkin, 1966; High et al, 2014). It facilitates rich verbal interactions, in which caregivers ask questions, point to pictures, elaborate on story events, and help children connect narratives to their everyday experiences. These interactions are known as conversational turns (Leung et al., 2020; Romeo et al., 2018). These exchanges strengthen the foundational skills needed for later reading success (Bus et al., 1995). Importantly, it is not solely the presence of books that supports literacy development, but the interactions that books make possible (Crain-Thoreson et al., 2001; Leech et al., 2018; McGillion et al., 2017). Daily shared reading is crucial for developing emergent literacy skills (Samuelsson et al., 2005). Shared reading provides a structured opportunity for responsive communication, guided participation, and collaborative meaning-making, all core components of early literacy learning.

Shared Reading as a Relational and Emotional Practice

Beyond its cognitive and linguistic benefits, shared reading strengthens the emotional bond between caregivers and children. High et al. (2014) emphasized that consistent reading routines offer stability and predictability that support child well-being, particularly in contexts of stress. Many caregivers describe shared reading as a peaceful, cherished time; an opportunity to slow down, connect, and foster a sense of security. International research confirms this relational dimension. MacLeod and Tett (2019) found that shared reading can increase parental confidence and reinforce caregivers' sense of agency in supporting their children's learning. Similarly, Fikrat-Wevers et al. (2021) reported that caregivers view reading time as a moment of closeness that strengthens relationships and motivates children to engage with books. These emotional and relational components illuminate why consistent access to books and the routines built around them matter so deeply for families. When predictable book access is disrupted, the relational routines that families rely on may also be affected, underscoring the importance of examining how ILD caregivers experienced the delivery pause. When children enjoy reading, they learn to associate reading with positive interactions and are motivated to read more often (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Mol & Bus, 2011).

Constraints on Shared Reading in Low-SES Households

Although shared reading offers meaningful benefits, structural and contextual barriers can impede families' consistent engagement. Neuman and Celano (2001, 2012) found that financial strain, limited access to bookstores and libraries, and neighborhood-level resource disparities restrict families' opportunities to obtain print materials. Time constraints, shift work, and unpredictable schedules further limit opportunities for shared reading, particularly for caregivers managing multiple jobs or nonstandard hours (Tura et al., 2023). Fikrat-Wevers et al.

(2021) similarly noted that families in low-SES contexts often struggle to establish consistent reading routines, even when they value literacy highly. Housing instability, transportation challenges, and competing household demands frequently disrupt efforts to maintain reading habits. These barriers underscore the importance of literacy supports that eliminate access challenges by bringing books directly into the home. Together, this research highlights a key reality: families' interest in shared reading is often strong, but structural barriers, not caregiver motivation, limit the consistency with which routines can be maintained.

Additional evidence from early childhood intervention studies reinforces the central role of interactive shared reading in supporting children's learning. In an experimental study with Head Start students, Bochna (2006) found that children who participated in shared reading incorporating teacher questioning to support comprehension showed significantly stronger main-idea identification than those in read-aloud-only conditions. Earlier work by Lamb (1986) demonstrated similar patterns: young children who engaged in shared reading with active adult interaction made greater literacy gains than peers who simply listened to books being read aloud. These findings highlight that the benefits of shared reading extend beyond exposure to print. It is the quality of interaction; talk, questioning, elaboration, and emotional engagement, that drives literacy development, particularly for children in low-income contexts.

The Role of Reading Cues and Predictability in Literacy Routines

Emerging research aligns with the study's conceptual framework by demonstrating that new books can serve as behavioral cues, or environmental prompts, that trigger or reinforce shared-reading routines. De Bondt et al. (2020) showed that the arrival of a new book increases the likelihood that caregivers read in the days immediately following receipt. This "nudge effect" reflects how the novelty and excitement of a new book can stimulate motivation and help re-

establish or strengthen family routines. This cueing effect is especially relevant in households where external stressors or unpredictable schedules make routine-building challenging. Predictability plays a stabilizing role in literacy engagement: when books arrive consistently, they help anchor shared-reading routines; when delivery is interrupted, the absence of this cue may weaken or disrupt those routines (Ridzi et al., 2014).

Shared Reading in the Context of Structural Barriers

Families living in book deserts often rely on creative alternatives, such as community book swaps, occasional library visits, or rotating a small collection of books at home, to provide children with meaningful literacy experiences (McNally et al., 2024; Neuman & Celano, 2001). While these efforts reflect caregivers' strong commitment to supporting early literacy, they are not always sufficient to sustain daily shared-reading practices. Shared reading remains one of the most powerful levers for academic readiness and caregiver-child connection, and research on DPIL shows that consistent book access can increase reading frequency and support kindergarten readiness, with powerful benefits for low-SES families (Ridzi et al., 2014).

Studies consistently demonstrate that when families have access to high-quality literacy materials, their ability to support children's learning expands. MacLeod and Tett (2019) found that caregivers reported increased confidence and a greater sense of empowerment when they had appropriate books readily available in the home. Similarly, Tura et al. (2023) showed that providing families with books significantly increased reading frequency in low-income households, reinforcing the idea that access, not caregiver interest, is the primary limiting factor. Monthly book deliveries help families establish and maintain shared-reading routines that are otherwise difficult to sustain under socioeconomic strain (Dolly Parton Imagination Library, 2023; Duursma, 2007).

Taken together, this research paints a coherent picture: shared reading is widely valued and strongly supports foundational language and literacy development (Bus et al., 1995; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Unfortunately, families in low-SES contexts often struggle to maintain consistent routines due to affordability constraints, limited transportation, time pressures, and chronic stress (Evans et al., 2016; Neuman & Celano, 2001). Book-gifting programs address these barriers by reducing access issues and providing a predictable stream of literacy resources that stabilize and strengthen reading habits at home (Canfield et al., 2020; Ridzi et al., 2014). This broader context helps explain why predictable book-gifting models are so meaningful for families, and why disruptions in book delivery may have significant consequences for shared-reading practices (de Bondt et al., 2020; Ridzi et al., 2014). In response to these structural barriers, book-gifting programs have emerged as a targeted strategy to expand access to print materials and support shared reading in low-SES households.

Impact of Book-Gifting Programs on Family Literacy Practices

Book-gifting programs have emerged as a central strategy in early childhood literacy efforts, especially for families experiencing socioeconomic hardship or living in book deserts (Neuman & Celano, 2001; Tura et al., 2023). DPIL and similar programs aim to reduce inequities in book access by mailing high-quality, developmentally appropriate books directly to children each month (Dolly Parton Imagination Library, 2023; Ridzi et al., 2014). This model removes cost barriers, eliminates the need for transportation, and ensures that literacy materials reach homes consistently.

A growing body of research underscores that book-gifting programs strengthen shared-reading routines, increase reading frequency, and enhance children's motivation and engagement with books (Canfield et al., 2020; de Bondt et al., 2020; Ridzi et al., 2014). By ensuring that

families regularly receive new books, these programs support both literacy development and family routines. For many caregivers, the arrival of a monthly book becomes a foundational cue that helps sustain shared reading, even amid competing demands and structural challenges (de Bondt et al., 2020; Dolly Parton Imagination Library, 2023).

Overview of the DPIL Library Book-Gifting Program and Its Purpose

Across the United States and internationally, book-gifting programs are designed to address persistent inequities in access to print materials (Dorman & Fair, 2021; Samiei et al., 2016). DPIL is among the most extensive and most widely researched of these initiatives, distributing millions of books globally each month (Dolly Parton Imagination Library, 2023; Neyer et al., 2018). DPIL helps foster a culture of literacy within communities and provides academic, social, and emotional benefits for young children (Beckett, 2012). By increasing children's exposure to books and encouraging shared reading between caregivers and children, community book-gifting programs support early literacy development and help promote greater equity for families in low-SES contexts. Its ambitious goal is to create a home library for every child in America. Through consistent book delivery, the program enhances access to literacy materials, promotes shared-reading routines, and supports children's early learning. As a result, DPIL serves as a stabilizing force in communities where access to books is limited, offering families reliable support in building and sustaining early reading practices.

Reading Frequency and Engagement in Homes Receiving Gifted Books

A substantial body of literature illustrates that book-gifting programs increase home reading frequency. Studies from the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States consistently show that families enrolled in such programs report reading more often, reading with greater enthusiasm, and developing more stable shared-reading routines (MacLeod & Tett,

2019; McNally et al., 2024; Mould et al., 2022). A consistent finding across studies is that the arrival of the monthly book, not merely its presence, stimulates reading behaviors (Ridzi et al., 2014). De Bondt et al. (2020) found evidence that a new book functions as a "reading cue," prompting caregivers to engage in shared reading in the days following the book's arrival. This cueing effect supports routine formation even in households with demanding or unpredictable schedules.

Child Motivation, Book Ownership, and Early Reader Identity

Book-gifting programs have also been shown to positively influence children's motivation to engage with books. Children enrolled in these programs often exhibit heightened excitement around reading and develop a sense of ownership over their books (Fikrat-Wevers et al., 2021; MacLeod & Tett, 2019). Receiving a book addressed to the child fosters early reader identity, contributing to feelings of pride and belonging. McNally et al. (2024) found that children in DPIL households frequently look forward to receiving mail, request repeated readings, and carry books around the home. These behaviors suggest that book-gifting programs influence not only literacy routines but also children's emotional connection to reading.

Strengthening Home Literacy Environments Through Access

A consistent theme in the literature is that book-gifting programs strengthen home literacy environments by increasing both the quantity and quality of available literacy materials. For many families living in book deserts or experiencing financial hardship, book-gifting may be the primary means of building a home library (Tura et al., 2023). This is particularly important given that the number of books in the home is strongly associated with children's early literacy development (Evans et al., 2010). Having books physically present increases the likelihood that caregivers will read whenever time allows, making shared-reading routines more accessible (Bus

et al., 1995; Neuman & Celano, 2001; Sonnenschein et al., 2012). Monthly book arrivals also introduce variety, sustaining children's interest and providing developmentally appropriate texts that support ongoing engagement (de Bondt et al., 2020; Samiei et al., 2016).

Caregiver Confidence, Agency, and Engagement

Participation in book-gifting programs has been shown to increase caregiver confidence, an especially important factor in low-SES contexts where stress and structural challenges may undermine a caregiver's sense of capability. MacLeod and Tett (2019) reported that caregivers participating in literacy initiatives felt more confident in their ability to support their children's reading development. Research similarly shows that when caregivers feel competent and supported, they are more likely to engage in shared-reading routines and create positive literacy environments (Sonnenschein et al., 2012). Increased confidence often contributes to more frequent shared reading and richer parent-child interactions (Sénéchal & Young, 2008). The simplicity and predictability of book-gifting programs reduce many of the barriers associated with book access, allowing caregivers to focus on reading with their children rather than on locating or affording materials (de Bondt et al., 2020; Ridzi et al., 2014). Over time, this consistency helps normalize literacy routines within the home and strengthens caregivers' sense of agency in supporting their children's literacy development.

Colorado-Specific Evidence and Program Evaluations

Because the present study is situated in Denver, it is essential to consider how book-gifting programs operate within Colorado's unique demographic and infrastructural context. Early Milestones Colorado (2021) documented substantial disruptions to early childhood learning environments during the COVID-19 pandemic, including program closures, reduced access to services, and increased caregiver stress. These disruptions compounded existing

inequities, particularly in low-income communities. An evaluation conducted by the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Kallman-Wegner & Klopfenstein, 2023) reveals that Colorado families report high levels of satisfaction with DPIL, increased reading frequency, and a strong emotional connection to the program. This body of research underscores the importance of examining how Colorado caregivers experience disruptions in access to books. It highlights why continuity of book delivery is particularly consequential within this regional context.

Synthesis of Research on Book-Gifting Programs

Together, these studies illustrate the central role book-gifting programs play in strengthening home literacy environments, motivating young readers, and supporting caregivers, particularly in low-SES communities. When families have predictable access to high-quality books, shared-reading routines tend to flourish. Conversely, when access is disrupted, research suggests that engagement may decline, motivation may weaken, and the stability these programs provide may be compromised. This body of evidence establishes a strong foundation for examining the significance of a book-delivery pause and the lived experiences of caregivers navigating it. The following section expands on these issues by reviewing the literature on service interruptions and their effects on families. While the benefits of consistent book access are well documented, far less is known about how families experience disruptions to these supports when continuity is interrupted.

Service Interruptions, Pauses, and Instability in DPIL

DPIL operates through a shared funding partnership rather than as a fully centralized national program. While Dolly Parton's foundation covers the cost of book selection, production, and publishing, the costs associated with mailing, local administration, and program coordination are typically assumed by state governments and local sponsoring organizations, such as United

Way agencies, libraries, or county-based nonprofits. In many states, this cost-sharing model relies on annual legislative appropriations combined with local fundraising efforts. When state legislatures reduce or eliminate their financial contribution, local affiliates are often left to absorb significant costs, making program sustainability increasingly difficult without substantial additional fundraising.

As a result, although book-gifting programs such as DPIL are designed to provide consistent and predictable support to young children and families, their real-world implementation is vulnerable to funding delays, logistical challenges, staffing shortages, and broader systemic disruptions. These conditions are well documented in early childhood literature (Early Milestones Colorado, 2021; Rybinska et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of early childhood infrastructure, especially in communities already experiencing economic strain or limited access to services (Early Milestones Colorado, 2021). Pandemic-related disruptions demonstrated how quickly essential supports can become unstable when programs depend on resource-constrained systems and when families have limited alternative options.

Understanding how families experience such interruptions is especially important for literacy initiatives that seek to function as stable, ongoing supports embedded in children's daily lives. Existing scholarship on disruptions to early childhood services, including childcare, home-visiting programs, early literacy initiatives, and broader social supports, provides insight into how pauses and interruptions affect caregiver routines, children's emotional well-being, and overall family stability (Fikrat-Wevers et al., 2021; McNally et al., 2024; Rybinska et al., 2021). Research consistently shows that interruptions to early learning programs can reduce opportunities for age-appropriate literacy engagement, destabilize family routines, and heighten

caregiver stress, particularly in low-socioeconomic-status households where alternative supports are limited (Early Milestones Colorado, 2021; Kallman-Wegner & Klopfenstein, 2023).

Recent Program Pauses around the United States

Recent funding reductions have affected multiple DPIL local affiliates, resulting in documented service interruptions, enrollment pauses, and program instability. In some communities, affiliates elected to pause new enrollments to preserve uninterrupted book delivery for children already enrolled. In Colorado, Mesa County has experienced a recent pause, along with ILD (Denverite, 2025). The affiliates serving Craven County in North Carolina and Washoe and Clark Counties in Nevada paused new registrations amid funding constraints as a strategy to maintain services for currently participating families (Rae, 2025; Reynolds, 2025; Sun Journal, 2025).

Other affiliates experienced more substantial service disruptions. The Fayette County, Kentucky, affiliate announced a pause in monthly book deliveries following a funding shortfall, with services scheduled to stop after January 2026 (Spectrum News 1, 2025). In Genesee County, Michigan, the local DPIL program shut down entirely after funding could not be sustained, illustrating the most severe consequence of prolonged financial instability (Gloria Coles Flint Public Library, 2025).

In addition to these pauses and closures, several states face ongoing uncertainty regarding the future of DPIL funding. Local affiliates in Indiana, Washington, and Maine have reported concerns about whether state or local funding commitments will continue into 2026 and beyond (Beck, 2025; DPIL of Washington State, 2025; Olsen, 2025; The Statehouse File, 2025; Wolanske, 2025). In Indiana, proposed state budget reductions raised questions about the long-term sustainability of local DPIL programs. Although state funding was eliminated for 2026 and

beyond, discretionary funds allocated by the State Superintendent temporarily supported program continuation in 2026 (Beck, 2025). Although services may continue in the short term, the absence of long-term funding assurances places these programs, and the families who rely on them, in an uncertain position.

Because these interruptions are recent and are primarily documented through program announcements, nonprofit communications, and regional news coverage, there is limited understanding of how DPIL pauses are experienced by families. These emerging examples highlight the vulnerability of early literacy programs that rely on layered funding structures and underscore the importance of qualitative research that examines how disruptions in book access influence shared-reading routines, caregiver confidence, and children's early literacy experiences.

