HOMESCHOOL LITERACY CHOICES: A CASE STUDY OF HOW PARENTS TEACH THEIR
CHILDREN WITH UNIQUE LEARNING NEEDS


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ABSTRACT

Abby Ampuja: Homeschool Literacy Choices: A Case Study of How Parents Teach Their
Children With Unique Learning Needs
(Under the direction of Jennifer A. Diliberto)

This qualitative case study was designed to explore the instructional methods, materials, and decision-making processes used to teach literacy by homeschool parents of children with unique learning needs. Participants were selected through purposive sampling from among a group of homeschoolers in the Research Triangle area of North Carolina. Information was collected via semi-structured interviews, surveys, and literacy observations.

The research questions were: What instructional methods and materials do homeschool parents of children with unique learning needs use to teach literacy? What sources of information do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to select these methods and materials? In what ways do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit confidence and competence?

The findings revealed that participants emphasized the importance of: (a) using authentic text to teach literacy, (b) "following the child" as a means of selecting appropriate methods and materials for literacy, (c) parents tapping into their own past experiences/education as well as the homeschool community, and (d) an inner knowing that was used to make decisions throughout the homeschool process. In addition, the homeschool parents in the present study were using a number of special education high-leverage practices (HLPs) and components of emergent curriculum to teach literacy to their children with unique learning needs. Practical applications and recommendations for future research were included.

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Finally, I dedicate this work to my family (both those connected to me by blood and by choice). Their unwavering support, faith, and belief in me have been both inspiring and humbling. This project has been a long, challenging journey – and without them, I could not have stayed the course. I am ever grateful for their continual reminders to be patient, persistent, and above all, resilient.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of homeschooling in the United States has increased significantly since the 1990s. In fact, it may be the most rapidly expanding type of education today, with a growth rate of 74% from 1999 to 2007 (Cook et al., 2013; Hurlbutt, 2011; Mazama, 2015; Sherfinsky, 2014) and, more recently, an annual growth rate of two to eight percent (Turner, 2016). Homeschooling is defined as "the practice of educating children and youth in a learning environment that is home-based and parent-led (or at least under the authority of parents rather than a state-run public school system or private school)" (Ray, 2004, p. 15). Collom and Mitchell (2005) expanded this definition, explaining that homeschool is "both a means of educating children according to parental standards and an alternative social movement embracing a unique set of cultural norms and values" (p. 274). In 1999, there were approximately 850,000 children being homeschooled in the U.S. By 2003, that number had risen to 1,096,000, and to over 1.5 million in 2007 (Hurlbutt, 2011). Currently, there are more than two million children currently being homeschooled across the U.S. (Mazama, 2015; Turner, 2016) and over 106,000 children in the state of North Carolina alone (Roulhac, 2016). Additionally, the percentage of learners with exceptionalities receiving homeschool instruction has also risen significantly during this time, with studies indicating that as many as one fifth of homeschool students have exceptional learning needs (e.g., Cook et al., 2013; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). Kirk et al. (2015) defined a learner with exceptionalities as one who "differs from the typical child in (a) mental

characteristics, (b) sensory abilities, (c) communication abilities, (d) behavior and emotional development, and/or (e) physical characteristics" (p. 4).

In spite of the tremendous increase in homeschooling, currently very little systematic research exists studying the phenomenon (Duvall et al., 2004; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Mazama, 2015). Of the limited number of studies, most have explored (a) the reasons parents choose to homeschool their children (e.g., Geary, 2011; Mazama & Lundy, 2013), (b) the academic outcomes of homeschool students (e.g., Barwegen et al., 2004; Cogan, 2010; Duvall et al., 2004), or (c) the performance of homeschooled students compared to that of traditional public school students (e.g., Duvall, 2011; Guterman & Neuman, 2018). While an understanding of these elements is important, it is also imperative to know *what* and *how* homeschool parents teach their children. With regard to literacy instruction, it is especially crucial when one considers (a) the increase in homeschool students with unique learning needs (Cook et al., 2013; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Templeton & Johnson, 2008); (b) that education is currently in an "age of accountability" (e.g., Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015; Elementary and Secondary Education Act [NCLB], 2002), with an emphasis on the use of "evidence-based practices" to ensure that students are making adequate academic growth; and (c) what we know about effective instructional practices for teaching students with unique learning needs (i.e., they often require explicit, systematic, instruction) (e.g., Williams & Pao, 2013).

The current investigation implemented a qualitative case study designed to explore the instructional methods, materials, and decision-making processes used to teach literacy by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs. For the purposes of the present study, "students with unique learning needs" were defined as those who (a) have been identified with an *exceptional learning need* (as defined above), and/or (b) have been identified as having

*developing literacy skills* (defined below). The current investigation adopted the definition of

*exceptional learning needs* from the seminal introductory special education textbook by Kirk et

al. (2015), as it is a textbook used in many courses at institutions of higher education across the

United States. For the purposes of the present study*, exceptional learning needs* included

students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), specific learning disability (SLD),

autism spectrum disorder (ASD) without intellectual disability (ID), and those who are

academically or intellectually gifted (AIG). Students with *developing literacy skills* were defined

as those who demonstrate documented difficulty in reading and/or writing based on performance

that is at least one grade level below current grade level expectations. Through the use of

surveys, semi-structured interviews, and observations, I investigated the instructional literacy

choices made by homeschool parents, the information and rationale used to make such choices,

and how homeschool parents exhibit confidence and competence with respect to teaching their

children with unique learning needs.

The first chapter includes a statement of the background and the problem that forms the

basis for the current investigation. Definitions of key terms used throughout the dissertation

follow the research questions that guided the investigation. A section including delimitations of

the study follows the definition of key terms. Joyner et al. (2012) defined delimitation as the

boundaries of a study, including why the findings may lack generalizability. The chapter

concludes with a summary of the problem and purpose driving the investigation.

**Background of the Study**

It is important to understand the current societal developments that influenced this study.

At present, the number of families choosing to homeschool their children is at an all-time high

and continuing to expand each year (Cook et al., 2013; Hurlbutt, 2011; Mazama, 2015;

Sherfinsky, 2014). Studies indicated that as many as 21% of these families have children with unique learning needs (e.g., Cook et al., 2013; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013), and that parents may be dissatisfied with the manner in which public schools have been educating their children and youth (e.g., Hurlbutt 2011; Neuman & Guterman, 2017; Templeton & Johnson, 2008). Moreover, a number of researchers reported that, overall, homeschooled students perform better on standardized tests of achievement than their traditional-school counterparts (e.g., Duvall et al., 2004; Templeton & Johnson, 2008). Furthermore, homeschoolers demonstrated higher levels of academic engagement than students educated traditional classroom settings (Duvall et al., 2004). Thus, it was important to examine the instructional methods and materials that homeschool parents use to help their children make such gains.

Overall current literacy levels in the United States are low. Approximately 63% of twelfth grade students in the United States are unable to read at a proficient level (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], c). Writing performance is even lower, with 73% of American students in twelfth grade unable to demonstrate writing proficiency (NAEP, 2011). As a subgroup, outcomes for students with learning disabilities in reading and writing are even lower than those described for all twelfth grade students (e.g., NAEP, 2011; Salahu-Din et al., 2008). These statistics highlight a clear need to improve literacy instruction so more students can demonstrate proficiency in reading and writing. Since research indicated that the majority of homeschool students return to the public school setting within six years (e.g., Isenberg, 2007), this is an issue that impacts them as well. The first step in improving literacy instruction is understanding the methods currently used to provide instruction. While researchers have a clear sense of how literacy is taught in the traditional school setting, there is little information about

how literacy is taught in the homeschool environment. The present study begins to address this gap in the research literature.

It is important to consider how weak literacy skills impact our nation, not only from a testing perspective, but also with regard to long-term endeavors. In an era of increased accountability (e.g., ESSA, 2015; NCLB, 2002), American students leave high school unprepared for the literacy demands needed during post-secondary endeavors related to both higher education and employment (Graham et al., 2013; National Commission on Writing, 2005). Although some studies have indicated that homeschool students are more likely to attend college than their public school counterparts (e.g., Ray, 2003), it is important to remember that correlation is not causation, and the majority of homeschool students return to the public school setting within six years (Isenberg, 2007). In order to ensure that *all* students are adequately prepared for the competitive and rigorous demands of both post-secondary education and employment, it is imperative that they have access to high quality instructional methods and materials.

Considering the fact that there is currently very little research examining the homeschool instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy by parents of students with unique learning needs, I chose to explore this phenomenon through the implementation of a qualitative case study.

**Researcher Orientation and Situation to Self**

At the time the research was conducted, I was a former general and special education teacher and a current education doctoral student focusing on special education. As a result, I was interested in understanding the instructional methods, materials, and decision-making processes used to teach literacy by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs. Although I

was familiar with the process of selecting curricula and instructional materials both as a teacher in the public school setting and as a private tutor, I felt that studying this phenomenon from the perspective of a homeschool parent might offer insight that has, up until now, been absent from the research literature. Specifically, I aimed to determine what homeschool parents may be doing that is unique or different from what is happening in traditional public school classrooms. Considering that homeschool students, as a whole, have been shown to perform better on standardized tests of academic achievement (e.g., Duvall et al., 2004; Ray, 1997; Templeton & Johnson, 2008), this could be very valuable information. (While I acknowledge that, as a qualitative study, the present investigation does not aim to make broad generalizations about the homeschool community, an inside perspective on how particular homeschool families approach literacy offers a window into what methods are being used and may serve as an impetus for future studies). As a former remedial reading specialist, I was particularly interested in focusing on the literacy methods and materials used for homeschool instruction. Additionally, I was interested in how individualization and differentiation are addressed in the homeschool setting, particularly for students with unique learning needs. Finally, as I recently opened a learning clinic which offers parent workshops and trainings, I was seeking to learn more about the confidence and competence of parents who have children with unique learning needs. This may be helpful information in designing future workshops and materials for the clinic to assist in addressing potential needs within homeschool communities.

**Statement of the Problem**

As stated above, the number of students being homeschooled in the U.S. has increased exponentially since the 1990s (e.g., Cook et al., 2103; Hurlbutt, 2011; Mazama, 2015; Ray, 2002; Sherfinsky, 2014). This included students with unique learning needs (e.g., Cook et al.,

2013; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). According to the 2007 National Household Education Surveys Program, 21% (or about one fifth) of parents who homeschool their children reported "other special needs" of their child as the reason for choosing to homeschool (Cook et al., 2013; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013).

In spite of the tremendous increase in homeschooling, there were a dearth of studies that explored the types of literacy instruction being used in homeschool settings. As Murphy (2012) explained, "While attention has been lavished on the motivations for homeschooling and the demographics of these families, considerably less work has been directed to 'seeing' inside homeschool" (Murphy, 2012, p. 106).

This gap in the research is of particular concern when considering the fact that (a) students with unique learning needs have been shown to benefit most from instruction that is explicit, systematic, multi-sensory, actively engaging, and highly structured (e.g., McLeskey et al., 2017; Williams & Pao, 2013); (b) overall literacy outcomes in the U.S. are currently at shockingly low levels (NAEP, 2011; NAEP, 2015); and (c) legislation in education has created what has been dubbed an "age of accountability" (e.g., ESSA, 2015; NCLB, 2002), where educators are required to use "evidence-based practices" and to show that their students are making adequate academic growth. This growth is essential to prepare students for the rigorous and competitive world of post-secondary education and employment (Berman, 2009; Graham et al.,2013).

In order to ensure that *all* students are receiving high-quality instruction using evidence-based practices, it is imperative that researchers investigate the instructional methods being used to teach literacy in the homeschool setting. This study will begin to explore that phenomenon.

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case study was (a) to explore the instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs, (b) to determine how instructional literacy decisions are made by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs, and (c) to determine how homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit confidence and competence. Participants were comprised of ten homeschool parents of children with unique learning needs (and their child(ren) who were educated in the home setting). Through the use of surveys, interviews, and observations, I investigated the instructional choices made by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs, the rationale and information used to make such choices, and potential indicators of parental confidence and competence. My role as the researcher in the study was that of participant observer. According to Bogdan and Taylor (1975), the research of a participant observer is "characterized by a period of intense social interaction between the researcher and the subjects" (p. 5). In the present study, I interviewed participants, asked them to complete a survey, and observed literacy lessons in their homeschool environments.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the investigation:

1.  What instructional methods and materials do homeschool parents of children with unique learning needs use to teach literacy?

2.  What sources of information do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to select these methods and materials?

3.  In what ways do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit confidence and competence?

**Significance of the Study**

An understanding of the significance of the present investigation can be gained by examining the importance of curriculum and of literacy as well as the dismal literacy outcomes in the US at the present time. The following sections will expand on these topics.

*Importance of Curriculum*

The importance of choosing a quality curriculum is a theme that surfaces in numerous education studies. For this reason, I chose to investigate the phenomenon. For the purposes of the present study, curriculum is defined as "the instructional methods and materials comprising a course of study" (Pannone, 2014, p. 11).

The impact of curricula on students as a whole cannot be underestimated. Schmoker (2011) argued that curriculum is the single most influential factor that affects intellectual development, learning, and college/career readiness. Similarly, Bernstein (1977) found that curriculum is one of the major message systems in the educational system. Similarly, as Brown et al. (2004) reported, curriculum choice has been correlated with student achievement. Equipped with quality curricula, students are more likely to be appropriately prepared for the challenges of post-secondary education and/or employment. Without quality curricula, these things are left to chance. Curricula is of particular importance for students with unique learning needs, who have been shown to benefit most from curriculum that is explicit, systematic, actively engaging, and highly structured (e.g., McLeskey et al., 2017; Williams & Pao, 2013).

*Importance of Literacy Skills*

A second factor associated with overall student success (both in school and in life) is that of strong literacy skills. For the purposes of the current study, literacy was defined as "the act of reading and writing" (Langer, 1991, p. 11). According to Business Roundtable (2009), a higher

level of literacy is required in today's modern workplace than in previous decades, and employers expect a high level of proficiency in both expressive and receptive communication skills of their employees. Competence in writing skills is often a prerequisite for both full-time postsecondary employment and education, and *not* having adequate writing competency can result in fewer opportunities for an individual (Graham et al., 2013). For example, the National Commission on Writing (2005) found that greater than 90% of white-collar and 80% of blue-collar jobs required writing (National Commission on Writing, 2005). Furthermore, in order to earn a sufficient wage to make a living, research has indicated that most individuals need to possess relatively high levels of literacy skills, and that these literacy levels were likely to continue to rise steadily over time (Berman, 2009). Thus, it is imperative that we employ effective literacy instruction in order to ensure positive student outcomes.

*Dismal Literacy Outcomes*

Currently, as a whole, it appears that American students are unprepared for the aforementioned literacy demands (Graham et al., 2013; National Commission on Writing, 2005). As mentioned above, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2011) results indicated that 73% of eighth and twelfth grade students did not meet goals for writing proficiency. This dismal writing performance has stayed at relatively stable levels for decades, with little sign of improvement (Aud et al., 2012; National Center for Educational Statistics). In 2012, the College Board reported that only 43% of students taking the SAT in the class of 2012 were prepared for college-level work. Additionally, NAEP (2015) reading results were at similarly low levels; 63% of twelfth grade students and 66% of eighth grade students scored below proficient levels. While NAEP results did not include homeschool students, since the

majority of homeschoolers return to public school settings within six years (Isenberg, 2007), at some point they will likely be a part of this assessment.

Of particular concern are students with unique learning needs. With respect to NAEP scores, 95% of students with disabilities were at or below the basic level for writing performance (Salahu-Din et al., 2008). In the area of reading, there were similarly concerning NAEP trends for students with disabilities. From 2002–2011, the mean NAEP fourth grade reading score for students with disabilities *decreased* from 188 to approximately 186, while that of students without disabilities *increased* from approximately 220 to 225 (National Center on Education Statistics, 2011). Compared to their typically-performing peers, students with disabilities were also less apt to employ writing skills to develop their learning across content areas, which in turn, could have a detrimental impact on academic performance (Graham, 2006; Graham & Perin, 2007). Students with disabilities were less likely to use metacognitive or "fix-up" strategies to aid with reading comprehension (Vaidya, 1999). Furthermore, they were more apt to use reactive approaches to learning, which are less efficient and effective than those that are proactive (Zimmerman, 2000). Swanson (1989) found that they often demonstrated inefficient learning strategies and difficulty managing the multiple demands of learning. Overall, students with unique learning needs have demonstrated poor outcomes on assessments of literacy and science with little improvement across time (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2009, 2011; Salahu-Din et al., 2008). While homeschool students, as a whole, fare better on standardized tests than their traditional school counterparts (e.g., Duvall et al., 2004; Templeton & Johnson, 2008), the majority of homeschoolers return to public school settings within six years (Isenberg, 2007). Thus, it is imperative that we investigate ways of reversing the current trend in reading and writing performance. Considering the fact that as grade level increases, academic

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demands increase (Swanson & Saenz, 2003), while overall student motivation and interest in reading and writing decrease (Harris et al., 2013; Wigfield et al., 2016), this is a problem that must be addressed.

Considering (a) the tremendous importance of curriculum and its relationship to literacy, (b) the increase in the number of children with unique learning needs who are homeschooled, and (c) what we know about effective instructional practices for teaching students with unique learning needs (e.g., McLeskey et al., 2017; Williams & Pao, 2013), it is imperative that researchers investigate the instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy to homeschoolers. The present study explored the above topics through a qualitative case study design. The purpose of the current study was (a) to explore the instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs, (b) to determine how instructional literacy decisions are made by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs, and (c) to determine how homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit confidence and competence. The following research questions guided the investigation:

1.  What instructional methods and materials do homeschool parents of children with unique learning needs use to teach literacy?

2.  What sources of information do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to select these methods and materials?

3.  In what ways do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit confidence and competence?

**Delimitations of the Present Study**

To help define the boundaries of the current investigation, several exclusionary and inclusionary delimitations were established. First, the present study was delimited by geographical restrictions within a one-hour radius of the university I attended. As mentioned above, this is a region in the southeastern United States with a population of approximately two million residents. The region houses three major research universities, four historically black colleges/universities (HBCUs), two private institutions of higher education (IHEs), two medium-sized cities, eight counties, numerous renowned hospitals, and numerous high-tech/research companies. The majority of residents in the community were White (59%), followed by Black (22%), Hispanic (11%), and Asian (5%). The median household income was approximately $63,000, which is about ten percent higher than that of the United States as a whole. In addition, participating students either (a) had one or more exceptional learning needs, or (b) were determined to be "developing literacy skills" based on parent report of performance that is at least one year below grade level expectations in reading and/or writing. I included only those parents who had been homeschooling their children for at least one year or more, as it was hypothesized that the initial year of homeschooling may be a period of trial and transition. Finally, the phenomenon of interest in the present study was limited to the instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy in the home setting, due to: (a) the tremendous importance of literacy skills (e.g., Business Roundtable, 2009; Graham et al., 2013), (b) the overall poor literacy outcomes in our nation (e.g., NAEP 2011; NAEP, 2015), and (c) my past experience with/interest in literacy instruction. Consequently, no other academic subjects were included.

**Definition of Key Terms**

The terms used in the study with definitions are presented in this section. The terms chosen as key terms are critical for comprehending the implementation procedures and results of the present investigation.

- **Curriculum:** "the instructional methods and materials comprising a course of study" (Pannone, 2014, p. 11)

- **Exceptional Learner/Learner with Exceptionalities**: a learner who differs from the typical child in (a) mental characteristics, (b) sensory abilities, (c) communication abilities, (d) behavior and emotional development, and/or (e) physical characteristics (Kirk et al., 2015). This includes students with gifts and talents.

- **Evidence-Based Practice (EBP)**: effective educational strategies supported by evidence and research (ESEA, 2002)

- **High-Leverage Practices in Special Education (HLP)**: teaching practices that can be used to leverage student learning across different content areas, grade levels, and student abilities and disabilities. There have been 22 HLPs identified that are grouped into four categories: collaboration, assessment, social-emotional-behavioral practices, and instruction (McLeskey et al., 2017).

- **Homeschool**: The practice of educating children and youth in a learning environment that is home-based and parent-led (or at least under the authority of parents rather than a state-run public school system or private school) (Ray, 2004, p. 15).

- **Homeschool Cooperative (Co-Op)**: "a group of homeschooling parents who join together to share teaching duties" (Topp, 2008, p. 1). Parents in a particular

homeschooling co-op share similar values and expect a co-op to meet certain needs of their children, such as socialization or academic enrichment (Muldowney, 2011).

- **Literacy**: the act of reading and writing (Langer, 1991)

- **Private School**: Privately-funded education, usually by attending families. Private schools can be selective with regard to gender and socio-economic status (due to the cost of tuition) (Muldowney, 2011).

- **Public School**: Government-funded education where all students are permitted to attend regardless of socio-economic status, creed, religion, gender, or race (Muldowney, 2011).

- **Students with Developing Literacy Skills**: students whose performance is at least one year below current grade level expectations in reading and/or writing (based on parent report)

- **Students with Unique Learning Needs**: those who: (a) have been identified with an *exceptional learning need*, and/or (b) have been identified as having *developing literacy skills*. Students with *exceptional learning needs* will be defined as those who "differ from the typical child in (a) mental characteristics, (b) sensory abilities, (c) communication abilities, (d) behavior and emotional development, and/or (e) physical characteristics" (Kirk et al., 2015, p. 4). For the purposes of the present study, this included students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), specific learning disability (SLD), high functioning autism spectrum disorder (HFA), as well as those who are academically or intellectually gifted (AIG). Students with *developing literacy skills* were defined as those whose performance was at least one year below grade level expectations in reading and/or writing (based on parent report).

**Summary**

Presently, there is an extremely limited amount of research that has been conducted in the area of homeschool literacy instruction used by parents who educate their children with unique learning needs in the home setting. Considering that there has been a steady and exponential increase in the number of students being homeschooled in the U.S., including those with unique learning needs (e.g., Cook et al., 2013; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013), this gap in the research literature is one that needed to be addressed. Thus, the purpose of the current study was: (a) to explore the instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs, (b) to determine how instructional literacy decisions are made by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs, and (c) to determine how homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit confidence and competence. The present investigation contributed to the limited research on students with unique learning needs who are homeschooled, providing information for both educators and parents alike. Results of this investigation also yielded implications for homeschool students with unique learning needs and for the parent-instructors of these students. In addition, the present study added to the scant research literature in the area of homeschool curriculum and instruction. The following research questions guided the investigation:

1. What instructional methods and materials do homeschool parents of children with unique learning needs use to teach literacy?

2. What sources of information do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to select these methods and materials?

3. In what ways do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit confidence and competence?

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## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In order to provide a basis for the current study, a thorough review of the literature was conducted on homeschool instruction. The purpose of this chapter is to develop the rationale for the current study through a review of both empirical and conceptual literature that has been published in the area of homeschool instruction with an emphasis on literacy. The following sections will review homeschool literature on the following topics: (a) history of homeschool, (b) reasons parents homeschool, (c) benefits and drawbacks of homeschool, (d) demographics of the homeschool population, and (e) homeschool instruction and support networks.

**Search Process**

The following section was developed through a review of the literature. The articles gathered for the study were located through a search using two electronic databases: ERIC and Education Full Text. Articles selected for initial analysis were (a) peer reviewed, (b) published between 2000 and 2018, (c) set in the United States, and (d) included one or more of the following key terms: homeschool, home education, homeschooling. The initial search yielded 58 articles, 46 of which were categorized as focused on topics related to the study. Reference lists from the initial set of articles resulted in another 22 articles that were reviewed for the present study.

As mentioned previously, the number of students being homeschooled in the United States has increased significantly over the last several decades (Cook et al., 2013; Duvall et al., 2004; Hurlbutt, 2011). The number has continued to expand rapidly each year; thus making

homeschool a much more common approach currently than it has been in years past (Hurlbutt, 2011; Roulhac, 2016). Considering the rapid expansion, it was important to consider the instructional decisions of the parents who provided home education to their children. Although the research on homeschool is quite limited, particularly with respect to curriculum and instruction (e.g., Gann & Carpenter, 2018), there was a rather small literature base that has been built around the phenomenon of home education.

**Current State of Homeschool Literature**

The homeschool population is difficult to study (Collom, 2005; Stevens, 2001). Thus, the research that existed on homeschool was quite limited and focused less on instruction and curriculum decisions (e.g., Duvall et al., 2004; Isenberg, 2007; Martin-Chang et al., 2011). Isenberg (2007) stated that "despite its size, scarce data on homeschooling have impaired our understanding of even the most basic questions" (Isenberg, 2007, p. 387). Murphy (2012) proposed that the scarcity of homeschool studies may be due to the customary practice of focusing research on public schools (Murphy, 2012; Thomas, 2016). Isenberg (2007) suggested that the lack of data may be due to the fact that (a) homeschool is a relatively new phenomenon, and (b) it is quite challenging to assess this population in an experimental group with a significant number of students. Additionally, it is possible that homeschool families might be cautious about participating in research based on what they have read in homeschool publications. For example, Kaseman and Kaseman (1991) provided a list of reasons homeschool families should not participate in research (Altieri, 2000). Similarly, Knowles (1991) offered recommendations for families who decide to participate in research studies. Due to the challenges in researching homeschool families, there were a number of notable gaps in the literature. One of these gaps was in the area of homeschool curriculum decisions (Gann &

Carpenter, 2018; Pannone, 2014). At the time of this research, very few studies existed that address this important topic (e.g., Anthony & Burroughs, 2012; Hanna, 2012; Van Galen, 1988). The present study began to address the gap by investigating the curricula used to teach literacy by homeschool families. To begin, it was essential to understand the history behind homeschooling.

**History of Homeschool**

Contrary to popular belief, homeschooling is not a new concept (Moore et al., 1984). In fact, it dates back to colonial times, when parents in the U.S. frequently chose to teach their children at home rather than in a public setting (Hill, 2010; Templeton & Johnson, 2008). By the mid-19th century a shift occurred, and most students in America were educated in public schools. This led to the development of mandates that required children to attend school in all 50 states by the turn of the century (Templeton & Johnson, 2008).

The tide shifted again in the 1960s, which was characterized as a period of radicalism and reform. At this time, homeschooling resurfaced as a popular option for those who were disillusioned with the state of public schools. Scholars such as Illich (1973) claimed that educational reforms were wasted on a school system that was failing. Instead, Illich recommended that children be educated at home and should participate in a movement known as "deschooling". Illich stated "I believe that the contemporary crisis of education demands that we review the very idea of publicly prescribed learning, rather than the methods used in its enforcement" (p. 65).

