



University of  
**Southern**  
**Queensland**

**FACILITATING READERS:  
EXPLORING HOW PARENTAL BELIEFS INFLUENCE  
LEARNING TO READ IN HOME EDUCATION  
THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE**

A thesis submitted by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Home education has seen a meteoric rise in the past 5 years, with registered home-educated children now accounting for 1% of Australian school children. Home education is not school at home but rather a distinct paradigm of education where each family forms a unique community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) situated within their sociocultural context (Vygotsky, 1935/2011). However, little is known about how home-educating parents teach their children to read, which is a foundational skill for learning and life. This mixed methods research utilised a quantitative survey of 185 Australian home-educating parents and qualitative interviews with seven home educators to explore how parents enact reading education within the home learning environment and to what extent parental beliefs about reading influence these choices. The findings show that learning to read in home education is centred on the individual needs of the child and the family. Home-educating parents believe themselves to be facilitators of reading who cater to the learning methods and experiences best for the individual child. The choices they make are influenced by both their personal worldview and their prior experiences of reading. Implications of this study include strengthening understanding of the varied ways children learn to read for the benefit of home educators, home education support networks and regulators, and insights for teaching reading in mainstream education. An original contribution to theory has been created by the conceptualisation of a model of reading in home education.

## CERTIFICATION OF THESIS

I, Krystal Cathcart, declare that the thesis entitled *Facilitating Readers: Exploring How Parental Beliefs Influence Learning to Read in Home Education Through Communities of Practice* is not more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references, and footnotes. The thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Date: 25 October 2024

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
CoP	Community of practice
HERP	Home Education Reading Practices
HLE	Home literacy environment
NSW	New South Wales
PRBI	Parental Reading Beliefs Inventory
SOLAR	Science of Language and Reading
ZPD	Zone of proximal development

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Home education is an education approach where families take ownership of their children's education and facilitate learning within the home environment (Barratt-Peacock, 2003). As such, the primary caregiver is responsible for planning, directing, and/or delivering the chosen learning experiences. In recent years, the number of home-educating Australian families home educating has risen substantially, with the number of families registered to home educate doubling between 2019 and 2023 (Cassidy, 2023). In Australia, home education was once seen as the playground of religious fundamentals or social progressives (Morton, 2010); however, it now attracts families from diverse backgrounds and various life philosophies. While precise numbers are impossible to quantify due to many unregistered families, in 2022, there were 43,248 children legally registered to home educate in Australia (Cassidy, 2023). In the same year, 4,042,512 students were enrolled to be educated across 9,614 schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023), meaning that home-educated students represented 1% of the population of Australian school-aged children. The increase in home education research in recent years has helped to establish it as a valid form of schooling; however, there are still many gaps that need to be addressed to yield comprehensive research in this field within Australia (Jackson, 2017, 2021).

Of particular note is the lack of scholarly work on the teaching of reading in home education. In traditional education, reading forms a key pillar of the curriculum, with research showing both the importance of learning to read (Ritchie & Bates, 2013; Rowe, 2006) and the vital role parental beliefs play in influencing literacy development at home (Brown et al., 2012; Hood et al., 2008; Neumann et al., 2013; Stockard, 2010; Weigel et al., 2006). Yet no research has been located to show how Australian home educators teach their children to read, nor why they make the choices they do in relation to their chosen methods (Jackson, 2017, 2021).

As such, it is important to understand the choices home educators make when guiding their children's education, as there is potential to benefit parents and caregivers who take on the responsibility of this work as well as contributing to the scholarly literature. Knowing how home educators teach reading, one of the most important building blocks of early childhood (Brown et al., 2013), is important as it is a critical component of mainstream education (Hempenstall, 2016; Thomson et al., 2013). Given its importance, this study seeks to understand what the experience of learning to read is like for home-educating families and the factors that impact educational decisions about learning to read.

### **1.1 Background and significance**

This research grew out of personal and professional interest. I began my teaching career 15 years ago, working as a reading intervention teacher in a rural school that supported students from foundation through to Year 10 (approximately ages 5 to 15 years). This allowed me to see the importance of reading education and the varied approaches and skills needed to teach diverse students in diverse settings. My interest in this research also evolved from my experiences as a home-educating parent for the past 6 years. While the teaching of reading was my speciality in the classroom, I found these same skills and pedagogical models did not necessarily translate easily or effectively into the home education environment. While researching how to successfully home educate my children, I could locate no Australian research, and very limited international research, to support me in teaching my children to read in a home education context. During this time, I was also working as Head of Department for English and Humanities at an independent distance education school. Again, seeing the experiences of parents engaged in teaching their children to read further highlighted to me that home-based education requires different approaches to teaching reading compared to mainstream education. These experiences and the recognised need for research in this field

thus led me to explore how home educators teach reading and how their beliefs influence the teaching of reading.

Reading is well established as an essential life skill (Buckingham et al., 2014; Flint, 2007; Leahy & Fitzpatrick, 2017; Rowe, 2005), and it is imperative to understand how reading education unfolds in home education settings. Unlike teacher-led learning, which is well researched and supported, the beliefs of home-educating parents about reading need clarity to ensure that the home education community has clearer knowledge in this field. Research has shown that home education is a unique paradigm of education with pedagogical approaches distinct from traditional education (Barratt-Peacock, 2003), and this study may therefore provide insight for home educators and regulatory bodies (which are located in each state and territory) in relation to teaching reading.

Home education is considered the original form of education (Barratt-Peacock, 1997). Historically, Australian families have been providing education for their children at home for a wide range of geographic, social, and economic reasons (Chapman & O'Donoghue, 2000). However, the 1872 Education Act in Victoria and the subsequent Federation of Australian states in 1901 gave birth to a serious and organised focus, which has developed into modern mainstream schooling (Harding & Farrell, 2003). While home education has always existed in Australia, many families in the 20th century were noncompliant with compulsory schooling legislation depending on the requirements of where they lived. Due to the increasing numbers of home educators, modern home education in its current form has been legalised and legislated at different times across each state and territory (Harding & Farrell, 2003). It is now legal and regulated Australia-wide.

The changes to home education in Australia over the past 50 years have not just been legislative. Barratt-Peacock (2003) found in 1997 research of Australian home educators that

“their choice of home education indicated the presence of strong, family-based, explanatory systems that were in conflict with those they believed were promoted by local schools” (p. 102). However, recent research has found a diversification of reasons families choose home education, with Slater et al. (2020) finding four key reasons: social and emotional wellbeing, developmental differences, curriculum and standards, and lifestyle choices. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic saw a rise of home-educating families who either fell in love with the lifestyle of home learning or discovered a better fit for their child’s unique needs during the pandemic (English, 2021). While reasons for home educating are discussed in detail in Chapter 2, it is evident that the increasing numbers of children and the diversification of home-educating families are leading to home education becoming a more commonly accepted paradigm of education (English, 2019; English & Gribble, 2021; Home Education Network, n.d.-b; Slater et al., 2020). Therefore, gaining a comprehensive and sound understanding of how Australian home educators facilitate reading is imperative.

In Australia, education, including home education, is a responsibility of the state or territory, with each one having its own regulatory body for registering to home educate. There are also individual requirements and regulations for home education in each state or territory. All states require registration and provision of a learning program, but the degree to which curriculum and reporting are enforced vary (Slater et al., 2020). New South Wales (NSW) legislates rigorous governmental requirements for registered parents related to curriculum, time requirements, and initial home inspections for registration (Drabsch, 2013; NSW Government, n.d.). Parents are required to teach six subjects within the NSW curriculum and to keep planning and monitoring records (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2021). Northern Territory, likewise, requires a yearly registration with a written program that covers the eight learning areas of the Australian Curriculum (Northern Territory Government, n.d.).

Tasmania takes a more child-centred approach that emphasises an individualised learning program and does not prescribe a set curriculum framework (Office of the Education Registrar, 2017). Students in Tasmania may also be enrolled in home education part time in conjunction with mainstream schooling (Office of the Education Registrar, n.d.). Like Tasmania, Victoria also does not set the Australian Curriculum as a requirement but does request a written program tailored to a child’s individual learning needs (Victorian Registration & Qualifications Authority, n.d.). South Australia allows parents to choose a pedagogical approach that best suits their child, but this must be matched to the goals of the Australian Curriculum in the eight learning areas (Government of South Australia, 2023). Western Australian parents must keep records of their child’s learning and write a curriculum program aligned to the Western Australian curriculum (Government of Western Australia, 2020). Queensland also requires a written program and yearly monitoring; however, there is no prescribed curriculum required to be taught or assessed (Queensland Government, 2023a). The Australian Capital Territory also requires a yearly report and written education program of a “high quality” (ACT Government, n.d.). As demonstrated, each state and territory has slightly different requirements, but all aim to ensure registered home educators have a clear and effective plan for educating their child.

## **1.2 Defining key terms**

Within the research, “home education” and “homeschooling” are often used interchangeably. However, home education is generally preferred in Australian-based research as it recognises that home education is not school at home but rather a distinct paradigm of education that is separate from traditional institutional learning (Barratt-Peacock, 2003). This is also reflected by most Australian education departments that utilise the term home education for registered families (English, 2021). Home education is defined as

education provided mostly within the home, where the primary caregiver is responsible for planning, directing, and/or delivering the chosen learning experiences (Barratt-Peacock, 2003; Harding & Farrell, 2003; Jackson, 2017). As such, it is distinct from both mainstream schooling (which occurs in schools) and distance education (which is often online). Distance education is also mostly delivered at home; however, the registered school takes ownership over the curriculum decision-making and, in most schools, the delivery of the learning (Slater et al., 2020). In this thesis, the terms mainstream schooling and day schooling are used interchangeably to reflect traditional, institutional learning conducted by qualified teachers in a government-approved setting (inclusive of public education, private education, and alternative schools).

In all these contexts, teaching reading is a central component of learning. Reading is a complex literacy skill and is defined as the ability to decode written language to comprehend meaning (Konza, 2014; Westerveld et al., 2020). Even though there are other modes of meaning, this thesis considers reading in terms of language mode predominantly. The term “parental beliefs” is inclusive of the assumptions and attitudes about learning (Hirsjärvi & Perälä-Littunen, 2001) of responsible adults (inclusive of all legal carers, biological or not) towards reading and home education. Parental beliefs may be either explicit, which they are conscious of and can verbalise, or implicit, which they are less cognitively or consciously aware of and are seen through their actions and life choices (Sturge-Apple et al., 2015).

### **1.3 Research aims and questions**

Given the importance of learning to read, it is critical that we understand more deeply how home educators teach reading to their children. As such, this mixed methods research aimed first to establish how Australian home educators teach their children to read and, second, why they make the choices they do when teaching reading in the home education

context. This was explored by asking “How do parental beliefs about reading influence the teaching of reading within the home education setting?”

Subquestions that informed the mixed methods study were as follows:

- a. What approaches are used to teach reading in the home education setting?
- b. Why do home educators select these approaches?
- c. What do home-educating parents believe about learning to read?
- d. What do home-educating parents believe about their role in the teaching of reading process?

After establishing these questions, it was apparent that both breadth and depth were needed to fully answer the overarching research question. Due to the lack of data and scholarly literature, a broad understanding of the home education landscape was needed to establish the methods and approaches chosen by Australian home educators when teaching reading. However, to fully answer the research question, an explanatory approach was needed to provide a deep understanding of why parents make these choices. Resultantly, an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach was determined to be the best fit for the needs of this research question.

#### **1.4 Thesis outline**

In this first chapter, I presented an introduction to the research project and contextualised Australian home education. As home education is rising in popularity and prominence, it is clear why reading education is an important area of research. The research questions were presented, and an overview of the thesis provided.

Chapter 2 presents the salient literature about home education in general to give an existing theoretical understanding of what home education looks like. Additionally, mainstream reading research is unpacked, and international research about reading in home

education is presented. Through the combination of these two areas of research, the research problem is identified and contextualised.

Chapter 3 presents and justifies the explanatory sequential mixed methods approach to this research. This chapter also presents the conceptual framework of the study that brings together the works of Vygotsky (1934/1999), Lave and Wenger (1991), and Barratt-Peacock (2003). A model of home education is synthesised to help conceptualise the theoretical framework and situate this research project within the existing theoretical understandings.

Chapter 4 unpacks the results of the Phase 1 quantitative survey to answer key research questions about which methods Australian home educators use to teach reading. It presents demographic data from 185 home-educating families from every state and territory in Australia. Through analysis of the survey tool, parental beliefs about reading are examined and the selected reading methods are outlined.

Chapter 5 utilises multiple case study analysis to present the findings from the Phase 2 qualitative interviews. Each family is presented as a single case study representing a unique community of practice (CoP). This allows the voice of each family to be presented in line with the conceptual framework of this study. These results are then drawn together to present key themes from the multiple case study analysis (Yin, 2018).

Chapter 6 presents the research discussion. It demonstrates mixed methods analysis by synthesising the Phase 1 results with the Phase 2 results and contextualising the findings within existing literature about home education and reading. A reconceptualisation of the theoretical framework is also presented.

Chapter 7 presents the conclusions of the mixed methods research and my original contribution to knowledge: *Facilitating Readers—A Model of Learning to Read in Home*

Education. The limitations of the research are acknowledged and the implications and recommendations presented.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores the current research related to the reading practices of home educators. A literature review in this area is challenging due to the small collection of Australian-based research papers about reading in home education. Consequently, broader research related to teaching reading was investigated by drawing from relevant international studies and carefully critiquing their application to the Australian home education context. As such, the literature review is structured with the following sections: implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, home education research, reading research including in early childhood contexts, and parental beliefs related to home education and teaching reading. I begin this chapter by situating the research within the impact of COVID-19.

### 2.1 Implications of the COVID-19 pandemic

As part of the literature review, it is important to note the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education. The pandemic caused unprecedented challenges to mainstream education, and much research is being conducted to investigate the impact it has had on the school-aged population. One consequence relates to how research refers to “homeschooling.” While in April 2020, 1.5 billion children stayed home from school, this mode of education does not reflect the pedagogical and philosophical approach to home education (McCabe et al., 2021). Girard and Prado (2022), in France, labelled remote learning as homeschooling and found that parents’ prior beliefs about education, specifically where there was an existing supportive home learning environment, positively impacted students during lockdown. While these findings reinforce the importance of the home learning environment, it cannot be drawn upon to understand authentic home education. This is also evident in research by Fontenelle-Tereshchuk (2021) in Canada who conceptualised remote learning as a new form of homeschooling; however, they acknowledged that it is different from the form of education

where parents take full control of a child’s learning, and thus, the research in this area is incongruent with home education research.

On a related note, the pandemic has caused a dramatic increase in the number of children in Australia being authentically home educated. By the end of 2021, approximately 30,000 students across Australia were registered to home educate their children (English & Gribble, 2021), and this rose to 40,000 by the end of 2022 (Cassidy, 2023). While it is impossible to quantify how many people home educate due to the large numbers of unregistered or, as the government terms them, illegal homeschoolers, this is a substantial increase from the 20,000 children registered to home educate at the end of 2019 in Australia (English, 2019; Jackson, 2019). The three most populous states, Queensland, NSW, and Victoria, saw an average increase of between 15% and 25% in one year (English, 2021). This upward trend of home education has also been noted internationally, with the United States seeing the rates of home-educated students increase “from 5.4 percent in the spring of the 2019–2020 school year to 11.1 percent in the fall of the 2020–2021 school year” (Heuer & Donovan, 2021, pp. 6–7). English (2021) postulated that the rise in home education resulted from COVID-era lockdowns, namely, because parents got a “risk-free” trial of home education and, further, got an intimate look at what their children were learning in school. Emerging research further highlights that the COVID-era lockdowns have led to a reconceptualisation of a parent’s role in their child’s education and the choices they make as a result (English, 2021; Heuer & Donovan, 2021).

## **2.2 Home education research**

### **2.2.1 *Overview of home education research***

Although there are many gaps in the field of home education research, there is a developing understanding of what home education is and why it is increasing in popularity

(Harding & Farrell, 2003; Jackson, 2017). It is important to note that the research presented in this literature review must be viewed through the limitations that exist in this field, including the difficulty accessing participants for research, the lack of exhaustive representation, the hesitancy of some home educators to share their experiences (due to negative perceptions of researchers and external institutions), and the vast diversity of families (Jackson & Allan, 2010; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). The lack of published Australian research about reading in home education is also a limitation that should be acknowledged, as a full picture of this in Australia is still emerging.

Pivotal to the understanding of home education within Australia is Barratt-Peacock's (1997) research. While conducted over twenty years ago, it still forms a structural framework for much of the home education research conducted in Australia (Jackson & Allan, 2010). Through extensive qualitative research with 186 families, Barratt-Peacock (1997, 2003) built on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) to conceptualise home education families as CoPs, with key processes and characteristics unique to the mainstream school environment (Barratt-Peacock, 2003). The research identified that homeschooling is not school at home but rather an environment where each family forms its own CoP, which shares four key processes with other participants: domestic occupation, parents as guides, family conversation, and role modelling. Domestic occupation acknowledges that learning for a home-educated child is situated within a real-world context (including responsibilities like chores, farm duties, or family business). Barratt-Peacock (2003), also observed that children take what they have learnt academically and utilise it during play and real-life experiences. Within this, parents assume the role of tutors or guides who provoke the child's interest and participate with them in their learning. This is further enhanced by using conversation to expand knowledge and help children draw connections. Finally, role modelling is the "deliberate manufacture of a

family tradition” (Barratt-Peacock, 2003, p. 108), whereby a culture of learning and curiosity is developed. It is important to note that while the research shows these four processes are common across home-educating families, how families engage with these processes is unique to each CoP.

As demonstrated by the four key processes, home education is distinct; it is a coconstructed model of education where adults and children work together as active participants in the learning process (Barratt-Peacock, 1997). Barratt-Peacock’s (2003) sociocultural assertion that home education creates a complex CoP (within which learning occurs) is well supported by subsequent research (Burke & Cleaver, 2019; English, 2015b; Jackson & Allan, 2010; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). Neuman and Guterman (2016) similarly found that the goals and practices of home education align with the principles of social constructivism. Further, home education is a dynamic process where parents adapt and change their family functioning to accommodate a home education lifestyle as “a different way of living and thinking” (Rothermel, 2003, p. 82). This is echoed by McCabe et al. (2021) in their study of adults who were formerly home educated and their parents, in which home education was viewed as a “gift” that provided a mutually beneficial experience for both adults and children. This is the foundation from which home education can be viewed—not as a set moment or practice in time but as an evolving pedagogical endeavour that is mutually developed between child and parent.

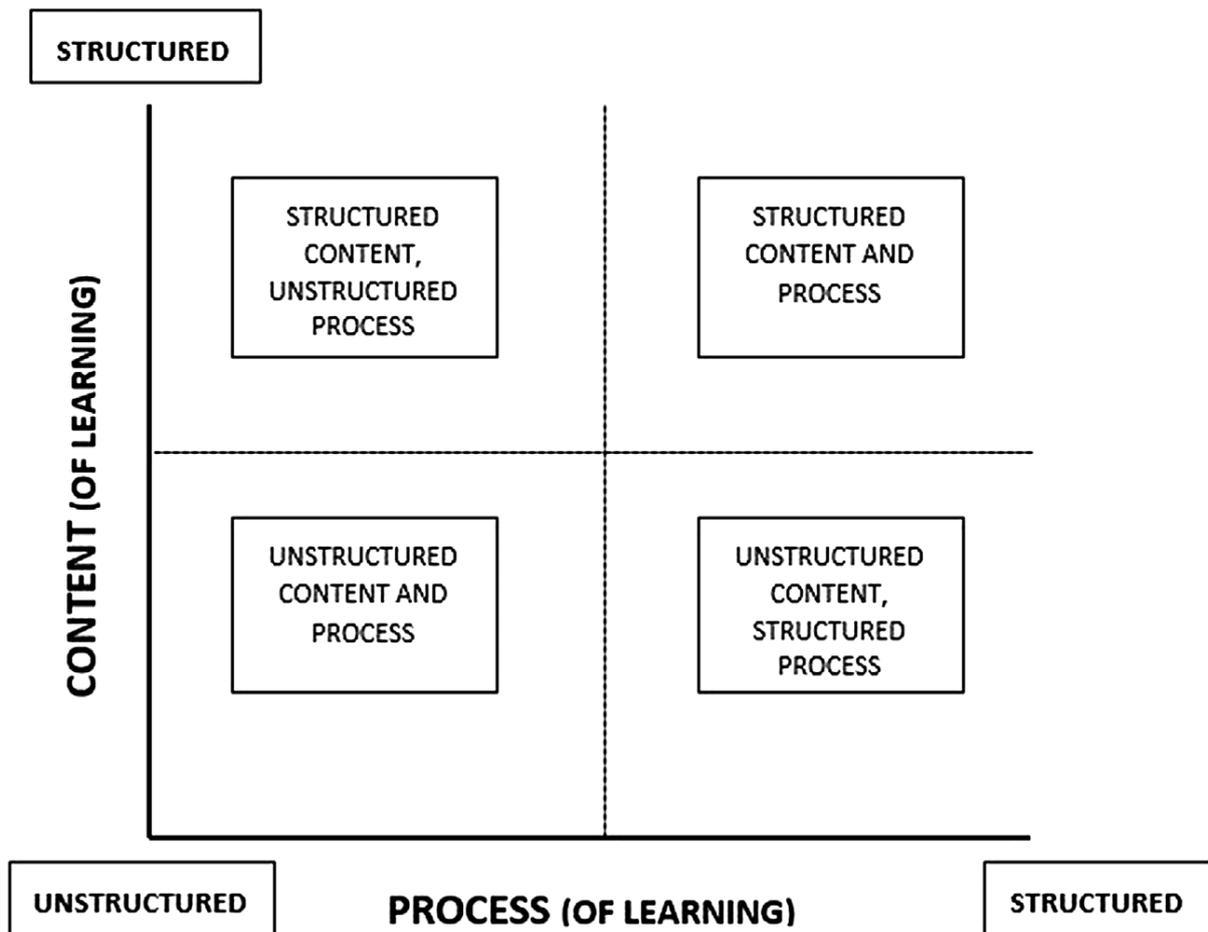
Some theorists, however, are critical of home education, claiming it is elitist and removes students and families from the mainstream education system instead of working together with schools to improve learning and address educational and social concerns about the education system (Morton, 2010). Socialisation difficulties are also cited, with Reich (2005) expressing concern that home education could lead to social deficits or social isolation,

reinforcing dangerous or antagonistic worldviews incongruent with democracy. While home education research about socialisation has indicated isolation or ineptitude is limited (Jackson, 2007; Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013), Kunzman and Gaither (2013) highlighted that the older a home-educated child is, the more likely they are to feel lonely or socially isolated. The authors also found that children who are home educated from the start are more likely to be academically successful than students who transition between mainstream and home education, indicating a need for more longitudinal research into home education outcomes given the unique attributes of this form of education.

While the literature generally agrees that home education is a unique pedagogical paradigm, there exists great diversity within the home education realm in the approaches to learning. This aspect of research is well covered, and various attempts have been made to categorise home educators' methods (English, 2015b; Jackson, 2017; Morton, 2010; Neuman & Guterman, 2017; Rothermel, 2003). In a broad sense, home educators can be categorised as either structured and unstructured (Martin-Chang et al., 2011; Neuman & Guterman, 2017) or formal and informal (Barratt-Peacock, 2003; Croft, 2012; Rothermel, 2011). However, Neuman and Guterman (2017) cautioned that these categories should not be seen as polarised but rather as a spectrum that illustrates how structured or unstructured the content and processes are within a specific family (see Figure 2.1). Herein lies one of the complexities of home education research: There is only an allusion of homogenous groupings (Morton, 2010). Each family has its own unique approach as a CoP. While one family may share some common beliefs and approaches with other families, they can only ever be summarised as "superficially homogenous groups" (Rothermel, 2003, p. 82) or a "collection of diverse groups" (Barratt-Peacock, 2003, p. 82). This is an important consideration as it provides a lens through which to interpret the research about home education practices, outcomes, and motivations.

Figure 2.1

*A spectrum of home education*



Note. From Neuman & Guterman (2017, p. 368).