Impact of Early Childhood Program Disruptions on Families

Research documenting disruptions during the pandemic illustrates how interruptions to early childhood programs can destabilize family routines, limit learning opportunities, and increase caregiver stress. Early Milestones Colorado (2021) found that families across the state experienced widespread closures of early learning centers, reduced operating hours, and significant strain on community resources. These disruptions disproportionately affected low-income families, who often lacked backup childcare, flexible work schedules, or access to alternative learning supports. Reports from the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Kallman-Wegner & Klopfenstein, 2023) indicated that families experiencing the most significant socioeconomic barriers were the least likely to have access to supplemental literacy or early learning materials during program shutdowns. These inequities meant that even temporary disruptions carried amplified consequences for children in low-SES contexts.

International research supports these findings. Rybinska et al. (2021) identified that interruptions to routine early childhood services created instability in children's learning environments and reduced opportunities for age-appropriate developmental engagement. Studies conducted during service disruptions, such as COVID-19 childcare and early education closures, similarly show that caregivers experienced increased difficulty sustaining learning routines under heightened stress, even when they highly valued early literacy activities and attempted to compensate for lost supports (Crawford et al., 2021; Yoshikawa et al., 2020). Taken together, these studies demonstrate that early childhood programs often serve as stabilizing forces for families, and interruptions can erode that stability by removing predictable structures that support consistent learning behaviors.

Predictability and Routine in Early Literacy Supports

Research on early literacy programs underscores the importance of predictable and consistent access to materials. Predictability strengthens routines, fosters anticipation in children, and supports habitual engagement in shared reading. Tura et al. (2023) found that even minor disruptions in book access can reduce reading frequency in low-income households, highlighting the fragility of literacy routines when resources are scarce. Building on this, de Bondt et al. (2020) demonstrated that new books can prompt increased reading behavior immediately upon arrival. By extension, the absence of such cues may contribute to decreased engagement simply because the external prompt that typically initiates shared reading no longer occurs. These findings reinforce the idea that, in communities with limited access, continuity is not merely advantageous but essential for maintaining reading routines.

Emotional and Motivational Consequences of Program Pauses

Although few studies specifically examine pauses in book-gifting programs, related research indicates that disruptions can influence children's emotional experiences and motivation to read. Children often form expectations around predictable routines, and caregivers report that interruptions can lead to confusion, frustration, or sadness (Early Milestones Colorado, 2021; McNally et al., 2024). Studies of library programs, home visiting models, and family literacy initiatives show that children's motivation to read can decline when programs are paused or suspended (Fikrat-Wevers et al., 2021). Program stability contributes not only to access but also to children's emotional engagement with reading. Altogether, these findings suggest that children and caregivers benefit not only from the resources provided by early literacy programs but from the predictability and relational stability these programs create.

Structural Vulnerability and Disproportionate Impact on Low-SES Families

A consistent thread across the literature is that service interruptions disproportionately affect families experiencing poverty, limited transportation, housing insecurity, or linguistic isolation. Neuman and Celano's (2012) work on book deserts highlights how few alternatives exist in many low-income communities when a primary literacy resource becomes unavailable. In these contexts, families often rely on subsidized or community-based programs to support early learning; when such programs are paused, families may be left without accessible alternatives. Colorado-specific research reinforces these disparities. Early Milestones Colorado (2021) reported that low-income families faced the steepest barriers to maintaining home learning environments during program closures, citing reduced access to early learning centers, limited availability of community supports, and increased household stress. Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Kallman-Wegner & Klopfenstein, 2023) similarly found that disruptions during

the pandemic exacerbated existing inequities in literacy resources and early learning opportunities, particularly for families in high-poverty neighborhoods. These studies underscore how structural vulnerabilities intensify the effects of program interruptions and explain why even temporary disruptions may have significant consequences for families' literacy routines.

Synthesis of Research on Early Childhood Service Interruptions

The literature on early childhood program disruptions, though not focused exclusively on pauses in book-gifting programs, provides compelling evidence that interruptions to early learning supports can influence family routines, children's emotional well-being, and shared-reading opportunities. Predictable access to literacy materials helps create stability, structure, and engagement within the home. When access is disrupted, particularly in low-SES households, families may experience decreased reading frequency, weakened routines, and increased stress as they attempt to compensate for lost supports. These insights help explain why examining a book-delivery pause is both timely and necessary. They also provide a strong conceptual foundation for understanding the experiences of caregivers in Denver whose literacy supports were unexpectedly interrupted. The following section builds on this foundation by identifying gaps in the existing literature and positioning the present study as a needed contribution to an underexamined area of early childhood literacy research.

Summary of Key Themes

The literature reviewed in this chapter highlights the essential role that early access to books, shared-reading routines, and supportive home literacy environments play in shaping young children's development. Research consistently shows that children benefit from predictable exposure to books, rich verbal interactions, and emotionally meaningful reading experiences with their caregivers. For families living in low-socioeconomic-status contexts,

however, these opportunities are often constrained by structural barriers such as limited access to print materials, restricted transportation options, and competing demands on time and financial resources. Within this landscape, book-gifting programs have emerged as a powerful mechanism for promoting literacy equity by delivering high-quality books directly into children's homes. Across national and international settings, studies of programs like DPIL show that monthly book gifting supports reading frequency, strengthens home literacy environments, increases children's excitement and motivation for reading, and fosters caregiver confidence. Research on reading cues shows that the arrival of each new book can anchor family routines, serving as a gentle yet powerful nudge that encourages shared reading (de Bondt et al., 2020). At the same time, scholarship on book deserts and literacy inequities reveals how essential such programs are in communities where access to books is neither guaranteed nor easily replaced.

The literature also situates these issues within broader concerns about stability in early childhood services. Studies documenting program disruptions, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrate how vulnerable family routines can be when external supports are withdrawn. These findings are especially relevant in Colorado, where reports from Early Milestones Colorado (2021) and the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Kallman-Wegner & Klopfenstein, 2023) highlight persistent inequities shaping children's early learning opportunities. Despite the growing body of research on the benefits of book-gifting programs, little is known about what happens when book delivery itself is interrupted. Few studies examine how families experience pauses or how such interruptions influence reading routines, child motivation, or the emotional climate surrounding shared reading. This underscores the importance of the present study. Understanding how caregivers make meaning of a delivery pause, how they adapt, the challenges they encounter, and how their children respond provides

an opportunity to deepen existing knowledge about early literacy supports. It also offers insight into the conditions under which book-gifting programs function most effectively, particularly in communities that rely on them as a consistent source of children's books.

Gaps in the Literature

Although the literature on early literacy, shared reading, and book-gifting programs is robust, several significant gaps remain. First, most studies focus on outcomes such as reading frequency, kindergarten readiness, or vocabulary growth, rather than on caregivers' lived experiences of participating in book-gifting programs. We know relatively little about how caregivers in low-SES contexts interpret these programs, integrate monthly book arrivals into the rhythm of family life, or navigate structural barriers as they try to sustain shared-reading routines.

Second, existing research on DPIL and similar initiatives overwhelmingly examines periods of stable implementation. Limited research has explored what happens when book delivery is interrupted; how caregivers experience a pause, how children respond when the expected book does not arrive, or how families adapt their routines during and after a disruption. Related scholarship on book deserts and early childhood program instability suggests that interruptions are likely consequential, yet the specific dynamics of a DPIL pause remain unexamined.

Finally, there is a notable lack of research situated in Colorado, and in Denver specifically, where caregivers contend with intersecting challenges such as housing instability, food insecurity, and limited access to early learning resources. How a book-delivery pause unfolds within this local context and within low-SES households that rely on ILD as a consistent literacy support has not been studied. This dissertation directly addresses these gaps by centering

caregivers' voices and examining how continuity, interruption, and resumption of book deliveries shape shared-reading practices in Denver.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter provides the conceptual and empirical foundation for the study's methodology. It clarifies the theoretical lens guiding the inquiry, establishes the need to examine interruptions in book delivery, and situates the research within broader scholarship on literacy access, equity, and early childhood development. Together, these bodies of research highlight the critical role of predictable literacy supports in low-SES households and underscore the consequences when such supports are disrupted.

The review also reveals a clear gap in understanding how families experience and adapt to interruptions in book-gifting programs such as Imagination Library Denver (ILD), particularly within a local context marked by structural barriers to consistent book access. These insights directly inform the design of the present study. The next chapter outlines the qualitative methodology used to explore caregivers' experiences with continuity, interruption, and resumption of ILD book deliveries, including the research design, sampling procedures, data collection methods, and analytic strategies.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter describes the methodological approach used to explore how low-socioeconomic-status (SES) caregivers experienced the continuity, disruption, and resumption of monthly book deliveries through Imagination Library Denver (ILD). The purpose of this chapter is to outline the research design, participant selection and recruitment procedures, data collection methods, and data analysis strategies employed to address the study's guiding research questions. Using a generic qualitative research design, this study centered on caregivers' perspectives through retrospective, semi-structured interviews. This approach was selected to capture rich, descriptive accounts of caregivers' experiences across three phases of the program: consistent book delivery, the four-month pause, and the subsequent resumption of services. Given the time constraints and structural challenges faced by low-SES families, a single-interview design provided an efficient and ethically appropriate means of gathering in-depth data while minimizing participant burden.

This chapter also details the analytic process used to identify patterns and themes across participant narratives, as well as the strategies employed to ensure trustworthiness, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Ethical considerations and researcher positionality are addressed to provide transparency regarding the study's conduct and interpretive lens. Together, these components establish a rigorous methodological foundation for the findings presented in Chapter Four.

Research Design

This study utilizes a generic qualitative research design to examine caregivers' experiences with the ILD program's delivery, interruption, and resumption. Rather than tracking

caregivers at multiple time points, a single, retrospective, semi-structured interview was conducted. This methodological approach aims to understand human experiences and provides a pragmatic strategy for investigating real-world phenomena (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). The design facilitated participant reflection across three phases of the program: regular book delivery before the pause, the four-month interruption, and the subsequent resumption of services. Additionally, it allowed the participants to present their perspectives and worldviews in their own voice (Merriam, 1998).

The retrospective structure is both pragmatic and conceptually sound. It provides an efficient means to capture a comprehensive narrative of how caregivers perceived changes in their routines and shared reading practices based on their access to books without requiring multiple meetings, which is a crucial consideration for a population facing significant time constraints and instability (Evans et al., 2016). This approach prioritizes caregivers' voices and is designed to capture the nuanced ways in which shifts in book delivery influence their perceptions, routines, and family literacy practices at home. As a researcher adopting a qualitative stance, my goal was to understand participants' experiences within their real-world contexts and to ask questions that elicited rich, descriptive data (Camic et al., 2003). This required setting aside assumptions to remain open to new potential meanings (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2020). Merriam et al. (2025) note that interviewing is the most widely used method of collecting qualitative data. In a generic qualitative dissertation, semi-structured interviews are recommended, as the focus is on words and language rather than numbers and measurements, and this data collection process seeks rich descriptions of caregivers' lived experiences (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). The generic qualitative design aligns with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory,

which emphasizes the role of context, social interaction, and access to cultural tools, such as books, in supporting children's development within the family learning environment.

Research Questions

To guide this inquiry, the following research questions structured the study's design and analytic process.

1. Research Question 1: How do caregivers describe the perceived benefits of the monthly book deliveries for their families' shared-reading practices?
2. Research Question 2: How do caregivers describe the challenges they experienced during the pause in book delivery?
3. Research Question 3: How do caregivers describe changes in shared-reading practices before, during, and after the pause and resumption of book delivery?

Participant Selection Criteria and Recruitment

Target Population

The study focused on adult caregivers from low-SES Denver households who actively participate in ILD. Participants had at least one child aged 0 to 5 enrolled in ILD who experienced the program's four-month pause and the resumption of book distribution. These criteria ensured participants could address research questions and offer insight into the experience of ILD's book delivery continuity, disruption, and reinstatement.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive criterion sampling strategy was employed to recruit eligible participants. In collaboration with ILD, eligible families received an email invitation outlining the study's purpose and inviting them to participate (Appendix B). Interested participants subsequently contacted the researcher via email to schedule interviews.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

1. Adult caregivers (18 years and older) with at least one child aged 0-5 living in the home.
2. Household qualifies as low-SES, defined by at least one of the following:
    - Current enrollment in SNAP, WIC, TANF, Head Start/Early Head Start, or Medicaid.
    - Household income at or below 200% of Federal Poverty Guidelines.
    - Residence in a census-defined economically disadvantaged neighborhood.
3. Child/children who were enrolled in and actively participated in ILD and were directly affected by the program's pause and subsequent resumption. SES status was determined through caregiver self-report during recruitment, consistent with qualitative research practices and IRB-approved procedures.
4. Ability and willingness to provide informed consent and share experiences through an interview.

Exclusion Criteria

1. Caregivers who do not meet the low-SES criteria above.
2. Families not directly enrolled in ILD or unaffected by the pause and resumption of book delivery.
3. Caregivers unwilling or unable to participate in an interview.

Sample Size and Recruitment

A target sample of 15-20 caregivers was set. The study met this goal, with 20 caregivers participating in interviews. This number aligns with qualitative research standards for achieving thematic depth and data saturation, when new data no longer yield new insights (Bloomberg &

Volpe, 2019). The single-interview requirement respects the significant time constraints and unpredictable schedules of low-SES caregivers. This approach facilitates participation and reduces the burden on their time and resources (Kostere & Kostere, 2021).

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured Interviews

Data were collected through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Kostere and Kostere (2021) describe how this method allows for focused inquiry aligned with the research questions while providing the flexibility to explore emergent themes and participants' unique narratives. Each caregiver participated in a single interview, conducted via a secure video conferencing platform (Zoom). Interviews were conducted in November, within the first two months following the resumption of book deliveries. This timing was strategic, as it allowed caregivers to experience the return of the "cue" while their memories of the pause and pre-pause periods were still recent. Interviews lasted between 10 and 34 minutes, with an average of 18 minutes. Shorter interviews occurred when caregivers provided concise responses, while longer interviews reflected more expansive narratives; all interviews addressed each research question. With participant permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy during transcription. The interview protocol was structured to explore the program's three phases and was directly aligned with the research questions. Interview questions invited caregivers to reflect on their experiences before, during, and after the pause, including how they understood and navigated the interruption.

Instrumentation

The semi-structured interview guide (Appendix E) was developed by the researcher and reviewed by the dissertation chair to ensure alignment with the study's research questions and

conceptual framework. The guide included open-ended prompts allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences.

Data Collection Timeline

1. September 2025: University of Oklahoma IRB approval received September 15, 2025 (Appendix A).
2. October 2025: Partnership finalized with ILD.
3. November 2025:
    a. ILD sent a recruitment email to potential participants (Appendix B).
    b. Potential participants were emailed to schedule an interview.
    c. Interviews were conducted with all participants, and data collection was completed.

Data Analysis

The analysis aimed to capture participants' shared experiences across the continuity, interruption, and resumption of book delivery. Data analysis followed an iterative, two-stage process consistent with a generic qualitative design. Steps included:

1. Coding: Transcribed data were organized and managed using ATLAS.ti software to support systematic organization, coding, and retrieval of qualitative data (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development, 2023). Analysis began with an initial topical codebook derived from the research questions, consistent with recommendations for generic qualitative studies that integrate deductive and inductive approaches (Percy et al., 2015). Using this codebook as a starting point, I conducted line-by-line coding to identify significant words, phrases, and statements relevant to caregivers' experiences. As analysis progressed, the codebook was refined through focused coding, grouping initial codes into broader, data-driven thematic categories (Braun & Clarke, 2008). This

iterative process ensured analytic flexibility while maintaining alignment with the study's purpose and research questions.

2. Thematic Development: After focused coding, codes were analyzed and synthesized to develop overarching themes that reflected participants' collective experiences. This stage followed a reflexive process of constant comparison within and across transcripts to refine emerging patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2008). Codes were examined for similarity, distinction, and conceptual alignment with the research questions and clustered into broader thematic categories representing caregivers' experiences with delivery, pause, and resumption of the Imagination Library Denver program. These themes are presented and illustrated with participant quotes in Chapter Four.