In the 1970s, Holt emerged as a major influence in the homeschool community. Often identified as the initiator of the contemporary homeschool movement (Gann & Carpenter, 2018; Lyman, 2000), and a former educator himself, Holt believed that "schools had failed and that the

only place for children to learn was at home, where they did not need to fear failure or being mocked" (Templeton & Johnson, 2008, p. 2). Holt's "unschooling" movement was favored by the radical left (Ortloff, 2006), and it called for a naturalistic approach to learning and development (Holt, 1981). Holt believed that children should have autonomy and that their education should be led by their own interests and desires. Parents, according to his view, should be facilitators and providers of learning tools for their children. According to Holt, "children want to learn about the world, are good at it, and can be trusted to do it with very little adult coercion and interference" (p. 67)

In the 1980s, the homeschool movement took an interesting turn by becoming popular with both conservative Christians and middle class America (Eder, 1993). At this time, education reformers Raymond and Dorothy Moore began promoting homeschooling from a religious, yet evidence-based, position. Both former educators and administrators, the Moores created the Hewitt Research Foundation, which produced a substantial quantity of empirical research that questioned traditional pedagogy (Moore & Moore, 1981). The Moores wrote a number of books which are still used by many homeschool families, including *Home-Spun Schools*, *Home-Grown Kids*, *Better Late than Early*, and *School Can Wait* (Ortloff, 2006).

By the 1990's homeschooling had gained a more diverse following (Romanowski, 2001). While most homeschoolers were still Christian (Ray, 1997), there were also more secular homeschool groups forming (Mayberry et al., 1995). During the 1990s, following the widespread legalization of this approach, homeschooling continued to grow at a rapid pace and to become a more common option for families across the U.S. (Isenberg, 2007).

At the time of this study, homeschoolers were an extremely diverse and heterogeneous group (Gann & Carpenter, 2018), attracting individuals from "all races, religions, socioeconomic

groups and political viewpoints" (Romanowski, 2006, p. 82). Just as the backgrounds of homeschooling families vary tremendously, so did the reasons for which these families chose to educate their children at home in the first place.

**Reasons Parents Homeschool**

Often, religious beliefs might be perceived to be the primary reason for which families choose to teach their children at home, and that "homeschool families are all conservative Christian families who homeschool in order to pass on Christian values to their children and protect them from the world" (Romanowski, 2006, p. 128). However, studies indicated that reality is quite different (e.g., Dahlquist et al., 2006; Wright, 2009). While one study found that as many as 64% of parents opted for homeschool due to religious reasons (NCES, 2012), there were a variety of other motivations that led to this decision, many of which related to unique learner needs (Ray, 1999; Romanowski, 2006). In contrast to the conservative image described above, the modern homeschool movement initiated in the late 1950s as a more *liberal* option for families to avoid what many felt to be an excessively rigid and conservative public school environment (Lines, 2003; Romanowski, 2006). Ray (1999) identified several other reasons that led parents to educate their children at home. The most common of these reasons was that the parents believed they could provide a better education than the schools could (Ray, 1999; Romanowski, 2006). Additionally, many parents sought to provide a curriculum and learning environment that suited their child's exceptional strengths, interests, and needs (Ray, 1999; Romanowski, 2006). According to Isenberg (2007), the three primary reasons that led parents to choose homeschool were "concern about environment of other schools, dissatisfaction with academic instruction at other schools, and to provide religious or moral instruction" (p. 399). Collom and Mitchell (2015) cited similar reasons as the major motivations for families deciding

to homeschool: (a) religious values, (b) dissatisfaction with the public schools, (c) academic and pedagogical concerns, and (d) family life" (p.277). The following section expands on some of the motivations behind parents' decision to educate their children in the home setting.

*Dissatisfaction with Traditional Public School*

A number of studies indicated that a sense of dissatisfaction with public school is a major factor in the decision to homeschool (e.g., Dahlquist et al., 2006; Hurlbutt, 2011; Templeton & Johnson, 2008). Specifically, parents felt that schools were either unwilling or unable to offer effective programming for their children (Geary, 2011; Hurlbutt, 2011). This could include anything from complaints about discipline procedures, to a school's insistence on using a particular instructional method (against parents' wishes), to a school's refusal to employ a particular approach (e.g. applied behavior analysis) (Hurlbutt, 2011). Parents cited low teacher expectations and lack of challenge for their children (Hurlbutt, 2011). Furthermore, there were concerns about the school environment (Duvall et al., 2004; Geary, 2011) and ineffective socialization in the schools (Dahlquist et al., 2006). Often, parents believed that they could offer a better education to their child than that offered by the public schools. As Hurlbutt (2011) explained, homeschool parents want "their children to be able to function in society as adults and be prepared for the real world," (Hurlbutt, 2011, p. 245). Mazama and Lunday (2013) reported that in the African-American homeschooling community, 23.2% of parents chose to educate their children at home because of a concern with the quality of education being provided in traditional schools. Additionally, parents expressed a dislike for the traditional Euro-centric curriculum that was being offered in the public school setting (Mazama & Lunday, 2013). Besides general dissatisfaction with public school, homeschool parents' strong beliefs often lead them to opt for educating their children at home.

*Ideologues vs. Pedagogues*

While there are a variety of reasons for which families opt to homeschool, Van Galen (1988) categorized them into two distinct groups: ideologues and pedagogues. While ideologues base decisions to home-school on religious and moral beliefs, pedagogues opt to teach at home for academic reasons (Romanowski, 2006; Van Galen, 1988). From the perspective of a pedagogue, the school's shortcomings have resulted in "children suffering both emotionally and academically" (Romanowski, 2006, p. 129). Thus, there is a realization that the public school is neither able, nor willing, to appropriately serve students with unique learning needs (Romanowski, 2006; Van Galen, 1988). These parents (i.e., pedagogues) are opposed to the manner in which schools categorize, track, and label students on the basis of what they feel to be very narrow and limited evaluations of children's abilities (Marchant & McDonald, 1994; Romanowski, 2006). Nemer (2012) expanded Van Galen's concepts to be more inclusive of current diverse and multidimensional homeschool population (Muldowney, 2011). Nemer reported that many families fit in between Van Galen's two classifications, and that often parents shifted from one category to another over time or combined aspects of one category with the other (Nemer, 2012). For this reason, Nemer updated Van Galen's terminology from "ideologues" to individuals with "ideological motivations" and "pedagogues" to those with "pedagogical motivations" (Muldowney, 2011; Nemer, 2012). Similar to Van Galen's (1988) model, the former category described parents who choose homeschool for moral or religious reasons (i.e., ideologues), while the latter are more focused on academic or curricular concerns (i.e., pedagogues) (Nemer, 2012). In both cases, parents' beliefs about education and how it is delivered could serve as the impetus to opt for homeschooling.

*Desire for Individualization*

Another general theme that emerged from the homeschool literature was that of parents'

desire for individualization to meet the unique learning needs of their child (e.g. Duvall et al.,

2004; Hurlbutt, 2011; Turner, 2016). This seemed to be an area in which many homeschool

parents seem to feel public schools are lacking (e.g., Hurlbutt, 2011; Neuman & Guterman,

2017). Specifically, in opting for homeschool, parents sought (a) a better student-teacher ratio

(e.g., Turner, 2016), (b) more individualized attention, and (c) an ability to set their own

priorities for what and how their child should learn (e.g., Hurlbutt, 2011; Peterson, 2009). Other

parents cited (a) pedagogical reasons (e.g., Geary, 2011; Guterman & Neuman, 2017), (b)

individualized academic instruction, and (c) special education or exceptional needs of their child

(e.g., Hurlbutt, 2011; Lange & Liu, 1999). In one study by Hurlbutt (2011), 3.6 % of

homeschooling parents surveyed shared that their major reason for choosing homeschooling was

due to their child's exceptional needs. Another 2.1% revealed that they opted for homeschool

due to their child's mental or physical health problems (Hurlbutt, 2011). Additionally, Thomas

(2016) found that 45% of parents surveyed in his study identified reasons for choosing

homeschool that were related to their child's unique learning style (Thomas, 2016). (The

percentage of students with exceptional learning needs in the general U.S. population is about

10%) (Kirk et al., 2015). The National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI) reported

that a common motivation for which parents choose to homeschool is the "desire to provide a

more customized curriculum and learning environment" (Turner, 2016, p. 42). Interestingly,

research suggested that parents who homeschool their children with exceptional needs have a

greater level of satisfaction with their educational experience than those who send their

exceptional children to public schools (Cheng et al., 2016; Duvall et al., 1997).

Neuman and Guterman (2017) found similar motivations of the homeschool parents they

interviewed. The primary objective the parents in this study had in choosing to homeschool their

children was one of individualization. This is, as opposed to trying to fit students into a

predetermined approach, it was crucial to enable them to develop and learn in a way that suited

them (Neuman & Guterman, 2017). With an understanding of the reasons parents opted to

homeschool, it was also important to understand the perceived benefits of this approach.

**Benefits of Homeschool**

Those who favor homeschool cited a host of benefits that support their decision. These

included student safety, a more rigorous curriculum, and higher academic performance than

public school could provide.

*Safety and Moral Reasons*

Concerns about bullying, peer pressure, school violence, and sexual harassment led many

parents to homeschool (e.g., Alamry & Karaali, 2016; Romanowski, 2006; Templeton &

Johnson, 2008). When homeschooling, the learning environment can be carefully planned,

executed, and insulated from such negative influences. Geary (2011) reported that 21% of

homeschool parents have concerns about the public school environment. Additionally, Alamry

and Karaali (2016) revealed that many parents who educated their children in the home setting

wanted to "protect them from negative influences of others in the school environment" (p. 6).

Mazama (2015) shared that African American homeschool parents, in particular, objected to the

"rhetoric of oppression" that is often presented in traditional schools (p. 38). These parents were

dissatisfied with both the content and the manner of what was being taught in schools. As an

alternative, they chose to educate their children at home using a narrative that was built around a

"rhetoric of resistance and victory" (p. 38). Regarding parent motivations for choosing

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homeschool, Ray (2002) reported that the "most frequently cited reason is concern for the development of their children's values and way of life. They desire to teach and transmit their philosophical, religious, or cultural values, traditions, and beliefs, and a particular worldview" (p. 42). Whether parent concerns revolved around physical, moral, or emotional safety, homeschool offers a way to protect their children from the negative influences of public schools.

*Academic Challenge*

Another benefit to home education was parents' ability to ensure the delivery of high quality, rigorous instruction (e.g., Alamry & Karaali, 2016; Altieri, 2000). According to Geary (2011), 17% of homeschool parents were not satisfied with the academic instruction provided by public schools. As discussed earlier, parents might doubt the capacity of the public school to provide challenging, appropriate curriculum that is well-matched to their children's needs (Duvall et al.,1997; Ray, 2009). This was of particular concern when parents had children with unique learning needs. Homeschooling enabled parents to hand-select the methods and materials to be used and to directly oversee how these were implemented. In addition, rather than being tethered to rigid standards or curricula that may not suit the child, homeschool parents were able to "reaffirm the value of learning through real-life problems, the development of critical thinking skills, and the use of online tools" (Alamry & Karaali, 2016, p. 3). Indeed, Ray (1999) found that 11.6 % of the parents in his study opted for homeschool because they felt traditional school did not challenge their children. For many parents, homeschool provided an opportunity to truly customize learning experiences to their children's capabilities.

*Higher Academic Performance*

Similar to the motivations described above, many parents chose homeschool because of the finding that students who are homeschooled perform better than their traditional school

counterparts on a variety of measures (e.g., Geary, 2011; Templeton & Johnson, 2008).

Researchers found that homeschooling resulted in positive educational outcomes that often exceeded the outcomes found in traditional school settings (e.g., Bolle et al., 2007; Hill, 2010; HSLDA, 1994; Ray, 2010). For example, Ray (2010) reported that homeschool students, as a whole, outperformed their public school counterparts by 15 to 30 percentage points on standardized achievement tests. Cogan (2010) highlighted the high achievement of homeschoolers on standardized assessments such as the ACT. Belfield (2005) found that homeschoolers demonstrated a significant advantage on the SAT when compared to their public school counterparts. Additionally, Burns (1999) found that students who were homeschooled had standardized achievement test scores in the 70th to 80th percentile range of the national median. Additionally, Burns reported that first through fourth grade homeschooled students were "on average one grade level above their age-level publicly and privately schooled peers, and this gap begins to widen even more at grade five" (Burns, 1999, p. 6). More recently, Snyder (2013) shared that homeschoolers performed significantly better than traditionally-educated students on the ACT, SAT, and overall college GPA (Snyder, 2013).

Murphy (2014) pointed out that the correlation is not a causation, and that due to the fact that there are neither comparative data nor controlled studies done in this area, definite conclusions cannot be made. As Reich (2005) explained, even when homeschoolers demonstrated strong performance, it was not clear whether homeschool itself was responsible for these results. With an understanding of the perceived benefits of homeschool, it was also important to examine some of the drawbacks of this approach.

**Drawbacks of Homeschool**

Those who were opposed to homeschool often cited a variety of reasons for their concerns. These included limited socialization opportunities for students, lack of teacher certification, and parents' inability to provide a balanced, comprehensive program of instruction. Each of these will be expanded upon in the following sections.

*Socialization*

Homeschool critics often cited concerns about socialization as a primary reason for objecting to this approach (Duvall et al., 2004; Romanowski, 2006; Templeton & Johnson, 2008). These critics claimed that homeschoolers' social development may be hindered due to their limited interactions with others (Duvall et al., 2004). In particular, the lack of occasions for homeschool students to interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds is frequently described (Templeton & Johnson, 2008). Reich (2002) elaborated on this, explaining that "customizing education may permit schooling to be tailored for each individual student, but total customization also threatens to insulate students from exposure to diverse ideas and people and thereby to shield them from the vibrancy of a pluralistic democracy" ( p. 2). Nevertheless, research indicated that homeschool students participated in social activities with the same frequency and belonged to the same number of organizations as their traditional school counterparts (Groover & Endsley, 1988; Ray, 1999). Ray (1997) reported that children who were educated at home participated in an average of 5.2 extrafamilial activities, with 98% of them involved in two or more (Ray, 1997).

*Concerns About Parents as Instructors*

A common argument of homeschool opponents was that homeschool parents would be unable to develop a well-rounded program of instruction, or that they would not have the proper

credentials and qualifications to deliver quality instruction to their children, particularly if those children have unique learning needs (e.g., Duvall et al, 2004; Templeton & Johnson, 2008). According to this stance, since all school educators were required to be "highly-qualified" (Elementary and Secondary Education Act 2001, Sect. 1119 (a)(1)), parents who homeschool their children should also have been required to prove that they were highly-qualified. This meant that they had both a college degree and appropriate certification in the subject(s) taught (Muldowney, 2011). In addition, since educators in schools have been expected to use evidence-based practices (EBPs) and high-leverage practices (HLPs), homeschool opponents argued that uncertified/untrained parents would not be able to deliver such instruction to their children

In reality, the research literature is mixed surrounding efficacy of homeschool parents' instruction. For example, Ray (2010) found that, across grade levels, homeschoolers who had two parents with a college degree outperformed those whose parents did not have a degree. Interestingly, Ray (2010) also found that children of parents who were homeschooled by a parent who was a certified educator demonstrated significantly *lower* achievement than those who were taught by a non-certified parent. While this was not a large effect size, it brings to question some of the assumptions that might exist about "parents needing to be trained teachers". Additionally, Duvall and colleagues (1997) found that, "to a large degree, non-certified parents engaged in the same teaching behaviors as certified special educators" (Duvall et al., 1997, p. 141).

*Variety in Levels of Regulation*

Opponents of homeschool often expressed concern about the regulation of homeschool education. There was a surprisingly huge variety in the levels of regulation of homeschools from state to state. As Murphy (2012) explained, after the battle of legalizing homeschool across all 50 states had been won, the controversy shifted to regulation (Murphy, 2012; Thomas, 2016).

Regulation laws typically addressed issues such as attendance, assessment, curriculum, qualifications of educators, and reporting (Thomas, 2016).

Basham and colleagues (2007) categorized states into three levels based on regulation: high regulation, moderate regulation, and low regulation. States with extremely low regulation (e.g., Alaska), had very few requirements. Parents in these states did not need to get permission to homeschool, to test their children in any way, or even to have teacher qualifications. Other states, like Pennsylvania (a high regulation state), required parents to keep extensive documentation, including portfolios of records and materials, a yearly written assessment of student progress by a professional, and certification of the student's evaluator (Thomas, 2016).

This lack of consistency in regulation might mean that some children have access to structured curriculum that is overseen by a licensed educator, while others may have neither. Given the fact that students with unique learning needs have been shown to most benefit from instruction that is explicit, structured, and has a high level of active student engagement (e.g., McLeskey, 2017; Williams & Pao, 2013), this variance in regulation levels might be of particular concern.

**Demographics of Homeschool**

Research indicated that the typical homeschool student (a) comes from a household that had two parents (one of whom usually stays at home), (b) had a middle to high income level, and (c) was White (Altieri, 2000; Masters, 1996; Templeton & Johnson, 2008). In addition, the mother was most often the parent who provided instruction in the homeschool model (Altieri, 2000). However, the homeschooling population is becoming increasingly diverse (Gann & Carpenter, 2018; Kunzman, 2009; Mazama, 2015; Welner, 2002;) and heterogeneous (Collom, 2005; Collom & Mitchell, 2005). Romanowski (2006) reported that homeschool attracts "a

demographic diversity that includes virtually all races, religions, socioeconomic groups and political viewpoints. There are conservatives who consider public education too liberal, liberals who consider it too conservative, and those who are driven by religious convictions" (Romanowski, 2006, p. 82). Similarly, Turner (2016) described the homeschool population as becoming more diverse, with approximately 32 percent of homeschoolers coming from Asian, African American, Hispanic, and other non-Caucasian backgrounds. Mazama (2015) reported that between 1999 and 2001, the number of African American children who were homeschooled tripled. Geary (2011) also described this shift toward greater diversity in homeschool families, stating that they "represent a demographically diverse group of people: from Christians to atheists, libertarians to liberals, low-income families to high-income families, blacks to whites, parents with PhDs to parents with no degree" (Geary, 2011, p. 1).

**Homeschool Instruction: What (and How) Do Homeschool Parents Teach?**

While a number of researchers have explored the reasons parents decide to educate their children at home ("the why"), very few studies have examined the curriculum ("the what") and instruction ("the how") that these families use (e.g., Gann & Carpenter, 2018; Thomas, 2016). Although there were not much data available about the curriculum and instruction of homeschool families, the few studies that have been conducted provided a bit of information on this phenomenon. It is important to note that there was a tremendous amount of variety in the approaches, methods, and materials used by homeschool families, and that beyond the unifying trait of 'not attending traditional public schools', there was a great degree of diversity (e.g., Davis, 2011; Gann & Carpenter, 2018; Guterman & Neuman, 2017). Much like the shift that has occurred in demographic composition, researchers have found that, since its inception, homeschool has become much more diverse with respect to the instructional methods and

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materials used (e.g., Hanna, 2012; Noel et al., 2015). In addition to the internet, homeschool families in the current review often utilized and combined a wide array of resources, including libraries, museums, tutors, clubs, and homeschool co-operatives (e.g., Hanna, 2012; Muldowney, 2011). Over time, many homeschool parents reported that their approaches and methods to homeschooling evolved and became more flexible as they gained comfort and a better understanding of their child's unique needs (Gann & Carpenter, 2008).

*Structured vs. Unstructured Homeschooling*

Two broad categories into which home education can be classified are *structured* and *unstructured* homeschooling. Taylor-Hough (2010) described *structured homeschooling* as the creation of a school in the home setting. It is typically very similar to the environment found in a traditional public school, with textbooks, lectures, tests, and workbooks (Allan & Jackson, 2010; Taylor-Hough, 2010). By contrast, *unstructured homeschooling* is not parent-led or planned. Instead, it used the child's interests and desires to guide the direction of the educational process (Alamry & Karaali, 2016; Neuman & Guterman, 2017). "Unschooling" and "deschooling" are two variations of unstructured homeschooling, and each will be expanded upon below. Although structured and unstructured approaches are on opposite ends of the spectrum, most homeschool families followed what Neuman and Guterman (2017) referred to as a "mix-and-match approach." According to this technique, parents combined components from various approaches that best suit the family's unique needs (Aurini & Davies, 2005).

*Use of Pre-packaged Curricula: Mixed Research Findings*

Research on the level of structure and the use of pre-packaged curricula in the homeschool setting was mixed. Some studies indicated a high use of pre-packaged curricula and structure among the homeschool population. For example, Martin-Chang et al. (2011) found that

most homeschooling parents reported that they "often" or "always" used premade curricula or structured lesson plans to educate their children. Similarly, Kleist-Tesch (1998) found that, while the teaching styles of homeschool parents varied along a continuum from unstructured to structured, most parents opted for a more structured approach. Medlin (1994) reported that 61% of homeschool parents utilized traditional instructional methods similar to those used in public schools, while only 19% identified their instructional approach as being more relaxed and creative.

However, several more recent studies indicated that homeschool parents may, in fact, prefer a less structured approach to teaching their children. For example, Thomas (2016) found that, in keeping with their desire for freedom and flexibility, many parents who homeschooled chose not to follow the recommendations of a curriculum package. In fact, Thomas (2016) found that only 1% of parents in his study reported creating their educational routines according to the suggestions of a packaged curriculum. Ray (2010) found that "homeschool families do not spend a great deal of money on education and tend not to subscribe to pre-packaged, full-service curriculum programs" (Ray, 2010). Similarly, Carpenter and Gann (2016) found that the homeschool parents interviewed in their study were more likely to act as a facilitator of learning activities than a provider of direct instruction for their children.

*Specific Methods*

Some of the common approaches used by homeschool families included Classical homeschooling, the Charlotte Mason method, Eclectic homeschooling, the Montessori method, School-at-Home, Unschooling, and the Waldorf Method (Allan & Jackson, 2010; Sherfinsky, 2014; Templeton & Johnson, 2008). As mentioned previously, many families will combine

aspects of various approaches in order to create a program of study that suited their child (Davis, 2011; Gann & Carpenter, 2018).

**Classical Homeschooling**. This approach was built on a system called the ancient Greek Trivium, which is comprised of logic, grammar, and rhetoric (Alamry & Karaali, 2016; Sherfinsky, 2014; Templeton & Johnson, 2008). Using this approach, students are taught via oral and written communication, as opposed to visual media and images. Learning is structured according to a staged progression (Allan & Jackson, 2010). At the elementary level, called the "Poll-Parrot Stage" (Sherfinsky, 2014), instruction concentrates on grammar. Children are taught to memorize, chant, and recite to build a foundation of basic concepts and facts (Alamry & Karaali, 2016; Templeton & Johnson, 2008). At the middle school level, called the "Pert Stage" (Sherfinsky, 2014), students are introduced to logic, where they are asked to engage in classification, inquiry, and to learn more complex ideas (Templeton & Johnson, 2008). Critical thinking is also emphasized at this stage (Alamry & Karaali, 2016). At the high school level, called the "Poetic Stage" (Sherfinsky, 2014), the focus shifts to building strong communication skills and fostering clear self-expression. Students at this level learn about apologetics (reasoned arguments), rhetoric and literature. As a whole, the Trivium was designed to move students along a continuum, from basic factual knowledge, to deeper understanding, to effective expression. The ultimate goal of classical homeschooling is for the student to become an autonomous, lifelong learner (Templeton & Johnson, 2008).

**The Charlotte Mason Method**. The Charlotte Mason method begins by instructing the students in "the three R's: reading, writing, and arithmetic" (Allan & Jackson, 2010, p. 57). Education revolves around creating real-world experiences for the homeschool learner (Alamry & Karaali, 2016), while engaging teacher and student in conversations and inquiries about their

experiences (Templeton & Johnson, 2008). Through such activities as hikes in nature and visits to museums, students learn to communicate about and document their experiences (Templeton & Johnson, 2008). Contrary to many other approaches, the Charlotte Mason method does not use textbooks, but rather focuses on authentic texts and high quality literature. Students are taught to keep journals, to engage in self-expression, and to be proactive toward their learning (Alamry & Karaali, 2016; Templeton & Johnson, 2008). Specific time is dedicated to creative thinking, play, and fostering strong ethics and work habits (Alamry & Karaali, 2016; Templeton & Johnson, 2008).

**Eclectic Homeschooling**. According to the Eclectic approach, a diverse array of resources and materials are encouraged, and flexibility/individual choice are key. Students might work in their homes or out in the community; instruction may be implemented in the traditional "school-at-home" fashion or built around student interests and real-world experiences (Hanna, 2012; Templeton & Johnson, 2008). The Eclectic approach appeared to be most common approach used by current homeschooling populations (Gann & Carpenter, 2018). As Davis (2011) explained, "Many parents opt for a blended approach and use a number of sources to develop their curriculum" (p. 29). Similarly, Bauman (2001) found that parents who homeschool employed a diverse array of curriculum options, with 78% using a public library, 77% using a homeschool publisher or individual specialist, 68% using retail bookstores, 60% using a non-homeschool book publisher, 50% using a homeschool organization, 37% using curriculum from a religious institution, 23% using curriculum from the local public school district, 41% using distance learning, 20% using media such as television, video, or radio, and 19% using eLearning. According to Templeton and Johnson (2008), "The Eclectic homeschool learner is flexible, with each day going in a new direction as new opportunities are explored" (p. 6).

**The Montessori Method**. Developed by Maria Montessori, the Montessori approach is a child-oriented method that involves close observation of children in relatively unrestricted environments (Lillard et al., 2017). The Montessori method is built around the idea that the environment can be purposefully designed to foster students' discovery of knowledge at an individualized rate. Autonomy and choice are emphasized in Montessori, and students are taught both daily life and social interaction skills (Templeton & Johnson, 2008). There are no grades or extrinsic rewards, and education is built around real-world experiences whenever possible (Lillard et al., 2017). Both the environment and the physical materials for Montessori instruction are carefully selected and designed by the educator. Teacher modeling and self-correcting materials allow students to gradually build upon and expand their current level of knowledge (Templeton & Johnson, 2008). By interweaving cognitive and social development, the Montessori method is designed to foster growth and independence of the whole child (Lillard et al., 2017).

**School-at-Home**. This approach uses a pre-packaged curriculum to spell out each and every component of instruction for the homeschool parent. Although this specificity might be appealing to the parent who is new to homeschooling, it has also been cited as being "overwhelming", "the most expensive" and "less motivating" than some of the other more flexible, less rigid approaches (Templeton & Johnson, 2008; Vender, 2004).