### **2.2.2 Parental beliefs and motivations of home educators**

Why, then, do parents undertake this diverse and complex form of education? The literature shows that parental beliefs and attitudes are at the core of decision-making regarding their children’s education (English, 2015b; Rothermel, 2003). Barratt-Peacock (2003) found that “the reasons given by Australians for their choice of home education indicated the presence of strong, family-based, explanatory systems” (p. 102). This means that families choose home education as the best fit for their family values and needs. Reilly’s (2007) research with home educating parents of children with disabilities found that they held

concerns regarding the physical, emotional and social safety of their children while others had concerns that their children lacked adequate academic progress. More contemporary data from the NSW Education Standards Authority (2023) show that the most common reasons given by home education registrants were philosophical (21.91%), followed by having a special needs child (17.18%), religion (5.63%), and bullying (0.68%). In general, it is reported that Australian parents choose to home educate based on the “pull” factors (the positive features of home education) or “push” factors (the negative elements of mainstream schooling) (Croft, 2012; Jackson & Allan, 2010).

Research conducted by Slater et al. (2020) surveyed 385 home educators, which provided a total sample of 676 home educated Australian children. From this, they identified four key reasons parents chose home education, which were “social and emotional wellbeing, developmental difference, curriculum and standards, and life style choices” (p. 8). Parents reported the belief that mainstream schools lack the capacity to meet their children’s social and emotional needs, with 22% of the surveyed sample having a diagnosed mental illness. Of those surveyed, 33% identified as having a developmental difference, with dyslexia being the most common; thus, the inability of schools to support developmental and learning challenges was highlighted as the second reason parents opted to home educate. The third reason identified was parental objection to curriculum and standards, with 28.5% of parents reporting a “mismatch between their expectations and the standard of education offered by the mainstream schooling system” (p. 9). Notably, within the group of parents, 6.9% were concerned their child would not graduate high school if they continued in mainstream education. Finally, just under 20% of respondents chose home education due to their life situations, including factors such travel, religion, limited school choice, or financial constraints. Within the broader sample, the authors found that “approximately 25% of all participants ...

indicated that once they were home educating one child, it positively influenced their decision to home educate subsequent children” (p. 10). This indicates that the family unit plays a strong role in motivations to home educate.

There is also evidence that a parent’s initial motivations to home educate often change over time as families evolve their beliefs about education (Rothermel, 2011). Even though the term “parent” is used liberally within home education research, it is important to acknowledge that female caregivers (most often mothers) are consistently the dominant adult involved in home education (Slater et al., 2020). Most research has investigated the views of the primary educator only (Croft, 2012; Neuman & Guterman, 2016) with one notable exception being Rothermel’s (2011) study of 183 families. This study found a father who was the primary educator and purposefully sought input from the secondary parent. The research indicated that the primary parent’s motivations are not always reflected by the secondary parent, and this should be considered while interpreting literature or conducting further research. The research further showed that secondary parents tend to be less involved and less knowledgeable about the academic needs of the child or, in some cases, disagree with approaches taken by the primary parent. This has implications for educating the child as it is unknown how primary and secondary parents interact within a CoP for home educating a child. This warrants further research and understanding.

It is not just parents’ educational motivations that determine their choice to home educate but also their values and beliefs. Morton (2010) identified three broad categories of motivations among home-educating parents: natural, social, and last resort. Natural home educators chose this method of education to reflect their values and philosophies, believing formal education to be contradictory to their lifestyle. For parents where home education was a social choice, they were either attracted by the freedom to impart their beliefs to their

children or repelled by socialised aspects of mainstream education, such as peer relations or teacher–parent conflict. The author found that this group felt private education was a suitable alternative, although financially unattainable; English (2013) also found in the Australian home education context that motivations often mirrored the reasons parents chose private schooling. The final group identified by Morton (2010) were the last resort families. These parents were well acquainted with the school system and removed their children for varied reasons, including self-harm, low achievement, and bullying. More recently, the term accidental home educators, as coined by English (2021), has been conceptualised to represent this group. Regardless of the motivation, all three groups ultimately choose home education as a reflection of their inherent belief systems. Interestingly, Kidd and Kaczmarek (2010) identified a subpopulation of Australian home educators who chose to remove their autistic children from school due to the difficult cognitive and social pressures in mainstream classrooms. They found that home education increased their children’s wellbeing and provided individualised education for them. This aligns with research from the Queensland Home Education Unit (Queensland Government & Enhance Research, 2022), which found that 46% of parents chose to home educate because it benefited their neurodivergent children.

Motivations for home education are also reflected in the chosen learning approaches. This includes a wide range of methods from a more conservative approach, utilising premade, commercial learning materials (Martin-Chang et al., 2011; Morton, 2010), to “unschooling,” a movement increasing in popularity, which involves child-led, naturalistic processes (English, 2015b; Riley, 2018). Along the spectrum from formal, commercial curriculum to unschooling, many home education approaches and styles exist, such as unit studies, the Charlotte Mason literature-based approach, and eclecticism (Jackson & Allan, 2010; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; McKeon, 2007). Gameschooling is another method of home education, whereby the majority,

if not all, of learning is done through engagement in a wide variety of physical and/or digital games (Home Education Network, n.d.-a). Croft (2012) found that all 55 parents in their study wanted learning to be “a joyful lifelong action,” and this influenced their choices both within academic learning and life learning experiences. Furthermore, a qualitative study of three Australian mothers by English (2015b) formed a hypothesis that Australian unschoolers chose this method of home education to reflect their personal belief systems, specifically attachment parenting. It can be seen generally from the research that motivations to home educate have a causal relationship with parental beliefs and attitudes (Morton, 2010; Rothermel, 2003, 2011). However, limited research has been done in Australia, and more research to clarify the motivations of parents in choosing each of the above pedagogies and practices would be valuable. Additionally, there is limited research on how parents teach reading within their CoP. The next section highlights research related to teaching reading in general and then turns to home education and reading success.

### **2.3 Reading research**

Reading has long been seen as one of the key educational pillars and is often linked to long-term academic success (Leahy & Fitzpatrick, 2017; Ritchie & Bates, 2013). However, it is estimated that up to one in four Australian children are at risk of lifelong disadvantage due to their reading ability (Hempenstall, 2016; Thomson et al., 2013). Furthermore, a study by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) showed that 44% of Australian adults did not have adequate reading skills to fully participate in the workforce and the wider community. The importance of reading cannot be underestimated. This is especially true when it comes to cultivating a love for reading, as research has shown that enjoyment of reading correlates strongly to higher reading ability (Cremin & Scholes, 2024; Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2021; Thomson, 2018). Specifically, reading for pleasure

has been shown to improve cognitive functioning and vocabulary skills (Sullivan & Brown, 2013). However, the most effective process by which children learn to read is a contestable issue. Rowe (2006) highlighted the deep divisions in Australian education caused by the colloquially named “reading wars,” referencing the tension between synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, and whole-language approaches.

The release of Version 9 of the Australian Curriculum has also brought the importance of reading back into the media spotlight. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has removed the balanced literacy approach, placing a greater emphasis on phonics, specifically synthetic phonics (ACARA, 2022; Carey, 2022), with some concern that this shift will minimise the importance of reading for pleasure (Cremin & Scholes, 2024). Some researchers, such as Misty Adoniou, an associate professor in language, literacy, and teaching English as a second language [TESOL] at the University of Canberra, and Denyse Ritchie, honorary chair of literacy at Murdoch University, have highlighted how this move is politically motivated, and it has subsequently assisted many commercial businesses to make a lot of money producing prescriptive products for teachers in the classroom (Henebery, 2022). To date, the government has reported that students’ low reading skills have resulted from teacher deficits in phonics teaching and below-standard initial teacher education, in addition to insufficient school resourcing and students falling through educational cracks (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2022). This is despite research showing that learning to read is a complex process that can be as broad as the student population (Castles et al., 2018; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). In light of this, it is imperative to understand how parents approach reading, and both the methods and philosophical approaches used by home educators.

Much research has been invested in determining effective, evidence-based approaches to reading instruction, both internationally and in Australia. The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) and the CIERA framework (Taylor et al., 2005) have heavily influenced teachers' work and scholarly research internationally. In Australia, the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (Rowe, 2005) was rolled out to all schools, emphasising a balanced approach to reading education and increased specialisation and support for teachers.

The science of reading has more recently emerged as a dominant reading philosophy in Australian schools (Australian Education Research Organisation, 2023). It asserts that reading is a complex cognitive skill that should align with the developmental stage of children's brains (Houston et al., 2014). Snow (2021) advocated that children's below-adequate reading acquisition may in part be explained by the failure to translate scientific research about reading into practice. They further suggested that the Science of Language and Reading (SOLAR) framework builds on the science of reading by advocating for the important role played by oral language in reading acquisition. However, there are concerns that the science of reading ignores the complexities and comprehension needs of bilingual learners (Kerper Mora, 2024). It has been further argued that the scientific approach may oversimplify reading, through its singular focus (Yaden et al., 2021), and may also fail to address the art and joy of reading (Barton, 2023). Castles et al. (2018) presented the case that the reading wars can be put to rest by balancing the benefits of developmental understanding with a deep understanding of language.

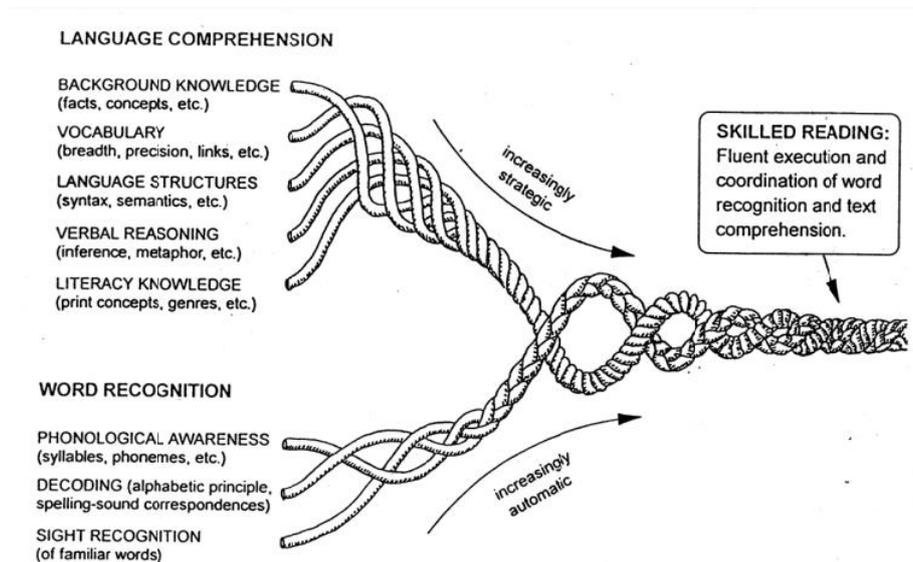
While this research project did not focus on the approaches to reading instruction utilised in mainstream education, a summary of key concepts is presented next to demonstrate contextual understanding.

### **2.3.1 Learning to read**

It is generally accepted that reading education follows two key phases; first, students learn to read across the early years of learning, and then they read to learn across upper primary and secondary school (Rose, 2017; Westerveld et al., 2020). Recently, however, this has been critiqued, with some researchers arguing students are constantly learning to read, and just the context changes (e.g., Yaden et al., 2021). For example, students may be learning to read more sophisticated texts in specific curriculum areas, such as science and mathematics (Yang et al., 2020), and in different contexts, such as to inform, entertain, or persuade (Mills et al., 2023). The focus of the current research was how parents facilitate the learning to read phase. Considering this, the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) asserted that there are five key skills of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Konza (2014), however, successfully advocated for these “fab five” to become the “big six” to include oral language, given the essential role it plays in reading development. In addition, Scarborough’s (2001) “reading rope” (see Figure 2.2) conceptualises the process of learning to read fluently and for meaning. The visual representation of the reading rope shows the strands of individual skills woven together to form a child with fluent reading skills and comprehension. There are two main areas shown: language comprehension and word recognition. Smith et al. (2021) highlighted that reading is heavily influenced by background knowledge, and this links importantly to comprehension.

**Figure 2.2**

*Scarborough's (2001) reading rope*



*Note.* From Scarborough (2001, p. 98).

The current research did not seek to assess which of the key components of reading are addressed by home educators, nor to assess the validity or success of these components. Rather, the research focused on the reading methodologies chosen by home educators and the reasons behind these approaches, rather than individual skills. The focus was reading strategies, as defined by Afflerbach et al. (2008), because with appropriate practice and automaticity, these become reading skills. With this said, there was scope within the qualitative phase of this research to further explore specific skills based on the generalised results of the quantitative survey (Appendix A).

This research explored key approaches to reading instruction, including phonics approaches, whole-language approaches, and the balanced approach to reading instruction. In the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, Rowe (2005) examined the teaching practices of reading in school settings and found strong evidence that systematic phonics

instruction is the most beneficial to children's reading development. However, the inquiry concluded it was more important for skilled educators to be able to use a variety of methods and strategies to meet the needs of individual children when learning to read. This is supported by U.S. researchers Pressley et al. (2001), whose study of 30 Grade 1 classrooms found that the most effective reading instruction used a balance of phonics skills and whole language; most importantly, the authors found a classroom culture was created where reading was loved, well-practised, and integrated across the curriculum. In addition, Freebody and Luke (2003) highlighted the futility of seeking one ideal method of literacy instruction given the complex nature of reading and the reality of multiliteracies where the process of becoming literate is situated within diverse societies and cultures. This led to their creation of the four resources model, which was a foundational pedagogical approach in mainstream education before Version 9.0 of the Australian Curriculum was released (Freebody & Luke, 1990, 2003).

On the other side of the reading wars debate sits the whole-language approach to reading. While Goodman (2005) did not claim to be the creator of whole language, nor did they advocate its use as a standalone method, they strongly upheld the holistic nature of the whole-language approach that is often overlooked in synthetic phonics. Whole language emphasises the importance of context in reading and promotes the foundational miscue system that is integral to whole-language teaching.

While the reading wars are a hotly contested issue in mainstream education, this polarised debate is not easily translatable to the home education environment. To illustrate, those who identify as unschoolers believe reading education does not need formalised curriculum or reading strategies (Riley, 2018). While limited, the emerging literature shows that unschoolers use informal methods such as a print-rich environment and the provision of

literature that is not levelled or age appropriate, utilising multiliteracies in their education (Riley, 2018). Further, Thomas and Pattison (2007) found that children learnt to read through informal processes, where parents followed their cues, promoted a love for reading, and stopped when children were frustrated or disengaged. Mainstream researcher Gee (2001) argued that learning to read is also a situational, social process. However, both Riley (2018) and Pattison (2016) went so far as to suggest that learning to read does not require formal instruction, as reading is a sociocultural process that children can learn through everyday life. This is in opposition to the generally held belief by mainstream education that children require direct, explicit reading instruction (Hempenstall, 2016; Rowe, 2006).

Reading for enjoyment is another area of research that has implications for reading researchers. Green (2022) advanced that reading for enjoyment is an essential element of a child's literacy education and is a priority that should be advocated for in Australian classrooms. It has been found that children who are intrinsically motivated read for pleasure more frequently and have higher reading comprehension skills (Wang & Guthrie, 2004). However, Clark and Teravainen (2017) noted that increasing reading skill does not automatically increase reading enjoyment. One longitudinal study of 4,000 primary children by Sainsbury and Schagen (2004) showed that reading enjoyment decreased as reading instruction and skill increased. In addition, McGeown et al. (2016) found that extrinsic motivations decreased the likelihood of students reading for pleasure; extrinsic motivators, such as social motivations, appeared to increase digital text use. Motivation for good grades increased academic reading but not reading for pleasure. Merga's (2017) research aimed to elicit the viewpoints of children with regard to how to increase their engagement in reading, through interviewing Year 4 and 6 students. They found that engagement can be fostered through providing engaging books and challenging reading materials. The students also noted

a preference for series rather than standalone books and the need for spare time to read. The authors noted there were many competing demands, such as homework, household chores, extracurricular activities, and parental expectations, that made free time for reading enjoyment difficult to find. Some students noted that their parents did not provide enough time or opportunities to be able to read for pleasure. Finally, and importantly, some children found a reading skills deficit when trying to read for enjoyment, which inhibited their motivation. Research by Ciampa (2016) found that Grade 1 students' intrinsic motivation and reading enjoyment increased through the use of ebooks. While this research was conducted with mainstream school students, it provides an important lens through which to understand student reading behaviours and motivations. These were not explicitly examined in this research project, but parents' perceptions of children's reading behaviours and beliefs about reading motivations were integral to this study.

Through a review of current research, seven key reading approaches were identified to be examined in this research project: synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, whole language, unschooling, environmental print, reading aloud, and a simple phonics alphabetic approach to reading. Synthetic phonics teaches the individual sounds of the English language and the many corresponding ways these sounds can be written (Johnston et al., 2012). Students are taught to encode and decode words using individual phonemes and blend them in order to read (Gallagher-Mance, 2023; Johnston & Watson, 2014). Analytic phonics teaching starts with whole words and breaks down the phonetic patterns and letter sounds within, also known as a whole-to-part approach (Gallagher-Mance, 2023). Whole language includes the teaching of sight words and focuses on learning to read using meaning-making in context, most often by matching images to words and phrases (Goodman, 2005; Johnston & Watson, 2014). An unschooling reading approach advocates that learning to read is a sociocultural

process that needs no formal instruction or tuition; rather, a child will learn to read when and how they choose (Pattison, 2016; Riley, 2018). Environmental print, as an approach to reading, relies on a literacy-rich home environment and immersion in reading as part of daily life (Neumann et al., 2013). The practice of parents reading aloud to their children is an established aspect of many home education environments and is explored in this research as a method of learning to read within the home (Gilmore, 2003). A final category for reading education is based on alphabetical practices in early reading education (Johnston & Watson, 2014). Jones et al. (2012) highlighted that this is most commonly taught by the uppercase and lowercase letters being taught to represent one sound, thereby teaching twenty-six phonetic sounds. While some early childhood settings taught one letter per week, Neuman (2006) advocated the inefficiency of this, with Jones et al. (2012) recommending enhanced alphabetic knowledge cycles in the first year of formal education. For the purposes of this research, the alphabetic approach has been labelled as “simple phonics,” whereby the 26 letters of the English language are taught as 26 sounds. Rather than teaching phonemic principles, each letter is introduced as a standalone concept and given a dominant label. This seventh approach was included in the research to acknowledge that parents often use the alphabet as a means of early reading, whether they are home educating or not (Bergman Deitcher et al., 2021). Early childhood centres also use alphabet books and initial letter–sound exposure as a foundational approach to reading (Brabham et al., 2006). While it is not an approach currently used in Australian mainstream schools due to the release of the Australian Curriculum V9.0, the simple phonics method of teaching alphabetic knowledge has been historically used in education (Jones et al., 2012; Numan, 2016; ACARA, n.d).

The seven approaches selected in this research are not exhaustive, nor is it reflective of mainstream schooling approaches. Instead, based on the presented literature, these seven

approaches have been highlighted to represent common ways home educating parents may choose to intentionally plan to implement reading learning: synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, whole language, unschooling, environmental print, reading aloud, and a simple phonics alphabetic approach to reading.

To date, no Australian research has been conducted into how home educators implement reading education (Jackson, 2017). To frame this literature review, two elements are explored. First, the international research into home education reading practices is considered. Second, Australian research into the home literacy environment (HLE) is explored. While not directly related to home education, this research provides a context for Australian children beginning their literacy journey and emphasises the importance of the home environment on a child's education (regardless of whether they are home educated or traditionally schooled).

### **2.3.2 *Home education and reading success***

To begin, a small number of international research projects have shown that home-educated children perform equally or above their traditionally educated peers on formalised reading assessments (Collom, 2005; Martin-Chang et al., 2011; Ray, 2010; Yu et al., 2016). Specifically, Martin-Chang et al. (2011) found that structured homeschoolers in Canada achieved higher results than public school students and unstructured homeschoolers. In contrast, Guterman and Neuman (2019) and Aram et al. (2016) found that home-educated children had lower literacy levels than mainstream students, including reading comprehension and phonological awareness. Differences in educational systems, pedagogical approaches, and the teaching of Hebrew (as opposed to English) were all factors in these differences. Therefore, it may be interpreted that reading research from non-English-speaking cohorts has less application to the Australian context. While the outcomes of standardised testing are not

within the scope of this research, these studies have been included to show the limited research into this area.

One of the most interesting differences between mainstream education and home education, in relation to reading, is the divergence in outcomes of late readers. There is a systematically held belief in mainstream education, often referred to as the “fourth grade slump,” that children who are not fluent readers by 8 or 9 years old will experience educational disadvantage for the remainder of their education (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2008; Stockard, 2010). Another example of this within the literature is cumulative disadvantage, where children lack emergent literacy skills before starting school, often due to socioeconomic disadvantage (Hartas, 2012), and remain behind their peers unless effective in-school intervention is achieved (Northrop, 2017). This cumulative disadvantage is often referred to as the Matthew effect, whereby children with advantageous early learning experience carry this with them throughout their schooling (Stanovich, 2009).

In contrast, the experience of late readers does not transfer to children who are home educated. Research from the United Kingdom and United States shows that home-educated children who are late readers eventually catch up and retain no observable disadvantage from learning to read later than their traditionally schooled peers (Keys & Crain, 2009; Riley, 2018; Thomas & Pattison, 2007). The literature shows that home educators still experience pressure to get their children reading early; however, they have the freedom to follow their child’s lead and allow them to learn to read in a positive and supportive environment (Thomas & Pattison, 2007). Keys and Crain (2009) found that 80% of late readers caught up by the age of 11 years. While this was a small-scale pilot project in the United States, it is supported by U.K. research by Thomas and Pattison (2007) who asserted that unlike within school environments, “‘late’ reading [does] not appear to disadvantage these children in any way” (p. 97). One of the

challenges with interpreting this research is the lack of clarity as to what determines a “late” reader and how it is assessed that they have “caught up.” Despite this, the preliminary findings in this area warrant further research.

### **2.3.3 *Approaches to reading in home education***

Very little is known about how home educators teach their children to read. The small field of research includes one small-scale study of two U.S. home-educating families (Gilmore, 2003), one PhD dissertation about the reading practices of U.S. home educators (McKeon, 2007), and three international studies about unschoolers (Keys & Crain, 2009; Riley, 2018; Thomas & Pattison, 2007).

A PhD dissertation by McKeon (2007) analysed 682 U.S. families and showed that home educators used various types of reading instruction. They noted that “while a large group of parents used the balanced approach (41.7%), others used a phonics approach, a linguistic approach, and/or language approach to teaching reading” and all experienced success (p. 135). In addition, both religion and teaching style were reflected in the reading approaches taken. For example, 70% of those who identified as Protestant or Catholic used an eclectic style of teaching, while those in the other category (when asked to indicated religion) were more likely to be unschoolers. The authors further noted that most families had to try a variety of approaches in order to match a suitable reading method to the individual child. The families sampled were from both religious and nonreligious backgrounds, of which 75% identified as European American. The 1,439 students represented by this sample were aged from 2 to 18 years old. No further research was conducted nor any work published following completion of this study. As such, little evidence exists as to the daily practices of home educated readers other than one small-scale project. Gilmore’s (2003) study of two home-educating families found that reading aloud was a key process that helped promote a

love for reading and a positive disposition towards learning to read. Furthermore, reading aloud provided opportunities for explicit teaching of vocabulary, comprehension, and reading strategies. Siblings also played a large role in promoting a family culture of reading, strengthening reading skills, and building sibling relationships. Both the studies by Gilmore (2003) and McKeon (2007) showed a strong agreement that families met the needs of the individual child.

Those who identify as unschoolers also show a desire to match learning approaches to the child, although this is undertaken without formalised curriculum or reading strategies. While limited, the emerging literature shows that unschoolers use informal methods such as a print-rich environment and the provision of literature that is not levelled or “age appropriate” (Riley, 2018). Further, Thomas and Pattison (2007) found that unschooled children learnt to read through informal processes where parents followed their cues, promoted a love for reading, and stopped when children were frustrated or disengaged. Both Riley (2018) and Pattison (2016) suggested that learning to read does not require formal instruction and can be learnt through everyday life. This is in opposition to the generally held belief in mainstream education that children require direct reading instruction (Hempenstall, 2016; Rowe, 2006). Consistent across the home education research is the belief that children should learn at their own pace with an individualised approach for each child.

### ***2.3.4 Parental beliefs about reading and the home literacy environment***

As demonstrated, there is limited research about home education and reading practices. However, there is a literature base that establishes the influence parents have on their children’s reading and literacy acquisition. This is seen in the literature about parental beliefs about reading, parent–child literacy interactions, and the HLE.