To support rigor and transparency, I engaged in ongoing memoing, iterative code review, and regular checks to ensure that analytic decisions were grounded in the data rather than in researcher assumptions. The final analytic codebook guided all subsequent coding decisions. Copies of the topical and final codebooks are included in Appendix F. Through this analytic process, the following themes were developed and will be presented in Chapter Four:

Table One
Themes by Research Question

Research Question	Themes
Themes for Research Question 1 Perceived Benefits:	1. Strengthening Shared-Reading Routines 2. Child Excitement, Motivation, and Book Ownership 3. Family Bonding and Emotional Connection 4. Equitable Access to Books
Themes for Research Question 2 Challenges During the Pause:	1. Loss of Routine, Disruption, and Reduced Reading Frequency 2. Child Emotional Distress and Confusion 3. Caregiver Stress, Frustration, and Feeling Unsupported 4. Barriers to Accessing Books During the Pause
Themes for Research Question 3 Changes Before, During, and After the Pause:	1. Resumption of Reading Routines 2. Renewed Appreciation and Gratitude for the Program 3. Urgent Need for Communication and Support During Interruptions

Note: Themes were derived from qualitative analysis of semi-structured caregiver interviews and organized by research question to reflect perceived benefits, challenges during the pause, and changes across continuity, disruption, and resumption of Imagination Library Denver (ILD) book deliveries.

Connecting to Theory

Viewing the analytic process through this interpretive lens framed how themes were understood, highlighting shared reading as a form of guided participation. The identified themes were examined through the lens of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes how learning occurs through social interaction with cultural tools. In this study, the book and the reliability of its monthly delivery functioned as a cultural tool that mediated shared-reading interactions and supported scaffolding within the child's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Applying this theoretical lens to the analytic process foregrounds shared reading as a relational, socially mediated practice in which caregivers support children's meaning-making, language development, and confidence through literacy-rich interactions. This perspective informed how themes were conceptualized and organized, while the interpretation of the findings themselves is presented in Chapter Four.

Presentation of Findings

The findings were presented with rich, thick descriptions and supported by direct, de-identified participant quotes keeping caregivers' voices central to the analysis and enhancing the authenticity and credibility of the results.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the study, several strategies were employed, consistent with established qualitative research standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). Credibility was supported through triangulation across participants' accounts and peer debriefing with my advisor. These approaches strengthened the accuracy and plausibility of the findings by allowing alternative interpretations to be considered and discussed (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). Dependability was addressed by maintaining a detailed audit trail of all

data collection, methodological decisions, and analytical processes, which was documented in Word and ATLAS.ti. This audit trail allows external reviewers to examine the consistency of procedures throughout the study and evaluate how decisions were made (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). Confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling practiced throughout the study to reduce researcher bias and to document how interpretations emerged directly from the data. This process ensured that findings reflected participants' voices rather than the researcher's assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1988; Moustakas, 1994). Transferability was addressed by providing thick, rich descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and findings so that readers have sufficient detail to determine whether the results may apply to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1988).

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the highest ethical standards for human-subjects research. Approval was obtained from the University of Oklahoma's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before data collection. All participants were provided with and signed a detailed informed consent form that outlined the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty (Appendix C). Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and any potentially identifying information was removed from the transcripts and final report to ensure confidentiality. All digital data, including audio recordings, verbatim transcripts, and consent forms, were securely stored on a password-protected computer in accordance with IRB requirements and best practices for qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

My position as a researcher requires careful reflexivity. I am a literacy advocate and a staunch believer in the power of shared reading, which introduces the potential for bias in data

interpretation. My personal background of being raised by a single mother who worked tirelessly amidst financial constraints, yet prioritized reading, profoundly shapes my understanding of caregiver resilience and the importance of book access. I recognize that this background sensitizes me to equity issues and may influence my engagement with the data.

To mitigate these biases and enhance rigor, I engaged in ongoing reflexive practices and maintained a research journal to document my assumptions, reactions, and decision-making processes throughout the research. I used peer debriefing with my dissertation advisor to ensure that participant voices, not my own perspectives, guided the analysis. My goal was not to eliminate my positionality, but to manage it transparently, using my insight to build rapport and trust with participants while rigorously ensuring that the findings represented their lived experiences.

Limitations of the Study

While this study was designed to be rigorous, several limitations are acknowledged. First, researcher bias is a potential limitation. As noted in the positionality statement, my strong advocacy for shared reading may have influenced the interpretation of the data. Strategies such as reflexivity and peer debriefing were intentionally employed to mitigate this influence. Second, the study relied on retrospective recall. Caregivers were asked to reflect on their experiences during the delivery, pause, and resumption phases of the program, which may be subject to memory lapses or reconstruction. Finally, the qualitative design and relatively small sample size limit the statistical generalizability of the findings. Rather than aiming for generalization, this study sought to provide rich, contextual insights that may offer transferability to similar low-SES family and community literacy contexts.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodological plan for a qualitative study designed to explore low-SES caregivers' experiences with the continuity, disruption, and resumption of a book delivery program. Using a generic qualitative design and a retrospective, single-interview approach, the study gathered in-depth narratives to examine how the presence, absence, and return of monthly books shaped family literacy routines. Through purposive sampling, systematic data analysis, and a commitment to ethical and trustworthy research practices, this methodology was designed to answer the study's research questions and generate meaningful insights into the role of delivery continuity in supporting early literacy development in vulnerable populations. The subsequent chapter presents the study's findings. Centering caregivers' voices, Chapter Four highlights the stories, emotions, and lived experiences that shaped the identified themes and illustrates not only what changed during the delivery pause, but how deeply these changes mattered in families' daily literacy lives.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the study's findings and describes the themes that emerged from caregivers' narratives about the continuity, disruption, and resumption of monthly book deliveries through Imagination Library Denver (ILD). Drawing on data from twenty semi-structured interviews with low-socioeconomic-status (SES) caregivers, the analysis captures how families experienced consistent book delivery, the four-month pause, and the program's eventual resumption, with particular attention to shared reading routines, emotional responses, and adaptations within the home literacy environment. Through an iterative thematic analysis, eleven themes were identified across the three research questions. These themes reflect caregivers' shared experiences of how predictable book deliveries supported family routines and relationships, how interruptions disrupted those patterns, and how the return of deliveries reshaped reading practices and perceptions of the program. The themes are organized by research question and presented in caregivers' own words to preserve the authenticity and depth of their lived experiences. While the study is theoretically grounded, this chapter focuses primarily on caregivers' descriptions, using theory sparingly to orient the reader rather than to interpret the findings.

For Research Question One, which explored caregivers' perceptions of the benefits of monthly book deliveries, four themes emerged: Strengthening Shared-Reading Routines; Child Excitement, Motivation, and Book Ownership; Family Bonding and Emotional Connection; and Equitable Access to Books. Together, these themes describe how consistent book delivery supported routine formation, caregiver-child interaction, and access to literacy materials within resource-constrained households.

For Research Question Two, which examined caregivers' experiences during the pause in book delivery, four themes were identified: Loss of Routine, Disruption, and Reduced Reading Frequency; Child Emotional Distress and Confusion; Caregiver Stress, Frustration, and Feelings of Being Unsupported; and Barriers to Accessing Books During the Pause. These themes describe how the interruption disrupted established routines, affected children's expectations and emotions, and intensified challenges for caregivers navigating limited access to alternative literacy resources.

For Research Question Three, which focused on changes in shared-reading practices before, during, and after the pause, three themes emerged: Resumption of Reading Routines; Renewed Appreciation and Gratitude for the Program; and Urgent Need for Communication and Support During Interruptions. These themes capture how caregivers experienced the return of book deliveries, reassessed the program's value, and articulated expectations for clearer communication and support during future disruptions.

The findings are presented thematically in the sections that follow, with each theme illustrated through direct, de-identified participant quotations. By centering caregivers' voices, this chapter provides a detailed account of how continuity, disruption, and resumption of book delivery shaped shared-reading practices and family literacy experiences within low-SES households.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore how low-SES caregivers experienced monthly book deliveries from ILD, how they navigated the unexpected service pause, and how they perceived changes in family shared-reading practices when deliveries resumed. Themes associated with each research question were identified through comparisons across interviews, with attention to

patterns that appeared consistently across participants and to variation in how experiences were described. The themes presented below reflect shared meanings articulated by caregivers while preserving individual nuance through representative quotations. The research questions guiding this inquiry were:

1. How do caregivers describe the perceived benefits of the monthly book deliveries for their families' shared-reading practices?
2. How do caregivers describe the challenges they experienced during the pause in book delivery?
3. How do caregivers describe changes in shared-reading practices before, during, and after the pause and resumption of book delivery?

Caregivers' descriptions across these phases revealed not only changes in reading frequency but shifts in emotional tone, motivation, and family rhythm, allowing for an understanding of how continuity and disruption shaped shared-reading practices over time. These questions guided the collection, coding, and interpretation of the data and served as the framework for presenting the findings in this chapter.

Overview of Participants

Twenty caregivers participated in one-on-one interviews, representing a diverse range of family structures, cultural backgrounds, and neighborhood contexts within Denver. All participants met the study's low-SES criteria and had at least one child between ages 0-5 enrolled in ILD who directly experienced the program's delivery, pause, and resumption. Participants were assigned unique identifiers (e.g., Participant 1) to maintain confidentiality. The caregivers varied in age, length of enrollment in ILD (ranging from 9 months to 4 years), and the number of children in their households. Although specific demographic details are omitted to protect

privacy, caregivers consistently described limited access to transportation, demanding work schedules, and financial constraints that shaped their daily routines and ability to access children's books outside of ILD. The experiences of the 20 participants provided a rich understanding of how ILD operated as both a literacy support and an emotional anchor for families navigating complex socioeconomic challenges.

Research Question One: How Do Caregivers Describe the Perceived Benefits of Monthly Book Deliveries for Their Families' Shared-Reading Practices?

Caregivers described the monthly ILD book deliveries as joyful, motivating, and transformative, and as far more than the arrival of a free book. For many families, especially those facing economic pressure, inconsistent work schedules, limited transportation, and ongoing instability, the monthly book delivery functioned as a reliable literacy cue that shaped family routines, ignited children's excitement, strengthened emotional bonds, and provided equitable access to developmentally supportive books. Across all twenty interviews, caregivers used language that reflected gratitude, relief, joy, and excitement. Their narratives demonstrated how ILD books acted as the kind of cultural tools Vygotsky described: objects that help children and caregivers co-construct meaning, create shared experiences, and anchor learning within daily family interactions. The following four themes illustrate how caregivers experienced the benefits of ILD's monthly book deliveries.

Theme One: Strengthening Shared-Reading Routines

Nearly every caregiver described the monthly book delivery as a powerful anchor in their home literacy routine. The arrival of the book was not random or unnoticed; rather, it was anticipated, celebrated, and used to structure reading time. Caregivers shared that receiving a new book strengthened daily reading practices by introducing novelty, offering a predictable cue,

and inspiring excitement that carried into bedtime rituals, morning routines, and weekend family time.

For many families, the new book served as an immediate catalyst for shared reading. One caregiver explained, “We usually read the new book right away, and she wants to read it again in the morning. She even pretends to read to her stuffed animals, which I think is adorable” (Participant 6). Another caregiver described the moment of arrival as a meaningful event, noting, “My child gets excited each time he sees his name on the envelope. It’s a little event, and we read it right then” (Participant 10). Reflecting on the first delivery, one caregiver shared, “I still remember that day, the moment I opened it, her face just lit up. Honestly, I think that’s when our reading routine started” (Participant 16).

Several caregivers described how the routine extended beyond one-on-one reading to involve the entire family, positioning literacy as a shared experience. One caregiver explained, “We all read together. It helped my child see that reading is something the whole family enjoys” (Participant 1). Another emphasized the relational aspect of this routine, stating, “It has strengthened our bond. After busy days, we celebrate together, we tell each other stories, we read together, and we have fun moments” (Participant 8). A father of twins echoed this sentiment, sharing, “It’s such a simple idea, but it makes a huge difference for families like mine. We always treasure our special moments together reading as a family” (Participant 9).

Caregivers also repeatedly described the monthly book as a motivational “spark” that revitalized reading practices. One caregiver observed, “We read more that week, for sure. The book brings fresh energy into our routine” (Participant 10). Another described how the delivery helped restart reading when routines had slowed, explaining, “Every time the book came, it

kicked off a little reading streak. It reminded us, okay, it's time to sit down and read together again" (Participant 15).

The importance of this structure was particularly evident given the demands many caregivers faced, including long work hours, transportation barriers, and exhausting daily schedules. One caregiver explained how the delivery helped maintain consistency, stating, "The delivery kept us on track. Life gets so busy, but the book showing up told us, 'Okay, today we read'" (Participant 12). Others described reading as a moment of rest and reconnection at the end of difficult days. One caregiver shared, "[Reading] is a quiet pause at the end of a long, exhausting day" (Participant 13), while another reflected, "It has helped create a calm bedtime routine and given us something special at the end of a long day. Reading is essential to my baby, and it is making her into the woman she is becoming" (Participant 8).

Several caregivers emphasized how the predictability of the monthly book shaped children's expectations around reading. One caregiver explained, "She looks forward to the new book all month. Because of that, we read every night. It gives her something to count on" (Participant 3). Across interviews, caregivers repeatedly used words such as routine, energy, momentum, and ritual, suggesting that ILD strengthened not only literacy habits but the daily rhythm of family life. Across interviews, caregivers consistently framed the monthly delivery as a cue that helped sustain routine and momentum for shared reading.

Theme Two: Child Excitement, Motivation, and Book Ownership

Across all twenty interviews, one emotional pattern emerged consistently: children were thrilled when the ILD book arrived. Caregivers described children's excitement as physical, enthusiastic, contagious, and deeply motivating. The arrival of the monthly book generated

anticipation and joy that extended well beyond the moment of delivery, shaping children's emotional connection to reading and reinforcing their motivation to engage with books.

One caregiver described her daughter's reaction to the delivery, explaining, "My daughter gets super excited, because she knows the envelope means a new adventure" (Participant 2). Another caregiver emphasized the pride her child expressed upon receiving the book, noting, "He says, 'Mom, this is my book,' and you can tell how important that feels to him" (Participant 14). This sense of personal ownership was especially meaningful for families with limited financial means, who could not easily replace or expand their book collections. One father described how access to monthly books transformed his son's relationship with reading, stating, "Peter the bookworm, that's what we call him now. Honestly, he never would have loved reading like this if these books didn't come" (Participant 13).

Caregivers also described how children eagerly shared their books with others, signaling pride and excitement. One caregiver shared, "She runs to show the book to our neighbors. She's so proud" (Participant 14). Others described how children treated the ILD books as prized possessions within the home. One caregiver explained, "He keeps all his Imagination Library books on one special shelf. Those are the ones he wants to read over and over" (Participant 18). Another caregiver shared a similar observation, noting, "My daughter lays all her books out on her rug and organizes them. It's her favorite thing to do" (Participant 4).

For many families, the excitement surrounding each delivery did not diminish over time. One caregiver reflected, "Each package still brings the same excitement as the very first. She rushes to the door to unwrap it. These moments have become the highlight of our days" (Participant 20). Another caregiver succinctly captured the emotional significance of the

deliveries, stating, “The books arriving represent stability, a sense that someone remembers us” (Participant 13).

Children were not passive recipients of the books; rather, caregivers described them as active participants who associated reading with joy, belonging, and celebration. Several caregivers shared vivid descriptions of their children’s physical excitement when the book arrived. One caregiver stated, “She squeals when she sees the envelope” (Participant 8), while another recalled, “He jumps up and down and yells, ‘My book came! My book came!’” (Participant 16).

Caregivers also described how children carried the books throughout the house and treated them as treasured objects. One caregiver explained, “My daughter carries the book around the house as soon as it comes. It’s like carrying a treasure” (Participant 11). Another reflected on the emotional impact of receiving mail addressed directly to her child, sharing, “It was a plain white envelope with her name printed on it. It felt special, like someone cared enough to send something just for her” (Participant 17). One caregiver summarized the emotional tone of these moments, stating, “Each delivery is like a small celebration, like a small gift that brings both happiness and gratitude. It feels like a gift not just for my child, but for me” (Participant 1).