**Unschooling**. Originally developed by Holt (1981), the Unschooling approach (also referred to as natural, interest-led, and child-led learning) permits the greatest degree of freedom and flexibility for the homeschool family. This method places a high value on utilizing the student's natural curiosity and real-world experiences to foster learning (Holt, 1981; Templeton & Johnson, 2008). Using this approach, the family would not follow any predetermined schedule

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or curricula, but rather would allow the learner's interests to guide what is covered (English, 2015; Gann & Carpenter, 2018). Instead of tests, textbooks, timetables, and grades, there would be collaboration between parent and child to set goals for learning activities and to reflect upon how those are working (Templeton & Johnson, 2008). Contrary to many instructional approaches, the Unschooling method views the parent as a facilitator and resource provider rather than a leader or teacher (Ortloff, 2006).

　　　　**The Waldorf Method**. Based on a recognition of the need to educate the whole child (mind, body, and spirit), the Waldorf method fosters an appreciation and understanding of nature and the fine arts (Templeton & Johnson, 2008). Three equally important components of the learner are emphasized: (a) the head (thoughts), (b) the heart (feelings), and (c) the will (physical). From ages zero to seven years, learning with the Waldorf approach focuses on communication via movement and physical growth. From age seven through adolescence, the emotional aspect of the child is emphasized. After reaching adolescence, there is a focus on logical thought and building autonomy (Templeton & Johnson, 2008). One aspect of the Waldorf method that is quite different from other methods is that explicit reading instruction is not provided until a student reaches the second stage (7 years and up) (Templeton & Johnson, 2008).

**Homeschool Support Networks**

　　　　Since the earliest days of homeschool, parents have turned to one another for support (Mayberry et al., 1995). Currently, there is a wide array of formal and informal homeschooling organizations that exist for parent support (Ortloff, 2006). Researchers have found that many homeschool parents regularly made use of these homeschool networks to guide their decisions for home education (Bachman, 2011; Hanna, 2012). In order to create a more well-rounded educational experience for their children, many parents utilized what are known as homeschool

cooperatives (also called co-ops). A co-op is "a group of homeschooling parents who join together to share teaching duties" (Topp, 2008, p. 1). Parents in a particular homeschooling co-op share similar values and expect a co-op to meet certain needs of their children, such as socialization, extracurricular activities, or academic enrichment (Gann & Carpenter, 2018; Muldowney, 2011). In addition, the co-op can serve as a place for parents to convene for resources and support regarding things such as curriculum and instruction (Gann & Carpenter, 2018).

**Implications from Literature Review**

After reviewing the extant literature in the area of homeschooling, I was able to use the information to design the current study. The following section will explain how the literature review was used to guide the purpose, survey, interview, and sampling procedures of the present investigation.

*Current Investigation Purpose*

As the literature review demonstrated, in spite of the rapid and exponential growth of homeschooling over the past few decades (e.g., Cook et al., 2013; Mazama, 2015; Sherfinsky, 2014), there were very few studies that examined the instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy by homeschool families (e.g., Duvall et al., 2004; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Mazama, 2015). This was especially concerning when one considered: (a) the tremendous importance of curriculum in a student's overall educational experience (e.g., Brown et al., 2004; Schmoker, 2011); (b) the equally immense importance of strong literacy skills throughout the course of both school and life (e.g., Berman, 2009; Graham et al., 2013); and (c) the dismal literacy outcomes of American students as a whole (e.g., NAEP, 2011; NAEP, 2015), particularly those with unique learning needs (e.g., NCES, 2009, 2011; Salahu-Din et al., 2008).

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While homeschool students, as a whole, fared better on standardized tests than their traditional school counterparts (e.g., Duvall et al., 2004; Templeton & Johnson, 2008), the majority of homeschoolers would return to the public school setting within six years (Isenberg, 2007). Thus, the purpose of the present study (to explore the instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs) is well justified by the literature review.

*Survey Development for Current Investigation*

Based on the mixed research findings regarding parent level of education and need for teacher certification (e.g., Duvall et al., 1997; Ray, 2010), I chose to include questions addressing these topics on the` survey for the present study. In addition, to explore how the participants in the current study sample compared to the "increasingly diverse" population of homeschool families overall (e.g., Gann & Carpenter, 2018), the survey also included questions about demographics, such as gender and age (see Appendix A). The literature review also indicated mixed findings on both the degree of structure used by homeschool parents and the decision to closely follow a prescribed curriculum (e.g., Martin-Chang et al., 2011; Thomas, 2016). Therefore, it was appropriate to include multiple questions addressing these topics in the survey for the present study. Finally, research indicated that homeschool parents tend to rely on a number of resources, networks, and communities to make instructional decisions (e.g., Davis, 2011; Hanna, 2012). For this reason, I chose to inquire about these topics on the survey for the current investigation.

*Interview Development for Current Investigation*

In order to determine how the motivations of the parents in the present study compared to the findings of the parents described in the literature review (e.g., Dahlquist et al., 2006;

Romanowski, 2006; Wright, 2009), I developed interview questions asking about (a) the

perceived benefits of homeschool, and (b) the educational outcomes that were most important

when designing a homeschool program of study (see Appendix B). In addition, as the literature

seemed to indicate that parents' teaching style and methods tended to evolve over time as they

continued to homeschool (e.g., Gann & Carpenter, 2008), I specifically asked if and how this

might have occurred for the participants. Studies have suggested that parents who educate their

exceptional children at home may be more satisfied with the child's educational experience than

those who send their exceptional children to public schools (e.g., Cheng et al., 2016; Duvall et

al., 1997); thus, I designed a question asking about parent perception of the homeschool

experience as a whole. Finally, since research suggested that many homeschool parents rely on

homeschool co-ops or other networking groups for support (e.g., Davis, 2011; Hanna, 2012), I

included questions to inquire about these topics.

*Recruitment Procedures for Current Investigation*

Due to the fact that there have been some homeschool publications cautioning parents

against participating in research studies (e.g., Kaseman & Kaseman, 1991), I took the following

steps to encourage parent participation. First, I explained the benefits of the study to both

potential and selected participants. These were shared both in recruitment materials (flyers,

emails) and when talking to potential or selected participants in person or via telephone. Rather

than portraying the study as an effort on my part to evaluate, judge, or assess the capacities of

participating families (Kaseman & Kaseman, 1991), I explained that I was seeking to understand

the rich tapestry of curricular tools and resources that are utilized in the homeschool setting. I

briefly described the current gap in homeschool curriculum research and explained that this

study had the potential to close that gap so that educators and parents alike could learn what

homeschool families are doing, what works, and perhaps expand the current thinking around how we teach our children. In short, I communicated that many people have much to learn from a qualitative case study on homeschool instruction.

**Theoretical Framework**

In developing the current study, I drew on social cognitive theory (SCT), developed by Bandura (2017). This theory will be expanded upon in the following sections.

*Social Cognitive Theory*

Through the lens of Bandura's (2017) social cognitive theory (SCT), one may be better able to understand the instructional decisions made by parents who homeschool their children with unique learning needs. SCT synthesizes concepts from cognitive, behavioral, and emotional models of behavior change. A basic tenet of SCT is that people learn not only through their own experiences, but also by observing the actions of others and the results of those actions (Bandura, 1986). SCT is often described as the 'bridge' between behaviorism and cognitive approaches. Rather than focus solely on the influence of the environment (i.e., behaviorism) or cognition (i.e., constructivism), SCT seeks to incorporate both the environment and cognition to explain how people learn. According to SCT, learning takes place in a social context with a continual interaction occurring between the person, the environment, and behavior (Bandura, 2017). SCT considers the impact of past experiences as well as the ways that people acquire and maintain behavior. Two components of SCT are of particular relevance to the present study: reciprocal determinism and observational learning.

**Reciprocal Determinism**. According to SCT, learning and development occur via a dynamic, reciprocal interaction between person (individual with a set of learned experiences), environment (external social context), and behavior (responses to stimuli to achieve goals)

(Bandura, 2017). This triad is known as reciprocal determinism, and it is the central concept of SCT. From this perspective, the homeschool parents' process of selecting, implementing, and adapting literacy curriculum could be seen as being continuously impacted by their own cognition, observed behaviors, and the context in which they are implementing the instruction. For example, a parent might have developed their own beliefs about how literacy instruction should be conducted, and these ideas would shape the methods and materials selected. Additionally, the success with which the parent was able to implement instruction (the response he/she receives as lessons are being taught) would impact said instruction. Finally, the environment (access to supportive networks, resources, and materials) would also be a major contributing factor to the process of a parent's instructional approach. According to reciprocal determinism, a person can be both an agent for change and a responder to change. Thus, changes in the environment, the examples of role models, and reinforcements may impact an individual's behavior (Bandura, 1986). I anticipated that the participants in my study would act as both agents for change and responders to change, thus demonstrating evidence of reciprocal determinism.

**Observational Learning/Modeling.** Another major component of SCT is observational learning (modeling). Bandura believed that the individual acquired knowledge through witnessing and observing a behavior conducted by others, and then reproducing those actions. These models could be in the form of observable human behavior (watching/learning from others) or various types of media (books, television, videos, etc.) (Bussey, 2015). In the present study, it was believed that the homeschool parents would utilize a variety of types of models to select and adapt their curricular choices. For example, the parents' own past teachers and experiences with lessons and curricula might be used as models to develop the homeschool

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program of instruction. Homeschool cooperatives or other networking groups might also serve as models.

**Current Study: Homeschool Instructional Choices**

Although the literature base in the area of homeschool has been gradually building over time, there was still very little research that related to the instructional choices of homeschool families, in particular, those with unique learning needs. This was quite concerning when considered in light of the fact that homeschooling was rapidly and exponentially increasing in popularity, and that the number of students with unique learning needs being taught at home was rising as well. In addition, considering that many homeschool students return to the public school setting before graduating from high school (Ray, 1997, 2010), it is imperative that we ensure that they are receiving adequate instruction throughout their educational career. The present study explored the instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs, the rationale and information used to make such choices, and whether or how homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibited confidence and competence.

<center>**CHAPTER 3: METHOD**</center>

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the components of the chosen research design, including sampling, procedures, participants, setting, data collection, and data analysis techniques. Additionally, this chapter addresses the roles of the participants and the observer. Finally, the chapter concludes with a review of limitations of the study and a summary of the chapter.

**Design**

The present investigation used a qualitative case study to explore the instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs. Through the use of interviews, surveys, and observations, I investigated the instructional literacy choices made by homeschool parents, the rationale and information used to make such choices, and whether and how homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibited confidence and competence. This triangulation of data sources offered rich information for analysis and interpretation. According to Robson (1993), "triangulation in its various guises (for example using multiple methods or obtaining information relevant to a topic or issue from several informants), is an indispensable tool in real world inquiry" (p. 197).

**Rationale for Research Approach**

*Qualitative Method*

For the purpose of investigating the curriculum choices of homeschool families, I had a choice between two distinct research methods: quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative research

uses statistical data to draw conclusions and consists of empirical data that either supports or

rejects a hypothesis (Carlson, 2008). By contrast, qualitative research seeks to observe

individuals holistically in their natural context, as opposed to reducing them to a variable or

hypothesis (Muldowney, 2011). Kirk and Miller (1986) added that qualitative research

"fundamentally depends on watching people in their own territory" (p. 9). Since the primary

objective of the present study was to describe the instructional methods and materials used by

homeschool families, a qualitative approach was selected. Specifically, a case study method was

chosen.

**Case Study Method**. Creswell (1994) described the case study as an approach that

"explores a single entity or phenomenon ('the case') bounded by time and activity (a program,

event, process, institution, or social group) and collects detailed information by using a variety of

data collection procedures over a sustained period of time" (p. 12). Best and Kahn (1989)

defined the case study as a "way of organizing social data for the purpose of viewing social

reality. It examines a social unit as a whole" (p. 92). Using this approach, the researcher conducts

a detailed examination of a single subject, group, or phenomenon (Borg & Gall 1989). Flyvbjerg

(2011) further expanded on the definition of the case study by identifying four essential

components of this design: (a) focus on an individual unit, (b) intensive study, (c) focus on

developmental factors that evolve over time, and (d) focus on context (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

According to Flyvbjerg (2011), the case study approach is particularly valuable in that it

leads to the development of real-world knowledge that is context-bound. This, Flyvbjerg

asserted, is the type of knowledge that moves a learner from beginner to expert, from rule-bound

facts to genuine understanding. Flyvbjerg further added that "the most advanced form of

understanding is achieved when researchers place themselves within the context being studied" (p. 310).

Since the goal of the current study was to conduct an in-depth exploration of the curricular methods used by homeschool families in an authentic context across a sustained period of time, the case study approach was an appropriate choice. The purpose of this qualitative case study was (a) to explore the instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs, (b) to determine how instructional literacy decisions are made by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs, and (c) to determine how homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit confidence and competence.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were addressed:

1. What instructional methods and materials do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to teach literacy?

2. What sources of information do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to select these methods and materials?

3. In what ways do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit confidence and competence?

**Sampling**

Using purposive sampling, I recruited ten homeschool parents and their home-educated child(ren) with unique learning needs. Creswell (2009) explained purposive sampling as a method in which the researcher "selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the

study" (p.125). Because I was seeking a very particular type of sample (homeschool families with a child with unique learning needs), random sampling was not an efficient or appropriate choice.

Participants for the present study were families who homeschooled their children. Additionally, participating families were those with children who were either: (a) identified with an exceptional learning need (defined below), or (b) identified as having "developing literacy skills" (defined as performing at least one year below grade level expectations in reading and/or writing). Students with exceptional learning needs were defined as those who "differ from the typical child in (a) mental characteristics, (b) sensory abilities, (c) communication abilities, (d) behavior and emotional development, and/or (e) physical characteristics" (Kirk et al., 2015, p. 4). For the purposes of the present study, this included students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), specific learning disability (SLD), high functioning autism spectrum disorder (HFA), as well as those who were academically or intellectually gifted (AIG). I chose to include students with "developing literacy skills" because it was hypothesized that in the homeschool setting, there may be learners who had not formally been identified with an exceptionality, but who nonetheless demonstrated performance that was below the expected level for their grade equivalent.

In order to recruit participants, I shared study information (via email and flyers) with local area homeschool groups and local stores. Parents who contacted me to indicate interest were provided with further detail on the timeline, structure, and inclusion criteria for the study. Those parents who expressed interest after receiving initial information were invited to (a) complete a survey (see Appendix A), and (b) sign consent forms (see Appendix C) for permission to participate in the study. In order to be considered eligible for the study, students

needed to either (a) be identified as having one of the exceptional learning needs described above (ADHD, SLD, HFA, or AIG), or (b) demonstrated performance that was at least one year below grade level expectations in reading and/or writing.

Initially, I intended to use a screening assessment to ensure that students without an IEP and/or diagnosis of exceptionality did, indeed, fit into the category of "developing literacy skills." However, upon sharing this information with parents, I decided to drop the screening assessment requirement. Many parents explained that they had opted to homeschool expressly for the purpose of getting away from the testing and assessment procedures that they felt "had too narrow of a scope" and "pigeon-holed" their children. In order to respect parent preferences, I decided to rely on parent report.

**Participants**

Recruitment resulted in ten homeschool parent participants and their home educated child(ren) entering the study. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants. A table was developed with demographic information (see Appendix A and B) for both parent participants (age, gender, level of education, past and/or current degree(s), past and/or current career field(s), current instructional programs/methods used for reading and writing instruction), and student participants (age, gender, area of exceptionality).

**Setting**

The study took place in a highly populated greater metropolitan area in the southeastern United States (approximately two million residents). This region houses three major research universities, four historically black colleges/universities (HBCUs), two private institutions of higher education (IHEs), two medium-sized cities, and eight counties, numerous renowned hospitals and high-tech/research companies. The majority of residents in the community are

White (59%), followed by Black (22%), Hispanic (11%), and Asian (5%). The median

household income was approximately $63,000, which was about ten percent higher than that of

the United States as a whole.

The majority of the research activities took place in the homes of participants in the fall

of 2018. However, in the data collection phase, the setting sometimes extended to areas outside

of the home. For example, for the interviews, some of the participants chose to hold the

interview in their home, while others preferred to meet at a public place like a park or coffee

shop. Additionally, the location of the completion of the survey was left to the discretion of the

participant.

*State Home Education Law*

Since the study took place in North Carolina, it is important to provide the current state

regulations regarding homeschool instruction.

According to the North Carolina Department of Administration (NCDOA, 2018), these are as

follows:

> Parents/guardians residing in North Carolina and desiring, in lieu of conventional school
> attendance, to home school their school-age children must: (1) hold at least a high school
> diploma or its equivalent; (2) send to the North Carolina Division of Non-Public
> Education (DNPE) a Notice of Intent to Operate a Home School; (3) the notice must
> include the name and address of the school along with the name of the school's owner/
> chief administrator; (4) elect to operate under either Part 1 or Part 2 of Article 39 of the
> North Carolina General Statutes as a religious or as a non-religious school; (5) operate
> the school on a regular schedule, excluding reasonable holidays and vacations, during at
> least nine calendar months of the year; (6) maintain at the school disease immunization
> and annual attendance records for each student; (7) have a nationally standardized
> achievement test administered annually to each student. The test must involve the subject
> areas of English grammar, reading, spelling, and mathematics. Records of the test results
> must be retained at the home school for at least one year and made available to DNPE
> when requested. The first standardized test must be administered within one year of the
> home school start date, and then annually thereafter; (8) notify DNPE when the school is
> no longer in operation. (NCDOA, 2018)

**Procedures**

Before collecting any data, I obtained IRB approval from the university. This was done after completion of the proposal defense. Following IRB approval, I obtained participants using purposive sampling (described above). Once the participants provided informed consent, I collected data through three primary means: surveys, interviews, and observations. With the exception of the surveys, all of the data were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The data were then analyzed using the inductive coding approach described below.

**Researcher's Role**

I was a currently certified special education and general education teacher who had also taught remedial literacy. I had been an educator for twelve years in a variety of private and public school settings, using a variety of curricula and instructional approaches. I also ran a private tutoring business, through which I utilized a combination of instructional methods and materials. As a human instrument in this study, I sought to listen, observe, and build rapport and trust with participants. Additionally, as a former public school student and teacher, I recognized that I might have an inherent bias toward the public school model (and hence, against homeschooling), so during the data collection and analysis process it was imperative that I be as objective as possible, allowing participants' experiences to speak for themselves.

**Data Collection**

Denzin and Lincoln (1998) recommended that researchers who choose to follow a case study approach use more than one method of gathering data. Specifically, the authors stated that "an increasing number of researchers are using multimethod approaches to achieve broader and better results" (p. 73). For this reason, I chose to use three distinct methods of data gathering: (a) surveys, (b) semi-structured interviews, and (c) observations as a participant-observer. In

addition, I conducted member check interviews, both as a means of triangulation and strengthening dependability/trustworthiness of the study.

*Survey*

Participants completed a survey that provided background information about the parent/child and the instructional methods and materials that were used to homeschool their child(ren) (see Appendix A). The survey was completed independently by participants prior to taking part in the interview.

*Interviews*

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the instructional methods and materials being used, and the parents' confidence and competence in teaching their children with unique learning needs, I conducted semi-structured, individual interviews with all ten of the parent-participants. According to Perakyla and Ruusuvuori (2011), "interviews consist of accounts given to the researcher about the issues in which he or she is interested" (p. 529). (In the present study, the phenomena of interest were the instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy in the homeschool setting and the parents' confidence and competence in teaching their child(ren) with unique learning needs). Lichtman (2013) refers to the individual interview as being "a conversation with a purpose" (p. 189). Chase (2011) reported that the interview is the most popular form of narrative data in use. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) further elaborated on the value of the interview, explaining that "we live in a narrative, storytelling, interview society" (p. 416), and that the interview facilitates the generation of "useful information about lived experience and its meanings" (p. 416). Fontana and Frey (2005) identified three main types of interview forms: (a) structured, (b) unstructured, and (c) open-ended (Fontana & Frey, 2005). They added that each form can be adapted or modified to fit the unique needs of the situation

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(Fontana & Frey, 2005). For the current study, a semi-structured interview format was used. Following this format, I was able to engage in a more concentrated examination of a particular topic, with the aid of an interview guide (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Participants were interviewed using a set of open-ended questions, which are listed in Appendix B. At the same time that the interview was conducted, participants were asked a series of demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, education level, etc.) These are also provided in Appendix B.

Through a semi-structured interview, I sought to learn about the various models/social influences that impacted homeschool parents in selecting their literacy methods and materials (e.g., past teachers/experiences, homeschool co-ops, and networking groups). I also hoped to gain insight into parents' confidence and competence with regard to teaching their child(ren) with unique learning needs.

*Observations*

The third data gathering technique that was used was to observe homeschool literacy lessons. This allowed me not only to hear about the instructional methods and materials used in the homeschool setting, but to also see them in practice. Using this eyewitness approach enhanced and strengthened the research study. As Angrosino and Mays de Perez (2000) explained, "In social science research, as in legal cases, eyewitness testimony from trustworthy observers has been seen as a particularly convincing form of verification" (p. 674). Adler and Adler (1994) further described observation as being "the fundamental base of all research methods" in the behavioral and social sciences (p. 389). Angrosino and Rosenberg (2011) identified three broad types of observational methods: (a) descriptive observation, (b) focused observation, and (c) selective observation. For the current study, I conducted open descriptive observations, which were concentrated on literacy lessons. I observed a total of five literacy

sessions, each lasting 45 minutes. After the interviews were complete, five participants

volunteered to take part in these literacy observations. During the observations, I both observed

and informally asked questions about the activities being conducted. Field notes were taken as

advised by Creswell (1994): "Gather observational notes by conducting an observation as a

participant" (p. 149).

**Protection of Participants' Privacy**

In order to ensure that the study was conducted according to appropriate ethical

standards, several measures were taken. First, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review

Board (IRB) at the university to conduct the study. Participants signed an Informed Consent

Letter (Appendix C), which explained the purpose and procedures of the study and provided a

statement of confidentiality. In addition, steps were taken to protect and secure the information

that was collected from participants. All data collected by the researcher were to be kept

confidential, and pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. The data were stored

on a secure, password protected computer and in a locked, secure file cabinet in the office of the

researcher's advisor, thus protecting the confidentiality of participants.

**Data Analysis**

In the present study, I utilized a general inductive approach to analyze the data

(Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Merriam, 2009; Thomas, 2006). Bloomberg and Volpe (2016)

described induction as a process by which "the researcher starts with a large set of data and seeks

to progressively narrow them into smaller important groups of key data" (p. 189). As opposed to

deductive analysis, which uses prior theories, assumptions, or hypotheses to evaluate data,

inductive analysis "allows the theory to emerge from the data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12).

Following an inductive analysis approach, the researcher forms categories from the raw data into

a framework which will provide an overview of the raw data and communicate key themes (Thomas, 2006).

*Data Review*

I began the inductive data analysis process by becoming familiar with the data as a whole. This was accomplished through doing an in-depth review of all of the surveys, interview transcripts, and observation notes that had been collected. Any "big ideas" that emerged from the data during this process were recorded using 'memoing'. Initially termed by Strauss (1987), memoing can be described as making note of particular pieces of information that seem to be significant to the researcher and the phenomenon of interest. Strauss (1987) likened the process of memoing to the recording of an internal dialogue from within the researcher's mind.

*Category and Code Development*

Next, I created categories and subcategories (descriptors) that fit within each category. This resulted in the development of 68 categories and 50 sub-categories. As recommended by Bloomberg and Volpe (2016), care was taken to ensure that there was at least one category that corresponded with each research question. Each of the categories and sub-categories was assigned a code. According to Saldena (2013), a code is "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3). I then reviewed those codes and revised or combined them into categories as needed. This resulted in the development of 29 codes.

*Theme Development*

Following the development of codes, I began to look for themes that appeared throughout the data. A theme was defined by Saldana (2013) as "a phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what it means" (p. 13). In order to identify relevant themes, two

techniques were used: (a) looking for repetition (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), and cross-checking with the original conceptual framework (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The goal was to reduce the data into several broad concepts, or themes (with a maximum of five to seven concepts) (Lichtman, 2013). At the end of the coding process, I had 14 themes, which were grouped into 5 sets. These are discussed further in Chapter 4 and 5.

**Reliability/Dependability**

Several methods were utilized for increasing reliability and dependability of the study. First, the interviews were coded at least twice by me to ensure that significant findings were not missed and to verify interpretations. Secondly, there was triangulation of data by using multiple data sources (surveys, interviews, and observations) (Patton, 1999). This type of triangulation is referred to as method triangulation (Polit & Beck, 2012). In addition, member checking interviews were conducted. Also known as participant or respondent validation, member checking is a way of investigating the accuracy of results (Birt et al., 2016). Using this approach, participants were asked to review my findings in order to ensure that they were accurate and effectively captured the participant's experience (Doyle, 2007). Specifically, I provided each participant with a written transcript of their interview session and then asked whether there was anything they wished to confirm, question, refute, or explain in greater depth.

**Limitations**

As with any research study, the present dissertation has several limitations. First, the study had a limited sample size of ten homeschool families. Although the sample size was appropriate given the chosen method (Creswell, 2009), this number of participants limits the ability to generalize any findings to a broader population. However, what is gained through choosing a qualitative case study approach is a level of depth that cannot typically be gleaned

through studies with larger sample sizes. A second limitation was the fact that all of the participants resided within a one-hour radius of the university attended by the researcher. The university is located in the midst of a highly populated region in the middle of one of the southeastern United States. The area is surrounded by three major research universities, four historically black colleges/universities (HBCUs), two private institutions of higher education (IHEs), two medium-sized cities, and eight counties. It has a population of just over two million residents, making it the second largest metropolitan area in the state. This region offered a large number and variety of resources and networks for homeschool families to choose from, which may make it quite different from other regions in the country. Drawing participants exclusively from this geographic area also meant that the chosen sample did not include participants from other areas of the country that may have different viewpoints and experiences. Additionally, the fact that parents for the current study were self-selected by volunteering to participate may have resulted in a unique subset of parents that may be different from homeschool parents as a whole.

Another limitation comes from my acting as a participant-observer. Although every effort was made to report information exactly as participants reported and to describe observations as objectively as possible, there is always the potential for bias when using oneself as the instrument of data collection (Creswell, 2009). Similarly, interpretation bias is another potential limitation of the present study. Although I made a concerted effort to interpret the data in an objective and unbiased manner, my experiences as both an educator and student may have resulted in her inadvertently shifting the data and conclusions into my own personal frame of reference and schema (Mezirow, 1991). Member checking interviews were used to help minimize researcher bias. Participant reactivity might also be a potential limitation of the present study. Although I explained to participants that I simply wanted to view, hear, and learn about

"business as usual" in the participants' homeschool settings, there is the possibility that participants might have unknowingly altered their performance due to the fact that they were being observed. A final limitation came from the fact that the majority of data collection was based on self-report (surveys and interviews). Participants' responses were filtered through their own personal lens of experience, memory, and perception, which may not always be 100% objective. To counter this limitation, I added a third method of data collection which does not rely on participant self-report: the literacy lesson observation.