A parent's beliefs about reading and their actions in early childhood tend to correlate to their child's successful reading when they start school. Through exploring the reading experiences of preschool children, Weigel et al. (2006) found two clear groups: facilitative mothers and conventional mothers. Facilitative mothers had a more positive experience with education, enjoyed reading, and were more likely to engage with their children in literacy activities. In contrast, conventional mothers tended to have lower levels of education and were less likely to engage their children in literacy activities. This longitudinal study tentatively shows that there is an advantage given to those children whose parents highly value and utilise early literacy learning. This is supported by Brown et al. (2012) who investigated the HLEs of Australian 4-year-olds to establish that parents' reading practices are mirrored in the dispositions of their children towards literacy. While this research took place before the start of formal learning, it helps to establish the role played by parental beliefs and reading practices in the homes of Australian children. According to Brown et al. (2012), "overall, these parents tended to pass on their own literacy practices to their children, and this finding is consistent with those from other studies" (p. 458), indicating the importance of parental influence. It would be reasonable to extrapolate that this may be true of home-educating parents as well.

Australian research has also demonstrated that having a home environment rich with literature and environmental print enhances a child's reading development (Brown et al., 2012; Hood et al., 2008; Neumann et al., 2013). The HLE has been categorised in three ways: active, child led, and passive (Van Tonder et al., 2019). An active HLE is where adults and children participate together in literacy-related activities, such as storybook reading and alphabet recognition. One benefit of an active HLE is an increase in vocabulary development (Van Tonder et al., 2019), as well as phonological awareness and letter identification (Hood et

al., 2008). In addition, Neumann et al. (2013) found that when mothers actively utilised environmental print when playing with their preschool children, there was an increased understanding of the concepts of print (a foundational reading skill). The second type of HLE is a passive one, where children observe adults engaging in literacy-related behaviours, such as reading novels and writing letters (Van Tonder et al., 2019). One Australian research project showed that more than 50% of parents read for pleasure, and up to 80% engage in traditional, environmental, and technological reading every day (Brown et al., 2012), although this may reflect the participants' high socioeconomic status. Brown et al. (2012) also showed that parents with positive reading habits were more likely to read to their children. Finally, a child-led HLE involves children independently engaging in literacy-related activities, such as watching educational television and using techno literacies; however, no emergent literacy benefit has been found from this (Van Tonder et al., 2019). Brown et al. (2012) formed a tentative hypothesis that there will be a rise in the use of both environmental and technological modes of reading by parents and young children. Merga and Mat Roni (2017) found that Australian children did not frequently utilise technology for recreational reading, despite having more readily accessible devices than ever.

In summary, the HLE contributes to a young child's reading development in a variety of ways and plays an important part in understanding emergent literacy. The quality of interactions between parent and child and the creation of a print-rich home environment both demonstrate the ability to prepare children for success in reading at school (Brown et al., 2012; Hood et al., 2008; Neumann et al., 2013). This literature establishes the importance of the home in a child's literacy development and presents a basis from which the Australian experience of home literacy education for young children can be understood. The gap in the literature lies in what happens to those children who do not attend mainstream school. This

research helps give insight into what role parental choices and the HLE continue to play in a child's home education.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

This literature review demonstrated the scope of home education research conducted both in Australia and internationally, highlighting the importance of reading. Emerging from the research is a clear relationship between parental choices and beliefs (English, 2015b; Morton, 2010; Rothermel, 2003). While there is a literature basis for the impact of parental beliefs about reading (Brown et al., 2012; Weigel et al., 2006) and the impact of these beliefs on the choice to home educate has been tentatively explored (Croft, 2012; Morton, 2010; Rothermel, 2011), no Australian research was located that establishes how parental beliefs about reading influence the choices made by home educators.

Regardless of where, when, or how, the reading education of children is important—it matters given the importance placed upon it for life success (OECD, 2013, 2021). The literature acknowledges home education as an increasingly important mode of education and acknowledges the need to understand how young children learn to become successful readers and eventually successful citizens (Leahy & Fitzpatrick, 2017; Ritchie & Bates, 2013). Integral to this is the understanding that home education cannot be interpreted through the same lens as mainstream education; it is a unique pedagogical practice that can be understood through a sociocultural perspective (Barratt-Peacock, 2003; Jackson, 2015). The literature review established that families engage in home education for both the benefits it offers and the negative experiences of institutionalised learning (Croft, 2012; Jackson, 2017). However, the literature paints a more complex picture, as each family holds unique motivations (Morton, 2010) and ultimately adapts their educational choices accordingly (English, 2015b; Riley, 2018; Rothermel, 2003, 2011). Thus, the child really is the centre of their educational world.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter outlines and justifies the project's conceptual framework and research methodology. The project was designed to identify the approaches taken by home-educating parents when teaching their children to read and the underlying reasons and beliefs behind the decisions they make. Given the limited scope of research in this field, as well as needing Australia-wide data, a mixed methods approach was determined to be the best fit for the breadth and depth needed for this study to answer the research questions. The methodology underpinning this research is presented and the philosophical assumptions of the research are outlined. An overview of the mixed methods approach, population considerations, ethical approval, and research limitations is also presented. To begin, the underpinning conceptual framework of this research is presented.

### **3.1 Conceptual framework**

Home education is a unique research area within the education sphere and has been advanced as a unique paradigm of education that is distinct from mainstream education (Barratt-Peacock, 2003; Jackson, 2015). As such, this research required a clear conceptual framework that combined the existing home education research understandings with theoretical perspectives. One element that distinguishes home education from mainstream learning is that students are situated within a sociocultural setting that is distinct from institutional learning, leading to the suggestion that home education is aligned with Vygotsky's perspective (Jackson, 2015).

The conceptual framework for this research therefore builds upon Vygotsky's (1934/1999) sociocultural theory and Lave and Wenger's (1991) CoP, combining existing sociocultural understandings from home education research (Barratt-Peacock, 2003; Harding, 2011; Jackson, 2015; Thomas, 1998). These three pillars of theory form a conceptual

framework from which this research project was designed, enacted, and analysed. The underpinning theory from these pillars is now explored before presenting a synthesis of these pillars as the conceptual framework for this study.

### **3.1.1 Theoretical underpinnings**

Vygotsky was a pivotal theoretical psychologist of the early 20th century who proposed theories about childhood cognitive development and the role social interactions play in the learning process. According to sociocultural theory, learning is a social process whereby the process of engaging with both the educational environment and wider social network influences the child's cognitive development and, thus, learning (Vygotsky, 1935/2011). There are three key areas of sociocultural theory: the importance of social interactions in learning, the role of language, and the zone of proximal development (ZPD; Allman, 2020).

Vygotsky (1932–1934/2020) advocated that “man [*sic*] is a social being” and requires social input for both external (social interaction) and internal (cognitive and intellectual) growth to occur (p. 82). The environment within which a child develops has a direct bearing on their learning and intellectual potential. The sociocultural view advocates that the environment is not merely a place where learning occurs but is a dynamic participant that influences the child's development (Vygotsky, 1932–1934/2020). Much like the research pertaining to the HLE presented in the literature review (Brown et al., 2012; Weigel et al., 2006), this theory advocates the importance of both the HLE and the human resources a child has available to them as key contributors to the learning process. In the HLE, this emphasises the importance of the family, the home environment, and wider social networks in providing cognitive stimulus for learning.

Speech and language are also crucial components of a child's development, as outlined by sociocultural theory. External stimuli and interactions form the child's speech foundations

and influence the internal language the child employs to understand the world around them (Vygotsky, 1932–1934/2020). Thus, speech is “not only a means of communicating with other people but also a means of internal thinking of the child himself [*sic*]” (p. 83). This again emphasises the importance of the child’s environment, particularly the role that social interactions play in the child’s learning, for either the better or the worse. Recognising the importance of speech and language in learning acknowledges two of the four home education processes identified by Barratt-Peacock (2003), thus giving validity to the sociocultural framework as a pertinent theory to home education. These two processes are family conversation and role modelling, which both play a role in language development and subsequent learning (Barratt-Peacock, 2003). Family conversation is the process by which families discuss ideas and knowledge, and this builds a shared language and learning culture. Role modelling is a child’s absorption of knowledge and family values through watching their parents in everyday life and participating in family traditions (Barratt-Peacock, 2003), of which speech and language play a core role (Inglebret et al., 2008; McLeod et al., 2014).

The development of creativity is another area of theory related to home education, with Vygotsky (1926/2004) asserting,

If we want to build a relatively strong foundation for a child’s creativity, what we must do is broaden the experiences we provide him with. All else being equal, the more a child sees, hears, and experiences, the more he knows and assimilates, the more elements of reality he will have in his experience, and the more productive will be the operation of his imagination. (p. 15)

Thus, creativity plays a pivotal role in the social development of a child and their learning as a home educated learner. Creativity could also be seen as a cornerstone of domestic occupation, which is one of the four processes identified by Barratt-Peacock (2003):

“The child would have the opportunity to learn by experiment in a family workshop, laboratory or garden and beyond that proximal zone into the surrounding fields and Australian Home Education forests to the remote zone of the wider world” (pp. 103–104). Experimentation with life processes requires creativity (Stein, 2014), and this is inclusive of home education.

Vygotsky’s ZPD is widely regarded as one of his most well-known concepts, although it was only developed late in his career and was one of his least explored ideas (Daniels, 2008). The ZPD describes the distance between what a child knows and can do unsupported and the maximum a child can learn with support from social and environmental supports. As Vygotsky (1924–1934/1997) clarified, “The zone of proximal development characterises the difference between what a child is capable of himself and what he can become capable of with the help of a teacher” (p. 29). This emphasises that the cognitive potential of a child is directly related to the input of both the environment and the support of an adult propelling and advancing their development (Smagorinsky, 2011). This asserts that a teacher or adult should aim to support learners to extend their understandings and attempt tasks of increasing difficulty. In the home education sphere, the role of teacher is assumed by the parent, a process Barratt-Peacock (2003) labelled as a “tutor or guide” role, explaining that in home education, “Parents accompany children in pursuit of learning objectives into the worlds of real practice” (p. 107). In this way, parents support children in authentic learning by guiding them through authentic learning experiences within their own family but also across wider society and networking across other CoPs. Barratt-Peacock (2003) advocated this as necessary for home education and, more broadly, life. As a result of this research, this thesis research sought to examine what the role of tutor or guide would look like in the parent–child home education relationship and the ways in which adults support the home-educating child to learn to read.

To understand how parents provide this support, it is integral to this research to understand what a CoP is and how a family can function as one. Building on sociocultural theory, Lave and Wenger (1991) developed a framework that determines the process by which a group of people share a collective goal of learning. In their seminal work, Lave and Wenger (1991) challenged traditional views of education as knowledge transmission and advocated that humans learn as social beings through participation in authentic contexts. They labelled this process as legitimate peripheral participation reflecting the process by which a novice becomes an expert through interactions within a knowledgeable community of learners. This expanded the way that learning was seen to include informal settings and varied contexts outside of structured learning experiences.

Wenger (1998) expanded on this to establish the characteristics present in CoPs and the varying contexts within which they existed. “Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2). Barratt-Peacock (2003) found while researching Australian home educators that they functioned with all the attributes of a CoP. He even suggested that the family is the ultimate CoP, and it would be pertinent to “see them at another level, arguably at least, as super COPs” (p. 10).

There are three characteristics present within a CoP: a domain or shared area of interest, a community built on joint activities and experiences, and the development of shared practices and/or stories (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). A domain of shared interest is characterised by a group who “value their collective competence and learn from each other” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2). In home education, this could be seen as the domain of learning itself, or domestic occupation. The second characteristic is the community that builds relationships to help them share information and learn from each

other. This parallels the home education processes of role modelling and parents acting as tutors or guides in authentic experiences (Barratt-Peacock, 2003). The final characteristic that delineates a CoP from an ordinary community or group is shared practices and stories. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) stated that this is a purposeful practice that “takes time and sustained interaction” (p. 2). Home education families have been found to incorporate conversation as a function of learning (Thomas, 1998).

Interestingly, Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) stated that schools and classrooms can become CoPs when these three characteristics are developed, inclusive of children, teachers, and external stakeholders. Jackson (2015) noted that schools can learn much from the sociocultural perspective of home education and their functioning both educationally and as a CoP. Likewise, the research project agrees with Barratt-Peacock (2003) that a singular home-educating family can be considered, for the purposes of this theoretical framework, its own CoP that cultivates these three attributes while developing its family home education culture. Additionally, Safran (2009) proposed that, based on the three characteristics, adult home educators participate in a CoP when they join neighbourhood home education groups that help them to learn, to a certain extent, how to become a home educator. However, Safran’s research did not consider the perspective or inclusion of the child. The parent–teacher role is multifaceted in the home-educating family and integral to the creation of a functioning CoP. Wenger (1998) explained that CoPs do not exist in isolation but rather are influenced by their interactions with external parties. For home-educating families, this includes the wider community, as well as governmental organisations and regulators.

Two key theories about home education are integral to the conceptual framework of this research. Barratt-Peacock’s (2003) model of Australian home education has been

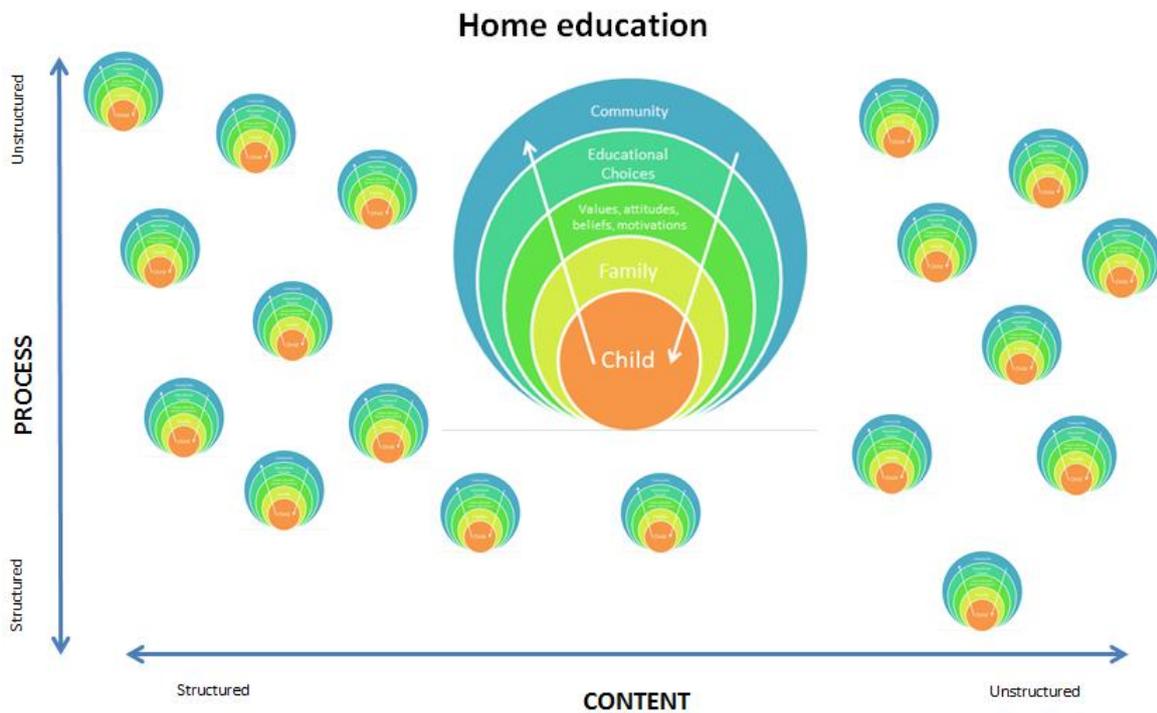
unpacked throughout this section to conceptualise the home-educating family as a CoP and to outline the four common processes among Australian home educators: tutor or guide, family conversations, role modelling, and domestic occupation. These processes are common among home-educating families; however, each one is enacted uniquely through a family's CoP. In light of this, Neuman and Guterman's (2017) research can be useful in understanding how families enact these processes. They conceptualised that home education is a mixture of choices that a family makes about learning, both in relation to the processes the family uses to learn and the content that is learnt. These decisions can be structured, where they are planned ahead of time and are more rigid, or they can be unstructured, where learning experiences are unplanned and more fluid. Neuman and Guterman (2017) argued that unlike other theories that promote families aligning with one or the other (e.g., Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Rothermel, 2011), families do not have to treat them (structured or unstructured approaches) as binary. They stated, "For example, the family may deal with content that was planned in advance (structured content) but do it at inconsistent times depending on when family members are available (unstructured process)" (p. 357). This led to the theory that home education processes and content of learning exist on a spectrum. While previous theories led to a binary division of home-educating families, Neuman and Guterman focused on the degree of structure in the learning content (the what) and the learning process (the how). The application of this spectrum has led to a finer grained understanding of how each family can be unique and act as a CoP that is unlike another home-educating family, in line with sociocultural theory. In the Australian context, Reilly (2004) found that home educating parents of children with disabilities often started more structured and became less structured over time in response to the needs of the child and confidence of the parent. Thus, indicating that a family's place on the spectrum changes over time.

### **3.1.2 Overview of conceptual framework for this study**

The conceptual framework presented in this section is a cumulation of the existing theoretical frameworks of sociocultural theory and home education theory. These theories align well with the practices of home educators and underpin current Australian research, as demonstrated by Barratt-Peacock's (2003) model of home education. Figure 3.1 illustrates this framework by building on research by Neuman and Guterman (2017; see Figure 2.1) that conceptualises home education as a spectrum, where each family makes choices regarding how structured their processes and content choices are. However, the sociocultural perspective shows that it is more complex than that; these choices come from each family's own values, attitudes, beliefs, and motivations. Vygotsky (1932–1934/2020) advocated that the sociocultural context of a child strongly influences their learning and cognitive development (Jackson, 2015). Furthermore, he promoted the importance of considering each child as an individual in their development and their learning needs (Vygotsky, 1935/2011). Each circle in Figure 3.1 represents one homeschooling family (one CoP) where every child and family is unique.

**Figure 3.1**

*Conceptual framework*



### **3.1.2.1 Processes and content**

The positioning of the circles on the x and y axes reflect Neuman and Guterman's (2017) research to show the spectrum of learning processes and content. Each family's positioning is not stagnant as families change and move along the spectrum throughout their home education journey (Rothermel, 2011). The theoretical understanding of structured or unstructured content and processes is a pivotal theoretical underpinning to consider when researching how families teach reading; however, this theory alone does not reflect the complex sociocultural factors influencing a child's learning, or the reasons a family may choose structured or unstructured approaches. Thus, the diagram within each circle was conceptualised to reflect the complexities of sociocultural theory and social influences on home education.

### **3.1.2.2 The child**

Each CoP circle within Figure 3.1 highlights the intrarelations within the CoP. The white arrows represent that there is an inverse relationship between each variable within the CoP. This means that the child influences the other relationships within their CoP, but they are also shaped and influenced by those associations, showing that social interactions are dynamic and evolving (Medlin, 2006). The child is placed as one starting point whose needs influence the family. This reflects home education research that shows home education offers opportunities for individualised education that considers the child's needs (Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; Queensland Government & Enhance Research, 2022; Slater et al., 2020).

### **3.1.2.3 The family**

When children are home educated, it takes place within a family unit. This means that their needs influence the family, and the family context influences the education the child receives (Barratt-Peacock, 2003; Thomas, 1998; Thomas & Pattison, 2007). While home-educating parents have a responsibility to shape their child's learning and make decisions about content and processes (Neuman & Guterman, 2017), Safran (2008) found that through the process of home educating their children, parents' identities and values were subsequently influenced and changed. This is reflected in Figure 3.1, where the family members influence the child's learning, and likewise, they are themselves changed and influenced by the child and home education itself. The significance of contextualising the whole individual within the sociocultural context is an important element of Vygotsky's theory. It is important to reflect that learning takes place within a child's social networks and environment (Jackson 2008).

### **3.1.2.4 Values and beliefs**

The family's values and beliefs are also reflected within the familial CoP. The family value system has a powerful impact upon the child's values and beliefs, and this is reflected in

the external networks (churches, schools, community groups) that families participate in. Interestingly, this was regardless of whether a child was home educated or not (Kingston & Medlin, 2005; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Uecker, 2008). Kunzman and Gaither (2013) found that social influences, inclusive of family, friends, and wider society, also shape the values and beliefs of home-educating children and the educational choices they make. This is represented by the inverse relationship between the white line in Figure 3.1.

#### **3.1.2.5 Educational choices**

In the conceptual framework, the educational choices made by parents are a cumulation of the needs of the child and the family unit and a reflection of their values and beliefs. The Home Education Unit (Queensland Government & Enhance Research, 2022) found that 48% of Queensland parents home educated because it aligned with their educational philosophy and beliefs, while Slater et al. (2020) found that 28.5% of Australian home educators did so to be able to have the freedom to make the educational choices that were right for their families. This desire to make educational choices, as influenced by the needs and values of the family, is reflected in the conceptual framework. It should also be noted that each state and territory has government regulations that families are required to comply with (Slater et al., 2020). In this way, government regulations also impact the educational choices that families make.

#### **3.1.2.6 External stakeholders and community**

Home educators also engage in various ways with their broader community. This includes home education support groups, which play a pivotal role in supporting home-educating parents and providing social opportunities for children (Safran, 2009). The values and educational choices of families influence the community groups they participate in. For example, unschooling parents, whose value of attachment parenting influences their

educational pedagogy, often find community with other parents of similar values (English, 2015b). Likewise, parents who join home education support groups are gently changed over time as a result of those networks (Safran, 2008).

Another important external stakeholder is the government organisations who regulate home education. There exists among some home educators a weariness to engage with government institutions (Jackson & Allan, 2010). Kunzman and Gaither (2013) highlighted that this extends not only to government but to other agencies such as health services, child safety, and mainstream schools. This has also been proposed as one reason families choose not to register (Slater et al., 2020). While this belief does not extend to all home educators, there does appear to be a strong belief that home-educating families feel they should be primarily responsible for their child's education, as opposed to government organisations (Jackson & Allan, 2010; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). This means families make decisions about how they engage with government stakeholders based on their values, beliefs, and educational choices. Furthermore, families who are registered are also influenced by the requirements of their state or territory, and this reflects back onto the education choices of the family unit.

### **3.1.3 *Suitability of the framework for the study***

This framework seeks to capture both the existing theoretical understandings of sociocultural theory that are firmly established in literature (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1934/1999) and the emerging understandings of the home education community. It breaks down the key tenets of Vygotsky's theory that social interactions impact the child and their learning potential by naming the specific spheres of influence the home-educating child experiences: family, community, and government. This is coupled with the concept that each family creates their own CoP (Wenger, 1998). They interact with the external social relations

and are thus impacted by them. After collating these into a working conceptual model, the mixed methods research was carefully developed.

#### **3.1.4 Criticisms of framework**

While Vygotsky's theory has undergone critique and development over the last century, there are still a few critical considerations relevant to this research framework. These include the concerns about Vygotsky's theories themselves, as well as about the school learning environment used for the theory.

Vygotsky was a Russian theorist, and his works have been translated into English. Some criticism has been levelled against both the accuracy of the translations from Russian to English and the cultural context of Russia at the time. Ageyev (2003) highlighted that the Russian context of social collectivism differs greatly from the individualistic values of the Western world, specifically the United States. The author argued that these differences in cultural beliefs and values have led to an uneven interpretation and implementation of social constructivism, such as prioritising ZPD while neglecting collective social learning philosophies. Ageyev (2003) advanced the importance of interpreting social constructivism through high-quality linguistic and cultural interpretation as imperative to overcoming this criticism of the sociocultural framework.

Furthermore, the incomplete nature of Vygotsky's works, with his untimely death at the age of 37 and not having fully developed and advanced his theories, is sometimes proposed as a limitation to his theories. However, many have undertaken further development of his ideas since his works were first translated in the 1960s (Allman, 2020). One example of this is the ZPD. While this is one of his most recognised theories, it was not presented until 1933 and only covered the concepts of assessment and instruction (Daniels, 2008). However, many researchers and theorists have tested and built upon these initial works

(Ageyev, 2003). For example, Wood et al., (1976) developed the notion of scaffolding in the, which further developed the ZPD's applicability (Allman, 2020). On balance, ZPD is a useful contribution to understanding why the needs of the individual child are important and the role that the parent plays in supporting their development.