The sense of ritual, pride, and enthusiasm associated with the monthly book deliveries contributed strongly to sustained reading engagement. As Vygotsky’s sociocultural framework suggests, the books functioned as cultural tools that empowered children’s agency in the reading process, strengthening motivation through emotional investment and ownership. Children hugged the books, carried them throughout the home, and eagerly requested repeated readings.

For families with limited financial means, this sense of ownership was both powerful and affirming, reinforcing reading as a joyful, meaningful, and personally significant activity.

Theme Three: Family Bonding and Emotional Connection

Caregivers consistently described shared reading as an emotionally rich, calming, and relational practice that strengthened family bonds. Across interviews, reading together was framed not only as a literacy activity but as a meaningful time for connection, comfort, and emotional closeness, particularly in households navigating demanding work schedules, financial stress, and limited opportunities for uninterrupted family time. One caregiver described shared reading as a moment of joy and imagination, explaining, “Reading is our bonding time. We imitate the characters and just enjoy being together” (Participant 19). Another caregiver reflected on how reading provided a space for emotional connection after long days, stating, “This is the time we connect. It’s when she tells me stories, and we laugh together” (Participant 8). Several caregivers emphasized that shared reading offered rare moments of calm and closeness within otherwise hectic routines. One caregiver described reading as an essential pause, noting, “It helps him calm down and get ready to sleep. It’s our quiet moment” (Participant 14). Another shared, “She snuggles up next to me every time we read. That’s how we end our day” (Participant 1). These moments were often described as emotionally restorative, providing caregivers and children with a predictable opportunity to slow down and be fully present with one another.

For caregivers balancing long work hours and multiple responsibilities, shared reading was described as a way to reconnect with their children. One caregiver explained, “I’m gone so much for work. Reading with him is the one time I feel like we slow down and really see each

other" (Participant 17). Another echoed this sentiment, stating, "With two jobs, it's hard to find time. But the book makes me stop what I'm doing and be with my kids" (Participant 20). Several caregivers described shared reading as the most meaningful part of their day. One father expressed this poignantly, stating, "After dinner, we sit, and we read, and we laugh. That's our time. That's our little world" (Participant 20). Another caregiver described the emotional significance of these moments, sharing, "It has strengthened our bond. After busy days, we celebrate together, we tell each other stories, we read together, and we have fun moments" (Participant 8).

For families experiencing economic stress and instability, caregivers described the monthly ILD book as a catalyst for these moments of connection. One father articulated the emotional weight of this support, explaining, "Working long hours, managing bills, caring for my kids, it was overwhelming. I was already stressed, but the books began to arrive, and it felt like a small miracle. Someone remembered us. This program has been more than book delivery; it restored our dignity. We sit together and share moments that strengthen our bond in ways I can't fully explain" (Participant 13). Across interviews, caregivers emphasized that shared reading provided not only literacy benefits, but emotional reassurance and relational stability. The predictability of the monthly book delivery anchored these moments, giving families something to anticipate and build time around. Reading together became a space for laughter, storytelling, affection, and mutual attention; experiences that caregivers described as deeply meaningful within the context of their daily challenges.

This theme highlights the relational role of shared reading as a practice that fosters emotional connection, comfort, and belonging. Consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, shared reading functioned as a socially mediated activity through which caregivers

and children co-constructed meaning, strengthened relationships, and engaged in literacy-rich interactions embedded within the rhythms of family life.

Theme Four: Equitable Access to Books

Caregivers emphasized that one of the most significant benefits of Imagination Library Denver (ILD) was relief from the financial and logistical barriers that made acquiring children's books difficult. Many caregivers explained that purchasing books was not financially feasible and that transportation challenges limited access to libraries or bookstores. As a result, the monthly book delivery served as a critical source of reliable, equitable access to developmentally appropriate reading materials.

Several caregivers spoke candidly about the financial strain of purchasing books. One parent explained, "I can't buy enough books. They're too expensive, so this program helps us more than you know" (Participant 8). Another caregiver reflected on the cumulative cost of parenting, stating, "As a single mom, where would I have the money to pay for everything and buy a book?" (Participant 14). For these families, ILD removed the financial burden associated with building a home library.

Transportation barriers further limited caregivers' ability to access books through traditional means. One caregiver described the difficulty of frequenting the library, explaining, "The library is too far. Two buses, sometimes a transfer. We can't do that often" (Participant 10). For others, the act of traveling with young children made library visits impractical, even when caregivers valued reading and literacy. In addition to cost and transportation, caregivers described emotional and practical barriers to borrowing books from friends or neighbors. One caregiver shared, "I don't like borrowing books. If my child tears it, I'd feel terrible" (Participant

3). This concern contributed to limited access, particularly for families who wanted their children to feel comfortable engaging freely with books.

Several caregivers described living in what they referred to as “book deserts,” where affordable children’s books were not readily available in their neighborhoods. One caregiver explained, “We don’t have stores that sell children’s books near us. There’s just no access” (Participant 3). In this context, the arrival of books by mail was not merely convenient but transformative.

The emotional significance of receiving books directly at home was repeatedly emphasized. One caregiver explained, “Unlike going to the library, the book comes to us; it was a lifeline” (Participant 20). Another caregiver described the experience more broadly, stating, “It feels like the world remembers us. Like someone cares that our kids get books” (Participant 14). For many families, the delivery itself conveyed dignity, recognition, and inclusion.

Several caregivers shared that they initially doubted the program because it seemed too generous to be true. One caregiver recalled, “I found out about ILD at a parenting group, and I said, ‘Free? Nothing is free. There must be a catch’” (Participant 20). Others expressed delight once they realized the books were truly provided at no cost. As one caregiver stated, “It surpasses every other thing. Something delivered to your home for free, it’s joyous!” (Participant 12).

Beyond access, caregivers described a sense of empowerment and pride in being able to support their children’s literacy development. One caregiver reflected, “It kind of gave me a feeling that I’m providing for my child educationally, at no cost. And it’s helping to level the playing field, which I couldn’t do on my own” (Participant 15). This sense of agency reinforced caregivers’ confidence and commitment to shared reading.

Collectively, these narratives illustrate that ILD functioned as an equity intervention, bypassing structural barriers that disproportionately affect low-SES families. The books did more than increase access; they reinforced dignity, autonomy, and joy, which are critical components of supportive early literacy environments. Consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, learning was shaped not only by individual effort but by access to cultural tools and environments that support participation and meaning-making. The centrality of ILD in caregivers' daily lives underscores why the subsequent pause in service was experienced as such a profound disruption. Across these four themes, caregivers consistently described the monthly book delivery as more than a material resource. The predictability of the delivery functioned as a reliable cue within daily family life, supporting shared reading routines, emotional connection, and caregivers' confidence in sustaining literacy practices despite competing demands. Taken together, these findings suggest that consistent access to books shaped not only reading frequency, but also the rhythm and meaning of shared reading within families' everyday lives.

Research Question Two: How Do Caregivers Describe the Challenges They Experienced During the Pause in Book Delivery?

When the ILD unexpectedly paused monthly book deliveries, caregivers described an immediate and significant disruption to their shared-reading practices, household routines, and children's emotional well-being. The absence of the familiar monthly delivery left people confused, sad, frustrated, and feeling unsupported. Many caregivers expressed that they did not initially realize how much they relied on the consistency of ILD deliveries as both a literacy tool and as a stabilizing element in their daily lives until the deliveries abruptly stopped.

Caregivers' narratives revealed four interconnected themes:

1. Loss of Routine, Disruption, and Reduced Reading Frequency
2. Child Emotional Distress and Confusion
3. Caregiver Stress, Frustration, and Feeling Unsupported
4. Barriers to Accessing Books During the Pause

Together, these themes illustrate how deeply the program had become woven into family rhythms and how the lack of communication during the pause exacerbated the challenges caregivers faced. As Vygotsky suggests, when a cultural tool that supports shared learning is suddenly removed, families must navigate the resulting gaps without the scaffolding they had grown to rely on.

Theme One: Loss of Routine, Disruption, and Reduced Reading Frequency

For nearly all families, the pause in book delivery led to an immediate disruption in shared-reading routines and a noticeable decrease in reading frequency. Many caregivers explained that they had not fully recognized how strongly the monthly book delivery functioned as a reading cue until that cue disappeared. Although several families attempted to continue reading with the books they already owned, caregivers consistently described a loss of motivation, momentum, and emotional energy around shared reading.

One caregiver reflected on the immediate shift in their household, explaining, “When the book didn’t come, the excitement wasn’t there. We still read sometimes, but not like before” (Participant 9). Another parent echoed this experience, noting that although reading did not stop entirely, its emotional quality changed: “We still read every day, but it was not the same. The spark and joy were missing” (Participant 10).

Across interviews, caregivers described reading as slowing down during the pause. One caregiver observed, “Reading reduced drastically, she got bored with the same books” (Participant 14), while another explained, “Our routine slowly faded. I tried to keep her interested, but the magic was gone” (Participant 20). These accounts suggest that the absence of new books affected not only how often families read, but how engaged children remained during reading time.

Several caregivers emphasized that the disruption stemmed from the loss of anticipation and momentum created by the monthly delivery. As one caregiver explained, “Without the new book, our reading routine lost momentum. It felt harder to keep it going” (Participant 6). Another caregiver described children’s emotional reactions to the missing delivery, stating, “The kids got frustrated when the books didn’t come. It took away one of the few joyful constants we had” (Participant 19).

For many low-SES families, routines were already fragile due to long work hours, inconsistent schedules, and chronic stress. Caregivers described the ILD book delivery as one of the few predictable and joyful elements anchoring daily family life. When that anchor disappeared, its absence created a ripple effect across household routines. One caregiver summarized this experience clearly, stating, “It was like something was missing from our lives. We didn’t realize how much we depended on that little envelope” (Participant 7). This disruption aligns with Vygotsky’s sociocultural perspective, which emphasizes that learning and routine are supported by consistent cultural tools. When the tool that structured shared reading was removed, the activity itself often lost coherence, meaning, and emotional resonance for both caregivers and children.

Theme Two: Child Emotional Distress and Confusion

Across all interviews, caregivers described immediate and often intense emotional reactions from their children when the monthly book failed to arrive. These reactions ranged from confusion to sadness and disappointment and were frequently marked by repeated questions about why the book had not come. Because many children had incorporated the monthly delivery into their identity and routine, the interruption felt personal. Several caregivers recalled their children's initial confusion and distress when the expected book did not appear. One mother described how her daughter checked the mailbox, explaining, *"*She went outside to check the mail. When she didn't see the book, she started crying*"* (Participant 7). Another caregiver described her daughter's persistent confusion, noting, *"*She kept asking, 'Did the mailman forget my book?' She asked almost every day*"* (Participant 5). For some children, the absence of the book led to deeper emotional questioning. One father shared that his son began to internalize the disruption, asking, *"*Did the people who send the books forget about us*?"* and added, *"*I didn't know what to say*"* (Participant 1). Other caregivers described how this distress continued over time, with one parent recalling, *"*She panicked. Every day she checked the mailbox. She thought maybe it was lost*"* (Participant 8). Similarly, another caregiver explained, *"*My child did not understand why the books stopped. He kept asking and asking*"* (Participant 19).

For many caregivers, witnessing their child's emotional reaction was particularly painful because they could not offer a clear explanation or reassurance. Children had developed strong expectations around reading, identity, and receiving mail addressed specifically to them, and the sudden absence of the book disrupted those expectations. These responses underscore that ILD books were not simply reading materials but emotionally meaningful, identity-forming objects in children's lives. The pause revealed how powerfully the books functioned as motivational and

emotional tools, consistent with Vygotsky's view that cultural tools shape not only cognitive development but also children's emotional connections to routines and learning.

Theme Three: Caregiver Stress, Frustration, and Feeling Unsupported

Although the interruption in book delivery was itself challenging, caregivers consistently emphasized that the lack of communication from ILD was the most distressing aspect of the pause. No email, text message, or mailed notice accompanied the disruption, leaving families without explanation, reassurance, or guidance. For many caregivers, this silence created confusion and emotional strain and, in some cases, felt like abandonment.

Several caregivers described realizing the emotional weight of the pause through their children's reactions. One mother recalled the moment her child checked the mailbox and became visibly upset, explaining, "She went outside to check the mail, but didn't see anything and started crying. That's when I knew this baby was really in love with those books" (Participant 7). Others described prolonged uncertainty as the months passed without communication. One caregiver stated, "I was so, so disturbed, one month, two months, three months. Nothing came" (Participant 14).

Caregivers frequently expressed frustration at being unable to explain the situation to their children. One mother shared, "I was confused and a little upset. No one told us anything, and I had nothing to tell my daughter" (Participant 8). For some, the lack of information led to deeper concerns about equity and inclusion. One caregiver wondered whether the disruption was neighborhood-specific, stating, "I did not know if it was just my community, maybe they stopped sending to our area" (Participant 20). Another reflected on similar fears, noting, "I wondered if this only happened to certain families. I kept thinking, did we do something wrong?" (Participant 13).

The absence of communication also intensified caregivers' emotional burden when children asked questions they could not answer. One parent described feeling powerless, sharing, "She asked me why the books stopped, and I had no answer. I felt like I failed her" (Participant 10). Another caregiver captured the emotional impact of the silence with a vivid comparison, stating, "It felt like Santa not showing up. How do you explain that to a child?" (Participant 5). Across interviews, caregivers described feeling unsupported during the pause, not because they doubted the program's mission, but because the silence disrupted the sense of partnership they had developed with ILD. Many had come to view the program as part of their parenting support system, and as a reliable presence aligned with their hopes for their children's literacy and well-being. Without communication, families were left to speculate about whether the pause was temporary or permanent, and caregivers struggled to reassure their children or plan alternative ways to access books. As a result, the pause represented not only an interruption in service, but a disruption in the relational trust caregivers felt with the program.

Theme Four: Barriers to Accessing Books During the Pause

During the pause in ILD book delivery, many caregivers attempted to find alternative ways to access children's books; however, structural barriers, including limited transportation, time constraints, financial hardship, and discomfort with borrowing, significantly restricted these efforts. For many families, the pause effectively eliminated access to new reading materials altogether. Transportation emerged as one of the most pervasive challenges. Caregivers repeatedly described the logistical difficulty of reaching libraries, particularly when relying on public transit. One caregiver explained, "The nearest library is 30 minutes away and takes two buses. With a four-year-old, it's just not realistic" (Participant 20). Another parent echoed this concern, noting that competing responsibilities made library visits infeasible: "We don't have

time for the bus ride, the transfers, the wait. With work and nap schedules, it just can't happen" (Participant 10).

In addition to transportation barriers, caregivers described emotional and practical limitations associated with borrowing books. Some families attempted to borrow books from friends or neighbors but found the experience unsatisfying or stressful. One caregiver reflected, "We borrowed a few, but it wasn't the same. She missed having her own book" (Participant 5). Even when families visited the library, caregivers noted that the experience did not replicate the anticipation and ownership associated with receiving their own book. As one parent explained, "It wasn't the same as getting a book in the mail. She missed that feeling" (Participant 5).

Financial barriers further constrained families' options. Several caregivers emphasized that purchasing books was simply not feasible during the pause. One parent stated plainly, "Books are expensive. We couldn't buy new ones to replace what we lost" (Participant 8). For families already navigating economic hardship, the pause underscored how fragile access to children's literature can be without consistent external support.

These accounts reinforce that ILD does not merely provide books; it provides equitable access by bypassing the structural challenges that disproportionately affect low-income families. Without the program, many caregivers reported that access to new children's books became limited or nonexistent during the pause. Consistent with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the interruption removed a reliable cultural tool that had supported children's participation, motivation, and shared learning with caregivers. In the absence of this tool, families struggled to sustain literacy routines and emotional engagement, highlighting the extent to which early literacy practices depend on accessible, consistent supports. This theme illustrates that the level of access ILD provided could not be easily replicated by families on their own. Across

caregivers' accounts, the unexpected pause in book delivery revealed how deeply the program had become embedded in family routines and emotional expectations. The absence of the monthly delivery disrupted established patterns of shared reading, intensified children's emotional responses, and increased caregiver stress, particularly in the absence of communication. These findings highlight how disruptions to consistent supports can reverberate across family life, affecting not only literacy practices but emotional well-being and caregiver-child interactions.