**Summary**

In summary, the present dissertation is a qualitative case study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) that explored the instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, surveys, and open descriptive observations, I attempted to gain an in-depth understanding of the instructional literacy choices made by homeschool parents, the rationale and information used to make such choices, and the parents' confidence and competence with regard to teaching their children with unique learning needs. Following data collection, an inductive approach was used to analyze the data, allowing me to compile a set of overall themes to summarize the study findings. To ensure reliability and dependability, triangulation and member checking interviews were conducted.

# CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was: (a) to explore the instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs, (b) to determine how instructional literacy decisions are made by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs, and (c) to determine how homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit confidence and competence. The researcher proposed that having a better understanding of this phenomenon would help educators, researchers, and other homeschool parents proceed with a more informed perspective when working with unique learning needs. This chapter presents the key findings obtained from: (a) ten (10) semi-structured interviews, (b) ten (10) surveys, and (c) five (5) open descriptive observations of homeschool literacy instruction. Following a brief review of the central research questions and details of the study's participants, the remaining text summarizes and analyzes findings from: (a) the participant survey, (b) participant interviews, and (c) participant observations. The chapter concludes with a summary of the major findings of the study.

## Research Questions

To help foster an understanding of how homeschool parents teach literacy to their children with unique learning needs, the following questions framed this study:

1. What instructional methods and materials do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to teach literacy?

2. What sources of information do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to select these methods and materials?

3. In what ways do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit confidence and competence?

## Participant Summary

Ten participants with at least one year of homeschooling experience participated in this study. Each participant resided within a one-hour radius of the university, and voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. After receiving an informed consent form (Appendix C) from each participant, the researcher met the participants individually at the location of their choosing. The literacy observations were held in the homes of five participants who volunteered to be observed. Surveys were completed online at the convenience of the participant.

## Participant Profiles

### Marla

A mother of four, Marla has been homeschooling her two youngest children for four years. She has a master's degree in business administration and is a member of two local homeschooling groups. Marla homeschools her two sons, one who has been diagnosed with ADHD and the other who has been diagnosed with dysgraphia. Both are 11 years old.

### Alison

A mother of two, Alison has been homeschooling her daughter for one year. Alison has a master's degree in library science and a bachelor's degree in math education. She is also a member of a homeschooling group for social activities and field trips. Alison's daughter (11 years old) has been diagnosed with a reading comprehension disability and generalized anxiety disorder.

### Tonia

A mother of two daughters, Tonia holds a bachelor's degree. She and her husband have

one home-educated college graduate and continue to homeschool their 15 year old. Tonia has

participated in three homeschooling groups for classes and/or co-teaching purposes. Tonia's

daughter who is currently homeschooled experienced a traumatic brain injury (TBI) as a child.

She has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), oppositional defiant disorder

(ODD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and apraxia.

*Lola*

A mother of four, Lola has been homeschooling for more than 10 years. She

homeschooled all four of her children, with the three oldest presently attending college (the

youngest is 10 years old). Lola has a master's degree and belongs to two local homeschooling

groups for social purposes only. Lola explained that one of her sons, while not formally

diagnosed with a learning disability, has "dyslexia-type problems."

*Kelly*

A mother of two children (ages 15 and 10), Kelly has been homeschooling her two

children for 10 years. She has a bachelor's degree and is a member of a local homeschool group

for field trip purposes only. Kelly's son has been diagnosed with auditory processing disorder

and ADHD.

*Dorothy*

A mother of three, Dorothy has been homeschooling the oldest of her children (a

daughter) for one year. Dorothy has two master's degrees (both in areas of education) and is

Orton-Gillingham trained. She uses homeschool groups as resources for unique materials and for

local classes. Dorothy's daughter (who is currently homeschooled) is 13 years old, and she has

been diagnosed with ADHD and an LD, dyslexia. She is considered to be "twice exceptional", as she has also been identified as AIG.

*Madeleine*

A mother of three, Madeleine has been homeschooling for three years. She is also a member of a local homeschool group for enrichment. Madeleine currently homeschools her daughter (14 years old), who has been diagnosed with ADHD (inattentive type).

*Jan*

Along with her husband, Leonard, Jan has been homeschooling their two children for over ten years. Leonard has a doctoral degree in educational psychology, and Jan has a master's degree in education. They belong to one local homeschooling group for social purposes only. Jan and Leonard have two children–one girl (12 years old) and one boy (9 years old). While neither child has been formally diagnosed with an exceptionality, their son has experienced significant challenges with both reading and writing

*Daniel*

A homeschooling father of one, Daniel has been homeschooling his daughter for four years. He has a master's degree in computer science and a bachelor's degree in mathematical sciences. Daniel is a member of a local homeschooling group and has taught classes in a variety of settings. Daniel's daughter, who is 10 years old, has been identified as AIG.

*Ruthie*

A self-proclaimed "unschooler", Ruthie has a bachelor's degree and is a member of a local homeschool groups for social and support reasons. While none of Ruthie's children have been formally diagnosed with an exceptionality, she is quick to point out that she has deliberately "chosen not to assess in this way" (as is common with unschoolers such as herself). She also

explains that one of her children learned to read significantly later than most, being "10 or so – definitely in the double digits" when he finally did learn to read.

**Key Findings**

Five major sets of findings emerged from this study (See Table 1):

1. A majority of the participants (80%) felt that immersion in reading authentic text was the best way to teach reading, with literacy being integrated both across curricular subjects and throughout the day or life. In addition, 80% of participants stated that they used a literacy curriculum.

2. All participants "followed the child" as a means of selecting instructional methods and materials for literacy. In addition, they drew upon their own past experiences and education, other homeschool parents or groups, and the internet.

3. The majority (80%) of participants cited that there was an inner knowing and trusting of their gut that they drew upon to make decisions throughout the homeschool process. Parents also mentioned that support from other parents, their own past experiences/skill sets created confidence.

4. All parents indicated that both they and their child(ren) were pleased and happy with the homeschool experience. In addition, all parents mentioned seeing success, progress, and transformation in their child as a result of deciding to homeschool.

5. The homeschool parents in the present study were using a number of special education high-leverage practices (HLPs) and components of emergent curriculum.

**Table 1**

*Delineation of Findings*

| RQ1: What instructional methods and materials do homeschool parents of children with unique learning needs use to teach literacy? | RQ2: What sources of information do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to select these methods and materials? | RQ3A: In what ways do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit confidence? | RQ3B: In what ways do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit competence? |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Finding 1: 80% of the participants felt that immersion in reading authentic text was the best way to teach reading, with literacy being integrated both across curricular subjects and throughout the day/life | Finding 2: All participants "followed the child" as a means of selecting instructional materials for literacy. In addition, they drew upon their own past experiences/education, other homeschool parents/groups, and the internet. | Finding 3: 80% of participants cited that there was an inner knowing or trusting of their gut in making homeschool decisions. Parents also mentioned that support from other parents, their own past experience/skill sets, created confidence. | Finding 4: All parents indicated that both they and their children were pleased/happy with the homeschool experience. In addition, all of the parents mentioned seeing success, progress, and/or transformation in their children. Competence was also seen through parents adapting to their children's unique needs. |

**Table 2**

*Demographic Information*

| Participant | Gender | Age (in yrs.) | Race/Ethnicity | Education | Other info |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Marla | Female | Over 50 | White | M.B.A. | Trained Mediator |
| Jan | Female | Over 50 | White | Master's | M.S. Ed. |
| Alison | Female | 31-35 | White | Master's | B.A. in Math Ed; MLS |
| Lola | Female | 46-50 | White | Master's | Lesbian; sons have two moms |
| Tonia | Female | Over 50 | White | Bachelor's | Special Education Coursework |
| Dorothy | Female | 41-45 | White | 2 Master's in Education | Orton-Gillingham Trained |
| Madeleine | Female | 41-45 | White | Bachelor's and all Master's coursework | B.A. in Geography GIS (Geographic Information Systems) Software |
| Kelly | Female | 46-50 | White | Bachelor's | Husband from Nigeria |
| Daniel | Male | Over 50 | Asian | Master's Some Ph.D. coursework | B.A., M.S.C., S.C.M. Parents from India |

**Summary and Analysis of Survey Results**

All 10 participants completed an online, 13-question survey that provided background information about the parent-child and the instructional methods and materials that were used to homeschool their child(ren) (see Appendix A, Table 2). The survey was completed independently (via an online survey link) by participants prior to taking part in the interview. Following is an overview of the findings from the online survey and tables summarizing the survey data (Table 3 and Table 4).

*Level of Structure*

When asked to describe the level of structure of their instructional approach to homeschooling, three participants identified their approach as being "very structured," while five out of 10 participants stated that their approach was "somewhat structured". Two participants fit into the structure category of "other".

**Table 3**

*Survey Data, Part 1*

| Structure | Follow Curriculum? | Type of Program | Groups | For How Long? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5-Somewhat structured | 6-Use curriculum as a starting point, but supplement | 5-Eclectic | 5-Local Homeschool Co-op | 5-More than 10 years |
| 3-Very structured | 2-Use curriculum as a reference | 2-Classical | 1-University model | 2-Four years or fewer |
| 2-Other | 2-No curriculum | 1-Montessori | 1-Local elementary school 1x/week | 3-Fewer than 3 years |
| | | 2-Unschool/Do not identify w/ approach | 5-Belong to co-ops for social use | |

**Table 4**

*Survey Data, Part 2*

| # of Children | # Hrs/Day | Age | Unique Learning Needs | Perceived Level of Confidence | Perceived Level of Competence |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4- Two | 4- Four to five hours | 4- Ten to eleven yrs. | 4- ADHD | 3- Very confident | 2- Very competent |
| 4- One | 3- Six to seven hours | 3- Twelve to thirteen yrs. | 3- LD | 2- Confident | 3- Competent |
| 1-Three | 2- Zero to 30 minutes | 3- Fourteen to fifteen yrs. | 2- Anxiety | 2- Somewhat confident | 2- Somewhat competent |
| 1-Four | 1-Varies | 2-Eight to nine yrs. | 2-AIG | 1-N/A | 1-N/A |
| | | | 1-Multiple disabilities | 2-No response | 2-No response |
| | | | 1-Auditory processing | | |
| | | | 1-Dyslexic-type problems | | |

**Table 5**

*Competence and Confidence Codes*

| Confidence Codes: | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| leap of faith | past experiences | know when to outsource | support creates confidence |
| inner knowing | | | |

| Competence Codes: | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| seeing success | progress/ transformation | child is less stressed/happy | magical moments |
| adapt to suit child | college/career success | child thanks parent | use of HLPs |
| | | | use of Emergent Curriculum Components |

*Use of Curriculum*

Regarding the degree of adherence to a structured curriculum, it was interesting that none of the participants indicated that they "followed a curriculum to a tee". Six of the 10 participants (the majority) stated that they "use a curriculum as a starting point, but supplemented with other materials", while two out of 10 participants used a structured curriculum "as a reference". Two participants reported that they did not use a structured curriculum at all.

*Type of Program*

When asked if they identified with a specific homeschool curriculum or approach, five of the 10 participants identified their homeschooling approach as "eclectic", two participants stated that they followed a "classical" approach, one identified as "Montessori", and two did not identify with a specific approach.

*Membership in Homeschool Groups or Co-ops*

Participants were asked if they belonged to a homeschool co-op or other homeschool networking group. In response to this question, five of the 10 participants stated that they belonged to a large local homeschool group (for both instructional and social purposes), one participant indicated that she sent her child to a university school model for part-time instruction, and five participants explained that they belonged to co-ops strictly for social (not academic) purposes.

*Length of Time Homeschooling*

When asked how long they had been homeschooling, five of the 10 participants indicated that they had been homeschooling for more than 10 years. Two participants stated that they had been homeschooling for four years or fewer, and three participants stated they had been homeschooling for fewer than three years.

*Number of Children Home-schooled*

When asked the question, "how many children do you homeschool?", four out of 10 participants indicated that they home-schooled two children, four participants stated that they home-schooled one child, one participant homeschooled three children, and one participant homeschooled four children.

*Number of Hours of Homeschooling Per Day*

In response to the question "how many hours per day do you devote to homeschool?", four participants stated that they spent "four to five hours" on homeschooling each day. Three participants spent "six to seven hours a day" on homeschool instruction, and one participant explained (after selecting a response of "other") that "the amount of time spent varies depending on subject". Interestingly, two participants indicated on the survey that they spent "0 to 30

minutes per day" on homeschool instruction. It should be noted that these were the two participants who considered themselves to be "unschoolers" (or at least very far toward that end on the spectrum of homeschool approaches). Thus, these parents considered all of the life experiences that take place throughout the day to be learning, and therefore part of homeschool. As Ruthie put it, "I could answer this question 'zero hours or all the time', depending on how you look at it." Lola expressed similar sentiments, stating that, "Life is learning. He learns stuff throughout the day in a variety of ways."

*Age/Grade of Child(ren)*

Four out of 10 participants stated that they had children who were 10-11 years old; three participants had children who were 12-13 years old, and three participants had children who were 14-15 years old. Two participants had children who were 8-9 years old.

*Unique Learning Needs*

Four out of 10 total participants stated that their children had been diagnosed with ADHD, three participants had children with an LD, two participants' children had anxiety diagnoses, and two participants had children who had been identified as AIG. In addition, each of the following categories had one parent who stated that their child had (a) multiple disabilities, (b) auditory processing disorder, (c) dyslexic-type problems, and (d) "not been assessed in this way".

*Parental Confidence and Competence*

Parents were asked to rate their level of perceived confidence and competence in teaching literacy to their children. On the measure of confidence, three participants indicated that they were "very confident", two parents described themselves as "confident", and two identified as "somewhat confident". One parent (Marla) responded "N/A" with the comment, "Not applicable,

because I did not do it nor did I try. I hired a professional because I needed time to work each day." Two parents did not respond to this question. On the measure of competence, two parents rated themselves as "very competent" in teaching literacy to their children, three participants identified "competent" as their response, and two parents indicated that they were "somewhat confident". Marla, again, indicated "N/A" to this question, with the same explanation given above. Two parents did not respond to this question (the same parents who did not respond to the confidence question above).

Several parents provided additional information with their ratings. Lola, for example explained:

My answer differs based on what you mean by "teaching literacy". I answered "Very Competent" and "Very Confident" based on my ability to provide the information needed for my children to gain these skills….Honestly, beyond helping my youngest learn to read, most of his literacy instruction is coming from outside sources.

Dorothy also provided background with her ratings, saying that:

I would give myself a 4 - Confident on both categories; but there is an important caveat: I am extremely confident in what my children need in terms of literacy. I've observed great teachers with little specific literacy knowledge to poor teachers with excellent training in specific literacy programs and all of the gradations in between. I know exactly what it takes to meet my children's specific needs.

Ruthie offered a "caveat" with her responses, as well. She explained:

This, of course, just like so many of the other answers I gave you in this study, will not align with conventional ways of looking at these things. For instance, my confidence in "teaching" literacy to my child is based largely in the knowledge that they do not need me to do anything (to teach them literacy) except read to them.

Kelly provided the following background information with her confidence and competence ratings:

Teaching literacy absolutely terrified me at first, but thankfully it worked better than anticipated. I am planning to consult with an actual certified teacher to develop a solid syllabus for my kids this year or purchase an online class. With a special needs child, it is overwhelming to figure out what to do and what is enough.

**Summary and Analysis of Interview Findings**

Each of the 10 participants in this study chose the location for their interview. Half of the participants chose to meet at a public location such as a park or coffee house, while the remaining participants opted to meet at their home. Each participant was asked the same 13 questions as outlined in Appendix B; however, when clarification was needed, additional follow-up prompts were included (these prompts are provided in bulleted below the main questions in Appendix B). The length of each interview varied from approximately 40 to 90 minutes, and every interview was audio-recorded and transcribed just as they were recorded. Once the transcription process was complete, member checking of the transcriptions was also employed to help ensure validity. This member checking was accomplished by emailing the participants the completed transcription and requesting them to examine the transcription for accuracy and completeness.

*Methods and Materials to Teach Literacy*

The following section discusses common methods and materials that study participants used to teach literacy to their children with unique learning needs. These were as follows: immersion in reading authentic text, integrating literacy across subjects or throughout the day or life, and use of a literacy curriculum.

**Immersion in Reading Authentic Text.** One consistent theme that emerged across participants with regard to literacy was that of immersion in reading authentic text. Whether these authentic texts were from the library, ordered online, or in the form of audiobooks, their importance to families was paramount. As Marla explained, "The number one thing with literacy is just to read, read, read!" Alison added, "We use real, authentic text. We pick classic literature that kind of coordinates with the history." Nearly every parent mentioned frequent trips to the

library to select these authentic texts. Jan stated, "They read a ton, and we are always at the library. They also listen to audiobooks in the car." Ruthie stated (with regard to early literacy immersion): "We would go to the library, and I would just take a laundry basket and fill it with books that they picked."

Parents often mentioned specific book titles, authors, and series. These included: *Caddie Woodlawn*, *Jane Eyre, Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stephen King, and books by Temple Grandin. Tonia went so far as to offer to create elective courses for her daughter around the Temple Grandin books they purchased following a meeting with the author. Daniel shared how he was able to find "kid-friendly" versions of the works of William Shakespeare for his daughter: "I found this great author who writes at a level that's great for fourth grade. So, *Romeo and Juliet*; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" Daniel went on to explain that he was even able to take his daughter to see a live theater Shakespeare performance after reading one of the books, which he and his daughter enjoyed immensely. Several parents mentioned graphic novels as a fun, engaging way of immersing their children in reading authentic text.

Allowing for choice or input from the child in selecting authentic text was a common practice of study participants. As Lola described, "He just picks out whatever he likes at the library." Ruthie expressed similar sentiments when she stated, "He has things he wants to read about. Like right now, he's really interested in investment, reading about and learning money management and investment." Madeleine carefully selected texts that she knew connected to her children's interests—for example, *Star Wars* materials for her son who had a love for this movie. Regarding the element of choice, Kelly explained, "I always offer my kids an option. I engage them to plan their day because they'll be more likely to want to do it if they had a choice of what we do first."

**Integration of Literacy Across Curricular Subjects and Throughout the Day/Life**.

Another common method used by many participants was to integrate literacy across contexts. This could be achieved in one or more of the following ways: (a) integrating literacy across curricular subjects, (b) integrating literacy throughout the day, and (c) integrating literacy skills throughout life. Several families mentioned using unit studies (or thematic units) as a means of integrating literacy across curricular subjects. As Marla explained, "In the unit study model, you get everything in one topic–it's great! So history has a math component, it has a writing component, it has a reading component." Tonia also used the unit study approach with both of her daughters, although added that with her second daughter she "loosened the reins" a bit. Alison described using IEW (Institute for Excellence in Writing) and Veritas as a means of integrating literacy across subjects: "So the IEW ties in with the Veritas, which also ties in with the literature. So they're all connected." Jan shared that her children attended a "Dungeons and Dragons" homeschool class, where they "build stories to make games. This incorporates math as well." Dorothy referred to the Dungeons and Dragons (DND) class as one of many courses in the homeschool community that her daughter attended. Madeleine, who used the Classical Conversations (CC) homeschool curriculum, stated that this particular model required a lot of searching on the part of the parent (which was difficult for her). As she described it: "Here's this sentence in history. Now you can go and study whatever you want about that sentence." (Eventually, Madeleine, opted to switch to a different curriculum, because this lack of structure was too challenging for her).

Many parents mentioned project-based learning as a way of integrating literacy skills. Jan explained that, "The kids can do a project on something that interests them yet incorporates the skills. Right now, they're doing YouTube projects where they make videos." Kelly also shared

that her son loved creating YouTube videos and scripts: "He was just pumping out script after script. I mean that's writing, so I just let him go with that!" Kelly added that she viewed this not only as a way of helping with her son's literacy skills, but also with social skills:

> As he keeps going, I see improvement every year...He understands socialization better…I just realized last week, he gets jokes now. I made a sarcastic comment and he got it. Three years ago, he wouldn't have. So I really believe that helped.

Ruthie revealed how her son's interest in comics led to opportunities for authentic, experiential learning across many different domains. She explained:

> It's amazing how you start to see how interconnected everything is. You know, like he was really into making comics. And he really wanted to make comics and sell them. And it just caused him to really want to read comics, and he wanted to understand like the history of it…And it's all connected to everything, you know….Like how much he had to sell them for to make a reasonable profit and pay for the paper and this and that. You know, all that stuff, it's all …it's… every interest contains all of those things.

Participants found many creative ways to integrate literacy throughout the day and across daily life. Tonia, for example, stated that over time she came to understand that learning and literacy can happen in many ways beyond the traditional "lesson structure." She explained this by saying, "The way I have learned to look at it is that everything is an educational experience." She talked about using trips to the grocery store as unique opportunities to practice literacy (and math) skills. Some of the other innovative ways Tonia found to incorporate literacy included setting up a Facebook account for her daughter (who wanted to read and create posts) and playing Words with Friends and Scrabble with her children. "It gave them a fierce competitiveness!" Tonia recalled.

Lola admitted that she "didn't know how to answer" the survey question (for this study) asking about the number of hours of daily literacy instruction because "It's actually all day!" This mirrored the holistic, integrated sentiment toward literacy and learning that Ruthie expressed:

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We just live our lives the way anybody does. We don't think of anything as separate from anything else. Learning is just part of our day. They pursue their interests, and we find that along the way, by pursuing their interests, they learn all the things they need to know...It's all interconnected.

Jan added that, in her view, "life is learning." Dorothy expressed that, "Learning is more about teachable moments every day." She recounted an example of her daughter's swim coach training her on the parts of speech during her swimming lessons.

Madeleine believed that being able to take field trips to reinforce instructional concepts was one of the biggest benefits of homeschooling. She mentioned going on field trips to places like battlefields (that her children were learning and reading about) so that they could "learn about topics in a hands-on way." Similarly, Kelly talked about the flexibility that homeschool gave her in teaching her son, affording her the opportunity to "keep exposing him to new things, going to museums, making everything fun."

**Use of Literacy Curriculum**. Most of the parents in the present study (eight out of ten) stated that they used a curriculum of some sort to teach literacy. While no one in the study "strictly adhered" to a literacy curriculum, many parents used curricula as a reference or a starting point, while also using supplemental materials.

**Writing curricula.** Alison, Madeleine, and Dorothy stated that they have used the IEW (Institute for Excellence in Writing) program, which Dorothy described as a curriculum that teaches "very systematic building blocks of language." Tonia and Alison both have both used the Abeka curriculum to teach grammar to their children. This is a Christian, packaged curriculum that was designed for use in homeschool communities. Tonia described using Abeka at the beginning of her homeschooling journey with her older daughter: "I bought a boxed curriculum; it was Abeka, the one that was supposed to be the top at the time."

Lola and Dorothy both used the Junior Analytical Grammar program to teach writing. As Lola explained, "It (Junior Analytical Grammar) comes with the teacher book and workbook. And it does diagramming sentences and everything. It really is just like learning all the parts of speech." Dorothy spoke of the popularity of the Junior Analytical Grammar curriculum, describing how it kept surfacing on homeschool listservs and in her own personal research: "I keep coming across the same one, Analytical Grammar. People love this one as a kind of 'in-the-middle' option." When asked to elaborate on the term 'in-the-middle', Dorothy explained that writing curricula tend to range from very structured (e.g., IEW) to less structured (e.g., Brave Writer), and that many parents prefer an option like Analytical Grammar, because it falls somewhere in between those two extremes.

Daniel cited a number of writing curricula that he had found to be effective for homeschooling his daughter. These included *Writing with Ease, Caesar's English,* and a grammar curriculum published by Royal Fireworks Press. Daniel described *Writing with Ease*, stating:

> It used a methodology of copying, so they give you like master text, like things from good works of literature. And they have you read it to the child and then they copy, they listen, remember what they write it down, and you correct them with spelling mistakes or whatever.

Daniel also spoke of a book he used, *Writing with Rosie*, saying:

> It's this child, this author... And so what she's done is it's a small book, and they're very short chapters. It's like the first chapter was about settings, and she gives suggestions, so she said, "a good story should have a setting, which is a place and a time."  And then she said, "think of something real in your world. Maybe a street, maybe a real school or a real building, a real store. And maybe make a couple of changes, and then, you know, look how I did". So she gave an example from one of her books. "And now it's your turn".

Kelly mentioned several writing programs that she tried with her children: *Write Shoppe, Click-N-Spell, Essentials in Writing*, and *Fix It! Grammar*. She described *Essentials in Writing*

as "a typical grammar book that had writing and grammar in it". One of Kelly's complaints

about this program was that it never returned to a skill or concept after it was taught, "so they

would completely forget what a noun is." Kelly later found (and preferred) *Fix It! Grammar*,

which she explained:

> uses the spiral method. Every week they have four sentences...Maybe they'll just do
> nouns and verbs one week, then the next week they add on adjectives, the next week they
> add on adverbs; another week they add prepositions, but they still have to remember what
> a noun is.

Kelly added:

> I think it (*Fix It! Grammar*) helped my son a lot with his word dyslexia, because he can
> see where the words have to be in a sentence, there's always an article before a noun, the
> verb comes after a noun because he used to put words in different places of the sentence.

As mentioned previously, Dorothy used the *Brave Writer* curriculum to teaching writing

to her daughter. Dorothy reflected that:

> All people love *Brave Writer*. It's about the spirit and the love of learning. You start
> writing, and then you start working on your mistakes. It's very much about the love of
> learning, love of writing. Like, "Become a writer, and then we'll fix your mistakes." And
> don't get bogged down in the nuts and bolts, because you just want to, you want to write.
> You start with a passion and start with the process of writing.

Dorothy found that this approach worked very well with her daughter, who found the "nuts and

bolts" of writing to be both frustrating and time-consuming. *Brave Writer* allowed her to focus

on the aspects of writing that brought her joy and excitement: ideas and passion.

Dorothy also recounted how she hired a tutor to teach her daughter using the Barton

curriculum. She stated that her daughter's "biggest challenge would be spelling. And she worked

with a Barton tutor for a year and a half on spelling, for the building blocks. Barton is an Orton-

Gillingham based program."

**Reading curricula.** To teach reading, Madeleine started her homeschool journey using

the Classical Conversations (CC) curriculum. As described previously, this is a Christian

curriculum with a focus on recitation, logical thinking, and persuasive rhetoric. One thing that initially drew Madeleine to this model was the community aspect around which it is designed. As she explained, "The Classical Conversations was appealing, because it had the co-op aspect; it seemed very organized and established, and it seemed like there would be some structure already in place to help me." Madeleine described annual practica that CC parents could attend (like mini-conferences), where there were opportunities to learn about classical education and to network with other homeschool parents.