A final criticism of Vygotsky's theories, relevant to this study, is that they were based on children learning in a school environment. Vygotsky's theories closely followed the Russian Revolution and sought to understand the best practices for children learning in this environment (Daniels, 2008). While this is accurate, Vygotsky's theory embraced the development of the whole child and considered a wider range of social influences on learning beyond the four walls of a classroom (Vygotsky, 1932–1934/2020). Jackson's (2008) exploration of Australian home education specifies that this is one of the reasons the sociocultural model of Vygotsky is indeed relevant to home education. It embraces the importance of social learning and wider notions of guidance for learning, both of which are provided in a home education setting. Barratt-Peacock's (2003) model of Australian home education includes four specific processes that were drawn from the sociocultural framework to bridge the gap between Vygotsky's mainstream research and its applicability to Australian home education.

### **3.1.5 Summary of conceptual framework**

This section presented this study's conceptual framework, as influenced by sociocultural theory and the CoP framework. These were chosen to convey the complex and social nature of the home education environment and utilised to develop the conceptual framework presented in Figure 3.1. This combines the existing understandings of home education, specifically Barratt-Peacock (2003) and Neuman and Guterman (2017), into a

conceptual framework that informed the development of this research as well as the selection of the research questions, research design, and tools.

### **3.2 Mixed methods design**

To understand what Australian home educators do to teach reading and why they make these choices, it was identified that mixed methods research would best fit the needs of the research project. Mixed methods research purposively combines qualitative and quantitative data to answer the research question in a cohesive and exhaustive manner (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Mixed methods research is frequently referred to as the “third research paradigm” comprising its own set of methodological principles whereby both quantitative and qualitative data are required to provide depth and breadth within a research context (Johnson et al., 2007). Schoonenboom and Johnson (2017) emphasised that the overall purpose of mixed methods research is to answer one overall research question using both sets of data to “expand and strengthen a study’s conclusions” (p. 110). It is further believed to be advantageous in the area of educational research as it broadens the data capable of being collected and explains the data within one research project (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Thus, in this research design, one overarching question was chosen that combined both the quantitative and qualitative analyses to fully explore the subject matter. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) outlined four key components of mixed methods research:

- i) the collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data, ii) the subsequent integration of the data sets, iii) logical organisation of a specific research design, and iv) provision of a theoretical and philosophical framework for the research. (p. 5)

All four areas were accounted for within this research design. Chapter 3 outlines the organisation of the research design and the theoretical and philosophical framework. The

collection of quantitative data is presented in Chapter 4 and the qualitative data in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 outlines the integration of the data sets.

### **3.2.1 *Philosophical assumptions***

This mixed methods research was approached from a pragmatic worldview, which allows quantitative and qualitative data to exist simultaneously without epistemological conflict (Hall, 2020). “Pragmatism emphasises that we understand the world and solve its problems through the application of subjective and objective methods” (Elgeddawy & Abouraia, 2024, p. 71). Pragmatism situates the research problem within a specific context and utilises individual worldviews and experiences to obtain an in-depth understanding of human experience. The ideas of pragmatism began with the work of Dewey and its legitimacy has been debated in the literature. Biesta (2010) advocated that the removal of the hierarchy of knowledge would minimise competition between worldviews, thus paving the way for a pragmatist philosophy. Pragmatism, as a research philosophy, is not aligned to a single philosophical worldview, and in doing so, it rejects the dichotomy of qualitative or quantitative paradigms and favours a commonsense approach to solving the research question (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Pragmatists advocate that the research question is of primary importance rather than the method or philosophical framework through which the data are collected. It is a problem-centred approach that combines “what works” to bridge the quantitative and qualitative worlds (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Thus, the philosophy of pragmatism is well suited to mixed methods research because “mixed methods research is, generally speaking, an approach to knowledge (theory and practice) that attempts to consider multiple viewpoints, perspectives, positions and standpoints (always including the standpoints of qualitative and quantitative research)” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 113). This makes pragmatism a suitable fit for educational research and the examination of belief

systems. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) further argued that modern research is becoming “increasingly interdisciplinary, complex and dynamic,” and mixed methods research needs to utilise a full spectrum of methods and philosophical underpinnings to meet the needs of complex research (p. 15). Pragmatist research counters traditional dualities in favour of a commonsense approach to solving the research question (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Accordingly, the research design for this project evolved from the research question and utilised both qualitative and quantitative methods to best answer the research problem.

### **3.2.2 Research questions**

The overarching research question for this project aimed to encapsulate both the approaches and underlying beliefs of Australian home-educating parents regarding the teaching of reading. To do this, an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach was adopted. This entailed collecting quantitative data through a large-scale survey in Phase 1 to inform a qualitative, multicase study in Phase 2 (Cohen, 2017).

The overarching research question, “How do parental beliefs about reading influence the teaching of reading within the home education setting?” was fully answerable using both quantitative and qualitative data.

Subquestions guided specific components of the research design (as outlined in Section 3.4.3):

- a. What approaches are used to teach reading in the home education setting?
- b. Why do home educators select these approaches?
- c. What do home-educating parents believe about learning to read?
- d. What do home-educating parents believe about their role in the teaching of reading process?

### **3.2.3 Rationale for mixed methods approach**

As established in the Chapter 2 review of the literature, home education research is still a developing field. A thorough engagement with the existing literature revealed no literature base from which to draw an understanding of the teaching of reading in Australian home education. This was a key consideration in choosing a mixed methods design, the design being a direct reflection of the needs of the research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). There was a need to obtain a broad, quantitative understanding of what the teaching of reading in home education looks like in Australia alongside a deeper qualitative explanation and analysis of this process. An explanatory sequential mixed methods approach was thus selected to equally balance the data and to ensure they were collected in a logical manner according to the specifics of this research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Synthesis of these data could then be integrated to provide a synthesised answer to the overarching research question (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). The two-phase, sequential structure is a straightforward design and achievable for a single researcher, which made it a suitable method for this research project (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010).

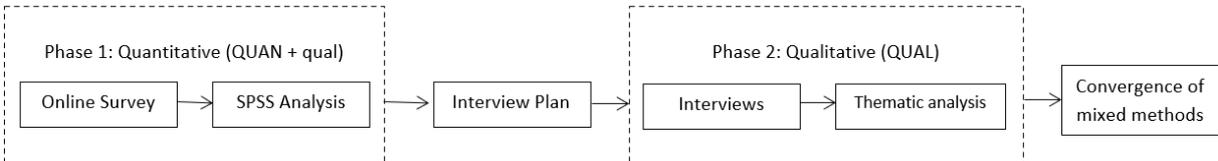
### **3.2.4 Explanatory sequential mixed methods approach**

An explanatory sequential mixed methods approach was used to balance the quantitative and qualitative data and ensure they were collected in a logical manner (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This approach balanced the need to explain a phenomenon, in this case what choices home-educating parents make when teaching their children to read and how these decisions are influenced by their beliefs. The quantitative Phase 1 provided the data missing from the literature about the demographics and methods of home educators. Phase 2 then contextualised reading education to better understand the choices parents make.

To implement the explanatory sequential mixed methods approach (Figure 3.2) quantitative data were collected in Phase 1 to inform a qualitative, multicase study in Phase 2 (Cohen, 2017; Yin, 2018). In Phase 1, 185 survey responses were collected from home-educating parents drawn from across Australia through home education networks. The Phase 1 survey (QUAN + qual in Figure 3.2) prioritised the collection of quantitative data, but included two qualitative questions. Combined with the quantitative data, these helped inform the development of the qualitative questions for the interviews in Phase 2 (QUAL). Phase 2 drew participants from the Phase 1 sample to form seven qualitative case studies through semistructured interviews. The qualitative interviews were developed in relation to the preliminary findings from the quantitative data so that these could be further explored and explained (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Due to the lack of research about reading in home education, this approach lent itself well to an explanatory approach to best answer the research question, in line with the pragmatic worldview (Johnson et al., 2007). By first establishing a breadth of information about reading in home education, Phase 2 could provide depth of understanding. Furthermore, informed by the conceptual framework of this research, and the foundational belief that each home-educating family forms a unique CoP, this method of research allowed each case to be analysed individually, while permitting a transferable understanding of how Australian home educators teach their children to read.

**Figure 3.2**

*Explanatory sequential mixed methods approach*



After collecting data through a multiphase research project, the data were integrated, an essential step in mixed methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Hall, 2020). The purposive integration of the mixed methods results ensured the overarching research question was able to be fully answered in breadth and depth, in line with the methodological approach of mixed methods and the pragmatist worldview. Schoonenboom and Johnson (2017) emphasised that having one or more points of mixed methods integration is the underpinning purpose to ensure a convergence of data and findings. The explanatory sequential model uses two points of integration (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). First, the data analysis from the quantitative stage in Phase 1 informed the qualitative research design of Phase 2. Second, the two sets of data analyses were integrated to form integrated conclusions that responded to the research question.

While explanatory sequential research follows a straightforward, linear approach to data collection, there are a number of considerations to be made. First, while simple to implement, the quantitative phase must be implemented and analysed before the qualitative phase can be completed, creating a time consideration for the researcher (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This concern was considered in the research design, with Phase 1 being administered at the start of an Australian school year (February 2022) and remaining open for 2 months. This allowed adequate time to collect responses and for the preliminary analysis of the data so that Phase 2 could be designed and implemented within the same academic year. The Phase 2 interviews were conducted between May and July 2022.

A second consideration of explanatory sequential research is that the qualitative phase cannot be fully planned in advance. In this study, there was no guarantee prior to the administration of Phase 1 which criteria would need to be used to select the Phase 2 participants as this would be based on the data analysis from Phase 1 in order to best explain

the data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). A purposive sample was used for Phase 2, selected from Phase 1 participants who self-nominated. However, some of the selected participants either did not respond to email correspondence or no longer wished to participate. While this is a noted limitation of this research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), the current study was not inhibited as only seven interviews were required (of a volunteer pool of 89 respondents willing to be interviewed). This is outlined in greater depth in Section 3.4.2.

### **3.2.5 Positioning of the researcher**

This research was conducted as part of a PhD program, with the process supported by a supervisory team. The purpose of the research and my qualifications as a PhD candidate were made clear in the participant information sheet for both the Phase 1 survey and the Phase 2 interview.

As part of the semistructured interviews, I introduced myself to the participants individually on the Zoom platform. The purpose of the research was disclosed, as well as my personal background as the researcher. I advised the participants that I was a home-educating mother of four children seeking the insights of each parent into their home education choices. Jackson (2015) and English (2015b) both noted that obtaining genuine research data from the home-educating populous can be difficult due to some home-educating parents' distrust of formal education and government departments (English, 2015b; Jackson, 2015). An important dimension of disclosing my background was the intentional choice to not mention my personal approaches, philosophies, and beliefs. The focus was instead on gaining the trust of the interviewees and establishing a positive rapport for the research (Cohen, 2017).

### **3.3 Research implementation**

#### **3.3.1 Phase 1 survey**

Phase 1 of the explanatory sequential design utilised mostly quantitative data collection methods to gain an overview of the beliefs of home-educating parents towards reading, as well as the practical methods they utilise to facilitate reading. This data collection occurred between February and April 2022. There were 238 responses to the online survey, with only 186 containing usable data. One data set was excluded as the family was enrolled in distance education rather than home education. This reduced the usable respondents to  $N = 185$ .

##### **3.3.1.1 Participants**

Home educators ( $N = 185$ ) from Australia-wide home education networks responded to the survey. Due to an unquantifiable home education population, a convenience sample was used (Jackson, 2017). While this limits the extent of generalisability and may limit representativeness, the voluntary nature of this sample may improve the quality and reliability of responses (Cohen, 2017; Hall, 2020). Thirteen online home education groups were approached to post the survey in their online Facebook communities. They were Home Education Australia, Australian Christian Homeschoolers, Hervey Bay Homeschoolers, The Educating Parent (Beverly Paine), Home Education NSW, Home Education Network Australia, Victorian Homeschoolers and Unschoolers, Home Education South Australia, Homeschool in Western Australia, Northern Territory Homeschool Network, Home Education Southern Tasmania, Homeschooling Littles Australia, and Home Education QLD. These aimed to represent as many Australian states and territories as possible: nationwide, NSW, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, Northern Territory, Tasmania, and Queensland. No specific online community was found for Australian Capital Territory, which may reflect their low

registration numbers (English & Gribble, 2021). Home Education Australia, which is a nationwide home education support organisation, sent the survey link by email and posted to their Facebook page.

### **3.3.1.2 Phase 1 data collection**

The quantitative online survey (Appendix A) comprised three key components: parental beliefs about reading, home education reading practices, and demographic information. In addition, two open-ended qualitative questions were included to allow the respondents an opportunity to further elaborate their answers. This survey was hosted online through Survey Tool, and a unique link was added to a digital invitation that was disseminated through Australia-wide home education networks. The survey was developed in three parts, comprising Survey Instruments A, B, and C.

**Survey Instrument A.** The Parental Reading Beliefs Inventory (PRBI; DeBaryshe & Binder, 1994) is a well-established tool to analyse parental beliefs about reading in the early years. It contains 42 Likert-style items to assess parental beliefs about reading and their role in their child's reading development. Comprehensive evaluation of this tool's capacity to assess parental beliefs about reading in early childhood supports its validity (Boomstra et al., 2013; Mathieu et al., 2020); however, limitations include a lack of application to diverse contexts and internal weakness (Gonzalez et al., 2013). This tool utilises seven subscales, four of which were chosen for administration in this research project: teaching efficacy, positive affect, verbal participation, and reading instruction. These were the most applicable to the home education context and the research questions. Gonzalez et al. (2013) found the internal consistency of the PRBI to be appropriate; however, the subscales were not distinct enough, and the authors felt that "the fit of the models that included all of the subscales together was quite poor" (p. 134) with most of the subscales easily interpreted independently. This finding

formed the basis of the rationale for selecting only the subscales relevant to the home education community, allowing for analysis of the beliefs relating to reading that were most useful and appropriate for the context. This also reduced the length of the survey instrument by removing three less-relevant subscales, which is an important consideration for participant engagement (Cohen, 2017).

**Survey Instrument B.** No tool currently exists to assess home education reading practices, thus requiring the construction of a survey to gather data on regular reading practices in each home education setting, entitled Home Education Reading Practices (HERP). HERP utilises dichotomous and multiple-choice questions about regular reading education practices in the home education setting. The questionnaire was constructed using current understandings from the literature about reading instruction methods and resources (Machin et al., 2018; Rowe, 2005), as well as home education methods and approaches (Barratt-Peacock, 2003; Guterman & Neuman, 2019; Rothermel, 2011).

**Survey Instrument C.** Demographic questions were utilised to represent the Australia-wide respondents. These included location, age, gender, education background, employment status, and income.

### **3.3.1.3 Phase 1 data analysis**

The quantitative data from Phase 1 were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS; Version 26). Descriptive statistics were utilised to analyse the demographic data and methods used to teach reading. Frequency analysis was conducted of the survey responses to provide a tabular display of data. Univariate statistical analysis was applied to the PRBI; each element of the subscale was analysed individually, providing an overview of responses as well as the cohort mean (Cohen, 2017). The subscales were then combined to analyse whether the individual participants had a high or low level of beliefs

about reading and their role in their child's reading. DeBaryshe and Binder (1994) used a priori assumptions (beliefs consistent with prior established research) to construct both positively and negatively worded questions to elicit parental beliefs about reading. To enable a total score, the negatively worded items were subsequently reverse coded so that 4 = high parental beliefs about reading and 1 = low parental beliefs. Each respondent's ( $N = 185$ ) individual result was calculated, and these were mapped onto a scatterplot to provide a visual representation of parental beliefs about reading. The higher the score, the more strongly a parent was deemed to value reading and their role in their child's reading education.

Pearson correlation was used to determine if there was a strong relationship between the home education approach taken and the strength of the parental beliefs about reading (Cohen, 2017). To gather a finer grained analysis of the parental beliefs from the PRBI, each individual question was entered into SPSS, and Pearson correlation was used to determine if these beliefs correlated with a parent's choice of reading approach. The two qualitative questions were inductively analysed to determine any common themes about reading approaches, as well as the impact of COVID-19 on home education. From the combination of these analyses, a set of 12 semistructured interview questions (Appendix B) were constructed to further explain the findings from the Phase 1 survey.

#### **3.3.1.4 Phase 1 limitations**

Survey research is a useful tool to elicit point-in-time responses from a sample within a population (Coughlan et al., 2009). Survey dangers include self-reported data, as it is impossible to verify the identities of participants and their truthfulness (Cohen, 2017). It was hoped that eliciting responses from closed home education organisations and online forums would increase the likelihood of genuine respondents recognised as part of the home education community. Furthermore, participant engagement and survey fatigue can also be a

concern (Cohen, 2017). To address this, the survey was kept to a short time frame, which was addressed up front, and only four subscales of the PRBI were selected to reduce participant fatigue.

### **3.3.2 Phase 2 interviews**

#### **3.3.2.1 Phase 2 data collection**

Semistructured interviews were conducted through a videoconferencing tool (Zoom) that allowed Australia-wide participation, minimised accessibility barriers, enhanced opportunities for diverse representation, and allowed participants to feel secure in their own environment (Hall, 2020). Semistructured interviews allowed for predetermined and follow-up questions (Cohen, 2017). From the initial 185 survey responses, 89 respondents provided contact details to participate in a follow-up interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed from the audio.

#### **3.3.2.2 Phase 2 participants**

A purposive sample ( $N = 7$ ) was drawn from Phase 1 responses, forming a multicase study to explore differences highlighted by the quantitative research (Yin, 2018). From the initial 89 volunteers, 12 of the respondents contacted either did not answer or became unavailable in the time that had elapsed between Phase 1 and Phase 2. Due to the large pool of willing volunteers ( $n = 89$ ), this was not prohibitive, and seven participants, who met the set criteria shown in Table 3.1, were easily selected.

This was a holistic study design, meaning that a single unit of analysis (the interview) was utilised to analyse each case (Yin, 2018). Purposive sampling was used to determine participants using answers to HERP Question HE2 (Appendix B) in which participants were asked to select the reading approach they mostly commonly used. The listed approaches were drawn from the literature review and revealed seven key approaches: synthetic phonics,

simple phonics, analytic phonics, whole language, environmental or natural reading, reading aloud, and unschooling (which uses no formal instruction). The seven interview participants were selected based on their self-identified approach to reading (Table 3.1). Additionally, each participant selected was from a different Australian state or territory to provide an Australia-wide representation (except for the Australian Capital Territory). The participants also represented a variety of home education philosophies (Question HE7). Of the 89 volunteers, 86 identified as female, one identified as male, and two identified as nonbinary. Gender was not considered as a key factor for selecting interviewees; rather, the type of reading instruction was given priority in order to give depth to Phase 1 results.

**Table 3.1**

*Overview of interview selection*

Survey response (HE2)	Type of reading instruction	Corresponding interviewee pseudonym
I teach my child the 26 sounds of the alphabet.	Simple phonetic approach	Mary
I use a phonics system to learn the 44 sounds of the alphabet.	Synthetic phonics	Sarah
I teach my child whole words and we work out the phonics patterns in those words.	Analytic phonics	Annie
We read simple books and/or learn sight words.	Whole language	Wanda
My child learns to read from the environment in our home (posters on the wall, catalogues, playing games).	Natural/environmental print approach	Nina
The only planned reading instruction I do is reading to my child. (We read aloud.)	Read aloud	Myrtle
I do not plan any activities or curriculum to teach my child to read OR my child will learn to read on their own.	Unschooling approach	Ursula

### **3.3.2.3 Phase 2 data analysis**

Interview data were inductively coded and analysed using both inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Allen, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2016). Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) outlined that explanatory sequential mixed methods research utilises both deductive and inductive reasoning to meet the needs of the research question and methods. While there is not enough research and theory to complete a purely deductive thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2016) guidelines were followed to meet the needs of this research according to its underlying philosophy.

The six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2016) were followed, starting with Step 1, familiarisation with the data. I chose to transcribe each interview myself, which enabled me to gain a greater familiarity and understanding of the interview responses. In Step 2, I generated initial codes using NVivo. I worked through each case as an individual transcript, and overall, 18 codes were identified. Step 3 then involved combining the codes into overarching themes. This was done by creating a mind map and linking codes and ideas that fit together, a method recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021). In Step 4, the themes were reviewed and reduced from five themes to three. Step 5 determined the significance of the themes. The themes and results from the Phase 1 survey were considered within Step 5 and Step 6 to ensure that the explanatory sequential approach was enacted as anticipated. At the completion of Step 6, each individual case was analysed, and then multicase study analysis techniques were applied to draw cross-case conclusions (Yin, 2018) and write up the results. By converging the thematic similarities and differences between the cases, the aim of Phase 2 was to provide in-depth understandings of why parents make the decisions they do when home educating and, subsequently, how this is influenced by their belief systems.

#### **3.3.2.4 Phase 2 limitations**

Interview limitations potentially include the researcher's impact within this social interaction, transcription error, and interviewer bias (Cohen, 2017). As a home-educating parent myself, I was concerned that the interviewees may give an altered response; however, by being an "ally," this may equally have helped me to overcome the notorious difficulty of recruiting home educators for the study, who have previously been found to be wary of formal education and governments (English, 2015b; Jackson, 2015). To counteract interview bias, respondents were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonyms for the case studies and were given a transcript copy to help validate their responses (Yin, 2018) and to increase credibility of the inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2016). The use of some predetermined questions (drawn from the Phase 1 analysis) was also a technique used to minimise interviewer bias, as each interviewee was given equal chance to answer the key questions.

#### **3.3.3 Overview of Phases 1 and 2 data collection and analysis**

Table 3.2 gives an overview of how the individual tools in Phase 1 and Phase 2 were combined to address the subquestions and overall research question.

**Table 3.2***Overview of data collection and analysis*

Subquestions	Method of data collection	Analysis techniques
a. What approaches are used to teach reading in the home education setting?	<p><b>Phase 1</b> HERP: Questions HE2 and HE3 asked “which research approaches” a parent uses to teach reading. HE1 was an open-ended question asking parents to describe their approach to teaching reading</p> <p><b>Phase 1</b> PRBI: Subscale 4, reading instruction</p> <p><b>Phase 2</b> Qualitative interview questions about what reading instruction looks like in the home education setting</p>	<p><b>Phase 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequency analysis of survey responses, including graphical summaries of the data</li> <li>• Univariate statistics on each of the items to identify significance</li> <li>• Factor analysis to confirm factors in the survey; link Subscale 4 to the reading approaches in the HERP (i.e., is the strong positive affect linked to a certain teaching approach?)</li> </ul> <p><b>Phase 2</b> Inductive and thematic analysis (Braun &amp; Clarke, 2016):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. familiarising with the data</li> <li>2. generating initial codes</li> <li>3. searching for themes</li> <li>4. reviewing themes</li> <li>5. defining and naming themes</li> <li>6. writing up</li> </ol>
b. Why do home educators select these approaches?	<p><b>Phase 2</b> Qualitative interview questions allowing parents to explain their approach to reading instruction and reasons</p>	<p><b>Phase 2</b> Inductive and deductive thematic analysis</p>
c. What do home-educating parents believe about learning to read?	<p><b>Phase 1</b> PRBI: Subscale 2, positive affect PRBI: Subscale 3, verbal participation</p> <p><b>Phase 2</b> Qualitative interview questions for parents to explain their beliefs about learning to read</p>	<p><b>Phase 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Univariate statistics on Subscales 2 and 3 to see if any have significance</li> <li>• Descriptive statistics: graphical methods to show which items have significance</li> </ul> <p><b>Phase 2</b> Inductive and deductive thematic analysis</p>

Subquestions	Method of data collection	Analysis techniques
d. What do home-educating parents believe about their role in the teaching process?	<p><b>Phase 1</b> PRBI: Subscale 1, teaching efficacy</p> <p><b>Phase 2</b> Qualitative interview questions for parents to explain their approach to home education and the role they take in the teaching process</p>	<p><b>Phase 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Univariate statistics on Subscale 1</li> <li>• Descriptive statistics</li> </ul> <p><b>Phase 2</b> Inductive and deductive thematic analysis</p>

Main research question	Method of data collection	Analysis techniques
How do parental beliefs about reading influence the teaching of reading within the home education setting?	<p><b>Phase 1</b> The PRBI collected data on parental beliefs about various elements of reading (subscales). The HERP collected specific techniques and practices parents use to teach reading (including methods and frequency of reading instruction).  This provided data on whether a relationship exists between a high score on subscales within the PRBI (indicating strong parental beliefs about reading and their role in the teaching process) and elements of the HERP (the practices used to teach reading).</p> <p><b>Phase 2</b> Qualitative questions asked parents how they teach reading, why they do this, and what they believe about reading.</p>	<p><b>Phase 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Univariate statistics on each of the items to see if any have significance</li> <li>• Factor analysis (correlations) to confirm factors in the survey; link factors (each subscale of the PRBI) to the reading approaches used (HERP)</li> <li>• Univariate statistics and chi-square test of independence to analyse whether teaching method/type of home educator is associated with age/gender/economic status</li> </ul> <p><b>Phase 2</b> Inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Braun &amp; Clarke, 2016)</p>

### 3.4 Ethical considerations

This research study gained ethical approval from the University of Southern Queensland's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC approval number H21REA240). The research was conducted at all times within the guidelines for the National Statement of Ethical

Conduct in Human Research. Informed consent was ensured within both the survey and the interviews through participant information sheets and consent forms.