Research Question Three: How Do Caregivers Describe Changes in Shared-Reading Practices Before, During, and After the Pause and Resumption of Book Delivery?

Caregivers described a clear pattern in their shared-reading practices across the three phases of the ILD experience: before the pause, during the pause, and after the resumption. Their narratives illustrated a pattern of stability, disruption, and renewal, revealing the powerful influence that predictable literacy supports have on family routines, emotional well-being, and children's motivation to read. Caregivers described a consistent pattern in their shared-reading practices across the three phases of ILD participation: a strong routine before the pause, a significant disruption during the pause, and an enthusiastic resumption once book deliveries restarted. Their narratives reveal not only behavioral changes but emotional and relational shifts within their families. Across the interviews, three themes emerged that captured these changes over time:

1. Resumption of Reading Routines and Restoration of Momentum
2. Renewed Appreciation and Gratitude for the Program
3. Urgent Need for Communication and Support During Interruptions

These themes demonstrate how deeply ILD became woven into families' everyday literacy lives. The findings also reinforce Vygotsky's sociocultural view by showing that when dependable cultural tools re-enter a child's environment, they restore opportunities for shared meaning-making and relational connection.

Theme One: Resumption of Reading Routines and Restoration of Momentum

When book deliveries restarted, caregivers consistently described the moment as exciting, joyful, and filled with relief. The return of the monthly book delivery immediately restored shared-reading routines that had weakened during the pause, often serving as a clear turning point for families. Several caregivers described the resumption as a return to normalcy and emotional relief. One mother shared that when the book arrived, “We returned to our normal routine, and bedtime reading became our bonding time again” (Participant 8). Another described the moment as “like a weight lifted,” explaining that her child “became more alive again when that book came” and that “our whole house felt the difference” (Participant 20). For others, the resumption felt deeply symbolic, with one caregiver describing it as “The return of a family tradition and culture that we had missed” (Participant 6).

Many families experienced the first delivery after the pause as a celebration. Caregivers recalled children shouting with excitement, “My book is back!” and immediately engaging with the book (Participant 10; Participant 5). One parent vividly remembered that when the books resumed, “My child started dancing. Beautiful to behold” (Participant 3). Another caregiver emphasized the visible joy on her daughter’s face as she ran to retrieve the book, noting how clearly the excitement had returned (Participant 5).

Caregivers also described a renewed sense of momentum in their household reading routines. Several used language such as “spark,” “rhythm,” and “routine” to describe how

quickly shared reading resumed. One parent explained, “The spark came back. The routine came back. She was excited again” (Participant 1), while another reflected, “It was like we got our rhythm back. The new book got us reading every night again” (Participant 18). The anticipation and structure that had previously surrounded the monthly deliveries re-emerged almost immediately.

Beyond routine restoration, some caregivers noticed changes in their children’s engagement and development after deliveries resumed. One caregiver observed that her child “actually talked more about the story” after the pause, reflecting that “it was like she missed that part of herself” (Participant 4). Another parent described the emotional power of the moment simply: “She hugged the book. She literally hugged it. That told me everything” (Participant 14). Collectively, caregivers’ accounts illustrate how the return of ILD books restored both literacy routines and emotional connection within families. The resumption reaffirmed the program’s central role in daily life, re-establishing shared reading as a meaningful, relational practice grounded in predictability, joy, and renewed momentum.

Theme Two: Renewed Appreciation and Gratitude for the Program

Caregivers consistently described how the pause, though difficult, intensified their appreciation for the program once book deliveries resumed. Many reflected that the interruption revealed just how central ILD had become in their family lives, noting that the program’s value was most apparent when it was no longer there. Several caregivers spoke directly about this shift in awareness. One father explained that the pause “made me realize how important the program is for our family” (Participant 5). Another caregiver echoed this sentiment, describing how the return of the books restored a sense of connection and belonging, stating that it “brought back that feeling of connection, knowing we are part of something bigger” (Participant 8).

Caregivers also reflected on the lasting impact the program had already had on their children, even during the interruption. One participant noted that “even after the books stopped arriving, those habits and memories stayed with us” (Participant 10), while another emphasized that the program “has molded my child into someone who loves reading” (Participant 8). These reflections suggest that the benefits of ILD extended beyond the physical delivery of books, shaping long-term attitudes toward reading and shared literacy practices.

For some caregivers, the pause highlighted how much the books supported them in their parenting role. One mother shared, “I didn’t know how much the books supported me until they were gone. When they came back, it was like getting help again” (Participant 17). This framing positioned the program not only as a literacy resource for children, but as a meaningful source of support for caregivers navigating the demands of daily life.

Expressions of gratitude extended beyond appreciation for the books themselves to what the program symbolized. Caregivers described feeling seen, supported, and valued. One participant shared that the program made her feel as though “someone out there cares about my child’s future” (Participant 12), while another expressed a desire to formally acknowledge the program, stating, “I would like to share my thanks with ILD. The books become part of us” (Participant 1). Another caregiver simply described the program as “a blessing for families like us, truly a blessing” (Participant 14).

Across interviews, caregivers frequently used language such as grateful, thankful, blessed, relieved, and hopeful when describing the resumption of deliveries. This renewed appreciation reinforces that ILD books were not viewed as optional extras, but as essential supports that promoted family literacy, emotional stability, and meaningful connection. The

pause ultimately underscored how deeply embedded the program had become in caregivers' efforts to support their children's learning and well-being.

Theme Three: Urgent Need for Communication and Support During Interruptions

Throughout the interviews, caregivers emphasized one strong and consistent message: if a pause in book delivery occurs, families need clear and timely communication. Caregivers repeatedly described confusion and emotional strain during the interruption because no explanation accompanied the pause. After deliveries resumed, many reflected that even minimal communication would have helped them reassure their children and emotionally prepare for the disruption. Several caregivers spoke directly about the distress caused by the absence of information. One participant explained that "If they had just told us, it would have helped. We needed to know what was happening" (Participant 10). Another echoed this need, stating "They should send emails or texts. Even a short note would help us explain to our kids" (Participant 9).

For many caregivers, the lack of communication undermined their ability to support their children during the pause. One caregiver shared, "I wished they had said something. I didn't know how to help her understand" (Participant 7), while another noted that "it was hard not having an answer for him. A message would have made a big difference" (Participant 1). These responses highlight that caregivers were not only navigating the loss of books, but also the emotional burden of explaining the interruption without guidance or reassurance.

Some caregivers also expressed concern about the reliability of the program moving forward. One participant emphasized that, alongside improved communication, continuity itself remained essential, stating, "I would like them to continue to send books. Families depend on this" (Participant 18). This comment reflects how deeply ILD had become embedded in families' routines and expectations. Caregivers also offered thoughtful, concrete suggestions for how ILD

could support families during future interruptions. These included sending brief acknowledgment messages by email, text, or mail; deploying book mobiles to affected neighborhoods; partnering with local libraries; or mailing printed activity pages when books cannot be delivered. Collectively, these suggestions reflect caregivers' desire not for complex solutions, but for recognition, transparency, and continued connection. One caregiver summarized this sentiment succinctly, stating, "Just let us know. Communication is care. It shows us we're not forgotten" (Participant 20).

From a sociocultural perspective, this theme underscores that the monthly book delivery functioned as a relational tool as much as a literacy tool. Its absence disrupted not only shared reading practices but also the felt connection between families and the program. Communication would have helped preserve that relationship during the interruption. As caregivers' narratives illustrate, literacy routines are not merely habits; they are co-constructed interactions shaped by context, relationships, and access to cultural tools. This theme reinforces that ILD was experienced not simply as a book provider, but as a trusted partner in children's development, one whose presence, absence, and communication all carried meaningful weight for families. Caregivers' descriptions across the three phases, before, during, and after the pause, revealed a clear trajectory of stability, disruption, and renewal in shared reading practices. The return of book deliveries restored routines, rekindled children's motivation, and deepened caregivers' appreciation for the program. Collectively, these themes underscore how consistent literacy supports contribute to sustained family practices and how their absence, even temporarily, can significantly alter daily routines and emotional experiences.

This chapter presented the findings from twenty in-depth interviews with caregivers who experienced the continuity, disruption, and resumption of monthly book deliveries through

Imagination Library Denver. Using a generic qualitative approach, the findings centered caregivers' voices and illuminated how consistent book delivery shaped shared reading routines, children's excitement for reading, emotional connection, and equitable access to literacy materials within low-SES households. Caregivers described the monthly delivery as a meaningful and stabilizing presence in their daily lives. When deliveries paused, families experienced disruptions to routines, increased emotional strain, and challenges accessing books independently. The resumption of deliveries restored reading practices and renewed caregivers' appreciation for the program, while also highlighting the importance of clear communication during interruptions. Together, these findings provide a rich, participant-centered account of how continuity, disruption, and resumption of book delivery influenced family literacy experiences. While this chapter focused on describing caregivers' experiences in their own words, the following chapter moves beyond description to interpretation. Chapter Five situates these findings within existing scholarship and the study's conceptual framework and explores implications for literacy programs, policy, and future research.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

Introduction

Chapter Four presented findings from 20 semi-structured, in-depth interviews and highlighted how predictable access to books shaped family literacy routines, children's emotional experiences, and caregivers' efforts to sustain shared reading amid economic and structural stressors. Chapter Five builds on those findings by interpreting what caregivers' experiences suggest about the role of consistency, access, and relational support in sustaining shared reading in low-resource contexts. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how low-socioeconomic-status (SES) caregivers experienced the continuity, interruption, and resumption of monthly book deliveries from Imagination Library Denver (ILD). Using a generic qualitative design, this study examined how caregivers made meaning of the ILD program across three phases: the period of consistent book delivery, the unexpected four-month pause, and the resumption of services. Chapter Four presented findings from 20 semi-structured, in-depth interviews and highlighted the influence of predictable access to books on family literacy routines, children's emotional lives, and caregivers' ability to sustain shared reading amid economic and structural stressors (Neuman & Celano, 2001; Mol & Bus, 2011); while Chapter Five builds on these findings by interpreting what caregivers' experiences reveal about the role of consistency, access, and relational support on sustaining shared reading in low-resource contexts.

Building on these findings, this chapter shifts from description to interpretation, examining how caregivers' experiences can be understood through established theoretical and empirical frameworks. Guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, this chapter interprets these findings through the study's conceptual framework and situates them within the broader literature

on early childhood literacy, shared reading, book access, and sociocultural learning. This study illustrates how books operate as cultural tools that shape interaction, routine, and learning within families, and how caregivers, acting as the more knowledgeable other, use these tools to scaffold literacy experiences for young children (Vygotsky, 1978). This chapter also considers how the findings align with and extend existing research on book deserts, family literacy practices, and early childhood book-gifting programs. It concludes with implications for practice organized by audience, outlines study limitations, and offers directions for future research. While Chapter Four centered caregivers' descriptions and themes, Chapter Five focuses on interpretation; what caregivers' experiences suggest about predictability, access, and support in sustaining shared reading in low-resource contexts (Bruner, 1990; Neuman & Celano, 2012).

Organization of the Chapter

This chapter is organized around the study's guiding research questions and the corresponding findings presented in Chapter Four. This structure maintains alignment between descriptive results and interpretive analysis as it moves from participants' accounts to meaning-making grounded in theory and prior research. Maintaining this alignment also ensures that caregivers' voices remain central, even as their experiences are situated within the broader literature on early childhood literacy, shared reading, and access to books (Neuman et al., 2016).

Across caregivers' stories, four interconnected meanings of the Imagination Library Denver program emerged: (a) the program as access rather than simply a resource, (b) its empowering role in supporting caregiver agency, (c) its emotional significance for both caregivers and children, and (d) its relational meaning in strengthening caregiver–child bonds. These meanings extend across all three research questions and offer an analytic lens for understanding how caregivers experienced continuity, disruption, and resumption in monthly

book delivery. Although the discussion that follows is organized by research question, these program meanings are woven throughout to illustrate how predictable book delivery functions not only as an early literacy intervention, but also as a stabilizing presence in families' everyday lives.

Research Question One: How Do Caregivers Describe the Perceived Benefits of Monthly Book Deliveries for Their Families' Shared-Reading Practices?

The Program as Access and Caregiver Empowerment

A central finding of this study is the meaningful role that monthly book delivery played in strengthening shared-reading routines and creating joyful, predictable literacy moments within families. Caregivers consistently described the arrival of the ILD book as an anticipated event, one that signaled connection, learning, and togetherness. Interpreted through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, these findings underscore how cultural tools shape children's learning environments by organizing the interactions that occur within them (Vygotsky, 1978). This interpretation aligns with prior research demonstrating that routine, caregiver involvement, and access to meaningful literacy materials contribute to early literacy development, particularly in low-SES households where resources are limited (Bus et al., 1995; High et al., 2014; Mol & Bus, 2011; Neuman & Celano, 2001). In this way, the ILD book supported not only literacy learning, but also children's agency and participation, reinforcing shared reading as both a learning practice and a relational routine. Caregivers described feeling more confident and intentional in sustaining reading routines when books arrived consistently, highlighting how predictable access also strengthened their sense of agency in supporting their children's learning.

Caregivers' accounts suggest that the monthly ILD book functioned as a mediating tool embedded in daily family life. Rather than serving solely as a material resource, the book's

arrival operated as a concrete cue that initiated shared reading and structured caregiver-child interaction. In sociocultural terms, learning occurs through mediated action, as tools and symbols support meaning-making alongside more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978). For many families in this study, the predictability of the book delivery created repeated opportunities for language-rich interaction, back-and-forth conversation, and caregiver scaffolding, all conditions consistently associated with early literacy growth (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010).

Emotional and Relational Meanings of Monthly Book Delivery

Caregivers also emphasized that children's excitement surrounding each delivery shaped both the tone and the frequency of shared reading. Descriptions of children eagerly checking the mailbox, expressing pride in ownership, and requesting immediate read-alouds echo findings that consistent access to print materials and a sense of book ownership strengthen children's motivation, engagement, and emotional connection to reading (McNally et al., 2024; Neuman & Celano, 2001, 2012). In this way, the ILD book supported not only literacy learning, but also children's agency and participation, reinforcing shared reading as both a learning practice and a relational routine.

Caregivers described the monthly delivery as stabilizing within households navigating long work hours, transportation barriers, childcare constraints, and unpredictable schedules. Within these contexts, the recurring arrival of a book created a reliable rhythm that supported routine formation and emotional regulation. Prior research similarly suggests that consistent book access supports predictable literacy routines that are easier to sustain under conditions of stress (Bus et al., 1995; Mol & Bus, 2011; Sonnenschein et al., 2012), and that such predictability is especially critical in communities where structural barriers make routine-building more difficult (Neuman & Celano, 2001, 2012; Samiei et al., 2016).

Caregivers' narratives also reinforced the emotional dimension of shared reading. Reading was frequently described as a quiet moment, a time of closeness, and a daily highlight, indicating that literacy routines were deeply intertwined with comfort and connection. These descriptions align with evidence that shared reading supports early literacy development not only through exposure to print, but through rich oral language, interaction, and responsive caregiver guidance (Bus et al., 1995; Mol & Bus, 2011). The interactive practices caregivers described, such as explaining ideas, pointing to pictures, expanding children's comments, and responding to questions, mirror dialogic reading behaviors associated with vocabulary growth, comprehension, and sustained engagement (de Bondt et al., 2020; Ihmeideh & Al-Maadadi, 2020; McNally et al., 2024; Neuman et al., 2020).

Taken together, caregivers' accounts suggest that ILD supported repeatable, emotionally meaningful literacy interactions that strengthened relationships and helped families sustain shared reading under constrained circumstances. From a sociocultural perspective, the monthly book delivery functioned as a cultural tool that organized interaction, supported caregiver scaffolding, and embedded literacy learning within the rhythms of everyday family life (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1990).

Research Question Two: How Do Caregivers Describe the Challenges They Experienced During the Pause in Book Delivery?