Madeleine also discussed "Community Day", an important component of a CC homeschool education. According to Madeleine, the Community Day occurred one day per week, and it was a time when families were provided with the topics and lessons to be covered that week. Madeleine further explained that, "The other four days, you worked on them however you wanted to at home." While Madeleine did appreciate the flexibility of being able to find resources that suited her daughter's unique learning needs with CC, this lack of structure was also what eventually led to her to switch to another curriculum (Seton Homeschooling). She stated: "Eventually I decided I needed to give the day more structure, especially when I had multiple kids…with different curricula and different lessons." Alison expressed an interest in Classical homeschool instruction as well, saying: "I like classical instruction in general. I like things that are very classical mindset, I guess."

As described above, Seton Homeschooling was another literacy curriculum referenced by participants. Madeleine opted to switch from CC to Seton because both she and her daughter needed more structure than CC was able to provide. As Madeleine explained, "With Seton, it came with more organization and more structure, which I eventually decided I needed …..in order to be able to help her." Madeleine elaborated further, stating that, "Seton is more like a

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traditional, conventional classroom, whereas CC seems to present the information kind of differently."

Daniel discussed the curricula he used to teach reading, describing his experience with Phoenix as follows: "It was so cool to teach her how to read." He added that this was something he had never before (or since) done, and that it was an amazing experience. Daniel also shared that in addition to Phoenix, they used a reading curriculum called Oak Meadow, "a very common one" by Susan Weisbower. Daniel added that he and his daughter were currently using a program called Caesar's English.

Tonia shared that she had used several curricula to teach reading over the years. These included Snodgrass, Bob Jones, and Hewitt Homeschooling. She used Hewitt Homeschooling with her oldest daughter, explaining that what she liked about it that it:

> gave the regular material …. based on the average child. And then it also told you how to bring it down or take it up, depending on their level all the way to, you know, being an A.P. or honors class to …. down to the very basic learner.

She went on to add that she and another homeschool mom were co-teaching together this year, and the other mom chose the Snodgrass curriculum for them to use. Tonia stated, "So I'm okay with it. I'm going with it...It's a history, Bible, and literature book all-in-one. So the, the literature follows the, the history curriculum. The timeline, and that's…. so that's what we've been doing is following that timeline."

Madeleine purchased a program called *Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons*. Essentially, this program is an abbreviated version of Reading Mastery I and II, which follow a direct-instruction approach to teach reading. *Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons* uses the same orthography and sequence of introduction for letter-sound correspondences as Reading Mastery I and II (National Institute for Direct Instruction, 2015). Madeleine learned about this

book from other homeschool parents, and she stated that, "It was wonderful. It worked extremely well for him."

Kelly had success with several reading curricula, including *Explode the Code, Reading Straight*, *Click-N-Read,* and the *Bob Books*. She described her reading journey with her daughter as beginning with *Explode the Code* ("That seemed to have worked well"), and later switching to *Bob Books* when her daughter appeared to have "phased out" of *Explode the Code* "after one or two years." Kelly added that she learned about the *Bob Books* on Amazon reviews, and that while they are "so simple", the kids "just love them", and they were "highly successful" for her children. She spoke briefly of *Click-N-Read*, stating:

> That's been a great find. And that saved me for Gerard for phonics. It taught him phonics. He did not want to learn it from me at all. I was perfectionism or whatever, but, um, once he could learn it on his own on the computer, it's supposed to teach the kids, taken from kindergarten to third grade reading level in, like, 15 minutes a day roughly. And he's a perfect speller.

Kelly also discussed how the Click-N-Read program helped her daughter: "I noticed that the more she does this Click-N-Read, she's learning like "ch" sound, "sh" sound. She'll spell it better. And then the spelling clicks for her." Kelly shared that she discovered the *Reading Straight* program (by Scott Pearson) when she signed up for "Free Virtual Schools" (an online homeschooling program), but then "chickened out" and decided not to pursue online homeschooling. "People didn't have good reviews about the program," she explained. However, she ordered all of the materials recommended for virtual homeschooling, and the *Reading Straight* program was part of those.

While most parents in the study used a literacy curriculum of some kind, two of the participants did not use any literacy curricula. Ruthie, for example, deliberately chose this route when she opted to "unschool" her children. She stated:

A lot of unschooling is about …. especially with older kids, is about, them growing up knowing how to pursue things and knowing how to find things out and how to learn things, um, and not necessarily being spoon-fed information.

Ruthie added that, "We never use any textbooks or secondary sources or anything like that. I don't choose any materials for them." Ruthie explained that her decision *not* to select curriculum for literacy (or any other subject, for that matter) was built on very careful, deliberate observations and understandings of her children:

I came to see it as my job mainly to kind of get ever more out of the way of the natural learning process, to like, back off, because I found that anything I suggested or tried to get him to do or anything like that, like it just …. he recoiled from it. It made him not want to do it. Like I might as well just have been crossing …. making a list of …. and crossing off things that he was ever going to be interested in, you know. And he really had his own internal agenda, and that's what he wanted to do.

Similarly, Jan expressed, "I've given a lot of thought to how kids learn–how it just happens naturally because they want to explore the world and participate in community." Jan added that, "We don't really work with concepts or assessment. It's just learning. I mean, we don't assess people as adults. Learning just happens. For the most part, I just tried to let them learn about things they're interested in."

*Sources of Information Used to Select Materials*

Participants described a variety of sources of information as being useful as they selected appropriate literacy materials for their children. These included "following the child", the parents' own past experiences and education, and talking with other homeschool parents.

**Follow the Child.** A theme that surfaced repeatedly across participants was that of "following the child". This was especially true as parents tried to find methods and materials that best suited their children. Participants shared many ways that they tailored literacy instruction to fit their children's unique learning needs. They also spoke about using their children's interests and desires as a guide.

**Tailor Literacy Program to Suit Child's Unique Learning Needs**. Tonia explained,

"With Riley, I have to very much tailor her work to her abilities. And then as far elective

courses, I choose those based on what she would like to do." Dorothy describes how, over time,

she learned to follow (rather than fight) her daughter's learning profile. Originally, Dorothy

resisted the idea of allowing her daughter to use audiobooks (rather than hard copy text) for

literacy tasks. After meeting with a cognitive learning specialist, she shared what she was told:

> She said, "Stop making it conditional. You're pinning her strength down and making it
> conditional on a weakness. And you should be doing the opposite. You should be using
> her strengths to leverage her weakness. Instead you're trapping a strength in a weakness."

Dorothy also reflected on how, to be an effective homeschool parent, she feels that you need to

"be prepared to dump" anything that does not work for your child. She added, "That's the

biggest thing I learned, is to be willing and able to walk away from anything and everything as

soon as possible, before you create problems."

Kelly admitted that she had to completely change her approach to homeschooling when

she started teaching her son:

> So with him, I kind of had to let him lead me in the sense…you know and be very
> flexible. I had to really let go of what society expects you need to teach in order to reach
> him...With him it's just been so different.

Kelly described using a variety of 'non-traditional' methods and tools to help her son. For

example, she discovered that using the Wii (video game) helped her son to learn his letters. Kelly

recounts this experience, saying, "When he was about five, he got his first videogame...And that

was the best way for him to learn. That's where he learned letters."

Kelly also used her son's interest in road signs to help him learn to write his letters. She

recalls, "And then he became obsessed with road signs. And I saw him drawing all these road

signs. I'm like if you can draw these road signs, you can draw letters. So he learned his letters,

literally in 48 hours."

When he was older, Kelly explained, her son created YouTube scripts as a way to engage

in both literacy and communication/social skills. She stated:

> And on his own, he became interested in YouTube. He started writing scripts... And I just let him …. I mean he was just pumping out script after script. I mean that's writing, so I just let him go with that. He was doing it on his own. He was inspired and then he started filming videos on YouTube. And I see progress in his understanding.

Kelly also discovered that completing assignments alongside her son was helpful. She

recounts:

> What I found with my son was that if I did the work with him, he was motivated. It was like he had a peer. You know, we're racing….We're working together. Seeing who can do it first or, you know, who got it...and I make mistakes all the time…so that would make him feel confident.

Alison shared that, for her, the best part of homeschooling was being able to devote as

much time as her daughter needed to learn each concept. She explained that, while public

schools often have to put a limit on the amount of time that can be spent on literacy, at home, she

can spend as much time as it takes to reach mastery. Alison expanded on this, saying:

> And then comes her literature, which is the most tedious part of her day, it usually takes an hour and a half. It takes so much time. So I mean, an hour and a half at least, sometimes two hours. Whereas, in her literature class in school, she had grammar, writing and literature in a block of an hour. Forty-five minutes to an hour. So for us, now we're able to spend more time on it because she needs it.

Alison went on to explain that she was also able to stop and discuss text with her

daughter in a way that the public school teachers simply did not have the time to do. She

describes this, saying:

> So our literacy instruction was different than our, you know, when she had public school, because public school, for example, teachers would read out, you know, read the literacy to the children. But then there's not a lot of stopping and talking about what's going on in

each paragraph because the teachers don't have a lot of time for that. So with my daughter, after each paragraph or after each page, we'll re-tell the story together.

Daniel described a variety of ways that he "followed the child" in selecting literacy methods and materials for his daughter. One of these was designing unique curricular materials expressly built around his daughter's needs and interests. Another was signing her up for classes that were on her instructional level; she qualified as being academically gifted, so Daniel enrolled her in a variety of programs for gifted learners, including a summer camp through Johns Hopkins University. Finally, Daniel was able to structure his schedule and activities around his daughter's energy levels and motivation. He explained that when he could see that her interest and energy were waning, he would suggest that they take a break and return to the task later. He also deliberately designed their daily schedule to suit their personalities and sleep preferences. They would get up in the late morning, work on academic lessons and activities for a couple of hours, then spend the afternoon going to classes and group activities. Later, they would often return to academic lessons in the evening, "sometimes going as late as midnight" if their interest continued.

**Use of Child's Interests and Choice to Guide Literacy**. Ruthie shared some of the ways that she "followed her children" along the homeschool journey. These included enrolling her children in classes that interested them in the homeschool community. She recounted an example, stating, "My son had a few classes that he took. It was stuff he was interested in...Like, he wanted to learn essay writing, so he took an essay writing class." Ruthie also described how her children self-selected the books they were reading. She spoke of her son's literary interests, saying that, "He has things he wants to read about. Like right now he's really interested in investment, reading about and learning money management and investment." Ruthie further explained how unschooling (the homeschool approach she has chosen to follow) really is about

"following the child" and his or her personal interests and inclinations. She describes this, stating: "He picks it all himself. That's part of the whole thing (with unschooling) is that he picks what he is interested in and then he reads it." In fact, Ruthie carved out an entire day of each week to spend doing activities with her son that he selected. She recounts:

> I had Tuesdays like carved out. That's my day that I just spend with him, like focus time on him….I don't get any other work done. And we basically just do whatever, you know, I say, "What do you want to do?" And, you know, he usually is ready with projects he wants to do and things he wants me to take him to.

Throughout the interview process, it was clear that parents followed their children's interests and inclinations as they selected materials for homeschool instruction. Marla described what this experience was like, stating, "I would go, and I would look at one example, or I'd get one used book, and try it, and see if they liked it. And if they hated it, I would switch! So trial-and-error!" Lola recalled a class that her son took based on his interests: "This semester he was taking an online Harry Potter genetics class." Madeleine purposefully selected literacy materials that related to her son's interests, seeking out workbooks with a *Star Wars* theme. It was also "following the child" that led Madeleine to shift from using the Classical Conversations literacy curriculum to Seton Homeschooling. She knew that her children needed more structure and used that information to guide her instructional decisions.

It was evident that Jan abided by the "follow the child" mantra as she selected instructional methods and materials for her son and daughter. For example, she described her decision to incorporate phonics workbooks and instruction (not her original intention) as a way of adapting to her son's unique learning needs. ("He needs rules.") Jan also spoke of numerous classes and projects in which her children participated, based on their personal interests. These included Dungeons and Dragons class, naturalistic learning classes at a local farm, and self-designed YouTube projects. "After the basics, the kids can do a project on something that

interests them but yet incorporates skills. Right now, they're doing YouTube projects where they make videos." Jan mentioned the importance of following her children's interests multiple times, stating, "I just tried to let them learn about things they're interested in" and "I want them to find their interests, go with those and know that they can live well doing so."

**Past Experiences/Education.** Nearly every participant mentioned using their own experiences and education to help select literacy methods and materials for homeschool. Jan, for example, stated that, "I learned about different types of education in graduate school. I heard about alternative forms of education and appreciated all of the things that had to offer." Jan also explained that both she and her husband had graduate degrees in education-related fields, and that, as a result, they were "totally comfortable" with teaching.

Alison mentioned her own experience being homeschooled as a child:

I was homeschooled as a child for five years of my education... So I was open to the idea of homeschooling for my children if it ever arose. I knew that this would be my preference, the structure, based on how I was. We use the same exact grammar work that I actually did.

Alison also gained experience through her own work as an educator. She recalls, "I taught school in South Carolina, and it was really poor kids, but they were awesome kids. They were so great. But then I decided not to stick around education."

Tonia recounts that she originally planned to become a special education teacher. She was excited to go in to this field, but her advisor told her that "her heart was too soft." Tonia eventually opted for another career path but sees the irony in the fact that she has now become a homeschool educator for a child with exceptional learning needs. (Her older daughter also became a teacher.)

Dorothy shared that she has two graduate degrees in education: one in early childhood education; the other in teaching English as a second language. She added that she spent "about

five years" thoroughly researching homeschool methods and materials before deciding to begin homeschooling her own children.

Ruthie explained that, while some parents who choose to homeschool feel like that decision is a "big, scary leap", for her it simply felt like a "natural progression". She recounted that she had been following the principles of attachment parenting from the time her children were born, so opting to homeschool was essentially a decision "to continue what we've been doing naturally." Much like Dorothy, Ruthie recalled that she spent a great deal of time reading about homeschooling and talking to parents who homeschooled prior to embarking on her own homeschool journey. She explained that this helped to build her comfort and knowledge. "So I felt like I understood it. I knew what I was getting into. I felt very prepared in that way."

Daniel has been an educator in a wide range of settings and for a variety of populations. He stated: "I do a lot of teaching. I teach food and nutrition, I teach photography, I teach philosophy, non-violence history, and I teach math. I love teaching. I'm bad at many things, but I'm pretty good at teaching."

A number of parents explained that their own experience with the public school system served as a non-example as they chose methods and materials to homeschool their children. Lola reflected that:

> I mean, I guess I didn't realize all of this at first because we grew up in the school system. And so you kind of think that's how you would learn stuff–it was like people teaching you stuff. But the longer I've done homeschool now, I have no doubt. I watched a lot of my friends unschool their kids and they completely let the kids to do whatever they wanted the whole time and their kids are doing great. We didn't do that, but I realized at some point along the way that I didn't need to teach them anything. I just gathered resources.

Tonia expressed similar sentiments, saying:

When we first started homeschooling, I had in my head a picture of school. The school that I had been to, the school that she had been to–I had this picture of how it should be. You know, everything to mimic a school environment." She came to realize that life is filled with educational experiences, and they do not all have to be in a traditional classroom setting with a textbook or curriculum.

Other parents recalled quite negative experiences with public schooling, which was often in large part why they chose to homeschool in the first place. Dorothy, for example, explained that, "I have my own personal history (with public schooling), and I know the things that I didn't want to go the way my childhood went." She also talked about several limitations of the traditional public school model, including the fact that it did not allow ample time to build a strong mother-daughter relationship, it resulted in her child choosing "the wrong group of friends", it could not provide the small group instruction that her daughter needed to thrive, and over time, it led to a decrease in her daughter's motivation and self-esteem. Dorothy recounts that her daughter "was starting to come home from school every day in tears" (due to social emotional issues) and "saying that she was bored and not learning anything." Dorothy explained that was the turning point for her as a parent, "My red line is, don't kill my kids' love of learning."

Madeleine recalled her daughter's difficulties with public school:

As she made her way through elementary school, right around second grade, she started having some difficulties keeping up with the work, completing the work, staying focused...She started taking CCR (special education) classes. We had a tutor come to the home once a week. We eventually also tried going to Brain Balance. And, none of that seemed to really click. She still had difficulties in class, and we were really concerned by fourth grade.

After much research and discussion, Madeleine and her husband eventually decided that homeschool would be the best option. Madeleine described when she knew she had made the right decision for her daughter:

So you know, she had struggled a lot with memory related skills in public school. And we were not encouraged by the teachers at public school. They... not 'gave up', but they had to move on...and you know, 'it just may not be possible' is the kind of message we were receiving, and we didn't believe that. And so when we were in our first year of homeschooling and she was being presented with these sentences about George Washington or the cumulative property in Mathematics or the definition of a gerund, she was not only able to remember those things for the short term, she would blow away all the other students in review games. And those students had been in the program longer than she had! So, it was a confidence booster for her, and it was just reassuring for us that we were making the right decision.

Daniel stated that, based on his own experience as a teacher in public school, he knew he did not want to go this route with his own daughter. He explained:

I've taught in public schools, and I enjoy it to some extent. But academic rigor isn't the strength of public school. One thing that really bothers me about the schools, is the No Child Left Behind testing. The testing is not only meaningless, it's counterproductive. What a great way to turn somebody off to learning!...And then the teachers aren't able to teach what they're good at doing. And they should have some ability to customize their classes.

When Daniel opted to homeschool his daughter, he was able to avoid the issues that he found problematic about public school. Now he is able to create curricula and lesson plans that are uniquely designed for his daughter and to design formative, interactive assessments that are purposeful and enjoyable.

**Other Homeschool Parents.** Participants often relied on the advice and experience of other homeschool parents as they selected methods and materials to teach literacy to their children. Marla explained:

I very quickly joined homeschool groups in the area and met incredible people. And that was where I really got connected to the homeschool community, and I met a couple really phenomenal women who just helped me remain confident and competent. And they shared information sort of like I'm sharing with you.

Marla added that she now served as a resource for many other homeschool parents, particularly those who were new to homeschooling: "People ask me all the time for my stuff. And I'm like oh...here! Because I was just recreating it."

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Alison also connected with other homeschool parents as she embarked on her

homeschooling journey. She explained:

> I knew other people who homeschooled. There are five families on our street alone that homeschool. So when I decided to homeschool my daughter, my turning point was finding a co-op where I felt like she can get other teachers to help.

Many participants described the social and networking aspect of belonging to a

homeschool group, not only for their children, but for the parents as well. Lola stated, "We very

quickly realized that there are tons and tons of homeschoolers in the area, and there's a whole

community where you could fill up every day from morning to night with activities. And it was

super fun!" She talked about one of the homeschool groups that her children belonged to in this

way: "On Thursday afternoon, there's a park that day that we go to. It's like people start

gathering around 2 p.m. and pretty much we stay until the sun goes down." She spoke about how

this day gave her kids a chance to play and socialize, and it also allowed her to connect with

other parents in the homeschool community.

Jan belonged to the same homeschool group mentioned above, and her interview for this

study was actually conducted during the weekly "Park Day." It was clear to me that the parents

enjoyed this experience as much as their children. When I arrived, the parents were eating lunch

together at a picnic table while their kids played on the playground. Ruthie also mentioned

belonging to this same group, saying:

> That's like an all-day thing. We go hang out at the park. They play with the other kids. And the moms hang out and talk and whatever. We're available to them. Um, that's what we do on Thursdays…. and we're there until dark and we come home late.

Tonia recounted that when she started homeschooling her older daughter (20 years ago),

there really weren't many homeschool groups in the area. Of those groups that did exist, most

were religious and required a statement of faith in order to join. This led to Tonia and her friend

creating their own homeschool group. Tonia recalls this experience, saying:

> I had a friend who, for her own reasons, did not want to go into those groups because you have to sign a statement of faith. And so I said to her, well how about we start something that's not based on that? So we accepted all types of families. And at the highest membership we had about a hundred fifty families. So we were key to starting a lot of those things.

Tonia explained that to this day, she still serves as a contact for homeschool parents in the area

who have questions:

> So if there's someone moving into the area or that sort of thing, they always... I get maybe four or five emails a week. And I'll email them back okay let me answer your questions and that sort of thing. So I talk to a lot of new homeschoolers for homeschoolers who are moving in from out of state.

Dorothy mentioned a number of ways that she utilized homeschool parents as a resource.

These included talking one-on-one with homeschool parents, listening to other parents in various

homeschool groups, joining homeschool listservs, and following homeschool groups and parents

on social media (such as Facebook). In particular, Dorothy stated that she often referred to

Secular Eclectic Academic (SEA) homeschool sites and groups when she had questions or

needed information.

Madeleine explained that she spent a lot of time networking and talking with other

homeschool parents, both as she was embarking on her homeschool journey, and after she was a

part of the homeschool community. She belonged to a number of homeschool co-ops and

networking groups, attended homeschool conferences, and got a great deal of advice from one of

her close friends, who was also a homeschooling parent.

Kelly, who enrolled her children in homeschool groups solely for social purposes (she

handled all academic instruction), explained how helpful these groups were for her as a parent.

"Once you get in a co-op or homeschool group, you get so much support," she recalled. Kelly

also belonged to homeschool parent groups on social media (such as Facebook) and mentioned that she often utilized a popular local homeschool store and gathering space to find methods and materials for her children.

Daniel shared that he had previously been the leader of one of the large local homeschool groups in the area. Many of the parents in this study belonged to and/or mentioned this group during their interviews. Much like the participants described above, Daniel explained that he utilized homeschool listservs, attended homeschool conferences, and visited the local homeschool store and gathering place as a means of locating resources.

Unlike most of the other study participants, Ruthie explained that she did not seek out methods or materials from other homeschool parents. Instead, she allowed her children's interests and needs to guide their learning. She stated:

> So there are plenty of people who are talking about what curriculum they use and talking about philosophies and all that kind of stuff. Oh yeah, definitely, everybody shares resources and stuff. But again, like for me, for what I do, I'm not looking for stuff for them.

**The Internet**. In seeking out methods and materials to teach literacy to their children, many of the study participants utilized the internet as a tool. Marla explained, "I literally go online, and I print out the state pacing standards. And then we look and see what we're going to do quarter by quarter. And it's all free on the internet." Marla also mentioned a website recommended by her children's tutor, *Teachers Pay Teachers*. She stated:

> Another resource the teacher/tutor introduced me to was this *Teachers Pay Teachers* website. They have the most wonderful lesson plans. Right out there, and for three bucks, you can have a whole unit! There are even some that are free!

Lola also mentioned frequent use of the internet as she sought out literacy materials for her sons:

I spend a lot of time online looking for good resources. So that's kind of time-consuming. There's a ton out there. And it's like being on Amazon, trying to buy something...Reading review after review to try to see if it's good for my kid.

Tonia shared that she would often use the internet to search for supplemental literacy materials for her daughter. She stated:

And of course I'm throwing in things from the internet that are relevant. Both of the girls have some issues with their grammar and some deficits where, maybe we went over it and they just weren't listening that day kind of thing.

Tonia also mentioned a website that she found, *Schoolhouse Teachers*: "We tried an online teaching site, schoolhouseteachers.com. You join it and then they have online classes."

Dorothy mentioned a number of websites, listservs, and groups that she utilized to create a comprehensive literacy program for her daughter. These included numerous homeschool parent listservs, educational websites, homeschool social media groups, and webinars. During our interview, Dorothy pulled up some of these to show me the depth of resources that are available to homeschool parents. It was evident, based on the number of tabs and bookmarks that she had created (combined with the ease with which she navigated them) that Dorothy spent a substantial amount of time gathering instructional resources online. Dorothy also mentioned an online resource that her daughter used called *Outschool*, where students could take courses online. She shared that her daughter often participated in *Great Courses* lectures online, and that the family belonged to both a *gameschoolers* group and a *Dungeons and Dragons* group.

While Ruthie did not use the internet in the same way as other study participants (to seek out instructional resources), it was clear that the internet was a part of her son's literacy learning. Ruthie described this, saying, "So he watches YouTube videos to learn how to make them. He actually started a balloon animal business, and he has now had two gigs. He made a Facebook page, and he's like being a balloon animal guy." Ruthie also described that, while she does not

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seek out instructional resources without prompting from her children, they will frequently ask for ideas or assistance:

> They fairly often will come to me and say, "I want to learn about X. Can you help me learn about that?" And then I will sometimes recommend books to them or websites or I'll get books for them or I'll get something like that.

Ruthie also shared that her son had found his own instructional tools on the internet, and that her main role was to assist him in checking the accuracy of those sources:

> My youngest son, he uses Khan Academy. He uses it just himself. And he uses actually a lot of online stuff. He really likes to watch science videos online. So my role in that has mainly been that, I talked to him about how to vet the source that you're watching, you know, so that you're not just watching garbage. He really wanted to learn about that stuff, so I taught him how to make sure he's watching something that's going to be true.

Both Madeleine and Kelly mentioned using an online resource called *Cathy Duffy Reviews*. Madeline shared that, "One of the best resources was Cathy Duffy Reviews. She essentially reviews every new curricular or every – every program that she can come across and lists the pros, lists the cons, um, talks about the approach." Madeleine explained that this was an incredibly helpful resource for her as she was trying to sift through all of the possible options for homeschool literacy instruction. Kelly mentioned that she often used Amazon reviews to select her instructional materials, in addition to using online resources such as study.com, powerschooling.com, and Free Virtual Schools.

Daniel explained that, while he certainly used the internet to find instructional materials for his daughter, he purposefully did not use technology as part of his literacy instruction. He stated:

> We don't use technology in our school. Almost not at all. I don't think technology should play a role until much later. That's the other reason to opt for home schools. Technology comes later, not now, not even fourth grade.

*Parental Confidence and Competence*

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As discussed in Chapter 1, one of the goals of this study was to explore the ways that homeschool parents exhibit confidence and competence in teaching their children with unique learning needs. The findings revealed that confidence and competence were demonstrated in a variety of ways. Each of these will be discussed in the following sections.

**Confidence.** Study participants exhibited confidence as they made the decision to homeschool their children, selected appropriate homeschool methods and materials, and adapted to their children's unique needs. This confidence often manifested in the form of an "inner knowing" or a "trusting of the gut" that guided the parents along the homeschool journey. Participants also shared that they gained confidence through support from other parents and from their own past experience, education, and skill sets. Following is a discussion of each of these components of confidence.