Data storage was managed in accordance with University of Southern Queensland policies. Multiple online points of data storage were utilised, with physical back-up on an external hard drive as well. All storage was password protected. Reported data were deidentified to protect individual identity.

### **3.5 Summary**

This chapter outlined the theoretical and methodological approach of this research project, including the rationale for a mixed methods design, instrument design, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations. An explanatory sequential mixed methods approach was used through a pragmatic worldview to advance the capacity of the research question to be answered with breadth and depth. The next chapter reports the results of Phase 1, followed by the results of Phase 2 in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 4: PHASE 1 SURVEY RESULTS

In the previous chapter, the methodological approach for this research was outlined. This chapter outlines the results of Phase 1 (QUAN + qual) of this mixed methods study. The tool used for data collection was an online survey with responses collected between February and April 2022. The quantitative component of the overall explanatory mixed method approach aimed to answer the following subquestions:

- a. What approaches are used to teach reading in the home education setting?
- b. What do home-educating parents believe about learning to read?
- c. What do home-educating parents believe about their role in the teaching of reading process?

These subquestions help to inform the overarching research question: “How do parental beliefs about reading influence the teaching of reading within the home education setting?”

SPSS (Version 26) was used to analyse the quantitative data. First, the data were analysed using descriptive statistics to outline demographic data collected within the study. Second, the PRBI responses were reverse coded to provide an overall score of the degree to which parents valued reading. Pearson correlations were then calculated to determine any statistical correlation between high parental beliefs about reading and their practices when teaching their child to read.

Two qualitative questions were also analysed as part of the survey results, using inductive thematic analysis. These are also presented in this chapter as they were used to inform Phase 2 interview questions.

#### **4.1 Demographics of Australian home educators**

Phase 1 of this research administered an Australia-wide online survey to 185 respondents educating 546 children. Responses came from every Australian state and territory, with Victoria, Queensland, and NSW having the most populous responses (see Table 4.1). This is mirrored in the home education enrolment data provided by the respective state authorities, with those states accounting for a majority of home educators (English & Gribble, 2021; Jackson, 2019). NSW has the most legally registered home educators, and this state also had the largest proportion of survey respondents (27.3%), followed by Victoria (25.6%) and Queensland (25.6%). The main anomaly in the data is Western Australia, which holds 14.2% of the national registrations but only 3.5% of survey respondents. The percentages indicated in Table 4.1 show that responses to this survey provided an appropriate spread of Australian home educators from each state and territory.

**Table 4.1***Comparison between survey responses by state and state registration numbers, 2022*

State/territory of residence	Phase 1 survey responses (N)	%	State registration numbers	%
New South Wales	47	27.3	12,359	28.5
Victoria	44	25.6	11,912	27.5
Queensland	44	25.6	8,461	19.5
South Australia	16	9.3	2,443	5.6
Tasmania	11	6.4	1,303	3
Western Australia	6	3.5	6,151	14.2
Australian Capital Territory	3	1.7	413	1
Northern Territory	1	.6	206	.5

*Source.* Australian Capital Territory Government, 2022; Cassidy, 2023; Government of Western Australia, n.d.; NSW Education Standards Authority, 2023; M. Price, Personal communication, 4 October 2023 (Manager of Home Education South Australia); Queensland Government, 2022; State Government of Victoria, n.d.; Tasmanian Government, 2022.

The quantitative survey first used descriptive statistics to profile home educators demographically. The survey respondents represented a diverse variety of home educators with a mixed spread of ages, family income, and education (Table 4.2). As reflected in previous key research studies about home educators (Rothermel, 2011; Slater et al., 2020), most respondents (98.3%) were female, and all but three respondents were the primary educator (98.4%). Secondary educator responses (1.6%) were included in the data set as their views on reading and the methods used were seen as valuable to the study. The majority of home educators fell within the 25 to 44 years age bracket (70.3%), while 26.7% of home educators surveyed were aged from 45 to 55. Data from Slater et al. (2020) found similar demographics within Australian home educators, with 74.5% between the ages of 26 and 45 years and 22.6% between the ages of 45 and 55 years.

Most of the home educators were not in paid employment (67%), and the remaining respondents showed a mix of part-time (18%) and full-time work (5%), as well as casual work (8%) and study (2%). Economic responses were spread across all socioeconomic levels, with the majority of respondents (54.6%) having a family income under \$100,000 per year. A total of 68.6% of respondents had a university degree (undergraduate and postgraduate combined), and 18.6% had a TAFE (technical and further education) or trade qualification, while 2.9% of respondents had an education level below Year 12. A study of Australian home educators by Slater et al. (2020) found that 53.8% of their sample had a university degree, while 32% had a certificate or diploma level.

**Table 4.2***Demographic background of the respondents (N = 185)*

Variables	Values	<i>n</i>	%
Age	25–34 years	43	25.0
	35–44 years	78	45.3
	45–54 years	46	26.7
	55–64 years	4	2.3
	65+ years	1	.6
Gender	Female	170	98.3
	Male	1	.5
	Nonbinary	2	1.2
Highest level of education	Year 10	4	2.3
	Year 11	1	.6
	Year 12	17	9.9
	TAFE (technical and further education)	25	14.5
	Trade qualification	7	4.1
	Undergraduate at university	55	32.0
	Postgraduate at university	63	36.6
Total combined family income	Less than \$49,999	26	15.2
	\$50,000 to \$74,999	38	22.2
	\$75,000 to \$99,999	30	17.5
	\$100,000 to \$124,999	29	17.0
	\$125,000 to \$149,999	13	7.6
	\$150,000 to \$199,999	9	5.3
	Over \$200,000	9	5.3
	Prefer not to say	17	9.9
Employment status	Home duties/not in paid employment	114	66.7
	Working part time	31	18.1
	Working full time	8	4.7
	Casual work	14	8.2
	Retired	1	.6
	Student	3	1.8

Home educators reported using a variety of styles (Table 4.3). The eclectic approach, which involves using a variety of curriculum and teaching methods, was the most reported (53.2%). This was followed by the unschooling approach (24.9%) that does not utilise planned or structured curriculum.

A conflict in the data was noted in that 9.3% of respondents said they used a distance education curriculum; however, in the screening data, these respondents selected that they were home educating (registered or unregistered) and not doing distance education. It is possible that these families either mis-selected in the screening questions, or they previously utilised distance education curriculum but changed to home education. Furthermore, there are some distance education providers, such as Australian Christian College, who sell curriculum to home-educating families. Thus, distance education may be a source of home education curriculum or approaches. As the precise reason could not be quantified, these five respondents were kept in the data set based on the self-reported screening questions.

**Table 4.3**

*Approaches to home education*

Description of approach to home education	<i>n</i>	%
Eclectic	92	53.2
Unschooling	43	24.9
Charlotte Mason/Living Literature	15	8.7
Other	15	8.7
“School-in-a-box” purchased curriculum	11	6.4
Individualised distance education program	11	6.4
Unit study	7	4.0
Nonpersonalised distance education program	5	2.9

## 4.2 Reliability

The original PRBI consisted of seven subscales, four of which were selected as relevant to this parental demographic. These subscales were the teaching efficacy (partial), positive affect, verbal participation, and reading instruction. Cronbach's alpha revealed a good level of internal consistency for teaching efficacy and verbal participation (see Table 4.4). Positive affect was within the acceptable range, while reading instruction had a poor level of reliability, in part due to the low number of items. These reliability results are well reflected in the established data (Table 4.5).

**Table 4.4**

*Results of reliability for each factor*

Factors	No. of items	Cronbach's alpha
Teaching efficacy	4	.845
Positive affect	11	.755
Verbal participation	8	.831
Reading instruction	4	.587

**Table 4.5**

*Reliability results from literature*

Subscales	No. of items	DeBaryshe & Binder (1994) $\alpha$	Rodriguez et al. (2009) $\alpha$	Gonzales et al. (2013) $\alpha$	Radisic & Seva (2013) $\alpha$	Dhima (2015) $\alpha$	Mathieu (2020) $\alpha$
1. Teaching efficacy	9	.73	.79	.68	.58	.62	0.63
2. Positive affect	11	.85	.79	.77	.77	.80	0.75
3. Verbal participation	8	.83	.88	.83	.76	.76	0.84
4. Reading instruction	4	.63	.65	.73	.65	-.16	0.39

### 4.3 Approaches to teaching reading

The survey was administered to home educators currently teaching their children to read (46.5%) and those who had previously taught their child to read (34.6%). A total of 18.9% of respondents utilised an unschooling approach to reading instruction, as shown in Table 4.6.

**Table 4.6**

*Currency of reading instruction*

Current circumstances	<i>N</i>	%
Currently teaching a child to read	86	46.5
Previously taught a child to read	64	34.6
Allow or previously allowed a child to learn to read without help	35	18.9

To elicit an understanding of parental approaches to reading, the HERP section of the survey investigated three key areas: methods, time, and materials.

#### 4.3.1 *Teaching methods used by parents*

To understand the reading method used by parents, respondents were asked first to indicate their primary method and then to indicate all other methods utilised in their home education. Table 4.7 shows that the most common method of reading instruction was a synthetic phonics approach where parents explicitly taught the 44 sounds of the English language (38.7%). This was followed by parents reading aloud to their children (14.5%) and then environmental print (12.7%), whereby children learnt to read by immersion in literacy-rich environments. Analytical phonics and whole language were both used in 9.8% of families as the primary method. Analytic phonics teaches the phonics patterns within whole words, while the whole-language approach relies on meaning-making and the three-cueing system for reading development (Johnston & Watson, 2014).

While synthetic phonics was the most common primary method, the most common secondary method was whole language. When results from both questions were combined, synthetic phonics was used by 71.1% of all parents surveyed, while whole language was used by 70.5%. This indicates that many of the parents surveyed utilised what the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (2005) referred to as a balanced approach to reading instruction. The second most populous additional method was natural and environmental print (56.6%), indicating that this may be seen as a method that is supportive to the chosen primary method. Unschooling, where there is no planned instruction or child-led learning, was the least chosen approach as both the main method (6.9%) and the additional method (15%). Given that 24.9% of all respondents indicated that they were unschoolers, this indicated some disconnect between the parents' identified homeschooling philosophy and their approach to reading education.

**Table 4.7**

*Approaches to teaching reading*

Approach	Main method		Additional method	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Synthetic phonics	67	38.7	56	32.4
Read aloud (only)	25	14.5	39	22.5
Natural/environmental print	22	12.7	98	56.6
Analytic phonics	17	9.8	58	33.5
Whole language	17	9.8	105	60.7
Simple phonics (26 sounds)	13	7.5	64	37.0
Unschooling (no planned instruction/child teaching themselves)	12	6.9	26	15.0

To elicit parental beliefs about reading instruction, the PRBI subscale of reading instruction was utilised. Table 4.8 shows that home-educating parents believed it is important

to read with their child. Sevent-five percent of respondents believed reading with their child would help them to learn letters and words. The majority of parents (60.9%) believed that reading to their child should be an active process by asking them questions or pointing out words and patterns, while the remaining parents (39.1) disagreed. On the whole, the parents also felt there was no need to teach their child to read before school age (75.5%).

**Table 4.8**  
*Parental Reading Beliefs Inventory Subscale 4: reading instruction*

Reading instruction	% of responses					
	<i>n</i>	SD	D	A	SA	Mean
I read with my child so they will learn the letters and how to read simple words.	183	0.5	24.0	44.3	31.1	3.06
Parents should teach children how to read before they start school.	184	26.6	48.9	19.0	5.4	2.03
My child is too young to learn about reading.	184	59.8	38.0	1.6	0.5	1.43
When we read, I have my child point out different letters or numbers that are printed in the book.	184	4.3	34.8	47.3	13.6	2.70

Note, SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; A = agree; SA = strongly agree.

To analyse finer grained correlations between the individual items on the PRBI and the parental choice of reading approach, Pearson correlations were run on each of the 27 individual items of the PRBI with the seven main reading approaches selected by parents. Table 4.9 shows the correlations that were found from this process. Only the reading instruction substrand showed correlations. However, these were weak.

Pearson correlation (*r*) was used to determine if there was a strong relationship between the home education approach taken and the beliefs of the parent about reading instruction. There was a weak correlation (*r* = .173) between parents who used analytic phonics and valued reading as an opportunity to learn letters and simple words. Furthermore,

unschooling parents showed a weak correlation ( $r = -.180$ ) against the belief that parents should teach their children to read before school age. Parents who used a synthetic phonics approach were also more likely to point out letters and numbers to their child as they read aloud, albeit a weak relationship was seen between the approach and the instruction ( $r = .166$ ). However, as noted, all these correlations registered as weak, and as such, their statistical relevance should be regarded as such.

**Table 4.9**

*Correlations between parental beliefs about reading instruction and the chosen reading approach*

		A2 Synthetic phonics	A3 Analytic phonics	A7 Unschooling
R11 I read with my child so they will learn the letters and how to read simple words.	Pearson correlation	.012	.173**	-.044
	Sig. (two tailed)	.878	.023	.566
	N	172	172	172
R12 Parents should teach children how to read before they start school.	Pearson correlation	.085	.099	-.180*
	Sig. (two tailed)	.266	.195	.018
	N	172	172	172
R14 When we read, I have my child point out different letters or numbers that are printed in the book.	Pearson correlation	.166*	.143	-.142
	Sig. (two tailed)	.029	.061	.063
	N	173	173	173

### 4.3.2 Time

Parents were asked to consider how frequently, in a typical week, they read to their child and how frequently their child read to them. Table 4.10 indicates that parents reading aloud was a common practice in the home, with 54.1% reading to their child daily and 30.8% reading 4 to 5 days per week, while only 3.5% of respondents did not read aloud to their child at all. Of the respondents, 96.5% read to their child at least once per week.

The results for the child reading to the parent are also reported in Table 4.10, showing a wider spread of frequency. Of the children, 19.3% read to their parent every day, 56.1% read at least two times per week, and 12.9% did not read aloud to their parent at all.

**Table 4.10**

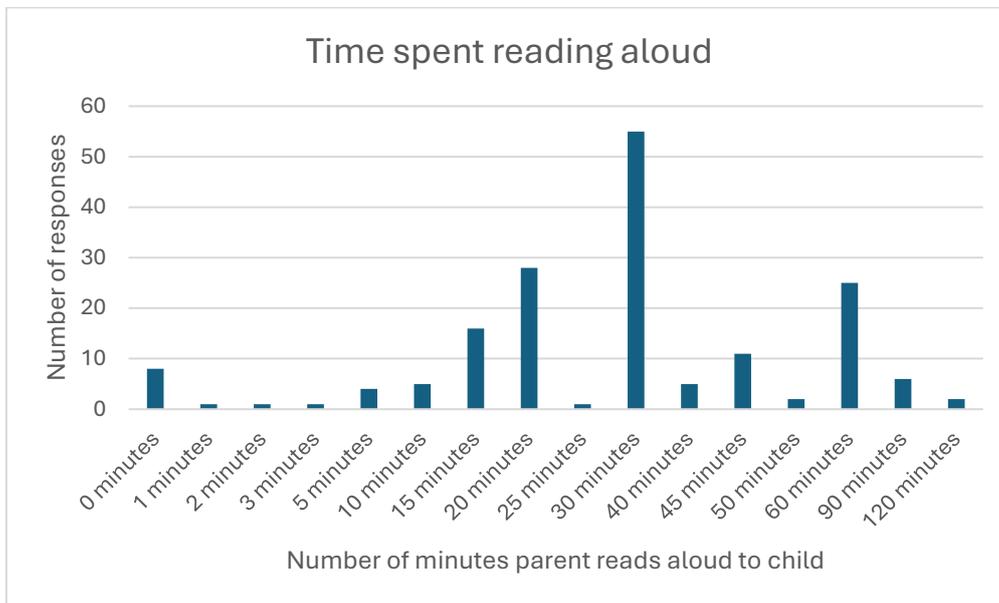
*Frequency of reading aloud*

Frequency of reading aloud	Parent reading to the child		The child reading aloud	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Not at all	6	3.5	22	12.9
Once per week	4	2.3	20	11.7
2–3 days per week	16	9.3	39	22.8
4–5 days per week	53	30.8	57	33.3
7 days per week/daily	93	54.1	33	19.3

Parents were further asked to indicate how many minutes they spent reading aloud to their child on a typical home-educating day. No range was given to parents, and they could write any amount that reflected their personal circumstances. Fourteen participants did not indicate a response, and the results of parents who chose to respond ( $N = 171$ ) are tabulated in Figure 4.1. The average length of reading aloud from the respondents was 33 min, with the span ranging from 0 min to 2 hr.

**Figure 4.1**

*Time parents spent reading aloud to children*



### **4.3.3 Materials**

Parents were asked to indicate the types of resources they used in their home to teach their child to read. As shown in Table 4.11, the most prominent resources were novels for reading aloud (77.5%), games (76.9%), and simple reading books, such as performance measurement (PM) readers or phonics books (74%). Hands-on materials, such as wooden letters, salt trays, and playdough, were also a popular resource, with 65.9% of respondents indicating their usage. Electronic resources were used by almost half the families, with iPad apps being operated by 49.1%. However, ebooks were the lowest reported resource at 14.5%. This contrasts with physical books for students to read (54.9%), indicating parents showed a preference for hard copy books over electronic texts.

Parents were also given a short response box to indicate any additional resources they used that were not in the list (Table 4.11). Some parents used this to elaborate their answers. For example, they named specific electronic apps or websites such as Reading Eggs ( $n = 4$ ),

Nessy ( $n = 2$ ), IXL ( $n = 1$ ), Skoolbo ( $n = 1$ ), and unspecified online courses ( $n = 2$ ). Parents also indicated use of audiobooks ( $n = 2$ ), movies and documentaries where subtitles may be used ( $n = 3$ ), and printable worksheets ( $n = 2$ ). Some parents indicated that the resources question in the survey proved to be limited in wording as it only specified novels and not other forms of books. Subsequently, parents added to the short response that they used books ( $n = 3$ ), picture books ( $n = 1$ ), and magazines ( $n = 1$ ).

**Table 4.11**

*Resources used to teach reading*

Resources	<i>n</i>	%
Novels for reading aloud (by parent)	134	77.5
Games	133	76.9
Simple reading books (such as PM readers or phonics books)	128	74.0
Hands-on materials (wooden letters, salt trays, playdough etc.)	114	65.9
Novels for child to read	95	54.9
iPad apps	85	49.1
Purchased phonics or reading workbooks	76	43.9
Alphabet cards or charts	70	40.5
Sight word cards	66	38.2
Kindle/ebooks	25	14.5

*Note.* PM = performance measurement.

Section 4.3 presented the variety of approaches and resources home-educating parents used when teaching their child to read.

#### **4.4 Parental beliefs about reading**

DeBaryshe and Binder's (1994) subscale of positive affect was created with the a priori assumptions that reading to children has a positive effect on children's interest in reading and engagement in learning to read. The results of this subscale in Table 4.12 show that the home-

educating parents surveyed indicated a positive disposition towards reading. Of the respondents, 98.9% enjoyed reading to their child, and 97.8% felt that reading together was a special bonding experience. It is notable that 100% of parents agreed that they wanted their child to love books. The parents indicated that 8.1% of the children did not enjoy being read to. Parents were also asked to indicate whether they had positive childhood memories of being read to, with 33.2% of parents indicating that they did not.

**Table 4.12**

*Parental Reading Beliefs Inventory results: positive affect*

Positive affect	n	SD	% of responses			Mean
			D	A	SA	
I find it boring or difficult to read to my child.	185	72.4	24.3	3.2	0.0	1.31
I enjoy reading with my child.	185	0.0	1.1	24.9	74.1	3.73
I have good memories of being read to when I was a child.	184	8.7	24.5	32.6	34.2	2.92
Reading with my child is a special time that we love to share.	185	0.0	2.2	37.3	60.5	3.58
My child does not like to be read to.	185	67.0	24.9	7.0	1.1	1.42
I feel warm and close to my child when we read.	183	0.0	2.7	36.6	60.7	3.58
I have to scold or discipline my child when we try to read.	185	65.9	30.3	3.2	0.5	1.38
I want my child to love books.	185	0.0	0.0	16.2	83.8	3.84
I don't read to my child because they won't sit still.	185	66.5	30.8	2.2	0.5	1.37
I read to my child whenever they want.	185	0.0	20.7	45.7	33.7	3.13

*Note.* SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; A = agree; SA = strongly agree.

The majority of parents (see Table 4.13) reported using a variety of verbal techniques when reading with their children, such as an excited tone (84.3%), questioning techniques (64.8%), and literary discussions (78.3%). Of the parents, 94.6% believed that reading would

help their children be better communicators. The total mean score for the verbal participation subscale, which were all positively worded, was 3.2, indicating that the respondents on the whole placed high value on verbal engagement with their child.

**Table 4.13**

*Parental Reading Beliefs Inventory results: verbal participation*

Verbal participation	n	SD	% of responses			Mean
			D	A	SA	
When we read, I try to sound excited so my child stays interested.	185	0.5	15.1	49.2	35.1	3.19
Children learn new words, colours, names, etc., from books.	185	0.5	3.2	36.2	60.0	3.56
Reading helps children be better talkers and better listeners.	184	1.1	4.3	32.6	62.0	3.55
My child knows the names of many things they have seen in books.	185	0.0	2.7	35.7	61.6	3.59
When we read, I want my child to help me tell the story.	185	0.5	28.1	45.9	25.4	2.96
I ask my child a lot of questions when we read.	185	1.6	33.5	48.6	16.2	2.79
When we read, I want my child to ask questions about the book.	185	0.0	9.7	62.7	27.6	3.18
When we read, we talk about the pictures as much as we read the story.	184	0.5	21.2	53.3	25.0	3.03

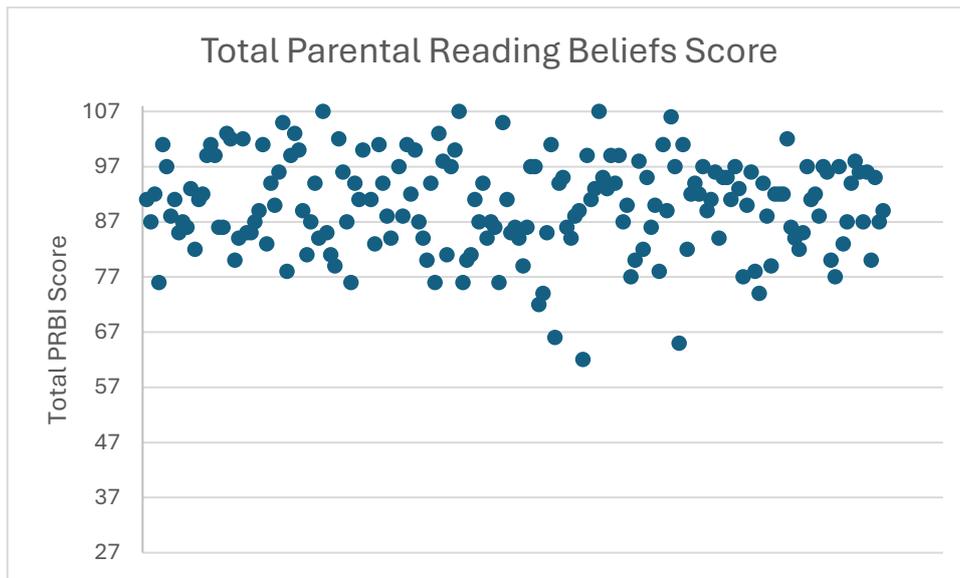
*Note.* SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; A = agree; SA = strongly agree.