Disruption of Access, Routine, and Emotional Security

The four-month interruption of book delivery revealed how vulnerable shared-reading routines can be in households already navigating limited resources, long work hours, transportation barriers, and the daily pressures of economic stress. Although many caregivers continued reading with their children, most described declines in frequency, energy, and

excitement. Many reported feeling unprepared during the pause, and several described a diminished sense of confidence in their ability to sustain shared-reading routines without the structure and support provided by the monthly book delivery. Prior research suggests that participation in literacy initiatives is associated with increased caregiver confidence and a stronger sense of efficacy in supporting children's reading development (Sénéchal & Young, 2008).

In contrast, caregivers' experiences during the pause illustrate how the sudden removal of predictable literacy supports can undermine that confidence, even among caregivers who remain highly motivated. When the monthly ILD book disappeared, the cue that had anchored shared reading disappeared (MacLeod & Tett, 2019). Caregivers described children repeatedly checking the mailbox, asking whether ILD had forgotten them, and expressing sadness or disappointment when the book did not arrive. These responses suggest that the routine had become embedded in children's expectations and emotional lives. This finding is consistent with research on book deserts, which indicates that children in low-SES communities are especially affected when access to books is unpredictable or interrupted (Evans et al., 2010; Neuman & Celano, 2012; Neuman et al., 2016). Within this study's conceptual framework, the pause illustrated how quickly routines can weaken when predictable literacy supports are withdrawn. Taken together, these findings directly address the problem identified in Chapter One regarding inequitable access to books and the fragility of shared-reading routines in low-income communities, demonstrating that when predictable book delivery is disrupted, families' literacy practices, caregiver confidence, and children's emotional well-being are simultaneously affected.

Caregivers' accounts also showed that the pause exposed the extent of inequities faced by low-SES caregivers. Many described transportation challenges, long commutes, the cost of bus

fare, and discomfort borrowing books from friends or libraries due to fear of damage or fines. These barriers align with research documenting how book deserts restrict families' access to high-quality, age-appropriate print materials and shape children's early learning opportunities (Lee, 2009; Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012; Neuman & Celano, 2001, 2012; Neuman et al., 2016). When caregivers wanted to supplement books during the pause, structural conditions limited what was feasible. Their experiences align with findings that children in low-SES communities often have far fewer literacy resources than higher-income peers, widening opportunity gaps long before kindergarten (Dorman & Fair, 2021; de Bondt et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2016; Shrider & Creamer, 2022). In this context, ILD deliveries were not simply helpful; for many families, they were the only predictable source of children's books in the home.

From a sociocultural perspective, the absence of this predictable cultural tool disrupted the mediated interactions through which caregivers supported literacy learning. Without consistent access to books, caregivers' ability to scaffold shared reading was constrained, reinforcing that access to cultural tools is foundational to sustaining meaningful literacy routines (Bruner, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978).

Caregivers also described a communication gap during the pause. Many felt confused and frustrated, not only because deliveries stopped, but because they received no information about why the pause occurred or whether services would resume. Without clear communication, caregivers were left to manage children's disappointment and their own uncertainty without guidance. This aligns with research emphasizing that families in underserved communities benefit from predictable supports and responsive partnerships, especially when other literacy resources are limited (Dorman & Fair, 2021; Neuman & Celano, 2012). Within this study's framing, communication operated as a form of relational scaffolding; when information was

absent, families experienced the pause as disconnection, revealing how deeply ILD had become woven into children's sense of routine and security.

Research Question Three: How Do Caregivers Describe Changes in Shared-Reading Practices Before, During, and After the Pause and Resumption of Book Delivery?

Restoration of Routine and Renewed Meaning of the Program

When monthly book deliveries resumed, caregivers described immediate relief, renewed excitement, and a rapid return to shared-reading routines that had weakened during the pause. Children recognized the familiar ILD envelope, and many families quickly re-established reading practices that had previously structured daily life. This swift recovery aligns with research suggesting that when families have reliable access to developmentally appropriate books, literacy routines stabilize and become easier to sustain, even in contexts marked by limited resources or structural barriers (Duursma, 2007; Neuman & Celano, 2001, 2012). From a sociocultural perspective, the return of the book illustrates the close connection between cultural tools and practices: when a familiar tool re-enters the home, the activity it supports often reemerges (Vygotsky, 1978).

Beyond restoring routines, the resumption prompted caregivers to reflect more deeply on the program's significance. Many noted that they had not fully recognized the extent to which the monthly book anchored reading practices, emotional reassurance, and family rhythm until it was temporarily absent. This heightened awareness echoes research suggesting that in book deserts, access to print materials carries emotional and relational meaning beyond instructional purposes alone (Dorman & Fair, 2021; Neuman et al., 2016). After deliveries resumed, caregivers described renewed appreciation for ILD as a steady presence that supported children's

excitement, strengthened caregiver-child relationships, and restored a sense of normalcy within the household (Crawford et al., 2021; Yoshikawa et al., 2020).

At the same time, caregivers emphasized that predictability involves more than consistent delivery. If interruptions were to occur again, timely and transparent communication was viewed as essential. Knowing why services were paused and what to expect would have helped caregivers support children emotionally and adjust routines more effectively (Fikrat-Wevers et al., 2021; McNally et al., 2024; Rybinska et al., 2021; Kallman-Wegner & Klopfenstein, 2023). Taken together, these findings suggest that for families who rely heavily on external literacy supports, predictability is relational as well as logistical, encompassing both continuity of access and clear communication during periods of disruption.

Implications for Practice

These findings provide valuable information for caregivers and educators, community partners, book-gifting programs, and policymakers. Caregivers' narratives reaffirm long-standing evidence that consistent access to high-quality print materials supports early literacy development, particularly in low-income households where books are often scarce (Neuman & Celano, 2001, 2012). The four-month pause made inequities in access more visible and highlighted how book deserts and structural barriers continue to shape families' opportunities to sustain shared reading (Dorman & Fair, 2021; Neuman et al., 2016). Because ILD functioned as a stabilizing presence in family routines and emotional lives, the findings underscore the importance of reliable delivery systems, clear communication, and community-based supports aligned with families' lived realities. For caregivers, the findings suggest that predictable routines support sustained shared reading (Bus et al., 1995; Mol & Bus, 2011).

While this study does not prescribe behaviors, caregivers' accounts indicate that routines are easier to maintain when reading is tied to consistent cues and when children experience ownership and agency. When new materials are not immediately available, anchoring reading to an existing routine, such as bedtime or a consistent quiet time, and supporting children's choice and participation may help sustain engagement. Caregivers also described everyday literacy opportunities, such as conversation, storytelling, environmental print, and informal language play, consistent with research suggesting that literacy can be meaningfully supported through daily interactions even when time and resources are limited (Mol & Bus, 2011). Finally, caregivers' accounts indicate a need for greater visibility of neighborhood-based resources; many were unaware of free-book options, suggesting that improved information-sharing may help families navigate access barriers (Neuman & Celano, 2012; Neuman et al., 2016).

For early childhood educators, the findings reinforce the value of affirming caregivers' efforts and strengthening home-school partnerships. Caregivers were deeply invested in shared reading, even when constraints made consistency difficult. Educators can support these efforts by acknowledging both the developmental and relational benefits of shared reading, offering low-burden strategies for busy families, and sharing ideas for creating literacy-rich environments with minimal resources. Caregivers' emphasis on clear communication further suggests that responsiveness and collaboration can strengthen trust, particularly in low-SES communities where structural barriers shape caregivers' capacity to engage consistently (Neuman et al., 2016). For ILD and other book-gifting programs, the findings highlight the importance of reliability, communication, and continuity planning. Caregivers found the monthly book to be a relied-upon resource that anchored routines and sustained children's motivation. When delivery paused, families experienced practical disruption and emotional strain, intensified by limited information.

When interruptions are anticipated or unavoidable, timely communication and clear guidance about what families can expect may reduce confusion and stress. Community partnerships may also support continuity of book access during disruptions, particularly in neighborhoods where transportation limitations and book deserts restrict alternatives (Neuman & Celano, 2012). Finally, caregivers' interest in additional support suggests that brief, strengths-based resources, such as reading prompts, QR codes for read-alouds, or affirming messages about conversation and connection, may help sustain shared reading without adding a burden to caregivers (Mol & Bus, 2011).

For community organizations and literacy partners, the findings underscore the importance of neighborhood-level access. Localized strategies such as book boxes, Little Free Libraries, and distribution hubs in trusted community spaces may help reduce barriers (Neuman & Celano, 2012). Embedding books and literacy supports into routine services, such as in clinics, family resource centers, housing organizations, and food assistance sites, may expand access without requiring additional time or travel (Neuman et al., 2016). Caregivers' accounts also suggest that culturally and linguistically responsive access matters; engagement increases when families can find books that reflect their languages, identities, and lived experiences (Dorman & Fair, 2021). Coordinated networks among ILD, libraries, schools, clinics, and neighborhood agencies may strengthen the broader literacy ecosystem by creating consistent points of support.

For policymakers, the findings reinforce that funding stability and local literacy infrastructure shape families' access to books. The pause illustrates how vulnerable book-distribution programs can be when resources are disrupted. Policymakers can support continuity by investing in stable funding for early childhood book-access initiatives and addressing structural contributors to book deserts, including transportation and uneven neighborhood

resource distribution (Neuman & Celano, 2012; Neuman et al., 2016). Policies that expand culturally responsive access, such as including diverse book options, may further support equitable engagement (Dorman & Fair, 2021). Finally, caregivers' accounts reinforce that literacy routines are intertwined with broader conditions of family life; policies that support childcare stability, housing security, transportation access, and economic well-being may indirectly strengthen early literacy by increasing families' capacity to maintain routines and sustain shared reading (Neuman & Celano, 2001, 2012). Together, these implications highlight how caregiver-informed insights can guide more responsive, equitable, and sustainable early literacy supports.

Limitations of the Study

As with all qualitative research, the findings are shaped by contextual factors, methodological decisions, and participant characteristics that influence interpretation. One limitation is reliance on retrospective caregiver self-report across the delivery-pause-resumption cycle. Although the pause occurred only months before the interviews, recollections may have been shaped by memory constraints and by meaning-making over time. These narratives reflect lived experience rather than quantifiable measurement, which is appropriate for the study's purpose but important to acknowledge.

This study drew from a purposive sample of twenty low-SES caregivers in Denver who were actively enrolled in ILD and directly affected by the pause. Because the sample reflects a specific geographic and socioeconomic context, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all ILD families or communities with different infrastructures. Transferability depends on similarity between contexts. The single-interview design also limited opportunities for follow-up

clarification or exploration of change over time; longitudinal or multi-interview designs could yield additional nuance regarding how routines evolve following disruptions and resumption. The study relied exclusively on interview data, limiting triangulation. Observational data or additional sources, such as caregiver journals, program documents, or child literacy indicators, could have expanded the analytic scope. My positionality as a literacy advocate also shaped my interpretation. Although reflexive journaling, analytic memoing, and peer debriefing supported the questioning of the researcher's assumptions, qualitative inquiry recognizes that the researcher serves as the primary instrument of analysis. Finally, interviews were conducted via Zoom, which increased accessibility but may have introduced technological or contextual constraints that affected the depth or clarity of some responses. Taken together, these limitations provide important context for interpreting the findings while underscoring the value of caregivers' perspectives in understanding how program continuity shapes family literacy routines.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings suggest several pathways for continued inquiry into early literacy, book access, and family reading routines in communities navigating socioeconomic hardship. Longitudinal studies could examine how shared-reading routines develop and change over time as children age and family circumstances shift. Future research should also more directly center children's perspectives, using developmentally appropriate methods, to offer insight into how children experience book ownership, interpret disruptions, and engage emotionally with reading. Comparative studies across cultural, linguistic, and geographic contexts could strengthen understanding of how book-gifting programs function in rural settings, multilingual households, suburban communities, or regions with stronger library infrastructures. Because communication emerged as a consistent concern, research examining the effectiveness of different

communication strategies during service disruptions, such as text alerts, emails, QR codes, or partnerships with schools and clinics, could offer practical guidance for programs seeking to maintain trust and reduce family stress.

Future studies could also examine caregiver stress, emotional labor, and resilience during disruptions in literacy supports, including protective factors that help families sustain shared reading under instability. Structural analyses of book deserts could identify neighborhood-level issues, including transportation access, distribution of community resources, and the impact of housing instability or overcrowding on literacy routines.

Research evaluating low-burden supplemental supports paired with book-gifting programs, such as brief prompts, video demonstrations, or conversation starters, may identify approaches that strengthen shared reading without increasing demands on families. Mixed-methods designs could deepen understanding by triangulating caregiver reports with observations, surveys, and child outcomes. Together, these directions underscore the need for research that attends not only to access, but to the relational, emotional, and structural conditions that shape family literacy experiences.

Conclusion

Together, these findings highlight four interconnected meanings of the Imagination Library Denver program for participating caregivers: the program as access rather than simply a resource, its empowering role in supporting caregiver agency, its emotional significance for both caregivers and children, and its relational meaning in strengthening caregiver-child bonds. Across continuity, disruption, and resumption, caregivers described how predictable book delivery shaped their daily routines, emotional well-being, and shared-reading practices. When deliveries paused, these supports were disrupted; when they resumed, routines and relationships

were restored. These findings underscore that predictable book delivery functions not only as an early literacy intervention, but as a stabilizing presence for families navigating socioeconomic constraints.

This study examined how low-socioeconomic-status caregivers experienced the continuity, disruption, and resumption of monthly book deliveries from Imagination Library Denver, and what those experiences revealed about shared reading, access, and family routines. Through twenty in-depth interviews, caregivers described how a predictable book arriving each month became embedded in the rhythm of family life, shaping children's excitement, emotional connection, and opportunities for shared learning. The monthly delivery functioned not simply as a material resource, but as a reliable cue that supported routine formation and caregiver-child interaction amid economic and structural constraints. The four-month pause exposed the vulnerability of shared-reading routines in communities affected by book deserts and limited access to print. Without the monthly delivery, caregivers described declines in reading frequency, increased child confusion and disappointment, and heightened stress, particularly in the absence of communication. When deliveries resumed, families experienced renewed excitement, restored routines, and a deeper recognition of the program's role in sustaining daily literacy practices. These experiences demonstrate that consistency in book access, along with transparent communication during disruptions, is essential for supporting shared reading in low-resource contexts.

Collectively, these findings reinforce the central problem identified in Chapter One: while access to books is foundational, continuity and predictability are critical for sustaining family literacy routines in households facing structural inequities. Caregivers' narratives show that early literacy supports are most effective when they are reliable, relational, and responsive to

families' lived realities. A book in the mailbox became more than an instructional tool; it became a source of joy, stability, and connection.

This study contributes to the early childhood literacy literature by extending research on book access and shared reading to foreground continuity as a key mechanism shaping family literacy practices. By centering caregivers' perspectives during a service interruption, the findings illuminate how disruptions destabilize routines and how predictability supports resilience, caregiver confidence, and sustained engagement. Taken as a whole, this dissertation underscores that early literacy development is shaped not only by the presence of books but by the stability, predictability, and relational trust surrounding their use. Book-gifting programs operate as more than material interventions; they function as relational systems that support routines, emotional security, and caregiver capacity in communities where access is otherwise constrained. When early literacy supports are consistent, transparent, and community-centered, they have the potential not only to promote reading but to strengthen relationships and expand opportunities for young children and their caregivers.

References

Anderson, K. L., Atkinson, T. S., Swaggerty, E. A., & O'Brien, K. (2019). Exploring the short-term impacts of a community-based book distribution program. *Literacy research and instruction*, *58*(2), 84-104.

Anderson, R. H., H.; Scott, J., Wilkinson, I. (1985). *On Becoming a Nation of Readers*: The Report of the Commission of Reading.

ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH. (2023). *ATLAS.ti*. In (Version 23) [Computer Software]. https://atlasti.com

Baker, L., & Wigfield, A. (1999). Dimensions of children's motivation for reading and their relations to reading activity and reading achievement. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *34*(4), 452-477.