Time and again across interviews and participants, parents spoke of an "inner knowing" that helped them to make the best decisions for their children throughout the homeschool process. Alison, for example, spoke of how she began to realize that an alternative approach might be needed for her daughter. She stated, "I'm a librarian, so I knew something was wrong with my child. And it wasn't...Like, I know all the tools to get to learn to love reading– and she wasn't." Marla shared similar sentiments about her children's experience with traditional school, saying, "You know, this just isn't working... I'm not going to do it any worse than these other people are doing it...We're doing our own thing!" She reflected on the process of deciding to homeschool her boys, saying, "It's a leap of faith...You take this leap of faith...I was like, 'Oh, well, if it doesn't work, so what?' So I just sort of said, 'Okay I can do this myself.'" Marla added, "I would just tell, if there's a parent afraid of it, not to fear it, and to be brave, and be courageous, and go for it."

Jan expressed a similar knowing and confidence as she decided to move her children from traditional school to home school. She stated that, "We decided we could just do it ourselves. We are both very comfortable with teaching." Lola reflected that, through observing her son in public school, she could sense that this was not the best match for him. She shared:

> And so he felt really good about himself, but I could see it wasn't going to take long to start feeling badly. And I just thought, you know what, well, just between…they're tired and little things like that, they aren't a huge deal but could become a bigger deal.

Lola ultimately followed her gut sense and opted to homeschool her sons.

Tonia explained that while she initially felt extremely unprepared to homeschool, over time she came to trust that she knew what was best for her daughters and their unique learning needs. By starting her own homeschool group, learning through time and experience what was best for her daughters, and expanding her idea of what "learning" is, Tonia gradually became extremely confident in her own skills, wisdom, and intuition. She spoke of some examples of this confident "knowing", saying:

> So you know, the state says the requirement for homeschool is four hours a day. And we typically would not spend four hours a day. Her attention span would not do that…But the way I have learned to look at it is that everything is an educational experience. And so she's learning things continually. They may not be classroom instruction all time but she's learning.

Tonia went on to explain how, in spite of the negative words and opinions of other people, she held firm to her decision to homeschool:

> And what's interesting is that even though I had a child in college, you know, when I was starting with my youngest daughter, people continued to tell me, "You need to put her in school, you need to put her in school." They did that with my oldest, too, but I ignored them completely.

Tonia added that these 'naysayers' actually served to further motivate her to stay the course:

> The stereotypes continue. I mean, 20 plus years ago when I started, people were very openly rude about it. They're not quite so rude about it now unless they're older. They're a little more reserved about it– "Oh, I know someone who homeschools." And that has

made it a little easier, but you still get that stare. And I think that's one of the motivators for me to continue to homeschool my daughter. When so many people say, "Just put her in school. They can teach her better than you." I knew I didn't want her pigeonholed in that environment. I wanted her to grow and learn on her own, and she has.

Dorothy shared that she, too, had to learn how to follow her "inner knowing" as she figured out how to best homeschool her daughter. She explained that through observing, learning, and being open-minded, she came to shift the instructional focus for her daughter from "reading" to "acquiring ideas". Dorothy sensed that this would open up the pathways and passion to learn for her daughter–and she has found that this has, indeed, been the case. Dorothy added:

> I don't have any system telling, controlling how I teach her. I can really let go and see how she leaps. And me letting go and stepping back and letting her learn the way she learns, that was very challenging for me. And you really have to trust that things are gonna work out. A wonderful thing is that I learned what kind of learner she is.

Ruthie shared just how early on she had an inner knowing that she would be a homeschooling parent: "So I have three kids, and I have known that I was going to homeschool since my oldest was one." She explained that since she was already practicing attachment parenting, homeschooling simply felt like the next logical step, so she went with it. Later, when two of her children did not read until much later than most (10 years old), she again had to trust her own inner sense that things would work out. She recalled:

> I had a lot of people on the outside stressed out about their age and why I wasn't like teaching them to read and whatever. But I never had any concerns about that at all. I just always felt like, we live in a house full of books, I'm a writer. I just always felt like there's just absolutely no way that they are going to not learn how to read. Like it was not a thing that I felt was even possible.

Ruthie also shared that she believed that her sense of ease around this topic kept her children from feeling any sense of worry or panic about being late readers:

> My oldest got a lot of questions from other people. Like he could tell that other people were stressed about it...and I think that could have been a problem for him, except that I…I mean not to pat myself on the back, but I was just generally so unstressed about it that I think that I was able to communicate that to him.

Kelly described a number of occasions where she had to rely on her "gut sense" to know

what was best for her son. This began back when he was very young and she realized that,

although he displayed some of the traits of autism, "he was not traditionally autistic." She knew

that he was such a social child and loved people, so she continued to search for answers and

options that reached beyond the scope of autism. Later, Kelly toured a public school to see if it

would be a good fit for her son. Her inner knowing told her that it was not. Kelly described this

experience, saying, "I thought the curriculum was so developmentally inappropriate. And I

realized my son is never going to survive in this environment, because he was looking out the

window at the lawnmower." Kelly shared that she found the public school environment to be too

rigid and restrictive for her son's needs. "I would quit my job if I was in that type of

environment!" she joked of public school. Kelly also described how she had to follow her

knowing that things would be different with her son than they had been for her daughter:

> With him, I had to let him lead me in a sense and be very flexible. There was no
> structure. I had to really let go of society just expecting you to teach it in order to reach
> him. You know, I had to let go. With him, it's just been so different. I had to let go of
> like, "I'm going to screw up my kids." That fear is so strong because you have naysayers
> around...like I come from a family of schoolteachers. So for me to do this is like a sin.
> "How could you do that? You're going to screw up your kids!" So I said, "Okay well it's
> my kid, so I'm going to go ahead. If he's going to end up on Dr. Phil no matter what I do,
> at least I'll give him some interesting stuff to talk about."

**Support from Other Parents.** Many study participants explained that they gained a sense

of confidence due to the strong support they received from other homeschool parents. Marla, for

example, reflected on the close connections that she and others have found through homeschool

groups and co-ops: "It's just what happens when you go to one of those Meetups, is they share

with each other, and then they help each other. Because whatever brought them there, they're all

in that boat together."

Alison shared that having the expertise of the other homeschool parents in her co-op bolstered her confidence to homeschool her daughter. She recalled, "So that was, I guess, the number one factor that made me confident. 'Okay, this is the right choice'– because I had that co-op." Ruthie explained that, through talking with other homeschool parents, her interest, curiosity, and confidence was piqued. She stated, "And then I met some people who were homeschoolers and unschoolers, and I was very impressed by the kids. And I started talking to them about it, asking questions." Ruthie's confidence ultimately increased to the point that she wrote and published a book on homeschooling, which now helps other parents to build their comfort and confidence with this approach.

Madeleine shared that as the contemplated "taking the plunge" into homeschooling, her friends' support gave her tremendous confidence. She laughed as she explained that her friends who were already homeschooling were "overly reassuring" as they insisted that "Anybody can do this!"

Kelly gained confidence through observing other homeschool parents. As she put it, "I was watching another parent (with no educational experience and only a high school diploma) homeschool her kids, and she was successful. So I said, 'Ok, I actually went to college for teaching, so I bet if she could do it, there's no reason that I couldn't.'"

***Own Past Experiences/Education/Skill Set.*** Many participants spoke of their own past experiences, education, and skill sets contributing to their confidence toward homeschooling. For example, as Marla explained, "I was a marketing manager of a mega-corporation for years. I have an MBA. I have nothing to do with education other than really high executive function. I can multitask and organize." Marla continued to explain how her career experience helped guide her along the journey as a homeschool parent:

> One thing we learn in business is if you're not good at something, what you need to be good at is hiring someone who is good at it. So I knew how to interview people, I knew how to hire people in order to achieve the goal. So that's where the business part comes in and sets a goal. You have measurable goals, And you look to achieve those goals.

Marla used her business expertise to help her find a team of tutors, classes, and resources to support her children as they were homeschooled. She added that the saw herself as a "facilitator" of her children's education.

Jan shared that both she and her husband were college professors in education-related fields (education and psychology). This helped to build their confidence and comfort when they opted to homeschool their children. Similarly, Alison explained how her own past training and experience in education fostered a sense of confidence toward homeschooling her daughter. She stated, "I have an education degree and a library science degree, so I am very confident with my ability to teach stuff to children."

Dorothy shared that, "My own background definitely gave me confidence." (As mentioned previously, she has two graduate degrees in education.) Ruthie recalled that she "felt completely prepared" to homeschool her children. This came from a combination of her familiarity with attachment parenting, the homeschool research and reading she had done ahead of time, and her own past experience as a student. As she put it:

> This is going to sound kind of ironic, but I'm a very academic person. I was very school-y. I loved school, and I was like a straight A student. I'm a very studious person. So I feel like my life experience and my academic background and everything has definitely, um, been put to use.

Ruthie added:

> When I got interested in homeschooling, I just read a lot about it. I just read like everything I could find about it. So, um, I felt like I understood it. I knew what I was getting into. I felt very prepared in that way.

Lola shared that her confidence toward homeschooling came from realizing that it was more about providing resources than actually teaching. She stated:

> It turns out that you don't actually have to know how to teach anything. Like teachers, being a teacher, is a completely separate job. Being a homeschool parent is really just being a parent, and maybe organizing the resources if you need them. So I didn't feel unprepared in any way.

Tonia explained that decades of experience helped to build her confidence to effectively homeschool her daughters. As she stated (with a laugh), "I've been doing this for 21 or more years, so I've been around a while."

**Competence.** Study participants demonstrated competence in a number of ways, including (a) the fact that both they and their children were pleased and happy with the decision to homeschool; (b) seeing success, progress, and/or transformation in their children; and (c) their ability to adapt based on their children's unique needs. Each of these will be discussed in the following section.

*Pleased/Happy with Homeschool.* One component of parental competence was in evidence by the parent and/or child being pleased with the homeschool experience. Marla expressed this when she described the outcome of switching from traditional school to homeschooling: "Our kids really learned an amazing amount in a very short amount of time." Marla also spoke of "magical moments" that occurred as she homeschooled her sons:

> And every now and then I would say, 'Oh my gosh we had a magical homeschool day!' Often, I mean I can't say that was like every week. But we would have them, and I'm like, "That was so cool!"

Marla summed up her overall homeschool experience by saying, "Homeschooling has been excellent, it's outstanding! And I would never want to change what we did. Glad we did it. Nothing's perfect but yet."

Jan recalled a similar "magical moment" as she was teaching her two homeschooled children to read. She described how she created a game where she cut out manipulative letters of the alphabet and "tried to make it fun" for her children. She reflected that, "The kids really enjoyed it and wanted to do it. It was fun for them." Similar to Marla, Jan had overwhelmingly positive things to say about her homeschool experience. She smiled as she stated, "Homeschooling has been fantastic! I mean we don't use alarm clocks!"

Alison reflected on how the decision to homeschool has gone for her family, saying:

It's been surprisingly wonderful. And I'm going to put "surprising" in there because I have realistic expectations typically in life, and so my expectation was, "Oh, we're going to give her the tools she needs, but she might not like it." It wasn't her choice to leave school. But she's doing great, she's happy, doesn't have tummy pains anymore.

Alison added that, "For me, that was the big benefit of homeschool, having more time to teach and more time for her to be a kid and do other activities."

Tonia shared that her oldest daughter expressed gratitude toward her for deciding to homeschool. She recalled that conversation, saying:

And her freshman year, I remember her telling me–and I'll never forget it–she came to me, she was like, "Mama, thank you for homeschooling me." And I was like, "Okay. Why?" And she said, "Because none of the other kids know how to study!"

Tonia also explained that homeschooling not only allowed her to provide more appropriate academic instruction for her daughters, but it also fostered the development of important social skills. She spoke of her youngest daughter in particular, saying:

And in eighth grade, she did so much better. She just made this huge leap. And it was fantastic. I think the key there was having a good group of friends, in those classes, being able to talk to them, being able to socialize, you know, a little bit more, because my daughter was pretty much a loner up to that point, and so it's really taught her not only to read, with the literacy aspect, but it's also taught her to be a really good friend. And so that was kind of a turning point for her.

Dorothy shared that her daughter was noticeably happier after leaving public school. The social-emotional challenges, tears, and frustration that had previously affected her daughter were no longer a regular occurrence. Dorothy also expressed great joy that her daughter's "love of learning" had returned since switching to a homeschool model. She attributed this to being able to follow her daughter's unique learning profile and learning needs. One thing that Dorothy particularly appreciated about homeschooling was the ability to maintain a close relationship with her daughter. She explained, "Our success story is based on our relationship. I am able to cherish the personal relationship with my child and put that first. I mean, how many parents can really say that they know their child as a learner?"

Ruthie shared that homeschooling:

really does feel like success every day, because there's always something they want to learn. They come, they ask...Or more often they just come show me that they learned something and they're like, "Guess what I figured out," you know. But they come and they ask, and it's very rewarding. And they always thank me for teaching them something, too.

Ruthie also explained that she knew that homeschool was a success after seeing her daughter's reaction to a major setback. As Ruthie explained, she had to tell her daughter that a plan that had been orchestrated and anticipated for months would not work out after all. Ruthie admitted that her initial thought was, "Oh my gosh, I have to tell my daughter and she's going to be crushed, and it's going to be …like what's going to happen?!" Ruthie dreaded having to break the news to her daughter but was pleasantly surprised with the outcome when she finally did. She recalled:

I don't know what I expected, but I thought she was going to be really upset. And she said, "Huh, I never would have thought that that would have been one of the steps on my path to success." Like she literally said, "I wonder what the good is going to be that's going to come of this," you know.

Rachel shared that her daughter's response reassured her that she was learning the "big things" that are important to learn, and that "all the academic skills are sort of, like, incidental, you can pick them up."

Madeleine spoke about how homeschool gave her the chance to see her daughter experience success with skills that the public school had "all but given up on teaching her." For example, the memorization that previous teachers had communicated "just might not be possible" for her daughter was now coming easily and effortlessly. This not only boosted her daughter's confidence; it also helped both parents to know that they had made the right decision in opting to homeschool. Madeleine also spoke of the excitement about learning that she saw in her children as they shifted to a homeschool approach. While school had previously been a frustrating, anxiety-producing endeavor for her daughter, now Madeleine described her daughter's eagerness to share what she had learned through homeschooling: "In conversation when she would talk to her dad (or anybody that she was engaged in a conversation with about something), she would go into a long spiel about the Berlin airlift, you know, candy droppers." Madeleine also appreciated the flexibility of homeschool and being able to spend as much or as little time as each child needed to learn a concept.

Kelly, too, spoke of her family's homeschool experience in a positive manner, stating that "It has been wonderful and enriching." She was grateful for the ability to customize lessons, materials, and approaches to suit her children's unique learning needs. For example, Kelly used the Wii and road signs to teach her son his letters, provided for lots of choice or input for her children as she planned their instruction, and worked alongside them on tasks that were more challenging. This was in stark contrast to the public school that she visited and knew would not suit her child.

Daniel sums up his satisfaction with homeschool in one simple, but profound statement: "It's the coolest thing I've done in my life."

***Success/Progress/Transformation.*** One major indicator of the compentece of participants' homeschool instruction was the degree of progress and transformation that occurred in their children. Parents spoke of these successes time and again. Marla, for example, recalled the tremendous change that she saw in her children's spelling skills after starting to homeschool: "You used to get 20s on spelling and now you get 90s!" Marla also shared that, for one of her sons, reading went from something to be avoided to a true joy: "And sure enough, boom! For one of them, they just took off. And it's absolutely wonderful, he loves reading. Excellent!"

Alison explained that when she was able to use alternative approaches to teach literacy to her daughter, she saw a level of enthusiasm that traditional school had not been able to foster. For example, when Alison turned learning into a sort of "competitive game" where she and her daughter challenged each other, "She did great and was able to understand it and was happy, and the next day she's like, Mom I want to do that again!" Alison also created unique book projects for her daughter to complete; for example, creating a children's book about a topic she had read. Alison recalls this experience, saying, "And so I was like, 'Oh we should do, you know, a children's book.' And she was really excited, and she did fantastic. I was so proud of her when she colored the pictures and everything."

Tonia explained how homeschooling helped with her daughter's anxiety and medical challenges. Her oldest daughter had severe kidney problems while in public school due to stress and not being able to go to the bathroom as often as she needed. Tonia explained that, after switching to homeschool, there was a huge transformation:

It was amazing, because once we had her home and I was with her day in and day out, I was able to recognize patterns. And we were able to find a way to help her with that (kidney problems and stress.)

Tonia also shared how homeschooling helped with her younger daughter's anxiety:

She has a lot of anxiety. And I realize that and try to work with it, you know. And with the dog, even though she's not trained, she's our therapy dog, because she's able to help Rachel calm down and that sort of thing. She just goes and lays her head on her, and I think it's very calming.

Tonia also spoke of the incredible transformation that took place in her youngest daughter's literacy skills as they homeschooled. She described spending years on the alphabet, struggling to figure out how to help her daughter to read effectively, and finally moving to a place where she could see that it was all coming together:

And the thing that I think I was the most shocked or happy about that happened during all this was when she was in middle school. Her first year, sixth grade maybe. I was really concerned because we were just doing a literature and I was just like the helper in the class. And I was really terrified that she would not be able to keep up, that you wouldn't be able to read and understand. And she really surprised me. She was able to, you know, I mean she had to have help, but that really surprised me when she was able to keep up in the class.

Dorothy, too, described a remarkable transformation that occurred in her daughter as a result of homeschooling. She spoke of how her daughter went from being a reluctant and struggling reader to eagerly going through 40-60 hours of audiobooks per week. Dorothy was shocked to see her daughter choose to spend two and a half hours diagramming sentences "because of her love of learning and the amazing relationship she had built with her teacher." Dorothy's daughter, who was present for our interview, explained this experience herself, saying, "And just today the light bulb went off, and I got diagramming sentences!" Dorothy also explained that her daughter would choose to go for extra homeschool classes when she felt she needed more repetition or reinforcement of a concept. Homeschooling, it seems, had transformed

her daughter into an engaged, self-directed learner who not was not only excited to learn, but had come to understand herself as a learner–and to adjust accordingly.

Ruthie spoke of her son's transformation as a reader. While she was not concerned about the fact that he was not reading at a 'typical age', she does recall vividly when this transition from non-reader to reader occurred for him. She stated:

> So anyway, my oldest, he was… you know, I actually don't know how old he was because I really didn't like… it wasn't a thing for me what the age was. He was definitely in the double digits. He was definitely like 10 or older. Um, but he went from like not being able to read, not being able to read, not being able to read to like boom, he could read like anything. It was like all of a sudden he could read any books and he could read like scholarly articles. It just like …Wow, he could read!

Ruthie added that, while her daughter followed a more "typical trajectory" as a reader, both children were gleaning important information all along the way. Ruthie explained that, while her daughter's "learning leaps" were more visible to the outside observer, for her son, many things were going on internally before an external manifestation became apparent. Ruthie asked her children about how they learned to read, and what she discovered was fascinating. She shared:

> You know, if my daughter was looking at the words, he said he was studying the pictures. He's the artist. He has a degree now from Savannah College of Art and Design and he's an artist and he's always been an artist. And that's what he was looking at. And he was seeing things in the pictures that I never even see until this day, and he was very interested in like the character development and the plot and the, you know, the settings and all those creative aspects of it that, um, that's what he was focused on. And he was getting a lot out of that. That wasn't an accident, you know. He was getting a lot out of that. So that's what he was doing.

Kelly shared that, through being able to select literacy methods and materials that were uniquely tailored to her children's needs, she saw wonderful progress as they homeschooled. As she tried various programs and approaches, Kelly was able to find things that really worked. By using her son's fascination with road signs to teach letters, she saw incredibly fast

transformation. Kelly recalls, "Then he became obsessed with road signs. And I'm like, 'If you can draw these road signs, you can draw letters!' So he learned his letters literally in 48 hours." Kelly also spoke of *Fix-It Grammar* as being a powerful literacy tool for her son: "That has been great because they get it, and I think it's helped my son a lot with his word dyslexia because he can see where the words have to be in the sentences." Kelly added that allowing for choice and flexibility in literacy methods and materials was tremendously beneficial for her son, leading him to become more engaged and independent in his learning. She explained, "He became interested in YouTube and started making scripts. Later he found a Grammarly program on his own, and he loves using that."

Daniel described his daughter's dedication and enthusiasm as being a wonderful outcome of homeschooling. He recalled a time where he had to convince his daughter that it was time to stop their lesson: "There was one night where it was like quarter of 12, and I said, 'You know, we should start thinking of heading to bed and reading'–because she really wanted to keep going." He added that they both enjoy the experience of homeschooling tremendously: "It seems like, since we are homeschooling, especially this year, and maybe last year, I could use all the hours of the day if I wanted to."

***Adapting to Child's Unique Needs*.** Another way that parental competence was demonstrated was through adapting to meet their children's unique learning needs. Parents gave many, many examples and stories about this, and they often stated that they'd originally decided to homeschool so that they could tailor instruction in this way. Marla explained how she decided to "go back to basics" and re-visit phonics instruction with both of her sons after realizing they did not have a solid foundation in this area. She recalled:

So I just watched all of that sort of dissolve into all sorts of negative things. And I was like, okay, we're just going to go back to the beginning, and we're going to fix this. And it's not a big deal.

Later, Marla described how she adapted a writing lesson to meet her son's needs:

I said, well I can see your frustration. He was just sitting there getting red. "I want you to dictate." And so I took and I jotted down his thoughts on post-its, and I put them all down as he dictated them. And I said, "Okay, now you have these post-its, now I want you to write it!" And so then he could organize it.

Jan explained how she had to adapt her literacy instruction when her second child was learning to read. This involved seeking out supplemental phonics materials. She stated, "This is my first year using workbooks. My youngest needed some help with phonics, so we started using workbooks for that. But for the most part, I just try to let them learn about things they're interested in."

Alison talked about how she discovered that a simple decision like changing modalities could significantly impact her daughter's motivation. She stated:

So we draw pictures. But I noticed she just needed more practice. She just needed more repetition and writing on paper was draining her. So I decided, well let's just take her little white board and go in the bedroom and then we'll do it at the same time to see if we did it the same way. So we each have our own whiteboard and she's working on it, and I have my little whiteboard. And we're not allowed to look. And then we're like, "Are you ready, now the answer is…" And we share. And then we talk through it, and it was so much more fun with the dry erase markers versus pencil because pencils are like, "Oh it's so much work!" But we use our colorful dry erase markers it's not so much work.

Alison further reflected on the white board activity, recalling that her daughter "did great and was able to understand it and was happy. And the next day she's like, 'Mom I want to do that again!'"

Lola shared several examples of how she adapted to meet her sons' learning needs. One of these was in helping them to select texts to read. She recalled:

So I've never tried to jump him up a (reading) level. But the other guys, sometimes they would get stuck reading the same thing over and over, and so what we would do is just, I'd suggest books, like, well here's a bunch of books that might be fun.

Tonia explained how she accommodated her daughter's unique learning needs, saying:

You know, my daughter is a big procrastinator, so it's frustrating as a mom and a teacher. But we typically, with things that are assigned, it's typically the day before and she kind of panics, "Oh my gosh I have to do all this!" And so I know that now, and I start Wednesday night saying, "Now what is your homework and what do we need to do? Let's get started. Can we get this finished every day?" And I'm asking and I'm working, and then we get to the next week and she's like, "AHHH!" So I'm totally aware of what she does and doesn't do. I keep up with it whether she knows it or not.

Tonia also explained that she often sought out supplemental literacy materials when the basic curriculum was not quite enough for her daughter:

And of course I'm throwing in things from the internet that are relevant. Both of the girls have some issues with their grammar and some deficits where, maybe we went over it and they just weren't listening that day kind of thing. So I just bought these little workbooks from Barons, and that's helped a lot.

Finally, Tonia shared how, after years of trial and error, she found a way to help her daughter with reading comprehension. She recalled:

We realized that she could not form a picture in her head. The words on the paper were just words; they had no meaning in her brain. And so we spent several years of taking stories, sentences, and saying "the lion is sitting on a rock". Well, when you and I hear that, we picture a lion on a rock. She did not have that. So we had to start replacing those thoughts with, those words with pictures. Physical pictures as well as painting that picture verbally. So I'd have to describe to him what I saw, like he'd read a sentence or whatever, and I'd have to describe it.

Dorothy, too, had to adapt in order to meet her daughter's learning needs. She explained how she could never be "too wedded" to any particular curriculum, material, or approach that she had chosen for her daughter. Dorothy shared that, for her, one of the greatest benefits of homeschool was the ability to "throw out whatever did not work" in order to find something that did. Sometimes this meant getting rid of an expensive, highly-rated boxed literacy curriculum. Other times it meant knowing that it was necessary to hire a tutor or sign her daughter up for a

homeschool class in order to preserve the parent-child relationship. The beauty of homeschool, according to Dorothy, was that you could do this as often as you felt was necessary. You could, in essence, follow the child.

> Ruthie told a story about her son asking her to help him apply for college. She recalled:
>
> When my son was 15, he came to me and he said, "Okay, I have decided. I definitely would like to go to college. Will you help me do whatever I need to do to apply for that?" And keep in mind that at that point in his life he had literally never had a single formal lesson at all of any kind.

Ruthie went on to explain how she presented what she saw as possible pathways for her son:

> And so I said, 'Okay, you can… there's like two approaches you could take. So I said, "You can either start doing things to look like a traditional student and like make your transcripts and like, you know, take some classes and do stuff like that, or you could continue what you're doing and say, 'Here I am, this is what I've been doing.'" Um, and, you know, like I think there are advantages to both, you know? Like, in this one you're saying, "My whole life has been self-directed, and this is what I have to show for it," you know. Because, you know, by that point they've done a lot of cool stuff, too, you know, it's not a vacuum. All that time that they're not doing school-y stuff is filled with other cool stuff. So anyway, his response was, he thought about it and then he said, "Okay, I'm going to do both of those things."

Ruthie described how her son proceeded to carry out this plan, which eventually led to him receiving an academic scholarship to college and later graduating magna cum laude.

> Madeleine shared that one way she adapted to her children's unique needs was to add more structure to their homeschool program. She explained:
>
> Eventually I decided I needed to give the day more structure, especially when I had multiple kids. I needed to have time that I could sit and work on Latin with one, and time where I could sit and work on math with the other.

This eventually led Madeleine to switch to a literacy curriculum with more organization and structure to allow her to better help daughter (Seton). Madeleine added that, "The tailoring the lessons to that particular child I think is one of the best aspects of homeschooling."