The PRBI was originally designed as seven subscales that could be calculated to give an overall result. The higher the total score, the higher the parent's belief about reading. The PRBI used both positively and negatively worded items. To enable a total score, the negatively worded items were subsequently reverse coded so that 4 = high parental beliefs about reading, and 1 = low parental beliefs. Due to the inclusion of only four subscales, the maximum score was 108 and the minimum score possible was 27, as shown in Figure 4.2. The mean

response from the home-educating parents was 89, indicating most parents were deemed to place a high value on reading.

**Figure 4.2**

*Scatterplot depicting Parental Reading Beliefs Inventory total parental reading beliefs score*



Pearson correlation was conducted to determine if there was any statistical relationship between a parent’s total PRBI score and the frequency with which they read to their child and had their child read to them. Table 4.14 shows that there was no statistical correlation between the frequency of a child reading to their parent based on the strength of their PRBI score. There was also no statistically significant correlation between a parent’s total PRBI score and the frequency with which they read aloud to their child.

**Table 4.14***Pearson correlations of total Parental Reading Beliefs Inventory score*

		Frequency of reading aloud	Frequency of child reading aloud
	Pearson correlation	.238	.031
Total PRBI score for parental beliefs	Sig. (two tailed)	.002	0.686
	<i>N</i>	172	170

#### 4.5 Parental beliefs about their role in their child's learning

Respondents to the PRBI indicated that they played an important role in their child's learning (90.3%). They mostly agreed that their child learns from them (94%) and that they have a responsibility to be engaged in their child's education (95.7%).

**Table 4.15***Beliefs about teaching efficacy*

Teaching efficacy	<i>N</i>	SD	% of responses			Mean
			D	A	SA	
As a parent, I play an important role in my child's development.	185	9.7	0.0	9.2	81.1	3.62
My child learns many important things from me.	185	5.4	0.5	18.9	75.1	3.64
I am my child's most important teacher.	185	4.3	10.3	33.5	51.9	3.33
Parents need to be involved in their children's education.	185	3.8	0.5	18.9	76.8	3.69

*Note.* SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; A = agree; SA = strongly agree.

#### 4.6 Summary of quantitative results

The quantitative survey results include responses from a broad spread of home educators from each state and territory. They represent a variety of age, education backgrounds, and income levels. Parents nominated their primary method of teaching reading

as well as additional methods, which showed that the majority of parents used more than one approach. Synthetic phonics was the most used primary approach at 38.7%, while whole language was the most used additional method (60.7%), followed closely by natural or environmental print (56.6%).

The results from the PRBI showed weak correlations between the approach a parent used and their beliefs about reading. No correlation was found between the type of approach chosen and the amount of time a parent read aloud to their child. It was found that 96.5% of parents read aloud to their child every week, with 54.1% of those parents reading to their child daily.

The PRBI was used to calculate a parent's overall reading beliefs score. This indicated how much a parent valued their child's reading education and reflected a priori beliefs from literature, as developed by DeBaryshe and Binder (1994). Of the respondents, 98.3% of parents scored as having a PRBI score in the top 50th percentile, indicating that they placed a strong value on reading, and this was reflected in their actions.

#### **4.7 Qualitative survey responses**

To give parents an opportunity to explain their approach in their own words, a short response box was offered at the beginning of the HERP. The first question asked the parent to describe how they taught their youngest child to read. The goal of this question was to gather additional data that may not have been captured by the quantitative questions and to help inform the semistructured interview questions in Phase 2. The second question asked was about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their home education. This question was included as a reflection of the literature review. Recently, there has been an increasing focus in the research literature examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on both those who chose to home educate and those who were forced to do school from home (Fontenelle-

Tereshchuk, 2021; Girard & Prado, 2022). Furthermore, there has been a doubling of home education registrations in the past 5 years, and there are some hypotheses that the COVID-19 era has contributed to this rise in numbers (English, 2021; Heuer & Donovan, 2021).

#### **4.7.1 Teaching reading**

Of the 185 respondents, 168 ( $N = 168$ ) chose to answer the qualitative short response question: “In your own words, please describe how you teach/taught your youngest home-educated child to read” (HE1).

These responses were inductively coded in NVivo (version 14) to determine any common themes among responses. These responses also helped inform the interview questions developed for Phase 2 of this research.

##### **4.7.1.1 Type of reading instruction**

The most common response from parents was an explanation of the type of reading instruction they utilised. Most respondents indicated they used phonics ( $n = 105$ ; 62%), while 96 referenced reading aloud to their child (57%). Thirty-nine parents utilised environmental print (23%), and 25 specifically mentioned techniques used in whole language (14%). Twelve respondents indicated that their child taught themselves to read (7%).

The parents utilised the response box to qualitatively explain what learning to read looked like in their home, and the majority of respondents mentioned using more than one approach ( $n = 150$ ; 89%). Eleven parents also included use of the library as an important component of their home education. The following comments are representative of the insights provided by these parents:

We read lots to the kids, visit the library lots for exposure to many different books and types of literature. Help them with spelling words out and learning letter sounds. Other than that, the “reading” comes from them, in their own time. (Respondent 79)

We instil a love of reading from birth. We have many books in our home, visit the library every week and read a variety of books as a family most days. When my child started showing interest in letters, she would point them out and ask questions. She first learned the initials of all of her family members. When she asked to learn to read like her older brother, I started using a structured program called All About Reading. This is a phonics-based system involving stories, flash cards, worksheets and games.  
(Respondent 86)

We read many books every day. She watches shows with subtitles. She is interested in signs when we are in the community so we point out letters we recognise and I repeat the words on signs and buildings. We have the alphabet on the shower door with corresponding pictures and repeat it many days. Many of our books are the alphabet or numbers and we rotate these to keep interest but also stay familiar. She loves to copy things into her notebook so I will do dotted outlines and she will trace the letters.  
(Respondent 169)

Twenty-five parents mentioned utilising purchased curriculum programs that were used solely or in conjunction with their learning philosophy. Jolly Phonics ( $n = 6$ ), All About Reading/Spelling ( $n = 5$ ), SPELD ( $n = 2$ ), Fitzroy Readers ( $n = 2$ ), and Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons ( $n = 2$ ) were some of the referenced curriculum choices.

Reading Our Way was also referenced as a specific program that was successful in teaching a child with a Down syndrome diagnosis.

My youngest child was read to from infancy and would complete the end of the sentence if the reader paused while reading her favourite book by the time she was 1. She started to be interested in the words at around 3 so we introduced her to the Reading Our Way program [which is a whole word learning approach that was developed for people with Down syndrome]. She has a Down syndrome diagnosis and

learnt to read very quickly using this program. Her speech improved dramatically during the year. (Respondent 72)

Two parents highlighted that they used an alternative language to English to teach reading either first or simultaneously with the English language.

I taught them Polish first because it is exactly as it is written, and you read by syllables. Then we took the same approach using syllables to English language reading, even though it is so fluid and the same letter has a number of pronunciations. (Respondent 194)

Those parents who allowed their children to teach themselves to read indicated that they followed their child's lead and did little formal reading (if any).

No formal teaching, he learned to read through observing written text in real life, showing curiosity, and us reading aloud to him. He picked it up naturally, and we helped with reading difficult words. I expected it would be difficult, but he learned to read because he wanted to understand the world around him. (Respondent 19)

#### **4.7.1.2 Child-led learning**

Forty-seven parents indicated that their children led the learning to read process and that they followed their child's interests and cues. A common response among parents was an importance of waiting until a child showed readiness to learn to read ( $n = 13$ ).

My child learned to read when he was ready and had a need to read for himself. I use the word learn rather than taught because you can only teach something when the learner wants to learn it. And so my focus has always been on supporting my children and facilitating their learning based on their interests and their readiness to learn new material. (Respondent 220)

In the responses given, the age at which a child showed interest in learning to read varied greatly, with responses indicating a range anywhere from 2 to 9 years of age.

At around 2 years old she showed interest in letters and the alphabet. "B is for Butterfly", etc and singing the alphabet song. Then one day, around 3.5 years old, I found her stumbling through a picture book on her own. I then tried to provide books around the house that were about the right beginner-reader level and the right interest level (that was tricky) ... I didn't push at all as she was so young so there was absolutely no stress or pressure on whether or not she could read yet. Now, at 4.5 years old, she's an independent reader and enjoys chapter books like *The Faraway Tree*. (Respondent 161)

I didn't even begin intentional teaching until his 7th birthday, but he surprised us all by learning to read himself by watching and listening to our car's satellite navigation system. (Respondent 149)

Both my sons learnt to read when it necessitated them to do so. My first son, by way of needing to write down lyrics for songs he was creating on his guitar, engaged in reading and writing at the age of eight. Within 4 months, he was doing both, without much difficulty. My younger son loved the nighttime story and taught himself to read at around 7 years of age, wanting to read on his own. (Respondent 168)

One parent noted the challenge of a child who was "difficult to teach" and that the solution was to allow child-led learning. She also indicated that allowing this child to learn at a later age led to no long-term reading disadvantage.

He was most difficult to teach and had major melt downs. So around 8 years old we took a step back when he still couldn't read simple CVC [consonant vowel consonant] words. I continued to read to him but wouldn't push for him to "learn" to read—he is now 9 and by letting him figure it out in his own time with zero pressure he has used technology

including computer games such as Roblox to need to understand how to read and sound words out and I would say he is now a very, very good reader no different to what my first 2 children were at his age! Who went to school at that age! (Respondent 36)

Siblings were also cited as a positive catalyst in child-led learning ( $n = 7$ ). By observing older siblings, students gained a greater love for books and excitement for reading. Alternatively, their desire to “keep up” with them pushed them to pursue reading. Siblings also provided peer reading opportunities for the student to practise reading aloud.

I used *Teach Your Child How to Read in 100 Easy Lessons*. I started when she was 4 because she was desperate to “do school” like her big brother. We did a 5–10 min lesson each day. I’ve let her go at her speed and once we finished that instructional text, she’s read actual books. Because the home environment is so literacy focused, she didn’t need to be encouraged. She finished the first Harry Potter the day before she turned 6 because she wanted to talk about it with her brother! (Respondent 215)

#### **4.7.1.3 Parent-initiated reading experiences**

Parents initiated reading experiences with their child in a variety of ways according to their philosophy of learning. Some parents used formalised curriculum as part of their parent-led approach. Respondent 218 explained that they were teaching their 4-year-old by doing phonics together: “We read poems that have the sounds in them, and she draws a picture of what she understood.” Respondent 214 also used a “phonics-based approach with direct instruction”:

This took the form of 15 minutes a day. However, I would read aloud to my child 30min–1hr a day with no expectation of it being “reading practice” but rather them enjoying the story. Now my child is a bit older, she practises reading aloud 15 minutes a day of a

book that she chooses. We sit together and if she gets stuck, I am able to help.

(Respondent 214)

The most common parental response was from parents who felt it was their role to create a culture of reading aloud to their child. There were also those who expressed the importance of surrounding their child with a literacy-rich environment. Respondent 51 explained that “I always read to my child, even when pregnant, so that is a big part of the reading process to me, as well as having plenty of age-appropriate books strewn around the home to explore.” Respondent 167 mirrored this sentiment, explaining that they created “a love of books and reading first and foremost,” while also “singing, playing with language and talking about language.” Similarly, Respondent 107 stated, “Currently allowing my child the freedom to learn to read. We read novels daily and have simple picture books/early readers available for when she’s interested.”

Two parents mentioned the importance of modelling reading behaviour. Respondent 20 noted, “I read books for fun, reading is a positive enjoyable thing in our house.” Furthermore, Respondent 144 echoed the importance of reading “to both kids, a lot, many times a day and making a point of having them see me reading.”

Parents who initiated reading experiences did so according to their values and leading their child in the learning process through a variety of ways, including intentional environments, creating a culture of reading, and formalised learning experiences.

#### **4.7.1.4 Technology**

Forty-one respondents (24%) referenced the use of technology as a resource for learning to read. In no case was technology used as the only source for reading instruction and mostly as a tool to support a child’s learning or as part of a literacy-rich environment.

Reading Eggs was a popular choice of technology, with 28 parents specifically mentioning the program. ABC Reading Eggs Australia is a digital phonics program that is purchased through an online subscription and allows children to learn phonics skills, play literacy games, and read digital phonics readers (ABC Reading Eggs, n.d.).

Audio books ( $n = 4$ ) were used in addition to physical reading books. However, ebooks were not specifically referenced at all. “He took an interest in listening to audio books while having the physical book to follow along with” (Respondent 53).

Four parents also indicated the benefit of watching television with subtitles on as a way to enhance their HLE.

But what seems to have helped her the most is watching videos with subtitles on as well as doing google searches using the microphone where the word then appears. Using technology has really helped & she has basically taught herself. (Respondent 134)

#### **4.7.1.5 Summary**

The qualitative responses to HE1 provided a rich context and explanation of the parents’ choices regarding reading methods and resources as indicated throughout the HERP. Analysis of the 168 qualitative responses revealed four key themes: reading methods, child-led learning, parental expectations, and technology use. These insights helped inform the construction of the interview questions in Phase 2 and provided a depth of understanding for the survey responses.

#### **4.7.2 COVID-19**

Parents were given a short response box to indicate how their family’s home education was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with 162 parents choosing to answer this question. Forty-two respondents indicated that there was no impact, and 23 said there was a little impact. A common report from parents was that their lifestyle as home educators was

impacted ( $n = 93$ ), decreasing social opportunities and the ability to do excursions and life learning in the community. Respondent 104 highlighted that this impacted the “chance for communication skills to have developed optimally,” while Respondent 224 also highlighted that their regular opportunities to volunteer were impacted. One parent responded that their income was “destroyed by Australian lockdowns” (Respondent 42).

[The COVID-19 pandemic] stopped a lot of group activities—book clubs, music ensembles, camps—some were homeschoolers only and some were community based—not all of these have returned yet. Unable to access our local libraries when there were lockdowns and border closures (we live on border of NSW and VIC)—this had a very big impact as we rely on the libraries for educational materials but also for recreational materials (books and DVDs). (Respondent 203)

No parents cited educational disadvantage during the COVID-19 pandemic, but a few mentioned a lack of motivation for their children and the lack of resourcing. The pandemic restricted access to learning materials, with libraries shut and online shopping for resources experiencing increased costs, reduced availability, and longer shipping times. In contrast, the pandemic created an increase in online resources and online learning experiences that were utilised by home educators.

It is very annoying to have to wait so long for packages to be shipped and finally delivered. It has meant that I am buying more books on Kindle than hardcover, which I do not prefer. It also means that I need to plan months ahead for resources to come when we are ready for them. (Respondent 251)

COVID-19 and being based in Victoria has affected our family’s mental health. But the flip side of this is the availability of different platforms where the kids can learn—we have tuned into lectures from America, the UK and elsewhere. Different types of

resources were made free and available allowing the kids to follow their interests. Youngest also took part in a huge number of cooking classes online (often the only child) and is quite the little master chef. (Respondent 114)

A few parents also felt that the social restrictions were harsher on home-educating children than mainstream students.

It was a bit rubbish kids could go back to school, but we couldn't meet in our regular co-op group until weeks and weeks later. A lot of the places that usually form our "school" like the museum, art gallery, library, etc were off limits too. These are completely closed to us because of mandates now so we have had to completely change our approach. (Respondent 223)

Some mental health issues because of being isolated from their homeschool groups and not being able to go to parks, zoo, and all the places we go to learn. Homeschoolers were isolated longer than school kids because we weren't allowed to meet at houses or parks etc long after kids were allowed back in schools. (Respondent 63)

Some respondents ( $n = 9$ ) indicated that the COVID-19 lockdowns were the reason they began home educating. The reasons varied, with some citing educational advantages of home education rather than remote learning, while others cited the negatives of COVID-19 restrictions. This indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic created a new set of push (negative) and pull (positives) factors for parents to begin home educating (Croft, 2012). This included COVID-19 being "the deciding factor in us beginning home schooling. We had been considering it for quite a while with the older children, and COVID was the final push for us to take the leap" (Respondent 47). Remote learning was also mentioned as a catalyst for Respondent 134 to realise "home education was a better fit than mainstream school."

This experience was shared by other newly home-educating families, as well:

This was the last straw for me. Returning my children to school with masks being worn and vaccinated children and teachers around them all day was my final straw. Really made me pull the pin and finally go down the homeschool path which I have thought about for years. (Respondent 148)

Mental health was also indicated as a negative outcome of the COVID-19 restrictions ( $n = 9$ ), with families experiencing stress and anxiety during this time period.

Increased anxiety in my children and made them miss important regular psychologist and speech therapist appointments for disabilities which has led to setbacks in areas and meltdowns from change of routine and not being able to do usual activities as we usually spend time out of the house each day engaging in activities and homeschool group meetups. (Respondent 113)

There were also positives about the COVID-19 restrictions mentioned ( $n = 16$ ). Respondent 31 noted, "It gave us more focused time at home without outside activities," while Respondent 51 said, "We spend more time as a family, my children were able to teach themselves many things, they were able to discover new interests, and improved self-esteem." Another positive noted was that there was an additional parent in the home, due to working from home, which gave one family more one-on-one time for each child (Respondent 86).

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

This chapter presented the results of an Australia-wide survey of 185 home-educating parents to elicit how they teach their children to read. The PRBI scores showed that, in general, parents choosing to home educate placed a high value on reading. The HERP demonstrated that parents utilised a variety of methods to teach reading rather than relying on a singular

main approach. Through both quantitative and qualitative analysis, home-educating parents indicated the use of a literacy-rich environment with a variety of resources to support their children's reading. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on home education was also assessed to enhance contextual understanding during the time frame of the survey's administration.

## CHAPTER 5: PHASE 2 CASE STUDIES

Chapter 3 outlined the mixed methods approach that was enacted for this project. Chapter 4 presented the results of Phase 1, which was a quantitative survey with two qualitative questions. These results were examined through a preliminary analysis to select the participants for Phase 2 and to construct a question set for the semistructured qualitative interviews. The interviews were conducted between May and July 2022 with seven home-educating parents.

This chapter presents the interview data from seven qualitative interviews that were conducted as part of Phase 2 of this research project. The interviewees were drawn from a pool of Phase 1 participants who volunteered to be interviewed and met two criteria: (a) Each participant selected a different style or method of teaching reading (e.g., unschooled, etc.) in the Phase 1 survey, permitting an insight into a range of educational approaches; and (b) each participant was from a different state in Australia (except for ACT, which had no volunteer responses). These are presented as individual case studies (Yin, 2018) in this chapter. Yin (2018) advocated that multicase study analysis should be conducted, and this is presented in the latter half of this chapter to report the common themes emerging from the case studies.

The conceptual framework of this research project, as presented in Chapter 3, was integral to the design of the current chapter. Barratt-Peacock's (2003) foundational work emphasised that Australian families cannot be considered homogeneous, but rather, each family creates their own CoP that is unique to any other home-educating family. He found families are each characterised by four key processes: domestic occupation, parents as guides or tutors, family conversation, and role modelling. The author also emphasised that home education is coconstructed learning, with all family members playing a part in the way learning occurs. Each family then interacts with the curriculum, wider community, and government

regulations in a way that is reflective of their values, attitudes, and beliefs. The sociocultural context within which a family is located also dynamically interacts with their home education decisions. Due to the importance of each family as their own CoP, each family in this research is presented as a single case study. This acknowledges that home-educating families cannot be meaningfully grouped for a deeper understanding (Barratt-Peacock, 2003; Rothermel, 2003), and the case studies that follow aim to capture each family's unique culture.

### **5.1 The Livingstone family: interview with Wanda**

Wanda was a home-educating mother in NSW. She was home educating her four children who were aged 8, 10, 11, and 13 years. The family had home educated for 5 years (out of eight collective years of schooling) but had alternated between mainstream education and home education in that time. Only her youngest child had never attended mainstream schooling.

In relation to home education, Wanda noted NSW was considered one of the stricter states, with rigorous governmental requirements (Drabsch, 2013). Parents were required to teach the NSW curriculum, which includes a suite of six subjects that can be implemented according to the parent's educational philosophy (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2021). An authorised person conducts a home visit and must sight the child for registration. The parent is required to keep planning and monitoring records to demonstrate that the curriculum has been implemented. Additional visits may be conducted if there are any governmental concerns; however, the NSW Government reports that this is rare (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2021). Wanda explained,

In terms of registration, the paperwork is onerous, like what they want. I understand why they want it; they're attempting to make sure that children are not being neglected,

that their parents do not say they're home educating and then just plain neglect them and not actually educate them at all. But the paperwork burden is laborious.

Wanda explained that her key reasons to home educate included "philosophical issues with certain chunks of the curriculum," density of the curriculum, lack of individual attention, her own personal experiences with the education system, and the additional needs of her children:

My [four] children are also on the autism spectrum. My husband is too. The school environment is not ideal for them. They are not a behavioural issue in the classroom. But certainly, number two doesn't learn in the classroom because he puts all his effort into behaving and because he's putting so much effort into regulating he's got no energy left to learn.

The reasons given by Wanda regarding her choice to home educate align with the four main reasons found in research by Slater et al. (2020), which are life circumstances, developmental difference, curriculum and standards, and social and emotional wellbeing. She also felt that systemic and governmental problems impact the modern classroom. She cited the strikes that were occurring in NSW and the difficulty securing a stable teaching staff as an area of concern that would prohibit her from sending her children back to school. At the time of interview, the Independent Education Union of Australia (2022) in NSW was coordinating teacher strikes due to understaffing and unreasonable workloads in both public and Catholic schools. In addition to this concern, Wanda felt the curriculum did not have a strong enough focus on academics but overstepped into too much "content that used to be taught at home and is now somehow the teacher's job to teach." Wanda indicated issues with both the volume and content in the curriculum.

She also highlighted that home education, as an educational option, was not always possible due to financial and career constraints, and she therefore felt “fortunate to be able to sustain a household on one income.” Her belief that financial limitations restrict families’ ability to home educate is reinforced by Slater et al. (2020) who found that 64.7% of Australian home educators surveyed experienced a loss of income due to this educational choice.

Wanda built her home education philosophy around the Charlotte Mason literature-based approach. This approach focuses on holistic child development and a love of “living books” and is the second fastest growing model of home education (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). Living books are texts that bring subject matter to life. Wanda accesses a free U.S. curriculum called AmblesideOnline (n.d.) that uses the Charlotte Mason approach. However, to meet the NSW registration requirements, she includes additional Australian literature that aligns to the NSW curriculum stages. In the Phase 1 survey, Wanda self-identified that she used a whole-language approach to reading instruction. However, when explaining her approach, it was apparent that she utilised a wide range of resources and approaches, such as a variety of whole-language levelled readers, as well as ABC Reading Eggs (2023) and reading aloud with her children.

I have alphabet books. I have grapheme books, you know, St, Th, that sort of thing. Just a-word-to-a-page books. I have full-on levelled readers going up to level 20. So, we just slowly made our way through that as they got there. And then the Charlotte Mason approach, the Ambleside stuff, has built into the first three years’ specific texts that are added with the intention that they are read-alouds for the child to be reading to the parent as a reader.

When teaching her children to read, Wanda balanced phonics, which emphasises decoding sounds (Rowe, 2006), with whole language, which focuses more on meaning-making

(Goodman, 2005). She expressed the importance of using levelled readers in the early stages of learning to read but also the need to transition to more challenging and engaging texts once her children felt confident.

I found that once they got to a certain point, they genuinely found it [levelled readers] boring, and I was happy at that point to transition them to the readers in the Ambleside content. Yes, it was useful at the lower levels, though, because it meant that they felt confident that they were reading a book at their approximate level. It was about the comfort for them in their heads about what they could do.

One reason Wanda gave for approaching reading in this way was to help her feel confident to teach reading. She felt that having a “systematic structure” with levels and checkpoints helped reassure her that her children were progressing. In addition, she cited reading aloud to her children as a key principle of her children’s reading success. However, she believed this was limited as a sole approach, as she felt her children needed more systematic teaching. Wanda aligned herself philosophically as a more formal and structured home educator, and this belief reflected the choices she made in teaching reading (Neuman & Guterman, 2017).

I hear people say that your child will learn to read by you reading to them. And I think that’s true up to a certain point. But if you never point out to them what specific letters are and what specific words are, it will be very haphazard. So, if you want to say that a child is going to learn themselves, if you hold a book and read it, but you don’t point at the words, I don’t think the child will learn to read. I actually don’t think that’s possible because for them, how do they know you’re not reading the picture? How do they know what word belongs to what spoken words?

So yes, I believe you could teach a child to read by pointing at words over time and pointing out letters and that sort of thing. I think that would generally happen later than if you use a systematic process. And obviously, it'll vary markedly by child.

