

## Book Review

### **KSO Research (2015). Evaluation of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library for looked after children in Scotland. Dollywood Foundation UK**

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For some reason, the songstress, theme park owner and extraordinary wig wearer Dolly Parton is rarely mentioned in the same context as Sir Harry Burns, Scotland's former Chief Medical Officer. Unless that context happens to be my ideal dinner party guests – Seamus Heaney and Abraham Lincoln would also be invited in case you are wondering.

But from reading the [\*Evaluation of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library for Looked After Children in Scotland\*](#), I've realised that Ms Parton and Sir Harry would have more to bond about than just shared horror of my (lack of) culinary skills. Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) was founded in 1995 to provide pre-school children with age-appropriate books as:

*When I was growing up in the hills of East Tennessee, I knew my dreams would come true. I know there are children in your community with their own dreams... The seeds of these dreams are often found in books and the seeds you help plant in your community can grow across the world* (Parton, ND).

Sir Harry Burns also emphasised how vital it is to expose pre-school children to books when he said:

*I was probably the only chief medical officer on the planet who knew how many children in his country were being read bedtime stories. And we are educating their parents too, because we are telling them: 'If you read to your kids, good things will happen' (McKenna, 2015).*

Early years interventions are a key component in the Scottish Government's aim of improving outcomes and reducing inequalities to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up in. Therefore, it seems fitting that DPIL has been operating in Scotland since 2011. The scheme is funded by the Scottish Government and administered by the Scottish Book Trust and aims to send

monthly specially selected books to looked after children from the ages of zero to five years old.

At the time the evaluation was collated, 30 out of Scotland's 32 local authorities were taking part in DPIL and the other two local authorities were beginning to make their own preparations to run the scheme. This level of uptake is no mean feat in this time of stretched resources and huge demands on our public services. The evaluation's main purpose was to establish the effectiveness of the processes being used to implement and deliver the initiative. It used two main research methods: telephone interviews with all participating local authorities and a self-completion online survey with 63% of local authorities.

This is an impressive piece of work, especially since most of the research was completed by one member of staff. It highlights a number of issues that will be familiar to anyone working in the looked after children sector, including the impact of staff turnover, joint working education and social work services; and data protection and confidentiality surrounding sharing children's details.

It was really interesting to hear about some of the unintended consequences of DPIL, such as books being shared with siblings, and variations in how local authorities implement it, such as linking it with other early years schemes and adult learning initiatives. The report also highlighted that, in terms of implementation, 'the main challenges seem to be associated mostly with children who are looked after at home, rather than in any other type of care' (p. 8), which is something we struggle with throughout the sector.

For me, the single most powerful section of the report was 'Perceived Impacts', which included details of a letter from a kinship carer 'expressing how fantastic the books were and that they would not have been able to afford to purchase them otherwise' (p. 11). I would have loved to have seen the voices of children, parents and carers included more explicitly throughout the report – perhaps in style of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health's excellent [\*Evaluating Sistema Scotland – Initial Findings Report\*](#).

In terms of the scheme itself, it struck me that it may be a missed opportunity to restrict the books to only those children who are currently looked after and that huge administrative efforts must be required to keep the DPIL database correct. I'd like to see it expanded to include children who are formerly looked after or living in deprivation as I believe these children and families could really benefit from receiving them. Therefore, I took great notice of the section on 'Expansion of DPIL'.

Overall though, I'd recommend reading this report to find out more about DPIL's worthwhile work. If you are interested in the importance of reading for pleasure, I would also like to make a plug to check out our CELCIS 2014 conference

keynote presentation by Olympics opening ceremony writer, and possible Dream Dinner Party Guest, Frank Cottrell-Boyce who stated:

*All the energy came pouring out. That's what stories do. They stay in your brain and come out when you need them* (CELCIS website).

## About the author

Fiona is a Learning and Development Coordinator at CELCIS where she organises conferences and seminars for those working with looked after children, care leavers and their families. She helps with everything from sourcing venues and financial planning to marketing and liaising with speakers. Outside of work, Fiona is a keen gig goer, hill walker and total book worm.

## References

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