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As mentioned previously, Daniel created curricular materials and assessments uniquely designed for his daughter. He stated, "And then like I told you, I created curricular material for my daughter. It has her pictures. I customized it to her." Daniel also described the extensive and thorough assessments that he developed for his daughter each year:

> I write, twice a year, an assessment of my daughter. Nobody reads it, even my wife. And I do it just in case she ever goes to a school, then the teacher will know exactly what she's capable of. I want to believe my assessments are fourteen, fifteen pages. And it takes forever. I'm very detailed. So I assess her through many ways, and I look at common core.

**Summary and Analysis of Observations**

Five of the ten participants agreed to participate in a 45-minute literacy observation, during which I observed, audio recorded, and took notes on a homeschool literacy lesson. (See Appendix D for Observation form). Three of these literacy observations involved individual (one-on-one) instruction; the remaining two observations consisted of small group homeschool class instruction.

*One-On-One Observations*

Alison, Jan, and Tonia volunteered to participate in literacy observations with their children. For each of these, I went to participants' homes and observed literacy instruction for 45 minutes. Alison and her daughter, Elizabeth were doing an IEW (Institute for Excellence in Writing) lesson during my visit. Jan was simultaneously teaching her son Gene (word problems, phonics and writing) and her daughter Julia (writing and math) while I observed. Tonia and her daughter, Riley, were doing a literacy lesson on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* during my observation.

*Homeschool Class Observations*

Since Lola and Ruthie's sons both attended homeschool classes in the community for literacy lessons, I was invited to attend these classes rather than observe one-on-one instruction.

Lola's son participated in a small group writing class in the home of another homeschool parent (Kendra), and Ruthie's son attended the grammar class that Ruthie taught to a group of homeschoolers (that included her son).

*Themes from Observations*

The observations revealed a number of themes that had also surfaced during the interviews, including indicators of parental competence and confidence, using past experience and skill sets to select literacy methods and materials, and following the child and adapting to his or her unique learning needs. In addition, an unanticipated finding emerged: homeschool parents used high-leverage practices and components of emergent curriculum to teach their children with unique learning needs. Each of these themes will be explored in the following sections.

**Parental Competence.** Across all of the observations, there were numerous indicators of competence. This competence could be seen in a variety of ways, including student success and parents adapting to the unique needs of their children/students. For example, while Alison was teaching an IEW lesson with her daughter Elizabeth, there was a high level of success, engagement, and motivation demonstrated by Elizabeth. Elizabeth was able to answer questions posed by her mother with a high percentage of accuracy, to provide evidence from the text to support her answers, and to identify major details to include in her written summary. She was also eager to complete the tasks that were asked of her, saying that she was "excited" about writing. Alison adapted to her daughter's learning needs by providing plenty of opportunities for active engagement, having her daughter restate/summarize frequently to check for understanding (knowing that comprehension was an area of difficulty for Elizabeth), and alternating reading paragraphs between parent and child ("popcorn reading").

Jan's son, Gene, also demonstrated success during the time that he was observed. Gene, who had experienced difficulty with phonics and spelling in the past, was eagerly moving through his phonics workbook tasks during his literacy block. He shared (with what appeared to be great pride) that he "got the hard part" of the word he was trying to spell. (The word was 'answer', and he had been able to figure out that it had an 'sw' in the middle). Since Jan used word problems to integrate literacy with math, Gene had many opportunities to read story problems aloud. He was able to do so with good fluency and expression. Later, Gene was extremely excited to read his story aloud (in which he had included words from his phonics workbook, such as 'gnarly' and 'phony'). As Jan posed questions to Gene about his writing (e.g., "What do you put after a period?"), he was able to answer with accuracy and humor ("A capital. I like capitals."). Jan adapted to Gene's learning needs by providing verbal cues ("What does the rule tell you? When two vowels go a-walking..?"), allowing him to type his assignments rather than write them by hand, and providing scaffolding and verbal cues ("Where do you want a period? That sentence is too long!")

Tonia and her daughter Riley were working on a lesson about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* during my literacy observation. One indicator of success was the fact that Riley had developed effective learning strategies to help her master literacy content. She explained to me that she took "very thorough notes in class" to help her remember needed material. Later on during the literacy observation, Riley was able to compare and contrast two of the book characters using abundant text evidence. She read her paper aloud (on this topic) with good fluency, expression, and poise. Riley was also able to self-monitor and reflect on her own written work. When asked, "Which part of this piece gave you the most trouble?", Riley knew that she had included some run-on sentences that would need to be addressed later. Tonia adapted to Riley's unique needs by

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ordering an audiobook on Kindle of the text they were reading, providing supplemental questions and activities on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (she felt the ones provided by the curriculum were insufficient), and allowing Riley to use the computer to draft her written pieces ("She likes to go on the computer and review as she goes.")

Ruthie invited me to attend a grammar class that she taught to a group of homeschool students (including her son). Evidence of success could be seen in the high level of engagement and the deep, reflective responses of the students in the group. As Ruthie asked how the previous week's homework had gone, students were asking clarifying questions about "hard parts". They appeared not to worry about "not being sure" or "getting it right", but rather seemed to value the process of gaining true understanding. As the lesson continued, many heads were nodding, hands were raising, and eyes were engaging with the teacher and material. Students appeared happy to volunteer to come up to the board to demonstrate how they had diagrammed the sentences that Ruthie had assigned to them. Ruthie adapted to the learning needs of the group by always starting with *their* questions, needs, and concerns. Throughout the lesson, she would stop and ask students to share their input, so that she knew she was meeting them where they were. Ruthie checked for understanding often and adapted her instruction if what she was doing did not seem to be reaching her students. For example, when it became clear that one of the sentences the group was attempting to diagram was a "tricky one", Ruthie talked through and modeled the problem for the group, restating and explaining the example and her "trick" ("if you put the simple subject and the predicate together, it makes sense"). Ruthie also adapted to her students' needs by providing extra time when they indicated they were not ready to move on.

Lola's son attended a writing class taught by a homeschool parent named Kendra. During my observation of this class, there were many examples of success and adapting to student

needs. Success was evidenced by student engagement, organization, and participation. During our literacy observation, students were eager to share how their life experiences connected to the topics being learned in class (e.g., one student spoke of a woman who "created a video game to help herself heal faster"). The students also demonstrated maturity and responsibility as they used their binders to organize and utilize literacy materials. As Kendra returned their homework, the students turned to the appropriate sections of their binders and filed it away neatly. Later, they were able to quickly and efficiently find and reference various sections (vocabulary, grammar) and to get started on these tasks quickly. The group, as a whole, was very well behaved, highly focused, and seemed to enjoy being in the class. Questions were answered with a high level of accuracy, and when brief writing tasks were assigned, all students worked quietly and diligently on them (scrunched faces, furrowed brows, and squinted eyes seemed to indicate that substantial effort was being expended). Motivation was observed by 'high fives' being given when an answer was correct, and an exclamation of "YES!" when the teacher read a vocabulary word aloud to the group. Kendra adapted to the learning needs of the group by asking probing questions ("How did the homework go?"), creating an atmosphere of fun competition to suit her students ("to beat me, they need to get more than half correct"), and making academic learning relevant to real-world experiences (asking me to talk about annotating and how I use it in my life and work). Kendra also taught her students a mnemonic tool to help them memorize coordinating conjunctions: FANBOYS (F=For, A=And, N=Nor, B=But, O=Or, Y=Yet, S=So).

**Parental Confidence**. Throughout the five literacy observations, there were a variety of indicators of parental confidence. This confidence could be seen in several ways, including parents' use of an inner knowing and their decision to draw on their own past experience and skill sets while teaching. For example, Alison had an inner knowing of the strategies that would

best motivate her daughter, Elizabeth. She provided many opportunities for student choice during lessons and activities, and she approached tasks with her daughter in a collaborative manner, following a conversational, back-and-forth, team-oriented approach. Mother and daughter would alternate reading passages and paragraphs, collaboratively talk through questions and responses, and check on each other (i.e., Alison asking, "Am I doing this the right way, Elizabeth?"). Alison drew on her own past experience as a teacher, asking her daughter to support her responses with text evidence, providing real-word examples ("The Cherokee were from NC–did you know that?"), providing ample wait time for Elizabeth, and modeling skills and expectations. ("I'll show you how to do the first one.")

Jan also demonstrated confidence during our literacy observation. This could be seen in her comfort with teaching two children of different ages/grades simultaneously, her ability to adapt quickly and fluidly during lessons (opting to "become Gene's classmate" for an assignment that asked him to work with a peer), and the many ways she chose to incorporate her past education and skill sets into her teaching. For example, Jan explained to Gene during writing that, "In really good stories, you don't see the same word used over and over again. The author is changing the words, creating a picture in your mind." Jan also pushed Gene to deeper levels of thinking, asking such questions as, "*What* was the same? It helps clarify if you say what 'it' was?" and "*Why* is it easier?" Finally, Jan was careful to use inquiry, whenever possible, to put the workload on her son for the thinking. Instead of telling him an answer, she would ask him another question, wait, and let him come up with his own response.

As I observed Tammy teaching a literacy lesson to her daughter, Riley, I could see a variety of examples of Tammy's confidence. One of these was her inner knowing of what would work best for Riley and her unique learning needs. For example, while Tammy had decided to

use a rubric to help Riley understand the components that her writing should include, Tammy also explained that she would wait to present the rubric until later on in the writing unit "So the girls could focus on expressing themselves." Similarly, Tammy knew that if she gave her daughter the opportunity to earn a better grade by re-submitting her written work, this would help Riley focus more on the process of writing than the grade or the end product. Much like Alison and Jan, Tammy also drew on her own past experiences and skill sets as she taught literacy to her daughter. This could be seen in the literacy goals Tammy had for her daughter ("to write a good literary analysis"), the techniques she selected (peer editing, using a rubric to craft written work, using a syllabus), and her decision to use the curriculum used by the public school as a guide.

As Ruthie taught her homeschool class on grammar during our observation, it was evident that she had many indicators of confidence as well. Ruthie explained to me in a follow-up conversation, that she did not follow a structured curriculum for these classes. Instead, she stated, "I design my own curriculum for that class. The samples I give the students are of my own creation, based on what I believe is needed at that point in the course or even in the lesson." This inner knowing could be seen during the lesson observation itself, as Ruthie created follow-up examples for the students based on their specific questions or confusion. I also noticed that Ruthie's class, as a whole, had a very informal, comfortable, conversational style. The ability to teach in such an informal manner with ease (while clearly meeting student needs as they arose) was indicative of both Ruthie's confidence and ability to follow her own inner knowing as she went along. Ruthie drew on her own past experiences (as a writer, a scholar, and a student) in the development of the grammar class materials, which were notably "school-y" and included things

like worksheets, homework, sentence diagramming, teacher examples, and opportunities for independent practice.

Very similar to Ruthie, Kendra demonstrated confidence and inner knowing in the development of her homeschool writing course. When asked whether she followed a curriculum to teach this class, Kendra replied:

> We did not use any curriculum. I hand-picked everything we did, including the vocabulary words. I read the novels and highlighted any words I thought the kids wouldn't know. They were responsible for finding any unfamiliar words in the reading and learning them. I quizzed them on ten of my choice.

As was the case with Ruthie's grammar class, Kendra's class incorporated many aspects that were likely drawn from her past experiences as a student and teacher. These included the materials she utilized (binders, white board, worksheets, and homework) and the topics she selected (i.e., annotation, book reports, five paragraph essays, and restrictive and non-restrictive clauses).

**Sources of Information Used to Select Literacy Materials.** It became evident across literacy observations that parents used two common sources of information to select materials for their children. One of these was to "follow the child"; the other was to draw upon the parent's own past skills and experiences. Alison, for example, followed the unique needs of her daughter, Elizabeth, when she had her sing a 'sentence song' to reinforce the literacy skills they were working on during the lesson. Alison knew that Elizabeth would connect with this musical modality, as opposed to simply memorizing a rule. In addition, Alison selected literacy materials that could be completed on the iPad, and she welcomed the use of a cell phone to look up definitions and dates as needed throughout the lesson. This was more engaging than simple hard copy text and the use of a dictionary. Finally, Alison provided Elizabeth with a rubric checklist to edit her writing, which would help build the self-monitoring skills and independence of her

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daughter. Alison also drew on her past experience when selecting literacy materials. Having been homeschooled herself as a child, Alison shared that she had chosen to use the very same grammar curriculum for her daughter that her mother had used to homeschool her.

Jan showed a willingness to "follow the child" in her decision to incorporate phonics instruction for her son, Gene. While homeschooling her daughter in the past, Jan had followed a more immersive, "whole language" approach to literacy, she recently discovered that Gene "needed rules and structure", and thus opted to purchase and utilize instructional materials that explicitly taught phonics. Jan also demonstrated an ability to adapt to her son's learning needs on a moment-by-moment basis. For example, as they were reviewing his piece of writing, she would respond with statements such as, "You could put a comma here, or not. It's optional, depending on how you want it to sound" and "You usually don't start a sentence with 'but'." This responsiveness to Gene's needs allowed him to learn a great deal of skills in a short time (which a prescriptive writing curriculum likely could not). Jan likely drew on her experiences as an educator as she made these spontaneous, intuitive decisions about where to take her instruction.

The theme of "following the child" was evident throughout Tonia's literacy lesson with her daughter, Riley. This was demonstrated through Tonia's decision to incorporate many opportunities for student choice (of writing topic, of how to break apart a run-on sentence, of where to begin revising her essay) and in Tonia's careful selection of tasks that would teach her daughter the skills she needed (i.e., to form her own opinion, to evaluate others' opinions, to give and receive feedback). Tonia embedded many techniques that she had likely gained from her past experience, including praise ("I like the way you transitioned the body paragraphs"), modeling ("a comma is where you stop to take a breather"), and intentionally shifting the

workload to the student ("is that one sentence? How can you break that down into maybe two different sentences? Or maybe combine your thoughts? Your choice.")

### *Evidence of Parental Competence: Use of High Leverage Practices*

Throughout the various sources of data collected (surveys, interviews, observations), an unanticipated finding emerged: the homeschool parents in the present study were using a number of special education high-leverage practices (HLPs). HLPs are defined as "practices that can be used to leverage student learning across different content areas, grade levels, and student abilities and disabilities" (McLeskey et al., 2017). Developed by a team of researchers in special education and published by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the Collaboration for Effective Educator, Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) Center, there are a total of 22 HLPs that were released as part of a text entitled *High-Leverage Practices in Special Education* (McLeskey et al., 2017). These HLPs are grouped into four categories: collaboration, assessment, social-emotional-behavioral practices, and instruction.

It was found that the parents in the current study used practices from all four of the HLP categories. These will be expanded upon in the following sections.

**HLP Category 1: Collaboration**. Collaborating with professionals to increase student success was identified as an HLP of special educators, and many participants in the present study engaged in this important activity. This could be seen in a variety of ways–from parents such as Dorothy, Marla, and Madeleine seeking out private certified tutors and homeschool classes for their children, to Tonia working closely with an entire cadre of professionals to support her daughter (an SLP, OT, PT, counselor, medical doctors, etc.)

**HLP Category 2: Assessment**. One of the HLPs in this category is "using multiple sources of information to develop a comprehensive understanding of student's strengths and

needs." The parents in the current study used many means to gather a deep understanding of their

children's unique learning profiles. While some parents utilized formal assessments (many

mentioned the annual required standardized test required by the state), more often, this deep

understanding was gained via informal assessment techniques, such as asking questions,

observing their children, and looking to past examples and experiences of what worked and did

not work for their children. It became evident over the course of this study that these parents

knew their children extremely well, both academically and on a social-emotional-behavioral

level. Marla's description of her assessment process was on the more formal end of the spectrum.

She explained:

> I would literally just keep this little assessment for each grade, and I go okay, do we
> know how to do this? Check! Can I do these different skills? And I would go through,
> and I would check off different areas... Does each boy know how to do it?

Tonia allowed herself a bit more flexibility, but clearly knew her daughter's needs and

learning profile. She stated, "And so you know, the state of North Carolina says the requirement

is four hours a day. And we typically would not spend four hours a day. Her attention span

would not do that." Tonia went on to explain how she had to shift her thinking when she began

homeschooling her second child:

> When Riley came along it was much different. You know Amy, I could hand her the
> book by high school and say, "Okay this is what you need to do, just turn it in by Friday,"
> and she would do it. She was very much a self-starter a self-learner. And so going from
> that (and even though I did loosen my teaching style) to Riley, I've really had to do a
> complete change in how I teach, because Riley doesn't learn that way.

Both Kelly and Dorothy spoke of their children as being very visual learners, so they both

selected courses and materials based on that knowledge. Dorothy explained how she signed up

her daughter for a graphic design class ("it's very visual, and I think it really helps."), while

Kelly explained that, "*Veritas* is known as religious, but this is what my son needs, a visual, you

know it's all visual." Many parents in the study spoke about the amount of time they got to spend with their children while homeschooling, and how this really laid the groundwork for meaningful conversations to take place. Whether it was asking questions about how their children learned to read (i.e., Ruthie), or talking through the "bad behavior" of other students in classes their children attended (and what they long-term impacts of that might be), the parents in this study were afforded an incredible amount of time to gain a very deep understanding of their children, both as learners and as people.

**HLP Category 3: Social-emotional-behavioral Practices.** Providing positive and constructive feedback was identified as an HLP of special educators, and many of the parents in the current study demonstrated a commitment to this valuable practice. Lola, for example, described a situation where her son was no longer enjoying one of his homeschool classes (and the conversation that ensued):

> What we just decided today, we're going to quit (the Harry Potter class). But see, this is the nice thing about homeschooling. It doesn't matter, like I told them this morning, we got a week behind because we went out of town. And he was seemingly discouraged with that. And so we had talked about, "Well are you discouraged because you're behind? Because it totally doesn't matter...Or is it that you're just done with the class, and you've learned what you needed to learn out of it?" And so he thought about it, and he decided yeah he's learned what he wanted to know and actually he's learned way more than a nine-year-old would be expected to.

Lola went on to say:

> Yeah, I don't get the whole thing when people say you can't ever quit if you start something. And really as adults we don't do that. We start things, and you try them out and if it's not a good fit, it's not a good fit. I would rather give kids the message that it's perfectly reasonable to quit things; in fact it's good, it's healthy to be like, "You know what? This isn't a very good match."

Throughout the literacy observations, there were countless examples of positive and constructive feedback provided by parents to their children. For example, during a writing lesson Alison was observed saying to her daughter "Right! It has an emotion word" and "Oh, that's a good idea!"

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Similarly, Jan was observed exclaiming to her son (also during writing), "That's pretty good! You have over a page of writing on this book!" Tonia also used specific praise, explaining to her daughter, "I like the way you transitioned the body paragraphs." During her writing class, Kendra used many examples of positive and constructive feedback, including "Got it! Non-restrictive!" "Yeah!" with a high-five, and "Good job making a mistake!" with a fist bump.

**HLP Category 4: Instruction.** One of the HLPs identified by McLeskey and colleagues (2017) was adapting curriculum tasks and materials for specific learning goals. The parents in the present study accomplished this in a variety of ways, many of which were identified previously under the themes of "follow the child" and "adapting to unique learning needs." It seemed that, for many parents, this ability to adjust, adapt, and "meet the child where they were" was a primary benefit of homeschooling. As Marla described (upon realizing her kids didn't have basic phonics skills): "We went backwards. And basically, we re-taught phonics. Like the old-fashioned way. You know, CVC, letter patterns, the whole thing." Similarly, when Alison opted to have her daughter use a white board rather than paper and pencil (which was becoming too dull and repetitive), she was adapting so that her daughter could accomplish her goals.

Another HLP in the category of "instruction" was the use of strategies to promote active student engagement. Again, the parents in the current study presented numerous examples of using this effective practice. Jan, for example, developed games and manipulatives to teach her children early literacy skills (letters and sounds). She also signed her children up for naturalistic learning courses at a local farm where they could engage in experiential ("hands-on") education. Alison followed a more traditional learning curriculum, but also found many ways of making it engaging for her daughter. Whether she was alternating reading paragraphs with her daughter ("popcorn reading"), asking her daughter to retell or paraphrase what she had read, or making

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competitive games for her daughter to work alongside her on a white board with dry erase markers, Alison made active engagement a priority of her instruction.

**Evidence of Parental Competence: Use of Emergent Curriculum Practices**

A second unanticipated finding that emerged from the data was that homeschool parents in the current study were using many practices associated with Emergent Curriculum. Emergent Curriculum is an approach to teaching that emphasizes being responsive to the student's interests to create meaningful educational experiences (Cassidy et al., 2003; Crowther, 2005). According to Yu-le (2004), Emergent Curriculum "departs away from the idea that 'everything is predefined' and maintains that 'everything is developing'" (p. 1). Thus, rather than follow a strict curriculum, the teacher creates plans on a day-to-day basis according to observation and the student's needs and interests.

It was found that the parents in the current study used practices associated with an Emergent Curriculum approach. These will be expanded upon in the following sections.

**Emergent Curriculum Theme 1: Responsiveness to Student Interest and Needs.** One of the most recurrent themes found across all types of data collected in the present investigation was what the author referred to as "following the child." Stated another way, this theme involved noticing and then responding to individual students' interests and needs. Whether this was done through selecting courses that suited the child's preferences (e.g., Harry Potter genetics class taken by Lola's son) or through being open to alternative methods of teaching literacy (e.g., Kelly's son learning his letters using the Wii video game system), the participants in the current study consistently showed responsiveness to their children's needs and interests. This was in line with the principles guiding an Emergent Curriculum approach.

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**Emergent Curriculum Theme 2: Instructor Observation and Flexibility.** Study

participants also demonstrated a commitment to close observation of their children's learning

and responses, and a willingness to be flexible and adapt if the original approach did not seem to

be working. Whether through a decision to completely abandon an expensive packaged literacy

curriculum after noticing that it was not working (Dorothy) or through a deep understanding of

each child's unique learning profile and the paths that might help them best work with that

(Ruthie), the parents in the present investigation showed keen observation skills and adaptability.

This is another theme that is consistent with an Emergent Curriculum approach.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the major findings uncovered by the study. Findings were

organized according to the research questions. Data from individual interviews, surveys, and

observations revealed research participants' experiences and choices with regards to homeschool

literacy instruction. As is characteristic of qualitative research, numerous quotations from

participants were included. By using the participants' exact words, I strove to authentically

portray the reality of the parents and families studied.

One set of findings of this study concerned literacy methods used to teach homeschool

students with unique learning needs. It was found that a majority of participants (80%) felt that

immersion in reading authentic text was the best way to teach reading, with literacy being

integrated both across curricular subjects and throughout the day. In addition, 80% of

participants stated that they used a literacy curriculum.

Another set of findings related to sources of information that homeschool parents used to

select literacy methods and materials to teach their children with unique learning needs. I found

that all participants "followed the child" as a means of selecting instructional materials for

literacy. In addition, parents drew upon their own past experiences and education, other homeschool parents and groups, and the internet.

The third set of findings centered around parental confidence and competence. It was found that the homeschool parents in the present study displayed evidence of both confidence and competence.

Regarding confidence specifically, I found that the majority of participants (80%) cited that there was an inner knowing or trusting of their gut in choosing to homeschool. Parents also mentioned that support from other parents, their own past experiences, and skill sets created confidence.

In the realm of competence, it was found that all parents indicated that both they and their child(ren) were pleased and happy with the homeschool experience. In addition, all of the parents mentioned seeing success, progress, and transformation in their child. Competence was also demonstrated by parents' willingness and ability to adapt to the child's needs.

Findings from the observations corroborated the findings from the interviews and surveys. In addition, two unanticipated research findings related to parental competence emerged: the homeschool parents in the present study were using a number of special education high-leverage practices (HLPs) and components of Emergent Curriculum. The HLPs were identified as: (a) collaborating with professionals, (b) using multiple sources of information to develop a comprehensive understanding of student's strengths and needs, (c) providing positive and constructive feedback, (d) adapting curriculum tasks and materials for specific learning goals, and (e) using strategies to promote active student engagement. The components of Emergent Curriculum being used by participants were (a) responsiveness to student interest and needs, and (b) instructor observation and flexibility.

# CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to (a) to explore the instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs, (b) to determine how instructional literacy decisions are made by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs, and (c) to determine how homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit confidence and competence. The research questions were:

1. What instructional methods and materials do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to teach literacy?

2. What sources of information do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to select these methods and materials?

3. In what ways do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit confidence and competence?

The primary sets of findings were as follows:

1. A majority of the participants (80%) felt that immersion in reading authentic text was the best way to teach reading, with literacy being integrated both across curricular subjects and throughout the day or life. In addition, 80% of participants stated that they used a literacy curriculum.

2. All participants "followed the child" as a means of selecting instructional methods and materials for literacy. In addition, they drew upon their own past experiences and education, other homeschool parents and groups, and the internet.

3. The majority of participants (80%) cited that there was an inner knowing and trusting of their gut that they drew upon to make decisions throughout the homeschool process. Parents also mentioned that support from other parents, their own past experiences, and skill sets created confidence.

4. All parents indicated that both they and their child(ren) were pleased and happy with the homeschool experience. In addition, all of the parents mentioned seeing success, progress, and transformation in their child as a result of deciding to homeschool.

5. The homeschool parents in the present study were using a number of special education high-leverage practices (HLPs) and components of Emergent Curriculum.

This chapter will explore theoretical implications of the findings, as they relate to Social Cognitive Theory. Following the theoretical implications, I will discuss practical implications of the study, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research. The chapter will conclude with a brief summary.

## Theoretical Implications

As was discussed in chapter 2, the theoretical framework guiding this study was Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT, 2017). I selected two aspects of SCT, in particular, to look for in the present study. These were: (a) reciprocal determinism and (b) observational learning/ modeling. Each of these aspects will be discussed in the following sections.

### Reciprocal Determinism

One major component of SCT is that of reciprocal determinism, which refers to the dynamic and reciprocal interaction between the individual, their environment, and behavior.

Stated another way, reciprocal determinism can be thought of as the idea that a person can be both an agent for change and a responder to change. Hence, things such as the environment, the examples of role models, and reinforcement can prompt an individual to change (Bandura, 1986). Prior to data collection, I expected that evidence of reciprocal determination would be revealed through observing and interviewing study participants. Indeed, it was found that each parent brought to the homeschool experience their unique set of learned experiences and skill sets (the "individual" component of the aforementioned triad), which intersected with the external context of public school and/or the homeschool support community (the "environment" component) as well as with that parent's response to circumstances to achieve goals (the "behavior" component). Through interacting with the homeschool community (parent groups, co-ops, and informal discussion), participants gained confidence and competence to carry out the momentous endeavor of homeschooling their children. In response to various circumstances (e.g., poor fit with public school, ineffective instructional approach or tool), participants adapted their behavior (switching to homeschool or selecting a different approach or tool). In these instances, the study participants were acting both as responders to change and as agents of change.