In relation to teaching reading, she highlighted one benefit of home education being that there was no comparison to same-aged peers and the confidence this brought her children to have a go and persevere. Each child learnt and progressed in different ways and at different speeds.

My eldest, I started too early. He was interested, and I wanted him to be able to read, so at four, I got ABC Reading Eggs for him on the computer and don't get me wrong, he enjoyed it, but in hindsight, he wasn't developmentally ready for it.

My daughter learnt to read ridiculously early because she wanted to read to herself. She didn't want to have to ask her brothers to read to her. Number four [child] couldn't care less. He would front up at any one of his older siblings and go, "Here's my book. Read to me." And he just couldn't be bothered. I don't think he read to himself properly until he was six and a half.

Wanda concluded that her primary purpose in teaching her children to read was for them to have confidence. She desired for her children to be able to read anything they wanted as well as being able to comprehend for meaning. This was a shift from her earlier experiences teaching her eldest to read, indicating the educational and philosophical changes she experienced over time (Rothermel, 2011).

I think with my eldest, I was very worried about it. You know, I had really specific goals about what he should be able to achieve and when. And I made myself quite anxious about it, and I think I made him anxious too. By the time I got to the last one, I was much

more comfortable about the fact that simply surrounding them with words and a systematic process for learning would be sufficient.

Wanda indicated that her expectations of her children changed as she became a more experienced home educator. Not only did the benchmarks for her children's reading shift, but so did the degree of structure in her home, making her less structured and more flexible over time, which appears in the literature as a common phenomenon (Conejeros-Solar & Smith, 2021; Rothermel, 2011).

Wanda had a positive and easy experience of learning to read as a child. Both she and her husband were educated in the mainstream system and progressed well. As an adult, Wanda became an avid reader who used it as a "form of relaxation." Her husband was also a regular reader. "So as a household, we are highly reading focused. We have, I believe, at last count, ninety-five metres of bookshelf, which is full of books." She highlighted that her children all have different tastes in reading (fiction, nonfiction, interest-based texts) and that targeting her child's reading selection according to this was key. In this way, Wanda acted as a tutor who provoked her children's interests and guided their learning as a result (Barratt-Peacock, 2003).

Wanda also highlighted how the home education market had changed over the past 8 years and that there were a lot more resources and a bigger community available to home-educating families now compared to when she started. This positive experience provided a contrast to many other home-educating families with children who had additional needs and found a lack of social support for their children and themselves (Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010). Thus, Wanda's experience indicated a positive experience of the home education world for mothers of children with autism.

In summary, Wanda's approach to teaching reflected a structured, parent-guided approach. She believed in the importance of using a systematic approach to reading but emphasised that the approach should be tailored to the individual child. This indicates that, while still structured, her methods have become more flexible as she increases in confidence as a home educator. Furthermore, she believed that reading was important and her choice to home educate was to ensure her children received a positive experience with reading and education in general.

## **5.2 The Smith family: interview with Mary**

Mary was a home-educating mother of six children, including a newborn, and children aged 2, 3, 4, 6, and 9 years. Two of her children were of age to be home educated in Queensland and were formally registered. Her 4-year-old, Sonya, was completing her prep year (first year of schooling in QLD) but was not old enough to require formal registration. Her 2-year-old son, Lawrence, had Down syndrome and attended different therapies regularly that needed to be factored into their home education schedule.

Mary and her husband Chad initially planned to send their children to school, with their eldest daughter attending a kindergarten (the year prior to formal schooling) 5 days per fortnight. During this time, they had friends whose sons were struggling in the mainstream system and they reevaluated their intentions. They decided that home education would be better for their sons. As they intended for James (their second child) to be home educated, they also decided to keep Irena (their eldest) home for her first year of formal education (prep in Queensland). They cited gender bias in the education system as one of their initial motives for home educating.

We felt that there's been a strong bias towards girls within the schooling system and I don't think it's an intentional bias. I think it's got a lot to do with the gender split within

the teaching staff. Women will favour women, favour girls. It's not something that they are probably even aware they are doing.

Despite that being their original motivation, Mary stated that they had fallen in love with the lifestyle of home education and did not want to go back to mainstream schooling. This is a commonly reported experience for many home educators (English, 2021; Slater et al., 2020). Not only her motivation for home educating had changed, but also her approach. She began as a very structured and academically focused educator but found that it did not work.

So personally, I see myself as quite academic. I enjoy studying. I like getting things right. I enjoy the feeling of success and well, I'm an architect. I've got two degrees. I've taught at a tertiary level. We ran and coordinated the program for graduates to become architects. So we're very familiar with teaching adults and going right through the system. But then when it comes to your own kids, I tried bringing that attitude into teaching at prep level and it didn't work. Because first and foremost you're mum.

And now I see homeschooling as an extension of my role as a mum. So I feel that there's a lot of learning that happens in life. There's a lot of discussions that happen in life, and the academics [of learning] need to support life and not the other way around. And so I have definitely shifted because my kids have taught me that if you're hard on the academics, you don't have a very nice family life. And when you're homeschooling, that's really important because you're with each other all the time.

In relation to her two children who were home educated, Mary self-selected a method of reading instruction involving teaching the 26 sounds and letter names of the English language, and this has been categorised as a "simple phonics" approach, as opposed to synthetic phonics that teaches all 44 sounds of the English language (Rowe, 2006).

Mary noted that she used a lot of different methods of reading instruction, which reflected a balanced approach to reading (Rowe, 2006). “I just throw everything at them.” She was currently teaching her third child, Sonya, to read at the time of being interviewed. Mary created a unique alphabet chart to teach the initial 26 sounds of the alphabet where each sound was meaningful and significant to their family culture. This was supported with YouTube videos for each sound. In addition, she used levelled readers and sight words.

We do the PM [performance measurement] readers because that gives them reading in context. It gives them story and narrative and reading for a purpose. We do sight words because that speeds up their reading. So with that, we are doing the rainbow words.

The PM reader system by Nelson (n.d.) is designed with a whole-language approach where students use the three-cuing system (semantics, visuals, and meaning-making) to read and comprehend meaning from a text. It is often supplemented with high-frequency (sight) words, such as the Magic Words program that uses colour-based levels, often referred to colloquially as “rainbow words” (Magic Words, n.d.). Mary explained that she used a variety of methods initially and then customised her approach based on what was most successful for each child:

[James] had the beginning of the year through prep where we weren’t doing a whole lot of phonics, and so I was like wondering, why isn’t he progressing? He’s really struggling. I can’t get beyond level two readers. So, a whole year on level one, level two readers and I’m just racking my brain. I worked it out that he wasn’t decoding words, so he wasn’t able to pick out the sounds that made the word. So even though we were learning phonics, he had no context for applying that. And the penny dropped with Reading Eggs—to put the words into sound. So for him, it’s [Reading Eggs] been really good. For my eldest, it was all about the sight words for her. She needed the sight words.

And then for Sonya, aged 4, because she's been exposed to that by the other two, she's picked up so much just being around them that she's now a level four reader and James, 6, is a level five. So, he's going up three levels in six months simply through playing games on Reading Eggs. So, it's all different. I do what works for them. If it doesn't, I keep trying other things until I find something that does.

Mary also found that she needed to manage "the sibling dynamic." As she had six children under 10 years, there was a tendency for them to compare themselves with each other even though they were years apart chronologically. She expressed that such rivalry could impact a child's confidence in reading and therefore needed to be monitored.

Mary expressed that her ultimate goal in reading education was for her children to be independent readers who could "read to learn" (Rose, 2017). She emphasised that this also applied to Lawrence, 2, who had Down syndrome. She explained that while the timeline and approach may vary, it was important to her to also give him the best opportunity to be a functional reader.

I don't feel it would be fair to not have the same goals for all of my children. I want them all to be able to be functional readers, to be able to live in our society as adults and it'd be wonderful if they could progress to reading to learn. And then reading to relax and enjoy.

As a registered home educator in Queensland, Mary reported a lack of support for home educators from the governing body. To be legally registered, parents submit a written application to the Home Education Unit. They are not required to follow the Australian Curriculum but must show they are providing a "high-quality" education for a minimum of five subjects with appropriate planning and monitoring (Queensland Government, 2023a). Parents must submit an annual report for three subjects (English, mathematics, and one other of their

choosing). Mary explained that once the paperwork was submitted and approved each year, there was no support or governmental follow-up. However, she highlighted the positive side of this being that there was no burdensome government requirements or input. She considered this could be a good thing but emphasised the importance of families finding a community able to support them. "In some ways it's quite isolating because you really are on your own. But if you find good friendship networks there, there is a lot of peer support."

Mary's own experiences with reading as a child were not favourable. She found learning to read and spell a difficult and unenjoyable experience. It was not until she was in university that she found subject matter of interest, which improved her relationship with literature. She was now an avid reader. She also expressed the importance of reading physical books as a home educator:

I have stopped reading on my phone or on devices or Kindles. I now try to read for fun with physical books so that my kids can see me reading for fun. Well, yeah, because if they can't see me reading for fun, I look like I'm just on Facebook when I might be reading a novel. So, I do read for fun when I can. This year I've read one novel. It is what it is.

This indicated that Mary placed a high degree of importance on her own modelling of reading but that she must operate within the realities of being a mum of multiple young children. This meant there was not always as much time for personal reading as she would like.

In summary, Mary provided her children with an individual and customised home education. As she had a large number of children, she felt it was imperative that the education methods worked for the whole family but were then adjusted to see each individual child succeed. Her personal experiences of education inversely influenced the choices she made

with her children's learning and her overall desire to see them succeed, not only in school but in life.

### **5.3 The Chambers family: interview with Sarah**

Sarah was a home-educating mother of two children. The eldest was 5.5 years and in transition, which is the foundation year of schooling in the Northern Territory. She also had a 3.5-year-old daughter. Her partner worked full time while she home educated the children full time. However, she said they previously worked part time each and would like to return to that model eventually.

To be a home educator in the Northern Territory, Sarah was expected to provide a written program for her child covering eight learning areas to meet an approved Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Montessori, Steiner, or International Baccalaureate; Northern Territory Government, n.d.). It is a yearly registration that should show how educational progress will be monitored. Further, families must remain at a fixed address and cannot travel for extended periods of time while home educating. Sarah finds the Northern Territory to be a supportive place to home educate, with one large group of home educators rather than smaller cliques: "There are always excursions and activities and social meetups, and everything's close because it's Darwin."

Initially, Sarah planned to use an alternative form of day schooling, such as Montessori. However, there were limited options available in Darwin. Consequently, Sarah and her partner originally planned to home educate as a gap fill while a Montessori school was in development. Their decision to home educate would be classified as driven by social motivations (Morton, 2010), with her reasons for home educating similar to those who select private education (English, 2013), which included wanting control over her children's education and selecting an educational method that best suited her children's needs. Since

trailing home education, Sarah felt that this approach may be the best choice for both children: “It [a local Montessori school] probably isn’t happening for at least a few more years, and I’m not sure we’ll bother going to school now.”

The main reasons Sarah and her partner chose home education included lack of access to alternative schooling in Darwin, their own poor educational experiences as children, and observations of current schooling in the Northern Territory.

I was an alright student. I always got good marks, but I just felt it was a lot of time just sitting in a classroom waiting to be allowed to do something and not being able to have your questions answered because we have to wait for everyone to do this thing at this one point in time. And that just didn’t seem to make sense to me. And I understand why they do that. If you’ve only got one adult and 30 kids in a classroom, that does make things a bit difficult.

Then when we were living in the Kimberley for about 10 years and I was working with teachers and schools all across there and a lot of the remote community schools, and I could just see this kind of wave of direct instruction and explicit instruction come through the schools and whilst it may have helped some kids with their literacy and numeracy, overall, it didn’t seem to be a particularly constructive approach for the vast majority of students and teachers involved. And it wasn’t something that I thought if that was what was in place when I was in school, I would have probably got sent out of the classroom every day because it would have just been so tedious and boring.

In the interview, Sarah categorised her family as “Montessori-inspired nature-based unschoolers.” The Montessori philosophy of education centres on four stages of child development and focuses on “allowing students their personal choice of activities, respecting freedom and teaching responsibility, facilitating the manipulation and understanding of

materials, the uninterrupted work block, and a less observable role of the teacher” (Eacott & Wainer, 2023, pp. 2–3). Sarah said,

We have some Montessori manipulatives and I understand how the lessons would be given in the classroom, but we don’t usually give formal lessons. When I see the kids are interested in something, I’ll ask [them] about something. I might pull it out of the cupboard and show them and then ask them if they want to leave that out to practise with or if they want it to go back in the cupboard. And we spend a lot of time outside and we’ve got a big garden at our house or going on excursions and things like that too.

In the Phase 1 survey, Sarah self-identified her reading approach as using the 44 sounds of the English language to teach reading (e.g., the letter “a” has up to nine different sounds). This is referred to as synthetic phonics where each individual sound is introduced and learnt in isolation and then students subsequently learn to blend sounds together to read words (Machin et al., 2018). Sarah’s son was not interested in learning to read until a few months prior to the interview. Sarah said he began to show interest in letters and words once a neighbourhood playmate started school and began to learn how to read. They commenced with the Wild Reading curriculum, which is a U.S. phonics program that uses Waldorf, Montessori, and nature-based elements.

Each week there’s a different letter of the week, essentially, and you read a chapter of a story with lots of alliteration and the kids pick what sound it is, and then you go and introduce the letter that way once they’ve picked it and practised brushing it up with chalk. Then if it’s M then he might make muffins on Monday or something like that. Just those sorts of things that kind of they will then pick it up and remember it, but more with multisensory activities.

Sarah believed it was important to monitor her son's engagement and respond accordingly. For example, she mentioned that he was hesitant to try writing letters, so she offered him exposure activities but put them away when he found them too difficult or stressful. She also highlighted the challenges brought by having a 3-year-old at home as well. Her daughter was not engaged in the Wild curriculum, which made it difficult to complete in its entirety.

Well, my three-year-old doesn't like listening to the story. We probably would have kept going longer if she liked listening to the story, but when we have to find a time when she's not there or she screams through the entire thing, it's not worth continuing.

After completing one third of the Wild Reading program, Sarah chose to move on to less structured curriculum and replace it with everyday learning experiences that were easier to manage with a 3-year-old in tow. To do this, she catered to her son's learning interests and age, which included chalk, BOB books (early phonics readers), magnetic letters, "game schooling," and play-based learning of letters.

We've got some diagraphs he knows too, that we just write on bits of cardboard I cut out from cereal boxes and put in little depots around the room, and he drives his trains and trucks around to collect the ones he needs. Anything with vehicles is popular around here or we'd do things like we'd write all the letters in chalk on the driveway or a particular sound.

We do a lot of game schooling too, and I don't tend to buy explicitly educational games. But if I see them in the op shop [a store selling previously-owned goods] I pick them up and so, we've got a few kind of letter or phonics games that he's been playing just in the past week, and I think he's just clicked that he can read the letters; like he tells me, I

can't do that. I can't read. I say look at the letters and he looks at the letters and then he's amazed that he can read. It's quite an exciting stage for him to be at.

Sarah felt this approach worked well for her children because she observed they were hands-on, play-based learners who would not respond well to worksheets or desk-sitting. This play-based approach reflected the ages of both her children and, she believed, engaged them in effective learning based on their individual interests (Briggs & Hansen, 2012). Sarah noted that she had observed her nephews and her friend's child struggling at school due to being put in the "lowest reading group" or being given extra homework to catch up.

They're only five and I don't think they need to do that. I understand where the expectations are that he'll be at for this age level, and that's why I did ask if he wanted to start learning to read seeing as that's something that the curriculum says is what happens now. But I don't feel the need to make sure that he sits down and does a certain amount per week, so we might only do two or three, 10, 15 minute sessions a week of running around with chalk letters or writing something on whiteboards and drawing pictures, or whichever. But that's enough for him to retain it and he's happy and excited about it, rather than reluctant, not wanting to do it or thinking that it's something he's not good at.

Sarah saw herself as a facilitator of her son's learning. Her role was to find the resources and highlight to her children what they could choose to learn. She found that connecting real-life experiences to reading was key to her son engaging.

So just making it tangible and contextualised so that he can see the value in it, rather than just being some obscure thing that everyone decides that five-year-olds have to learn the alphabet and to write. You can just wait until your child's actually interested

and then cover six months' work in a fortnight when your child decides that that's where they're at.

Her main goals within reading education were for her son to have basic comprehension, critical reading skills, and functional ability to read for life purposes.

So, to be able to use reading and writing for everyday communication and to also be able to use it to find out more about things that he wants to know. And to not feel that it's just something he is obliged to do.

Personally, Sarah found school quite boring and irrelevant. She could already read before starting school due to a facilitative home learning environment, which was defined by Weigel et al. (2006) as one rich in parent and child literacy interactions. Sarah explained that her mother did early literacy activities with her and enabled her to learn to read alongside her older brother. When she got to school, she found it boring and could already meet the benchmarks, being rewarded with a "whole chocolate bar" on her second day of school for the reading accomplishment. Sarah noted that when she was at school, the teacher was implementing a new trial phonics program with her Year 1 class, but this was irrelevant to her as she could already read. As an adult, she had a home overflowing with books, and she loved reading. This indicates reading was a part of their family culture and highly valued by the adults in their home.

In summary, Sarah demonstrated flexibility in her approach to home education. While initially she started with a plan to use a formal phonics program, she adapted to an informal, play-based approach to meet the needs of both her son and the whole family unit. Her philosophy of learning did not change, but the methods she used adjusted as a result of monitoring her son's learning.

#### **5.4 The Wilkins family: interview with Myrtle**

Myrtle was a 37-year-old home educator with two children; Leif was 11 years, and Dorothy was 8 years old. Until 2017, her husband worked full time, and Myrtle was a stay-at-home parent. At the time of this interview, Myrtle worked part time and her husband was home full time. Myrtle stated that she remained the main coordinator of the home education, and her husband assisted through everyday life learning opportunities. In Australia, female caregivers tend to be the primary home educator (Slater et al., 2020), which Myrtle continued despite being the main income earner. She noted, “I still do most of the homeschooling thinking in my head coz I want to and we all just live life together.”

The family had previously lived in NSW and moved to Tasmania 5 months prior to the interview. She noted that they found a larger home-educating community where they lived in Tasmania compared to regional NSW. To register for home education in Tasmania, a parent must provide for each child “a rich educational program that meets their individual needs” with an emphasis on a well-chosen pedagogical approach, literacy, numeracy, and the provision of a balanced education (Office of the Education Registrar, 2017). The Australian Curriculum was not required to be taught. Myrtle found a big difference between the governmental requirements of NSW and Tasmania. She identified herself as a “geeky kind of person” who enjoyed the amount of paperwork in NSW rather than finding it onerous. However, she appreciated that Tasmania had a more practical, child-centred approach. She valued that the required plans were focused on the individual child and catering for their needs.

They [Tasmania Home Education Department] only really want to know about literacy and numeracy and then they just want to see your whole plan for a child. They don't really care about what curriculum you follow or what syllabus and you have to do it

every year. You're only going to get one year at a time. Whereas NSW I would get two years and be done for a bit.

Myrtle began home educating her eldest because she felt her son's personality was better suited to a gentle, slow education.

My son is beautiful and he is a tender-hearted, thoughtful, lovely human and he also took a really long time to kind of find his own skin in terms of being comfortable to move away from us. He was a very, very high intensity "I love you, I love you, I need you by my side in the world" kind of human and it was just blindingly obvious that school would be, it would just be traumatic. He needed a bit more time to figure things out.

Myrtle believed that home education allowed her children time to grow into their authentic selves without the pressures and influence of mainstream peers and education. As a result, she felt home education allowed her children to "be people who could find themselves in their own time." Myrtle divided her role as a home educator into three facets: school, unschool, and life. Each morning, they would do a structured school session with preplanned lessons or activities. She considered these the sequential and essential skills her children needed. Unschool was "facilitating interest, helping them find resources, throwing things in their path as well as encouraging interests." She referred to herself as "the creator of the container that they will swim in." She explained that children do not always know the options and interests available to them, and so she saw it as an important role to lay before her children new options and experiences. Some examples she gave of unschooling were introducing new podcasts to her children or throwing a poetry teatime. Finally, home education also encompassed everyday life where her children learnt new things and created as part of everyday experiences.

In the Phase 1 survey, Myrtle self-identified reading aloud as her primary approach to reading instruction. This approach involves the parent reading texts to their child, which provides opportunities for vocabulary development, reading strategies, and developing a positive disposition towards reading (Gilmore, 2003). During the interview, Myrtle explained that initially, they attempted formal learning to read programs. They did 6 months each of Reading Eggs and Soundwaves. However, her children found them boring and they stopped. Instead, their sole approach evolved to make reading aloud the key approach to learning to read, as well as a part of their lifestyle.

We read every night and have done forever, like every day of their life. Leif always has three books on the go, one with me, one with dad and maybe one he is looking at, and Dorothy, just since she was a baby would sit there just turning pages, and so we have just always had books around, the library's always been an event, we've listened to just so many audio books and we read to them lots.

She emphasised the power of repetition and having a "a cannon of books that we listen to over and over and over again." They have done limited formal "sit down, we'll do learning, reading, practise now." Rather, her children transitioned from being read to, to reading for themselves.

We'd had a cold and we'd just been reading this book. It was a David Walliams one. We were all gone off on our way, but he [Leif] was still sitting down and he just picked this up. He was like "Mum, I just started accidentally reading." He said, "I just picked up the book to look at the pictures. Then I just realised that I'd read like 80 pages." So that's only just recently happened. It's happened with a couple of other things too where Leif can read long books. He is ten and so that's another one of those moments where, "pew it worked really well."

Despite home educating, Myrtle sometimes felt pressure to make sure she was doing enough to get her kids reading or doing “normal” school, a pressure also noted in the literature (Thomas & Pattison, 2007). However, when she tried to mirror mainstream schooling and implemented more rigid learning strategies, it did not fit her family well.

Sometimes I do like especially some of the like some of the more Steiner inspired stuff of word groups and stuff with my daughter, but really, it just feels like a lot of extra work for everyone, for no particular gain.

Both of her children learnt to read through the reading aloud approach. While Myrtle acknowledged this approach may not work for children with learning difficulties or different learning styles, it had been successful for both her children despite being conventionally considered to be “late readers” (Keys & Crain, 2009). She noted that her children may have learnt to read faster with a mainstream approach, but home education had allowed them to go slower and enjoy the process of learning to read (Riley, 2018).

Just by basically doing a ton of books and having them always around and making it normal that you read and have all those opportunities, it’s basically been pretty smooth sailing, Dorothy’s just racing. She wanted to race me to read all four *Wings of Fire* graphic novels before I started one.

Part of the success in this approach was the continuity of home education and having a household that saw progress over time (rather than a school year). In addition, it was noted that both parents were mostly home, which gave the advantage of easy access to a parent for reading aloud and literacy support in everyday life.

There was a particular game for Leif when he was about maybe eight. It’s like an old 80s game that we were playing on, like a DOS simulator on Monkey Island, and no one would speak to you. Like if you wanted to know what you were doing, you had to read these

little typed conversations. And so Steve [Dad] would help him. And I mean, and we have time, we have had the ability to do that because we've often had two parents around.

Myrtle believed home education was a balance between tactics and strategy. This in essence mirrors Neuman and Guterman (2017) who conceptualised home education as a balance of content and processes, as per the conceptual framework of this research.

So tactics would be what curriculum you use or whether you're going to do a phonics approach or not or blah blah blah. They'd be the tactics. Whereas the strategy would be—I'm going to read to them for an hour a day, for half an hour a day. I'm going to get them as they get older, we're going to find series that we work through together. I'm going to make sure they listen to audio books or a podcast, and we're going to make the library an exciting day and we're going to do a poetry teatime, like that would be strategy, which is just create the environment.

Myrtle had an easy experience learning to read in mainstream schooling and was reading long novels by Year 3. She loved reading, and it was a daily part of her lifestyle. In contrast, her husband did not enjoy reading at school nor as an adult. Myrtle noted he could read "perfectly well" but simply found no joy in it. Despite Steve's personal feelings about reading, as a parent, he still engaged in reading aloud to his children and developing their gaming literacy.