Beck, C. (2025, July 28). Funding unclear for Indiana's Dolly Parton Library, but signups still open statewide. *Indy Star*. https://www.indystar.com/story/news/education/2025/07/28/dolly-parton-immagination-library-mike-braun-maureen-braun-funding-cuts-families-encouraged-to-enrol/85256924007/

Beckett, J. (2012). *The Imagination Library program and the kindergarten cohort of 2008–2009*.

Bloomberg, L. D. V., Marie. (2019). Completing your qualitative dissertation: A road map from beginning to end.

Blumberg, D. G., Dawn. (2013). Family Connections: The Importance of Prison Reading Programs for Incarcerated Parents and Their Children. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, *52*(4).

Bochna, C. (2006). *The impact of instruction in text structure on listening comprehension in preschool age students* Pennsylvania State University].

Braun, V. a. C., Victoria. (2008). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2).

Brooks-Gunn, J., & Duncan, G. J. (1997). The effects of poverty on children. *The future of children*, 55-71.

Bruner, J. (1990). Culture and human development: A new look. *Human development*, *33*(6), 344-355.

Bus, A. B., J.; van IJzendorn, M. (1997). Attachment and book reading patterns: A study of mothers, fathers, and their toddlers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *12*.

Bus, A. G., Van Ijzendoorn, M.H., Pellegrini, A.D. (1995). Joint book reading makes for success in learning to read: A meta-analysis on intergenerational transmission of literacy. *Review of educational research*, *65*(1), 1-21.

Caelli, K., Ray, L., & Mill, J. (2003). 'Clear as mud': toward greater clarity in generic qualitative research. *International journal of qualitative methods*, *2*(2), 1-13.

Camic, P. M., Rhodes, J. E., & Yardley, L. (2003). Qualitative research in psychology.

Canfield, C. F., Seery, A., Weisleder, A., Workman, C., Cates, C. B., Roby, E., Payne, R., Levine, S., Mogilner, L., & Dreyer, B. (2020). Encouraging parent–child book sharing: Potential additive benefits of literacy promotion in health care and the community. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *50*, 221-229.

Colorado Children's Campaign. (2022). *Kids Count in Colorado* Retrieved from https://www.coloradokidscount.org

Colorado Department of Education. (2023). *Colorado Reads: Early Literacy Initiative.* . Retrieved from https://www.cde.state.co.us/coloradoreads

Colorado Department of Labor and Employment. (2024). *Colorado unemployment and labor force data*. Retrieved from https://cdle.colorado.gov/labor-market-information

Crain-Thoreson, C., Dahlin, M. P., & Powell, T. A. (2001). Parent-child interaction in three conversational contexts: Variations in style and strategy. *New directions for child and adolescent development*, *2001*(92), 23-38.

Crawford, K. C. (2006). *Effects of scripted storybook reading on young children and mothers from low-income environments*. The Florida State University.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.

Cunningham, A. E., & Stanovich, K. E. (1997). Early reading acquisition and its relation to reading experience and ability 10 years later. *Developmental psychology*, *33*(6), 934.

Dahlberg, H., & Dahlberg, K. (2020). Open and reflective lifeworld research: A third way. *Qualitative inquiry*, *26*(5), 458-464.

Daniels, H. (1996). *An introduction to Vygotsky*. Routledge London.

Danish, J. A., Enyedy, N., Saleh, A., & Humburg, M. (2020). Learning in embodied activity framework: A sociocultural framework for embodied cognition. *International Journal of Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning*, *15*(1), 49-87.

de Bondt, M., Willenberg, I. A., & Bus, A. G. (2020). Do book giveaway programs promote the home literacy environment and children's literacy-related behavior and skills? *Review of educational research*, *90*(3), 349-375.

Denver Department of Public Health & Environment. (2024). *In Good Health Annual Report*. Retrieved from https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/ed0233d7a8bd4d8e9158cbfeaafc8b3a

Denver Public Schools. (2025). *DPS District Annual Strategic Roadmap Report*. Retrieved from https://issuu.com/dpscommunications/docs/2024-25_district_annual_strategic_roadmap_report

Denverite. (2025, June 19). Dolly Parton's free books haven't been arriving in Denver and Mesa County — here's why. https://denverite.com/2025/06/19/dolly-parton-imagination-library-pause/

Di Santo, A. (2012). Promoting preschool literacy: A family literacy program for homeless mothers and their children. *Journal of Childhood Education*, *88*(4).

Dolly Parton Imagination Library. (2023). *Dolly Parton Imagination Library Fact Sheet*. imaginationlibrary.com/news-resources/media-center/

Dolly Parton Imagination Library of Washington State. (2025, April 25). State budget shuts out funding for Dolly Parton Imagination Library Washington https://www.imaginationlibrarywashington.org/state_budget_shuts_out_funding_for_dolly_parton_s_imagination_library_of_washington

Dorman, A. F., T. (2021). *Dolly Parton's Imagination Library Impact Report*.

Duncan, G. J., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2000). Family poverty, welfare reform, and child development. *Child development*, *71*(1), 188-196.

Dunning, T. (2012). *Natural experiments in the social sciences: A design-based approach*. Cambridge University Press.

Durkin, D. (1966). The achievement of pre-school readers: Two longitudinal studies. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 5-36.

Duursma, A. E. (2007). *Parental bookreading in low-income families: Differences and similarities between fathers and mothers in frequency and style of reading and the impact on children's language and literacy development* ProQuest Information & Learning].

Early Milestones Colorado. (2021). *The impact of COVID-19 on early childhood systems in Colorado.* . Retrieved from https://www.earlymilestones.org

Evans, M. K., R.; Sikora, J.; Treiman, D. (2010). Family scholarly culture and educational success: books and schooling in 27 nations. *Journal of Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, *28*(2).

Evans, W. H., P.; Sethuraman, S.; Thiruvaiyaru, D.; Pendergraft, E.; Cliett, K.; Cato, V. (2016). Empowering Young Children in Poverty by Improving Their Home Literacy Environments. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, *30*(2).

Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. (2024). *Percent of population below the poverty level (5-year estimate) in Denver County, CO* Retrieved from https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/PUAACO08031A647NCEN

Feeding Colorado. (2023). *2023 state policy priorities*. Retrieved from https://feedingcolorado.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Feeding-Colorado-2023-State-Policy-Agenda.pdf

Fikrat-Wevers, S., van Steensel, R., & Arends, L. (2021). Effects of family literacy programs on the emergent literacy skills of children from low-SES families: A meta-analysis. *Review of educational research*, *91*(4), 577-613.

Font, S. A., Cancian, M., & Berger, L. M. (2019). Prevalence and risk factors for early motherhood among low-income, maltreated, and foster youth. *Demography*, *56*(1), 261-284.

Funge, S. P., Sullivan, D. J., & Tarter, K. (2017). Promoting positive family interactions: Evaluating a free early childhood book distribution program. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *45*, 603-611.

Gloria Coles Flint Public Library. (2025, September 1). *Dolly Parton's Imagination Library on Indefinite Pause* https://www.fpl.info/posts/dolly-partons-imagination-library-indefinite-pause

Golinkoff, R. M., Hoff, E., Rowe, M. L., Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2019). Language matters: Denying the existence of the 30-million-word gap has serious consequences. *Child development*, *90*(3), 985-992.

Hart, B. R., T.R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children*. Paul Brookes Publishing.

Hauser, R. B., B.; Prosser, W. (1997). *Indicators of children's well-being*. N. York.

High, P. C., Klass, P., Donoghue, E., Glassy, D., DelConte, B., Earls, M., Lieser, D., McFadden, T., & Mendelsohn, A. (2014). Literacy promotion: an essential component of primary care pediatric practice. *Journal of Pediatrics*, *134*(2), 404-409.

Ihmeideh, F., & Al-Maadadi, F. (2020). The effect of family literacy programs on the development of children's early literacy in kindergarten settings. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *118*, 105462.

Imagination Library of Tennessee. (2023). *Imagination Library of Tennessee Fact Sheet*. unitedwaygreaternashville.org/imagination-library/

Kahlke, R. (2014). Generic qualitative approaches: Pitfalls and benefits of methodological mix-and-match. *International journal of qualitative methods*, *13*, 37-52.

Kallman-Wegner, A. K., K. (2023). *Early literacy: Imagination Library of Colorado*.

Kostere, S., & Kostere, K. (2021). *The generic qualitative approach to a dissertation in the social sciences: A step by step guide*. Routledge.

Lamb, H. A. (1986). *The effects of a read-aloud program with language interaction* Florida State University].

Lee, K. (2009). The Bidirectional Effects of Early Poverty on Children's Reading and Home Environment Scores: Associations and Ethnic Differences. *Journal of Social Work Research*, *33*(2).

Leech, K., Wei, R., Harring, J. R., & Rowe, M. L. (2018). A brief parent-focused intervention to improve preschoolers' conversational skills and school readiness. *Developmental psychology*, *54*(1), 15.

Leung, C. H., M.; Suskind, D. (2020). Enriching home language enviornment among families from low-SES backgrounds: A randomized controlled trial of a home visiting curriculum. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *50*.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1988). Criteria for Assessing Naturalistic Inquiries as Reports.

Lonigan, C. E., K.; Strickland, D. (2009). *Impact of home and parent programs on young children's early literacy skills* (Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National early literacy panel, Issue.

MacLeod, G., & Tett, L. (2019). 'I had some additional angel wings': Parents positioned as experts in their children's education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *38*(2), 171-183.

Margolis, A. A. (2020). Zone of Proximal Development, Scaffolding and Teaching Practice. *Cultural-historical psychology*, *16*(3).

Martin, K. B. A., Xu, Y.; Szumlas, G; Hutton, J.; Crosh, C.; Copeland, K. (2022). Shared Reading and Risk of Social-Emotional Problems. *Journal of Pediatrics*, *149*(1).

McCall, R. B. (1981). Nature-nurture and the two realms of development: A proposed integration with respect to mental development. *Child development*, 1-12.

McGillion, M., Pine, J. M., Herbert, J. S., & Matthews, D. (2017). A randomised controlled trial to test the effect of promoting caregiver contingent talk on language development in infants from diverse socioeconomic status backgrounds. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *58*(10), 1122-1131.

McNally, S., Leech, K. A., Corriveau, K. H., & Daly, M. (2024). Indirect effects of early shared reading and access to books on reading vocabulary in middle childhood. *Scientific studies of reading*, *28*(1), 42-59.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education. Revised and Expanded from" Case Study Research in Education."*. ERIC.

Milteer, R. G., K. (2012). The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bond: Focus on Children in Poverty Clinical Report. *Journal of Pediatrics*, *129*(1).

Mol, S. E., & Bus, A.G. (2011). To read or not to read: a meta-analysis of print exposure from infance to early adulthood. *Psychological bulletin*, *137*(2).

Mould, O., Cole, J., Badger, A., & Brown, P. (2022). Solidarity, not charity: Learning the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic to reconceptualise the radicality of mutual aid. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *47*(4), 866-879.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. sage.

Neuman, S. B. (1996). Children engaging in storybook reading: The influence of access to print resources, opportunity, and parental interaction. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *11*(4), 495-513.

Neuman, S. B. (1999). Books make a difference: A study of access to literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *34*(3), 286-311.

Neuman, S. B., & Celano, D. (2001). Access to print in low-income and middle-income communities: An ecological study of four neighborhoods. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *36*(1), 8-26.

Neuman, S. B., & Celano, D. C. (2012). Worlds Apart: One City, Two Libraries, and Ten Years of Watching Inequality Grow. *American educator*, *36*(3), 13.

Neuman, S. B., & Celano, D. C. (2015). *Giving our children a fighting chance: Poverty, literacy, and the development of information capital*. Teachers College Press.

Neuman, S. B., & Knapczyk, J. J. (2020). Reaching families where they are: Examining an innovative book distribution program. *Urban education*, *55*(4), 542-569.

Neuman, S. B., & Moland, N. (2016). Book deserts: The consequences of income segregation on children's access to print. *Urban education*, *54*(1), 126-147.

Neuman, S. B., & Moland, N. (2019). Book deserts: The consequences of income segregation on children's access to print. *Urban education*, *54*(1), 126-147.

Neuman, S. B., & Roskos, K. (1993). Access to print for children of poverty: Differential effects of adult mediation and literacy-enriched play settings on environmental and functional print tasks. *American educational research journal*, *30*(1), 95-122.

Neyer, S. L., Szumlas, G. A., & Vaughn, L. M. (2018). Beyond the numbers: Social and emotional benefits of participation in the Imagination Library home-based literacy programme. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, *21*(1), 60-81.

Olsen, S. (2025). Dolly Parton's Imagination Library faces uncertain funding future in Maine. *News Center Maine*. https://www.newscentermaine.com/article/news/education/dolly-parton-imagination-library-uncertain-funding-future-student-literacy/97-da694c26-8702-4177-a120-54e36f8c6587

Paschall, K. W., Gershoff, E. T., & Kuhfeld, M. (2018). A two decade examination of historical race/ethnicity disparities in academic achievement by poverty status. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *47*(6), 1164-1177.

Pelatti, C. Y., Piasta, S. B., Justice, L. M., & O'Connell, A. (2014). Language-and literacy-learning opportunities in early childhood classrooms: Children's typical experiences and within-classroom variability. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *29*(4), 445-456.

Percy, W. H., Kostere, K., & Kostere, S. (2015). Generic qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative report*, *20*(2).

Perie, M. G., W.S.; Donahue, P.L. (2005). *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2005*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office

Prahl, A. (2023). Exploring Literacy Practices of Families Enrolled in the Imagination Library Book Gifting Program. *Reading Psychology*, *44*(8), 893-914.

Rae, A. (2025, December 18). Dolly Parton Imagination Library pauses for December amid funding issues. *2 News Nevada*. https://www.2news.com/news/dolly-parton-imagination-library-pauses-for-december-amid-funding-issues/article_d773c7f7-885f-447e-b868-ffd6eac98685.html

Reach Out and Read. (2024). *Strategic Plan*. Retrieved from www.reachoutandread.org/about

Reschly, A. C., S.L. (2006). Prediction of dropout among students with mild disabilities: A case for inclusion of student engagement variables. *Journal of Remedial and Special Education*, *27*.

Reshley, A. (2010). Reading and school completion: Critical connections and Matthew Effects. *Journal of Reading and Writing Quarterly*, *26*(1).

Reynolds, K. (2025, October 29). Parents lament end of Dolly Parton's free books in Clark County, say it will hurt literacy. *The Nevada Independent*. https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/parents-lament-end-of-dolly-partons-free-books-in-clark-county-say-it-will-hurt-literacy

Ridzi, F., Sylvia, M. R., & Singh, S. (2014). The imagination library program: Increasing parental reading through book distribution. *Reading Psychology*, *35*(6), 548-576.

Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context*. Oxford university press.

Romeo, R. R., Leonard, J. A., Robinson, S. T., West, M. R., Mackey, A. P., Rowe, M. L., & Gabrieli, J. D. (2018). Beyond the 30-million-word gap: Children's conversational exposure is associated with language-related brain function. *Psychological science*, *29*(5), 700-710.

Rowe, M. L., Denmark, N., Harden, B. J., & Stapleton, L. M. (2016). The role of parent education and parenting knowledge in children's language and literacy skills among White, Black, and Latino families. *Infant and Child Development*, *25*(2), 198-220.

Rybińska, A., Best, D. L., Goodman, W. B., Bai, Y., & Dodge, K. A. (2022). Transitioning to virtual interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic: Impact on the family connects postpartum home visiting program activity. *Infant mental health journal*, *43*(1), 159-172.

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.

Samuelsson, S., Byrne, B., Quain, P., Wadsworth, S., Corley, R., DeFries, J. C., Willcutt, E., & Olson, R. (2005). Environmental and genetic influences on prereading skills in Australia, Scandinavia, and the United States. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *97*(4), 705.

Sénéchal, M., & LeFevre, J. A. (2002). Parental involvement in the development of children's reading skill: A five-year longitudinal study. *Child development*, *73*(2), 445-460.

Sénéchal, M., & Young, L. (2008). The effect of family literacy interventions on children's acquisition of reading from kindergarten to grade 3: A meta-analytic review. *Review of educational research*, *78*(4), 880-907.

Shanahan, T., & Lonigan, C. J. (2010). The National Early Literacy Panel: A summary of the process and the report. *Educational researcher*, *39*(4), 279-285.