Reciprocal determinism can be exhibited in either a negative or positive direction. This study provided examples of each. In the former case (which can be thought of as a "downward spiral"), a particular environment (e.g., the public school setting, with its "excessive testing" and "pigeon-holing" of students) interacts with negative parent beliefs ("public school can't meet my child's needs"), which in turn interact with parental behavior that is in alignment with that belief (pulling the child from public school). By contrast, an 'upward spiral' can occur. In this case, the parent has a positive belief ("I can educate my child better than the schools can"), which

interacts with a corresponding behavior (the parent opting to homeschool and selecting approaches that suit the child), which in turn interacts with the environment (supportive homeschool community with similar experiences). In each case, the components of the reciprocal determinism triad were clearly present.

**Observational Learning/Modeling**

Another component of SCT is that of modeling or observational learning. This essentially involves an individual observing the behavior of another and replicating it. I anticipated that parents in the study would use a variety of models, including their own past experiences in the educational system. Indeed, it was found that modeling was utilized by participants in three distinct ways: (a) modeling based on positive past examples, (b) modeling based on past negative (or non) examples, and (c) modeling based on other parents in the homeschool community. Each of these aspects will be discussed in the following sections.

*Modeling: Positive Examples*

Many participants spoke about their own background and training in education providing them with a model as they homeschooled their children. For example, Alison (a former teacher) used the very same curriculum her mother had used to teach her as she taught literacy to her daughter. Tonia, Jan, and Kelly had all taken education courses, and this helped to build their comfort in homeschooling their own children. Tonia spoke about how, when she first started homeschooling, she tried to recreate what she had seen based on her own schooling experiences. She stated:

> When we first started, I had in my head a picture of school. The school that I had been to, the school that she had been to–I had this picture of how it should be. You know, everything to mimic a school environment.

Ruthie shared many examples of how she drew upon her own experiences as a student, a writer, and a scholar to help her son follow his chosen homeschool path. She shared:

> So yeah, I felt completely prepared to homeschool…and I also, I'm a…this is going to sound kind of ironic but I'm a very academic person. I was a very school-y, I loved school and was just like a straight A student. I'm, I'm a very studious person. So, when I got interested in homeschooling, I just read a lot about it. I just read like everything I could find about it. So, um, I felt like I understood it. I knew what I was getting into. I felt very prepared in that way. So I do feel like my life experience and my academic background and everything has definitely, um, been put to use.

*Modeling: Negative Examples*

Other parents (such as Daniel, Dorothy, and Lola) used their experiences with public school as a non-example. Hence, they chose to do the opposite when they homeschooled their own children. Daniel felt that the rigor in public schools was lacking; when he homeschooled, he selected methods and materials that he believed would provide appropriate challenge for his daughter. He also wanted to avoid excessive testing, which he felt took a lot of the joy out of learning. He stated:

> I've taught in public schools, and academic rigor isn't the strength of public school. One thing that really bothers me about the school is the No Child Left Behind testing. The testing is not only meaningless, it's counterproductive…What a great way to turn somebody off to learning. Learning is exciting, and you know …And then the teachers aren't able to teach what they're good at what they're doing. And they should have some ability to customize their classes, and so …: And so that was really a downer for me.

Lola opted to move away from the "empty vessel" concept of learning that she witnessed in the public school setting (the idea that teacher transmits knowledge to student) to one of experience and exploration for her own children in the homeschool setting. She explained:

> I mean, I guess I didn't realize all of this at first because we grew up in the school system. And so you kind of think that's how you would learn stuff, it was like people teaching you stuff. But the longer I've done this now, I have no doubt. I watched a lot of my friends unschool their kids and they completely let the kids to do whatever they wanted the whole time and their kids are doing great. We didn't do that, but I realized at some point along the way that I didn't need to teach them anything. I just gathered resources.

*Modeling: Other Parents and Tutors*

Bandura (1986) explained that when people see someone else rewarded for a behavior, they tend to behave in the same way in order to attain similar results. Study participants did this in their decision to utilize other homeschool parents and tutors as models; Marla explained how she learned many things through the strong community of homeschool parents she encountered when she began homeschooling:

> I very quickly joined homeschool groups in the area and met incredible people...And that was where I really got connected to the homeschool community, the homeschool mothers, and I met a couple really phenomenal women who just helped me remain confident and competent, and they shared information sort of like I'm sharing with you.

Marla also shared that she turned to the private tutors she hired for her sons. She stated, "I had the help of good guidance too. Because I always had a tutor, like yourself, who kind of taught me how to do it."

Later, when she was more experienced as a homeschool parent, Marla became a resource for families who were new to the homeschool community. Similarly, Tonia described how she served both as a guide and a resource for families who were new to homeschooling or who were seeking answers and/or resources about the homeschool experience. Bandura (2017) also posited that people are more likely to imitate those with whom they identify. Madeleine demonstrated this when she spoke of a close family friend who not only encouraged her to homeschool but also provided her with many resources and ideas. She shared, "Our good friends in Virginia…she homeschools her two boys and always has. So she had a lot of experience, and then I had a neighbor down the street who also homeschooled, um, three of her four at that time."

*Implications of Parents' use of High-Leverage Practices*

As was discussed in the previous chapter, one unanticipated finding related to parental competence was that the participating parents were utilizing special education HLPs. Defined as

"practices that can be used to leverage student learning across different content areas, grade levels, and student abilities and disabilities" (McLeskey et al., 2017, p. 9), HLPs are grouped into four categories: collaboration, assessment, social-emotional-behavioral practices, and instruction. It was found that the parents in the current study used practices from all four of the HLP categories.

This finding corresponds with previous research which indicated that parents are, in fact, capable of delivering effective instruction to their children (Duvall, 1997). While larger studies would be needed to see if the use of special education HLPs is a general trend among homeschool parents of exceptional learners, the implication for the parents in the *current* study is that teacher certification and/or specialized training is *not* a prerequisite for effective teaching in the homeschool setting.

Considering that the participants in the present investigation were using special education HLPs, one potential use of this knowledge could be to connect them with other parents in the homeschool community (and even teachers) to share the variety of creative ways in which they implement HLPs with their children.

*Implications of Parents' Use of Emergent Curriculum Components*

As mentioned in Chapter 4, a second unanticipated finding related to parental competence was that participants were using many practices associated with Emergent Curriculum. This approach to teaching emphasizes being responsive to the student's interests to create meaningful educational experiences (Cassidy et al., 2003; Crowther, 2005). It is a dynamic and flexible approach, which unfolds according to teacher observation and the student's unique needs and interests. The components of Emergent Curriculum that I found being used by

study participants were (a) responsiveness to student interest and needs, and (b) instructor observation and flexibility.

These findings suggest that (for the homeschool parents in the current study), an effective teaching approach is comprised of several components: (a) a willingness to "follow the child" as the guide for his or her own learning process; (b) the instructor's keen ability to closely observe, listen to and learn from the student; and (c) the ability to change course, adapt, and be flexible when the original trajectory is not working.

Considering that the participants in the present investigation are using components of Emergent Curriculum in their teaching, one potential use of this knowledge could be for elementary and secondary educators to consider implementing similar components into their own instruction.

## Practical Applications

From a practical standpoint, the findings from this study may be useful to educators and researchers in a variety of ways. The following section will discuss implications of the study for (a) educators as a whole, (b) special educators, and (c) homeschool families.

### Implications for Educators

This study revealed several implications that may be relevant to educators. One of these is the use of grammar instruction. Although less common in public schools today than in past years, grammar instruction was a very common theme of the literacy programs of many of the participants in the present study. Many study participants cited the benefits of such instruction, including the fact that "it makes you a better reader", "it helps with learning a foreign language", and "it really makes you think about your writing". Sentence diagramming, while sometimes frowned upon by schools today, was a very common practice in this study, and parents wished

they had had more of it when they were in school. This may be worth further exploration, especially for educators or parents who work with students in the public school setting.

A second practical application can be found in the alternative and creative approaches to literacy employed by the participants in the present study. From using the Wii video game system and road signs to teach letters, to writing YouTube scripts and playing Words with Friends, the parents in this study were willing to try many "outside-the-box" approaches with their children (which were met with great success and enthusiasm!). While not all of these options would necessarily be practical in a public school setting, they show the power of being innovative and following a child's natural interests and inclinations when choosing literacy methods. This is a message that is worth remembering and can be carried into many educational contexts.

A third practical application is the effective use of informal assessment techniques. While public schools tend to put great emphasis on formal standardized assessments, the parents in the present study used a variety of effective formative assessments that enabled them to have a very profound understanding of their children's learning profiles. Participants were continually asking probing questions to check for understanding and to push learning deeper; they observed and talked with their children frequently and in a very focused way to gather information. None of this seemed to be as stress-inducing or time-consuming as the typical standardized assessment format; yet through it, the parents were able to glean a very deep understanding of their children as learners and as people. Perhaps parents and educators who have children in the public school setting could learn from these examples.

**Implications for Special Educators**

As the founder/owner of a learning clinic that focuses on SEL (social emotional learning), this study revealed a variety of implications both for myself and for others who work with exceptional learners. One of these is to consider how special educators can implement the principles and practices being used by unschoolers. In particular, it may be beneficial to focus on (a) developing self-regulated learners, (b) tapping into the power of informal assessment and keen observation of students, and (c) valuing and utilizing parent input.

*Developing Self-Regulated Learners*

Ruthie, a self-proclaimed unschooler, shared that one of the main goals of unschooling was to help children develop into self-regulated learners. This is an important goal for all learners, but in particular, for those who have exceptional learning needs. Just as the participants in the study opted to veer away from 'one-size-fits-all' approaches (and toward a model that 'follows the child'), special educators can make it a priority to follow student interest, strength, and choice.

*Use of Informal Assessment and Observation*

Rather than rely solely on a formal or standardized assessment model, special educators can make a concerted effort to use the power of close observation and informal/formative assessment. This enables them to develop a deep understanding of the learner and to improve their teaching. In addition, informal assessment and observation have the benefit of generally being less disruptive, invasive, or anxiety-provoking than traditional formal/standardized tests.

*Valuing Parent Input*

The participants in the study were extremely knowledgeable about their children, both as learners and as people. They understood what had worked for their children, what motivated

them, and what had been unsuccessful in the past. This information has particular relevance to special educators, who (per IDEA), must work closely with parents and families throughout the IEP process. As opposed to viewing parents and families as "needing to be educated" about how to help their children succeed, educators can honor and value their input and wisdom. This shift in dynamic will not only result in a better understanding of the child as whole, but it also sets the stage for future collaboration and trust.

**Implications for Homeschool Educators**

It is important to consider that the participants in my study were a very unique subset of the homeschool population. Many of them had graduate degrees; all of them had attended college. A surprisingly large number of the participants had either worked in education or had taken coursework in education-related fields in the past. This may have contributed to their high-quality homeschool instruction and effectiveness in teaching their children. One possible implication of this information would be for homeschool parents to network and collaborate to share their practices. While my study did not capture the subset of homeschool parents without college or graduate degrees, these individuals would certainly have valuable ideas and practices that could be shared.

<div align="center">

**Limitations**

</div>

As is the case with any research endeavor, this study has several limitations. One of these is the fact that I was unable to use the assessment measure originally intended to screen study participants (children). Upon communicating with interested homeschool families, I learned that many of them (particularly those who had struggling learners without diagnosed disabilities) had purposefully chosen to avoid standardized assessments of any kind. As Ruthie put it, she had

"deliberately chosen not to assess in this way." Thus, in order to include these participants' perspectives, I had to rely on parents' description of their children's literacy difficulties.

A second limitation was the fact that three out of the ten participants did not have an official, documented diagnosis of an exceptional learning need. While it was my original intent to include only students with exceptionalities, this proved to be extremely challenging, especially given the attitudes toward formal assessment that are present in much of the homeschool community.

A third limitation was what could be called "self-selection bias." In essence, since the study was completely voluntary, it could be that those parents who chose to participate might be unique or different in some fundamental ways from others who may not have volunteered. This could have resulted in the absence of certain voices and perspectives from the present study.

A fourth limitation was the lack of hard data on the literacy abilities of the students in the study. While I chose not to collect that information, because the study was looking at what literacy methods and materials were used and how they were chosen (not effectiveness), it would have been helpful to see if students were making progress in all areas of literacy.

Finally, there was a high percentage of parents with an education background who participated in the study (and an even higher percentage of parents with college degrees). It would be helpful to have had a more diverse sample so that a different perspective/voice could be included.

### Concluding Thoughts and Implications for Birth-Grade 12 Learners

While this study provided valuable insights into homeschool literacy instruction, additional research should be conducted in this area. One possible area of research would be to look at the effectiveness of various homeschool literacy approaches. This would allow for an

understanding of not only what is being used to teach literacy in the homeschool setting, but also how it is working and for whom. Another area for future research would be to conduct a study that includes only a sample of students with documented areas of exceptionality. This might provide a perspective or information that the present study was not able to capture. Additionally, a larger, more diverse sample for future research studies would allow for exploration of some of the limitations explored above. For example, including more parents without education background and those without college degrees would enable for a broader understanding of homeschool literacy instruction. Studies with a larger sample size could also explore whether the use of HLPs and Emergent Curriculum components is a general practice across homeschool families. Finally, future studies could explore various sectors of the homeschool community, including unschoolers, gameschoolers, homeschool classes and groups, and the use of parent support networks and co-ops.

## Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study was (a) to explore the instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs, (b) to determine how instructional literacy decisions are made by homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs, and (c) to determine how homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit confidence and competence. This study was necessary because there is very little current research that explores how literacy is taught in the homeschool setting, particularly for students with unique learning needs. To address this gap in the research literature, three research questions were asked:

1. What instructional methods and materials do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to teach literacy?

2.  What sources of information do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to select these methods and materials?

3.  In what ways do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit confidence and competence?

To gather information related to these questions, I triangulated data from three sources: a 13-question electronic survey, semi-structured interviews, and open descriptive observations of homeschool literacy instruction. The data were gathered from 10 homeschool educators who had homeschooled a child with unique learning needs for at least one year and lived within a one hour radius of my university. After analyzing the data, five sets of pfindings emerged. These were as follows:

1.  A majority of the participants (80%) felt that immersion in reading authentic text was the best way to teach reading, with literacy being integrated both across curricular subjects and throughout the day or life. In addition, 80% of participants stated that they used a literacy curriculum.

2.  All participants "followed the child" as a means of selecting instructional methods and materials for literacy. In addition, they drew upon their own past experiences and education, other homeschool parents and groups, and the internet.

3.  The majority of participants (80%) cited that there was an inner knowing or trusting of their gut that they drew upon to make decisions throughout the homeschool process. Parents also mentioned that support from other parents and their own past experiences and skill sets created confidence.

4.  All parents indicated that both they and their child(ren) were pleased and happy with the homeschool experience. In addition, all of the parents mentioned seeing

success, progress, and transformation in their child as a result of deciding to homeschool.

5.  The homeschool parents in the present study were using a number of special education high-leverage practices (HLPs) and components of Emergent Curriculum to teach literacy to their children with unique learning needs.

**APPENDIX A: Survey Questions**

1.  How would you describe the **structure of your instructional approach** to homeschooling?
    a.  very structured
    b.  somewhat structured
    c.  somewhat unstructured
    d.  very unstructured
    e.  Other (Please describe)_____

2.  Describe your level of **adherence to a curriculum**.
    a.  Follow curriculum guide to the tee
    b.  Use curriculum as a starting point, but supplement with other materials
    c.  Use curriculum as a reference
    d.  Do not follow a curriculum
    e.  Other (Please describe) _____

3.  Do you identify with a **specific curriculum or approach**? Check all that apply. (e.g., Montessori, Waldorf, Unschooling, etc.)
    a.  Charlotte Mason Method
    b.  Classical Homeschooling
    c.  Eclectic Homeschooling
    d.  School-at-Home
    e.  Montessori
    f.  Waldorf
    g.  Unschooling
    h.  Other (Please describe)_____

4.  Do you participate in a homeschool **co-op or other networking group**?
    a.  Yes (Please describe)_____-
    b.  No

5.  **How long** have you been homeschooling?
    a.  Three years
    b.  Four years or less
    c.  Five years or less
    d.  10 years or less
    e.  More than 10 years

6.  **How many children** do you homeschool?
    a.  One
    b.  Two
    c.  Three
    d.  Four or more

7.  Approximately **how much time each day** do you devote to homeschooling?

a. Three hours or less
b. Four to five hours
c. Six to seven hours or less
d. Eight hours or more

8. What is your **child's current age?**
   a. 0 to 3 years old
   b. 4 to 5 years old
   c. 6 to 7 years old
   d. 8 to 9 years old
   e. 10 to 11 years old
   f. 12 to 13 years old
   g. 14 to 15 years old
   h. 16 to 17 years old
   i. 18 years or older

9. On what **grade level** do you currently instruct your child?
   a. Kindergarten
   b. First grade
   c. Second grade
   d. Third grade
   e. Fourth grade
   f. Fifth grade
   g. Sixth grade
   h. Seventh grade
   i. Eighth grade
   j. Ninth grade
   k. Tenth grade
   l. Eleventh grade
   m. Twelfth grade

10. Does your child have an **identified disability or area of academic difficulty**? If so, please describe.
    a. Yes, _____
    b. No

*please note: as this study is specifically looking at instruction for students with exceptional learning needs, documentation of disability and/or academic difficulty will be requested.*

11. Has your child been identified as **academically and/or intellectually gifted**?
    a. Yes (Please describe)_____
    b. No

12. How would you rate your perceived level of **confidence** in teaching literacy (reading and writing) to your child?

a. 1-not at all confident
b. 2-not very confident
c. 3-somewhat confident
d. 4-confident
e. 5-very confident

13. <u>How would you rate your perceived level of **competence** in teaching literacy (reading and writing) to your child</u>?
    a. 1-not at all competent
    b. 2-not very competent
    c. 3-somewhat competent
    d. 4-competent
    e. 5-very competent

# APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1.Tell me the story about how you came to homeschool.
   a. Own schooling experiences?
   b. Child's experiences?
   c. Friends', contacts' experiences?
2.Tell me about how your own skills/experiences prepared you to homeschool.
   d. At the decision point, which topics/subjects did you feel post prepared to teach?
3.Tell me about a typical day of homeschooling at your house.
   e. Schedule? (or not!)
   f. Activities?
   g. Instructional materials, methods?
   h. Assessment?
   i. Co-ops/groups?
4.Tell me about how you go about choosing the instructional materials you use for homeschool.
   j. Past experiences?
   k. Co-op/networking group?
5.What can you tell me about your approach to literacy?
   l. Tell me about the methods and materials you use to teach literacy.
   m. How has your child responded to your literacy instruction?
   n. What has been unexpected about literacy instruction?
      i. How did you navigate this?
6.Tell me about a time when a lesson or activity went really well.
7.Tell me about a time when a lesson or activity didn't go as you envisioned.
8.What educational outcomes are important to you?
   o. What do you hope your child will gain through the homeschooling experience?
9.How do you know your child has grasped/gotten the concept or skill you are teaching?
   p. How do you think about assessment?
10.Tell me about the benefits and drawbacks of using a homeschool approach.
11.How (if at all) as your teaching evolved/changed over time?
12.Overall, tell me how the homeschool experience has been.
   q. Tell me more.
   r. Specific examples.
13.Is there anything else you would like to tell me about homeschooling that I may not have asked you about?

**Personal Data/Demographic Questions**

(to be completed at time of interview)

a. What is your **current age**?
    i. Under 25 years old
    ii. 26 to 30 years old
    iii. 31 to 35 years old
    iv. 36 to 40 years old
    v. 41 to 45 years old
    vi. 46 to 50 years old
    vii. Over 50 years old

b. What is your **gender**?
    i. Male
    ii. Female
    iii. Other

c. What do I **need to know about you** that will help me to understand your **experiences/outlook**? (e.g., culture, identity, background, etc.)

d. What is your **highest level of education** received?
    i. High school diploma
    ii. Bachelor's degree
    iii. Master's degree
    iv. Doctoral Degree
    v. Other (please describe)

e. Do you have any **degrees or certifications**? If so, please describe.
    i. Yes (please list)_____
    ii. No

f. What is your **child's gender**?
    i. Male
    ii. Female
    iii. Other

g. What do I **need to know about your child** that will help me to understand his/her **experiences/outlook**? (e.g., culture, identity, background, etc.)

# APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

Parent Informed Consent Form

**INFORMED CONSENT FOR SPECIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH**
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

| | |
|---|---|
| **Title of Project:** | Homeschool Literacy Instructional Choices: A Case Study of How Parents Teach Literacy to Their Children with Exceptional Learning Needs |
| **Principal Investigator:** | Abby Ampuja<br>Doctoral Student<br>School of Education<br>Peabody Hall<br>The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill<br>Chapel Hill, NC 27599<br>EMAIL: abbya@live.unc.edu<br>TELEPHONE: 919-749-5072 |
| **Faculty Advisor:** | Jennifer Diliberto, Ph.D.<br>Professor of Special Education<br>School of Education<br>201F Peabody Hall<br>The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill<br>Chapel Hill, NC 27599<br>EMAIL: jdil@email.unc.edu<br>TELEPHONE: 919-966-5078 |

1. **Purpose of the Study**: The purpose of the research is to investigate the instructional methods and materials that homeschool parents use to teach literacy to their children with exceptional learning needs and/or those with academic difficulties.

2. **Procedures**: This study will use a qualitative case study design to explore the instructional methods and materials used to teach literacy by homeschool parents of learners with exceptionalities and those who are at-risk. You will be asked to complete a brief survey and to participate in a 1-1 interview with the researcher on your homeschool instruction approach. In addition, you may be asked to allow the researcher to observe one 45-minute literacy lesson in your home as you teach your child. As a pre-screening measure, your child's reading and writing performance will be assessed prior to the interview. This assessment will take no more than 45 minutes. The interview (and observation, if applicable) will be audio recorded in order to allow the researcher to transcribe the data. After transcription, the audio recordings will be destroyed.

3. **Discomforts and Risks**: There is a risk that you or your child may experience embarrassment or anxiety as a result of being observed and/or frustration with the lesson content. Participants will be offered breaks and encouragement to keep the session running smoothly. In addition, the researcher has extensive experience in working with students with exceptional learning needs and their families and is quite sensitive to their needs. The study procedures will take place in a setting that is familiar to the family and one that reduces any kind of embarrassing factors (home).

4. **Benefits**: By participating in the study, you and your child will have the opportunity to contribute to the limited research base on homeschool instructional approaches. This will enable educators and parents alike to learn about the methods and materials that are used in the homeschool setting, a topic that has been notably absent from the research literature up to the present time.

5. **Duration**: The project (survey, interview, observation, and member checking) will take approximately 6-8 hours total for each family (variance depending on whether observation is conducted), and will be completed between November 2018 and April 2019, at a mutually agreed upon time.

6. **Statement of Confidentiality**: Your participation and your child's participation in this research will remain confidential. Only the research staff involved will know that you and your child participated. The data generated from the research will be stored and secured at Dr. Dilberto's office in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in a locked file cabinet and on a locked/ password-protected computer. In the event of a publication resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information about your child will be shared. In other words, pseudonyms will be used and the community name will be disguised. The following may review and copy records related to this research: The Office of Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill IRB and Office of Human Research Ethics.

7. **Right to Ask Questions**: You can ask question about this research. Contact Ms Abby Ampuja at 919-749-5072 or Dr. Jennifer Diliberto at 919-966-5078 with questions. You can also call this number if you have complaints or if you feel you have been harmed by the research. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, contact The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Office for IRB and Office of Human Research Ethics at 919-966-3113.

8. **Voluntary Participation**: Your decision for you and your child to participate in this research is voluntary. Refusal to take part in this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you or your child would receive otherwise.

Parent Informed Consent Form

_____

Print First and Last Name of Your Child

_____

Parent or Guardian Signature                                          Date

_____

Person Obtaining Consent                                          Date

# APPENDIX D: OBSERVATION GUIDE

(From Creswell, 2007, p. 137)

*length of literacy observation: 45 minutes*

| **Descriptive Notes** | **Reflective Notes** |
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# APPENDIX E: RESEARCH QUESTIONS/SURVEY & INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

## MATRIX

**Research Questions**: (row 1 from left to right)

| **Survey/ Interview Questions:** (below) | **(RQ1) What instructional methods and materials do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to teach literacy?** | **(RQ2) What sources of information do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to select these methods and materials?** | **(RQ3) In what ways do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit self-efficacy?** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Survey Q1→ | How would you describe the structure of your instructional approach to homeschooling? | | |
| Survey Q2→ | Describe your level of adherence to a curriculum. | | |
| Survey Q3→ | Do you identify with a specific curriculum or approach? Check all that apply. (e.g., Montessori, Waldorf, Unschooling, etc.) | | |
| Survey Q4→ | | Do you participate in a homeschool co-op or other networking group? | |
| Survey Q12→ | | | How would you rate your perceived level of **confidence** in teaching literacy (reading and writing) to your child? |
| Survey Q13→ | | | How would you rate your perceived level of **competence** in teaching literacy (reading and writing) to your child? |
| Interview Q1→ | | Tell me the story about how you came to homeschool. | Tell me the story about how you came to homeschool. |
| Interview Q2→ | | Tell me about how your own skills/experiences prepared you to homeschool your child. | Tell me about how your own skills/experiences prepared you to homeschool your child. |

| Interview Questions: (below) | (RQ1) What instructional methods and materials do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to teach literacy? | (RQ2) What sources of information do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs use to select these methods and materials? | (RQ3) In what ways do homeschool parents of students with unique learning needs exhibit self-efficacy? |
|---|---|---|---|
| Interview Q3→ | Tell me about a typical day of homeschooling at your house. | | |
| Interview Q4→ | | Tell me about how you go about choosing the instructional materials you use for homeschool. | |
| Interview Q5→ | What can you tell me about your approach to literacy? | | 5a-How has your child responded to your literacy instruction? 5b-What has been unexpected about literacy instruction, and how did you respond? |
| Interview Q6→ | | | Tell me about a time when a lesson or activity went really well. |
| Interview Q7→ | | | Tell me about a time when a lesson or activity didn't go as you envisioned. |
| Interview Q8→ | | | What educational outcomes are important to you? 8a-What do you hope your child will gain through the homeschool experience? |
| Interview Q9→ | | | How do you know that your child has gotten/grasped the skill or concept that you are teaching? |
| Interview Q10→ | | | Tell me about the benefits and drawbacks of using a homeschool approach. |
| Interview Q11→ | | | How (if at all) has your teaching evolved/changed over time? |
| Interview Q12→ | | | Overall, tell me how the homeschooling experience has been. |

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