Shrider, E. C., J. (2022). *Poverty in the United States: 2022*.

Shulman, K. T., S. (2023). *Reading for Life: the impact of youth literacy on health outcomes*.

Shvarts, A., & Bakker, A. (2019). The early history of the scaffolding metaphor: Bernstein, Luria, Vygotsky, and before. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, *26*(1), 4-23.

Sinclair, E. M., E.; Koepsell, L.; Zuckerman, K.; Stevenson, E. (2018). Early Childhood Literacy: Comparing shared reading at 2 weeks and 6 months. *Journal of Pediatrics*, *142*(1).

Skibbe, L. E., & Foster, T. D. (2019). Participation in the Imagination Library book distribution program and its relations to children's language and literacy outcomes in kindergarten. *Reading Psychology*, *40*(4), 350-370.

Sloat, E. A., Beswick, J. F., & Willms, J. D. (2007). Using early literacy monitoring to prevent reading failure. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *88*(7), 523-529.

Snow, C. E. B., S.; Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. National Academies Press.

Sonnenschein, S., Brody, G., & Munsterman, K. (2012). The influence of family beliefs and practices on children's early reading development. In *Developing engaged readers in school and home communities* (pp. 3-20). Routledge.

Stanovich, K. E. (1986). Matthew Effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy. *Journal of Reading Research Quarterly*, *21*.

Sun Journal. (2025, June 16). Lack of funding affects Dolly Parton's Imagination Library in North Carolina. https://www.newbernsj.com/news/lack-of-funding-affects-dolly-partons-imagination-library/article_5fb56bdd-b7a0-5517-b759-e94339946ce0.html

Tennessee Board of Regents. (2008). *Tennessee School Readiness Model*. Retrieved from kidcentraltn.com/education/school-readiness/tennessee-school-readiness-model

The Statehouse File. (2025, February 28). Johnson County, Indiana Imagination Library supporters respond to proposed state budget cuts. https://www.thestatehousefile.com/politics/johnson-county-imagination-library-supporters-respond-to-proposed-state-budget-cuts/

Tichnor–Wagner, A., Garwood, J. D., Bratsch–Hines, M., & Vernon–Feagans, L. (2016). Home literacy environments and foundational literacy skills for struggling and nonstruggling

readers in rural early elementary schools. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, *31*(1), 6-21.

Tura, F., Wood, C., Thompson, R., & Lushey, C. (2023). Evaluating the impact of book gifting on the reading behaviours of parents and young children. *Early years*, *43*(1), 75-90.

US Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023). *Employment status of the population by poverty status*. Retrieved from https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat50.htm

US Census Bureau. (2023). *American Community Survey 5-year estimates: Housing cost burden (renters), Denver County, Colorado* Retrieved from https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT1Y2024.B25031?t=Renter+Costs&g=050XX00US08031

US Department of Agriculture. (2024). *SNAP maximum allotments: Fiscal year 2024-2025*. https://fns.usda.gov

US Department of Education. (2015). *Innovative Approaches to Literacy*

Vacca, J. S. (2004). Educated prisoners are less likely to return to prison *Journal of Correctional Education 55*.

Van Manen, M. (2016). *The tact of teaching: The meaning of pedagogical thoughtfulness*. Routledge.

Von Hippel, P. T., Workman, J., & Downey, D. B. (2018). Inequality in reading and math skills forms mainly before kindergarten: A replication, and partial correction, of "Are schools the great equalizer?". *Sociology of Education*, *91*(4), 323-357.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (Vol. 86). Harvard university press.

Wolanske, M. (2025, April 10). Thousands of families in Denver are without books. A program that could have helped is pausing its services. https://www.denver7.com/news/local-news/thousands-of-families-in-denver-are-without-books-a-program-that-could-have-helped-is-pausing-its-services

Wood, W., & Neal, D. T. (2007). A new look at habits and the habit-goal interface. *Psychological review*, *114*(4), 843.

Yoshikawa, H., Wuermli, A. J., Britto, P. R., Dreyer, B., Leckman, J. F., Lye, S. J., Stein, A. . (2020). Effects of the global coronavirus disease-2019 pandemic on early childhood development: short-and long-term risks and mitigating program and policy actions. *The Journal of Pediatrics*, *223*, 188-193.

Appendix A

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: September 15, 2025 **IRB#:** 18942

Principal Investigator: Staci L Koutsoukos

Approval Date: 09/14/2025

Exempt Category: Category 2

Study Title: The Impact of Book Delivery Continuity on Shared Reading: Low Socioeconomic Status (SES) Caregiver Experiences with the Dolly Parton Imagination Library Denver (ILD) Book-Gifting Program Examining Caregiver Perspectives on Delivery, Interruption, and Continuation

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Lara Mayeux

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix B

Subject: Invitation to Participate in a Research Study on the Imagination Library Denver

Dear Caregiver,

My name is Staci Koutsoukos, and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Oklahoma. I am conducting a research study about caregivers' experiences with the Imagination Library Denver book program, especially during the time when book deliveries were paused and then resumed.

You are invited to participate because you are a caregiver of a child age 0 to 5 who received books from the Imagination Library before, during, and after the pause in deliveries.
If you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in a one-time Zoom interview lasting about 30 to 45 minutes. I will ask you about your family's experiences with the book program and how the pause and restart of book deliveries may have affected your family reading routines. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may skip any question or stop the interview at any time. As a thank you, you will receive a $25 electronic gift card (Walmart or Amazon) within 48 hours after the interview.

If you are interested or would like more information, please reply to this email, and I will send you the consent form and schedule a time that works best for you.

Thank you very much for considering this opportunity to share your experiences. Your voice can help improve book programs for families.

Sincerely,

Staci Koutsoukos
Doctoral Candidate, University of Oklahoma
Email: staci.kou@ou.edu

Appendix C

Signed Consent to Participate in Research

University of Oklahoma

Would you like to be involved in research at the University of Oklahoma?

My name is Staci Koutsoukos, and I am a doctoral candidate from the OU College of Education. I invite you to participate in my research entitled: The Impact of Book Delivery Continuity on Shared Reading: Low Socioeconomic Status (SES) Caregiver Experiences with the Dolly Parton Imagination Library Denver (ILD) Book-Gifting Program-Examining Caregiver Perspectives on Delivery, Interruption, and Continuation.

This research is being conducted over zoom. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a caregiver of a child ages 0 to 5 whose family experienced both the pause and the resumption of book deliveries from the Imagination Library Denver program. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this research.

Please read this document and contact me to ask any questions you may have BEFORE agreeing to participate in my research.

What is the purpose of this research? This research aims to learn how caregivers experienced the Imagination Library Denver book program before, during, and after a two-month pause in book deliveries. We want to understand how these changes affected family reading routines.

How many participants will be in this research? About 15 to 20 caregivers will take part in this research.

What will I be asked to do? If you agree to be in this research, you will take part in a one-time interview over Zoom. The interview will last about thirty to forty-five minutes. You will be asked questions about your experiences receiving monthly books, how the pause in deliveries affected your family, and what happened when the books started again. To protect privacy during an online interview, please join from a private location**,** use headphones when possible, and rename your display to your first name or initials. Screen sharing and chat/file transfer will be disabled for participants. With your permission, the interview will be Zoom video recorded. We request that your camera be on so that a video recording can be made. If you prefer not to be video recorded, we will not record and will take detailed notes instead; you may still participate and receive compensation. You may choose not to answer any question and can stop the interview at any time.

How long will this take? Your participation will take about 30 to 45 minutes in one Zoom interview.

What are the risks and benefits if I participate? This study has minimal risks. You may feel a little uncomfortable if questions about family reading routines bring up challenges or frustrations. You may skip any question or stop the interview at any time. There is also a small risk of loss of confidentiality, but we will protect your information by removing names from transcripts and keeping all data on secure OU servers. You may not benefit directly, but your input will help improve book programs and show how they can better support families.

Using an online platform such as Zoom introduces small but real privacy and security risks**.** While the University-licensed version of Zoom uses security controls, no internet communication can be guaranteed completely secure**.** There is a minimal risk of unauthorized access to the meeting or data transmitted over the internet. To reduce these risks, we will use a password-protected meeting**,** a waiting room**,** and lock the meeting after you join. You can further reduce risk by joining from a private space, using headphones, and limiting any identifying items in your background; you may also blur your background or use a neutral wall. You may decline video recording and still participate; in that case, we will rely on researcher notes.

Will I be compensated for participating? Yes, you will be compensated for your time and participation in this research. You will receive a $25 electronic gift card (Walmart or Amazon) for your time. The card will be emailed to you within 48 hours after your interview, even if you choose not to answer every question. Declining Zoom video recording does not affect your compensation.

Who will see my information? Your name and contact information will only be used to schedule your interview and send you the gift card. Zoom recordings will be transcribed, and your name and any identifying details will be removed. Transcripts will use a participant code instead of your name. Only the researcher and faculty advisor will have access to the data. Research reports may include direct quotes, but they will not include your name or identifying details. Zoom recordings will be deleted within 3 months after transcription. De-identified transcripts will be stored securely for 5 years, then destroyed. We will not store data on Zoom's cloud. The local Zoom video file will be saved to secure, OU-approved storage.

Do I have to participate? No. Participation is voluntary. If you decide not to participate, nothing will change about your access to Imagination Library services. If you do participate, you may skip questions or stop at any time without penalty.

Will my identity be anonymous or confidential? Your information will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear in reports. Quotes may be used, but your identity will not be revealed.

What will happen to my data in the future?
We will not share your data or use it in future research.

Zoom Video Recording of Research Activities
I consent to Zoom video recording. ___Yes ___ No
Will I be contacted again? No. This is a one-time interview, and you will not be contacted again for future research.

Who do I contact with questions, concerns, or complaints? If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research, contact: Staci Koutsoukos, staci.kou@ou.edu or Faculty Advisor: Dr. Hyunju Lee, hyunju@ou.edu, (405) 325-4202.
You can also contact the University of Oklahoma-Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than the researcher(s) or if you cannot reach the researcher(s).
You will be given a copy of this document for your records. By providing information to the researcher(s), I agree to participate in this research.

Participant Signature	Print Name	Date
Signature of Researcher Obtaining Consent	Print Name	Date

Appendix D

Data Collection Document: IRB

Purpose and Approach

This study looks at how caregivers with young children experienced the Dolly Parton Imagination Library (Imagination Library Denver) during a four-month pause in book deliveries and after the program resumed. I want to understand how the regular arrival of books, the gap, and the restart shaped families' reading routines. The project uses one-time, semi-structured interviews. This design lets caregivers reflect on what reading looked like before, during, and after the pause.

Participants

Participants will be adult caregivers (18 or older) living in Denver who had at least one child ages 0 to 5 enrolled in the Imagination Library Denver during the pause and resumption. I will use purposive sampling to recruit eligible caregivers and plan to interview fifteen to twenty caregivers.

Recruitment (Attached)

Recruitment will be done through Imagination Library Denver. Staff will email an invitation to eligible families. Caregivers who reply with interest will be screened to confirm they meet the criteria. Those who qualify will receive an electronic consent form and a link to schedule their interview.

Data Collection

All interviews will be virtual, held through Zoom. No in-person sites are required.

- **Length:** About 30 to 45 minutes.
- **Format:** Semi-structured interview with open-ended questions.
- **Start of session:** I will review consent, confirm permission to audio-record, and remind participants they can skip questions or stop at any time.
- **Transcription:** I will transcribe all interviews myself.

Compensation: Each participant will receive a $25 electronic gift card within 48 hours of completing their interview.

Interview Questions (Attached)

Data Management and Confidentiality

Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed by me. Names and identifying details will be removed, and each participant will be given a study ID. Contact information will be stored

separately from interview data in a password-protected file. Transcripts and coded data will be stored on OU OneDrive. Audio recordings will be deleted within three months of transcription, and transcripts will be retained for five years before being permanently deleted.

Risks and Benefits

The study involves minimal risk. Some people may feel uncomfortable sharing details about their routines, but they can skip any question or stop the interview at any time. There are no direct benefits, though participants may find it meaningful to reflect on their reading routines and contribute to improvements in the program.

Data Analysis

I will use thematic analysis. After transcription, I will code the interviews for key ideas and group these into categories and themes. The focus will be on how caregivers describe their experiences before, during, and after the pause.

Timeline

- Month 1: IRB approval, finalize materials, begin recruitment
- Months 2 and 3: Conduct and transcribe interviews
- Months 3 and 4: Analyze transcripts, develop themes
- Month 5: Write up findings

Appendix E

Study Document/Interview Guide (IRB-Approved)

The Impact of Book Delivery Continuity on Shared Reading

Introductions

- Can you tell me a little about your family and your child(ren) who receive books from the Imagination Library Denver? How old are your kids who receive books?
- How did you hear about the ILD?

Book Delivery Before the Pause

- What kinds of reading routines do you have at home?
- What was it like for your family to receive a new book in the mail each month?
- How did you or your child usually react when the book arrived?
- Can you describe how the arrival of books affected your reading routine at home (day of arrival and throughout the month)?
- Were there particular ways the books supported bonding, learning, or routines in your family?

During the Pause

- How did you find out that the ILD book deliveries would pause and books would no longer arrive?
- When the books stopped coming during the pause, what did you notice about your family's routines?
- How did your child respond to not receiving books during those months?
- Did you make any changes, like going to the library or buying books to adjust during that pause?
- Did you face barriers to visiting the library or obtaining books?
- Were there challenges or frustrations during that time? If so, can you share an example?

After the Resumption

- What was it like for your family when the books started arriving again in August?
- Did receiving books again change or restart any family reading routines?
- How did your child react to the books arriving again?
- Do you feel the interruption changed the way your family views or uses the program? If so, how?

Overall Reflections

- About how long has your child been in enrolled in ILD?

- How many books does your child have? How many are ILD books?
- What was the hardest part about the pause?
- What advice would you give to the program about how to better support families if a pause in delivery happens again?
- What do you think the biggest benefits of being part of the Imagination Library program are for your family?
- Where would you recommend that ILD recruit families? Where should reach-out efforts happen?
- Is there anything else about your family's experience with the program that you'd like to share?
- Is there anything that I didn't ask that you'd like to discuss?

Appendix F

Topical Codebook (Prior to Coding)

Code / Category
Access to Alternative Books (Library, Borrowing, Buying)
Barriers to Access to Alternative Book Sources (Time, Transportation, Cost)
Book Arrival Reactions (Child & Caregiver)
Book Ownership (Having Their Own Books)
Caregiver and Child Reactions to Book Delivery Resumption
Caregiver Emotions About Pause
Caregiver Motivation
Child Emotional Responses (Excitement, Confusion, Disappointment)
Family Bonding/Connection Through Reading
Family Reading Routines (When/How Reading Happens)
Impact of Delivery Pause on Reading Routine
Imagination Library as Reading Cue
Perceived Benefits of ILD Program

Final Codebook

Code / Category
Access: Alternative Book Sources-library visits, borrowing, thrift books
Barriers to Access-transportation, cost, time poverty, discomfort borrowing
Book Arrival Effects-increased reading, family event, excitement
Book Arrival Reactions (Caregiver)-gratitude, motivation, support
Book Arrival Reactions (Child)-joy, mailbox checking, pride
Book Ownership & Personalization-name on envelope, confidence
Caregiver Emotions During Pause-distress, frustration, uncertainty
Caregiver Confidence & Motivation-empowerment, engagement
Caregiver Recommendations-communication, resources, partnerships
Child Emotional Responses During Pause-sadness, confusion
Child Literacy Behaviors-vocabulary growth, pretend reading
Communication from ILD-lack of notice, desire for transparency
Community Word-of-Mouth-learning about ILD from friends/neighbors
Family Bonding Through Reading-closeness, routine
Family Reading Routines-bedtime, daily habits
Financial Relief-reduced burden of buying books
Impact of Pause-reduced reading, disruption of routine
Impact of Resumption-restored routine, excitement
ILD as Family Tradition-monthly ritual, cue for reading

Perceived Benefits of ILD-equity, bonding, readiness gains
Program Appreciation-gratitude, ‘lifeline’
Shared Reading-increased frequency, joy