Ultimately, Myrtle wanted to ensure that her children could read and that "reading is a tool both for utility and for loveliness." She expressed confidence in her approach to reading instruction:

In my instance with my kids, I felt quite comfortable with the whole hands off [approach]. I believe you will learn to read. But that's because I know that for like almost every day of their life, they've probably been read to for about almost an hour a day and

that we go to the library each week and that I have like weird kids who are, like, super excited about using the catalogue. And so, I guess, it's like every other aspect of life, it's about the culture that you swim in. You know, it's the culture of whatever your home school life is going to be.

Myrtle, as a home educator, spoke with certainty about her pedagogical and philosophical approach. Despite feeling external pressure at times, she developed an individualised approach that catered to the needs of her children and enabled them to thrive. She expressed the importance of having a deep knowledge of her learners and chose to reflect this in the choices she made both educationally and within the family lifestyle.

### **5.5 The Laravel family: interview with Nina**

Nina was a home-educating mother of three children aged (almost) 7, 5, and 3 years. Her children had never been in mainstream schooling. She lived on a farm in Victoria with her partner, and they had seven additional foster children in their home at the time of this interview; however, Nina chose for them not to be the focus of this interview. Nina found Victoria a well-supported place to home educate. The Victorian Government requires parents to provide “regular and efficient” instruction in the eight learning areas (Victorian Registration & Qualifications Authority, 2023). The Australian Curriculum is not required to be implemented, with parents permitted to devise a program that best suits their individual children’s needs. Nina noted that there was a lot of support for the government application, and the registration learning plans “are easy” to complete.

Nina stated, “We do radical unschooling and we have a farm, but we’re about to hit the road, so we’re going to be homeschooling on the run.” Unschooling is a naturalistic method of education without formal or systematic learning (English, 2015a) in which Nina viewed herself as a facilitator of her children’s learning.

My role is just to be the anchor of our rhythms throughout the day. So, the inviter probably. Yeah, my role, I will place things out, usually like something for them to do in the mornings while we're kind of getting ready while I'm getting ready for the day. And it's just invitation.

In the Phase 1 survey, Nina identified herself as using natural learning and environmental print as her primary method of reading instruction. When explaining her home education approach in the interview, it was evident she used a different approach for each child and matched it to their interests and learning styles. Her son was five and loved gaming, so she facilitated his literacy learning through this.

So, say we're in Minecraft and he says, "Can you find me the Dragon egg?" And so, I'll tell him the letters. How we did the letters to start off with was just a poster in the shower. Every day we would just go through the letters. We got a lot of flash cards which are letters and usually like an animal that goes with them and tons and tons of books on letters.

She believed that using gaming motivated him to want to read and chat to his friends online, whereas Nina's oldest daughter was almost 7 years old and preferred outside learning in nature, such as reading in the dirt or sand at the beach. She also carried a notebook around where she could practise her numbers and symbols. Her daughter also read street signs and other meaningful symbols that engaged purposeful environmental print to enhance reading development (Neumann et al., 2013).

In contrast, Nina's 3-year-old loved reading books and showed an early interest in learning to read.

She's quite interested because the other two are interested. So, she's become interested more like earlier on and we do it through books primarily. We do a lot of

books that are repetitive so she can, she memorises, you know, usually the last word of each sentence. And we do the same books over and over and over again.

As a family, they had a book-rich environment so that there were always opportunities to read. She noted that her foster children were not always used to having a lot of literacy resources and learnt through her children modelling that reading was part of their daily life.

Now these little babies are seeing my kids bring books to me continuously. And pretty much whatever we're doing just gets dropped and we read. And then these other little babies are just bringing books along. So yeah, just always having the opportunity around. You know, we have them in the car, we have them reading books outside at the farm, just kind of everywhere, every bag that we carry anywhere. So, there's just always that opportunity to do that.

In addition to reading books, the family did a lot of theatre, puppetry, and creative play with stories.

We do like silhouettes too, do a lot of just not actual reading, but telling stories. So then they kind of imagine a silhouette story and the kids all have a go at adding bits onto the story. They kind of get the idea about the structure of a story. So then when they're reading, they're able to kind of figure out some of the words just by knowing how a story goes and how that structure works.

Nina said she loved reading and used that as a driving motivation. She believed it was a tool that opened up opportunities for children to learn anything they wish. As an adult, she read both for professional purposes and for pleasure. She also highlighted the benefits of social media. Seeing other families that allowed their children to learn at their own pace within the home environment gave her confidence in the approach she had taken.

Nina worked part time as a psychologist with a specialisation in child development. Due to her professional insight, Nina felt the approach she took with her children maximised the connection between kinaesthetic and proprioception with reading. She placed an emphasis on play, tumbling, jumping, and balancing and felt that this provided a strong foundation for brain development and subsequent reading skills. Even with her professional background, she did sometimes still feel pressured to keep up with the mainstream pace and have her children reading in line with mainstream school expectations.

We go like after hours [to the library] and meet up with friends each week that are mainstream schooled and the kiddos that are the same age are, you know, like voracious readers like they're reading, you know, small chapter books and you kind of go, "Oh shit like we're really behind." But just [it helps] knowing that all the play-based stuff that we're doing is actually setting up a really beautiful base for their reading when they want to do that later on.

In summary, Nina created a lifestyle of learning that was based on unschooling and minimal adult instruction. She catered to each child as an individual and provided a reading-rich environment for them to engage in. She expressed confidence in her approach and a strong desire to see her children love learning and love reading as an extension of everyday living.

## **5.6 The Freeman family: interview with Ursula**

Ursula and her husband lived in Adelaide, South Australia, with their 12-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son who had been home educated for the previous 5 years at the time of this interview. Her daughter initially went to mainstream school for 2.5 years; however, her son had not done any mainstream academic learning other than a Steiner

kindergarten for 6 months that was play based. Ursula's husband worked full time, which allowed her to focus on her children.

I'm predominantly the one who is with my children all the time and I was going to say "homeschooling" the children, but I don't school the children. We are, if you want to give it a label, we're mostly unschooling. I facilitate my children's learning with them.

Ursula and her husband knew they were not interested in a typical mainstream education for their children and sought alternative options when their daughter was school aged.

We knew we didn't want to put them into a mainstream schooling system. It just didn't sit well with us, particularly, the starting the academics with children at a really young age; that's something that just seemed like it was making the child grow up too quickly and also a lot of research pointing to that being more detrimental than beneficial. So, I just saw a lot of the flaws in the education system, in the schooling system that we didn't like.

They investigated democratic (English, 2014) and Steiner schools (Steiner Education Australia, n.d.) that both embrace a philosophy of individualised education and holistic child development. However, Ursula and her husband had never considered home education due to preconceived notions about it, such as socialisation deficits and limited worldviews.

I always thought homeschooling was for weirdos, you know that sort of stereotypical view that many people have on homeschoolers. They're highly religious. You know, people who don't like mixing with society [and] keep their kids, you know, away from the world and all of that. So, I just had the really wrong perception of what homeschooling was, which is why we never considered it.

Their eldest daughter was enrolled in a Steiner school for 2.5 years, but it was more structured than anticipated. There were also social challenges with it being “an institutionalised environment.” In particular, her child would vent (referred to by Ursula as “downloading”) to decompress her emotions each night, making them concerned about the impact schooling was having on their child.

I didn't like what I was seeing. I began to feel like we were losing our daughter, and she was downloading a lot every night after school. And then when my son went into the schooling system [for kindergarten], his anxiety shot through the roof. He was just an absolute anxious mess, and it was really obvious, he started wetting the bed, he started having night terrors. He didn't like school. He would cry for an hour, an hour and a half every night after school. And that was his downloading process. And I just thought, “Wow, what have we got here? I cannot keep him in this environment any longer.” So we ripped him out. And then my daughter followed suit a couple of weeks later.

Our son really made us make that big move into homeschooling. Had it not been him, we might have put up with that horrible, normal school behaviour, which is not, shouldn't be normal, but is normal.

Like a number of families, Ursula found home education as a “last resort” (Morton, 2010); however, it fit well within their family worldview. Ursula used an unschooling approach to learning and viewed herself as a facilitator for her children's learning.

I see myself as the person who can make learning available to them and offer them experiences that are of interest to them and also offer them experiences in life for them to try things to see what they might be interested in. So a facilitator is what I see myself as, as well as a mentor, because I'm their mum and obviously we all have our own belief systems and what have you.

As an unschooler, Ursula provided no formalised curriculum or program of learning but utilised self-directed education for her children (Riley, 2018). Ursula “absolutely” loved home educating in South Australia, particularly Adelaide. She highlighted the benefits of an active home education community and the geographic ease of living in the Adelaide hills to access both nature and the city. Their family lived off grid for gas and water but were still within half an hour of the CBD (central business district). We conducted this interview while she was waiting for her children to finish a hike in the hills.

We have such beautiful families who are really committed to making the experience of home educating the best thing, best possible thing they can for their children. And we have, yeah, we have a big community and then I have my closer core families that we see more often and absolutely adore every single one of them and feel so blessed to have found these people through home educating. And we absolutely love and are so passionate about it and no complaints.

The South Australian Department for Education requires yearly registration and an interview. Parents must create a home education program that meets the goals of the Australian Curriculum in the eight learning areas, but parents are free to use whichever pedagogical or philosophical approach best suits their child (Government of South Australia, 2023).

The education department, we only hear from them once a year when they want to do a review and they require us to fill out quite an extensive record of what we’ve been doing with our children and how we’ve met the Australian Curriculum subjects for the past year. And then they have an interview with us, which is usually them coming to our house. But now it’s on Zoom and that lasts for about an hour. So, we don’t really have anything to do with them. Just like the rest of Australia, we receive no funding or anything from them.

Ursula's daughter, Kaci, learnt to read within the school system. She believed Kaci was taught with readers, but she played no active role in the learning to read process.

I also had handed over the job of learning to read to the school which I see now as just ridiculous, but to be honest, that's what I did. And so my daughter learnt to read through school, so I have no idea how she learnt to read.

Her son had been mostly home educated and Ursula took a slower, unschooling approach to his reading education. When Henry turned seven, he asked to learn to read. As a result, her daughter brought him a 1950s Janet and John reader (that belonged to their grandmother), and without any prior instruction, Henry could read most of the book. According to Ursula, it was a bit stilted and he needed some prompting, but he was able to read it.

We continued to do things like normal. I'd keep reading to him and I would follow the words I was reading with my finger. And he would be—he would always sit next to me and listen to me read and I would only read things of interest to him. I never, ever read readers or books with big writing. If it had big writing, it was because that was a kid's book that he wanted me to read to him. It wasn't for him to aid him learning to read. So, I was reading all sorts of things and just follow my finger along and just see and he would just watch.

He was further motivated to learn to read by his love of the *Dog Man* comics. He wanted to read them endlessly, and eventually, Ursula told him he had to start reading them to himself as she had other things to do. Thus, enjoyment of reading propelled him to gain more reading skills, which is a common finding in the literature that enjoyment and reading skills are interlinked (Green, 2022; McGeown et al., 2015; Thomson, 2018).

So, he started reading them himself. And he was literally reading them. And again, I think it all happened very organically, and if he doesn't understand a word then he asks me. That doesn't happen very often. And quite literally, I'd never intentionally taught my child to read, and by seven and a half he was reading fluently.

Ursula was surprised by a recent experience where her son read a poem out loud to his grandmother, and he read it flawlessly, including following the punctuation. Reading out loud to adults was not something required in their home, and she was surprised that he had mastered this skill without help or practice. Despite her surprise and delight, Ursula chose not to make a big deal of it, believing reading was a normal part of life that her children could choose as and when they wished.

Ursula acknowledged that not all children may learn to read this way (unschooling) but that it had worked for her youngest child.

I kind of intuitively felt that I would know when he was ready to learn to read. I would see that he was showing interest. I would pick up on it and then I would tackle it. I didn't have a plan because I'm not a teacher and I didn't teach my other child how to read. I've never taught a child how to read, but I just sort of thought, I'll just take this day by day. He did tell me when he wanted to read, verbally—"I want to learn how to read." He didn't ask me to teach him, so I never actively tried to teach him.

It happened very organically when we would be reading something. So, it was capturing his interest at the time. I'm not very good at planning ahead and doing things in a way that is planned, I'm sort of on the fly. So that's how it all happened, and I just guess I just like with all their learning I just sort of take it, take their lead on it, and if they want to learn something and they want to ask me something they do, or if I see that they're interested, I tell. So, I just went along with that.

Her goal for her children's reading education was that they can read, research, and use it as a tool for future learning and work. "I wish for my children to be 100 percent literate." She also noted that her children read what they are interested in. Her son progressed from *Dog Man* to *Harry Potter* and tended to read graphic novels a lot more than fiction novels, while her daughter "chews through novels."

Ursula had an easy experience learning to read as a child. She recalled a combination of readers and simple phonics that she picked up easily. Nowadays, Ursula self-identified herself as a nonreader. "I don't because I lose interest too quickly. I can't focus long enough." However, she noted that she did read lots of internet texts with technological modes of reading, which were more appealing to her.

I read a lot of things, but I read small snippets of things, so I'll read a lot of articles on the internet. But whereas getting stuck into a good novel might happen if I'm lucky, once a year, maybe once every two years I get if I get a good novel. But then with ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder] if I find a really good, exciting novel, I'll hyper focus and chew through it in two seconds flat. I read a lot to my kids. So I read to them, but they're reading a bit more, they're reading a lot more to themselves now so that role is starting to diminish a little bit for me. So yeah, there's my relationship with reading.

While Ursula does not love reading due to the stress of concentrating for long periods of time, she does like reading. It is important to note that texts needed to capture her interest to maintain her attention.

Even [with something] capturing my interest, I will find that I am reading and then my brain trails off and starts thinking about something else, and I've actually read a page,

but I haven't taken any of it in. So, I guess in that sense, reading might be considered a bit of a challenge.

As a result, Ursula listened to a lot of podcasts that enabled her to do other things simultaneously and increased her focus. This indicates that Ursula matched reading and literacy experiences to her own needs and values, which was also reflected in the approach she took with her child's reading education.

In summary, Ursula advocated for unschooling and emphasised the importance of being active in her children's education. She believed that having a good community and facilitating her children's interests were the key to her educational approach. She viewed reading as simply an extension of life and a skill that her children learnt when needed and wanted.

### **5.7 The Jenkins family: interview with Annie**

As a family of three, Annie, her husband Max, and her 6-year-old son William were travelling home educators. At the time of the interview, they were based in Western Australia where they had paused due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, but they had previously spent a lot of time in Queensland and the United Kingdom as well. Their sole motivation for home educating William was to enable them to travel as part of their lifestyle.

Our intention is that he will go into mainstream school when we finish up, and that was always the plan. I have no intention of home educating all the way through. I think for both of our benefits and yes, it's purely for the travel aspect of it.

Annie and Max began home educating William in September 2020 to align with the time he should have started school in the United Kingdom. Annie had a difficult time trying to work out what system she would educate him with. They had just left the United Kingdom and were trying to align with both the education system in England and the Australian Curriculum

but found this challenging and decided that they would eventually settle in Australia. Thus, they decided to use the Australian Curriculum as their basis. At the start of 2021, William began his foundation year of schooling in line with Australian standards.

When Annie completed Phase 1 of this research in early 2022, they were home educating, but she subsequently enrolled William in day school in Western Australia. During the Phase 2 interview, Annie explained that they were pulling him back out to begin home educating that week. This afforded her the opportunity to share the differences she saw between their approach to home education and mainstream schooling.

We found the English and maths have been quite amusing; when we pulled into school here we discovered that we had accidentally taught Year 1 maths and not reception maths. So, he had no problems this term and that I had purchased an American curriculum. So, I was following one of the kindergarten curriculums and spent some time figuring out it looks about the same. But anyway, turns out it was a bit further ahead than he needed to be.

To home educate in Western Australia, parents must write a curriculum program that meets the Western Australian curriculum and then keep records to monitor student learning (Government of Western Australia, 2020). A moderator meets with the family to assess the curriculum plan and provide a report evaluating the home education program and student progress.

Annie self-identified as using the “analytic phonics” approach, whereby words are broken down to teach patterns and sounds (Machin et al., 2018). However, upon explanation, her approach tended to be more eclectic. She used Jolly Phonics (a multisensory synthetic phonics program), ABC Reading Eggs (when they had access to internet), reading aloud, and

environmental reading opportunities. She also noted the importance of resources being offline for travelling.

So, in terms of materials, it's gotta all be offline, basically. In terms of travelling in the other aspects of it, what we have found is he picks up a lot along the way. So pre starting reception, when we were in New Zealand when he was four, he basically learnt to skip count by 10s through road signs and speed limits. And yeah, he learnt that side of things pretty quickly. Like the maths, that's been a pretty easy thing to pick up. We'd be reading—before I taught him to read—signs in national parks and that sort of stuff. He learnt how to read the word “car park” before he could read anything else because it was always “get yourself back to the car park if you're lost.”

Their travelling lifestyle was also reflected in William's learning experiences. It afforded them the opportunity to learn about the communities and places they visited rather than arbitrary people or places as is sometimes the case in mainstream schooling.

So very much life learning, it comes as you move through places and you learn about the local Indigenous culture of the place you happen to be in, not being forced to learn about [others out of context]. Over here [in Western Australian mainstream school] they are learning about a Northern New South Wales Indigenous group. Why? Why aren't they learning nearer stuff? It makes no sense to me.

Annie approached William's education in a more formal, structured manner, which is part of the spectrum of home-education styles theorised by Neuman and Guterman (2017). She was solely responsible for planning the learning and delivered 80% while her husband delivered 20%.

I would say [I'm] more of a schooler, so I'm definitely not unschool. And yeah, we tend to be quite worried about things like you know following the curriculum, and I work best

using a workbook to go through. And I think a lot of that was confidence or lack thereof initially as well.

Putting William back in school had given Annie confidence in her approach, but she also felt as a result she would be more relaxed when they returned to the road.

[William] going to school and having feedback from the mainstream teacher, this time around, we're a lot more focused on the interactive side and I have learnt by accident a lot of stuff we do with homeschool anyway, but we are very much more similar to the school thing because our intention is he'll go back into a mainstream school.

Annie said she felt "quite daunted" at the prospect of teaching her son to read. He had been in a daycare centre in the United Kingdom that taught basic phonics, and so she decided to continue that once they began travelling.

So in our home, we were working through Jolly Phonics, so it was very much phonics based. And that was working through the initial forty-four sounds or however much there are. And actually my son at the time said to me, "That's really, really boring." I'm like, "Yeah, this is the boring bit, but we just have to acknowledge that. And when you get through this and you know them, it'll get so much better." So that was the initial painful stage for everybody. Fundamentally, I think my role is to help him get the basics so that he can then extend those skills himself. Which I think is what he's now doing with his own reading.

Annie said she taught him to read in a very guided and directed way. They continued with phonics and blending until William was able to read to himself. Upon enrolling in mainstream, they found he was in the top reading group. Subsequently, Annie switched her focus to facilitating his reading with topics he was interested in.

Fundamentally, I think my role is to help him get the basics so that he can then extend those skills himself. Which I think is what he's now doing with his own reading. I don't care what he reads as long as he's interested in reading something. And now he's at the point where we have a rule he doesn't wake us up before seven. So if he's in his bed and he's now got chapter books and he reads them to himself in the morning and the same ones over and over again, so it is about having exposure to it.

He loves trucks and cars, so he has truck magazines in the back of the car, that's what he reads when we're driving. And so he'll happily read me an article about some truck engines in an adult-designed magazine. So, he wants to do it, so he will. Again, that is facilitation. Without myself, my husband, he wouldn't have a truck magazine in the back of the car.

They also did a lot of reading while walking and hiking, such as information boards and real-life literacy. She also read aloud to William, but she noted that travelling in a camper could be a challenge to keep a lot of books available. "We have way too many books in the back of the van at the moment. They are about to be culled; it was about reading to him at night and just instilling that love." Both Annie and her husband read a lot. She noted that they used to read on the Kindle but switched to physical books for better role modelling. Barratt-Peacock (2003) identified role modelling as an important facet of Australian home education and this aligns with the experience of Annie. As a result, she desired for her son to be a proficient reader and to hopefully love reading as a past-time.

I come from a long line of domestic readers. There are always books everywhere in my parents' or grandparents' house. But if he's not interested, then okay, that's not his thing. But fundamentally, my ultimate goal is that he is completely proficient, capable.

Annie's family loved reading and modelled a lifestyle that supported reading (Brown et al., 2012). Her father was a teacher, and she had learnt to read before she went to school.

My parents were doing kind of sight reading. Before I went to school, we would have the alphabet on cards on the kitchen bench that have the labels of things attached to tables and fridges and stuff like that. So they were doing all that before I went to school. I don't know if we're talking about pre-kindy or preschool, but I certainly remember being at school and being horrifically bored by the books they had on offer. My experience was very positive.

Annie's experience of home educating William was further influenced by the COVID-19 era. When they were locked down, her son's education was largely unchanged, but they did see the impact remote schooling had on their friends and acquaintances. She felt students were given excessive amounts of work that was often irrelevant or "time fillers," and this has now influenced the public perception of what home education is (McCabe et al., 2021). She believed it was important to acknowledge the difference.

What they haven't done is what I consider to be true homeschooling. It's deciding (a) what approach you're going to do and (b), once you have decided your approach, what activities, resources, materials, how are you going to build your own child or children's curriculum, etcetera? And that's completely different.

That is a totally different skillset to being given something by a school and being expected to check in, return [work] and things like that. And I think that's the danger that a lot of people nowadays think of homeschool as being sitting in front of a computer for five hours a day, doing a bunch of stuff and sending it back, which I don't think it really is.

Annie explained that home education placed their family in a positive position when the COVID-19 lockdowns hit, as they were already a cohesive family unit used to spending time together, and while just beginning, she felt home education allowed them the freedom to give their son a more meaningful and effective education.

In summary, the Jenkins family lived and learnt as a family unit. As travelling home educators, they used their lifestyle to learn and teach their son in a meaningful way. When teaching reading, Annie utilised a structured, systematic approach, and this reflected the philosophical value she placed on traditional, mainstream education. Despite not intending to home educate long term, Annie became more flexible over time and discovered the benefits of home learning that are found within the distinct paradigm of home education.

## **5.8 Multicase study analysis**

In the previous section, each family was presented as an individual case, consistent with the conceptual framework of this research (Barratt-Peacock, 2003). This content summary allowed each participant's unique voice to be presented as its own case study and reflected the sociocultural framework of this research, which was presented in Chapter 3. Each family had created its own CoP, with internal and external factors influencing the functioning of that individual home education environment. Yin (2018) emphasised that drawing together understandings from across multiple case studies is an important component to multicase study analysis. This section outlines the results of this process.

The seven interviews were transcribed and inputted into NVivo (Version 14). A total of 151 references were categorised into 18 codes. The interviews were analysed according to the six steps of reflexive thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). In line with the theoretical framework of this research, the themes categorised from these seven interviews are now presented. The themes from these interviews align with the conceptual

framework of this research and reflect the individual child, the family unit, the values, and the beliefs underpinning the educational choices and external community influences. These themes are as follows:

- individualisation: child-centred learning;
- facilitation: guiding reading education;
- cultivation: parental choices influencing culture and values;
- connection: building and responding to external networks.

### **5.8.1 Individualisation: child-centred learning**

The home-educating parents interviewed showed deep understanding of their individual learner. They subsequently used this knowledge to customise their child's education and individualise the way they learnt to read. This knowledge was reflected in the narratives each parent used when speaking about their child, indicating both necessity and time investment were driving forces behind their efforts to individualise their child's reading education. The interviews reflected that the parents had a strong sense of who their child was and their learning styles, but they also felt a strong responsibility to protect their child's uniqueness and learning opportunities.

Each parent knew who their child was and the best ways to reach their learning potential. To illustrate, Myrtle described her son as a "beautiful and tender-hearted, thoughtful, lovely human" who "took a really long time to kind of find his own skin in terms of being comfortable to move away from us." Her approach to home educating him reflected this need for time to develop at his own pace and give him a gentle education that reflected his individual needs. "It started with the temperament of a child who we felt we would serve better by giving him more room and that has worked beautifully." In line with research findings from Gilmore (2003) and McKeon (2007), who found that parents met the needs of their

individual child within reading instruction, the interviewees also adapted their approach based on their child. For example, Mary, a mother of six, indicated the uniqueness of each child within her home and the need to adjust both methods and resources as a result.

This individualisation also extended to reading material provided for their children. Wanda highlighted that her eldest child loved fiction, while her youngest child loved nonfiction. As such, she catered their reading education according to their interests to engage them. This was an essential echo across the interviews, aligning with Thomson (2018) who found that enjoyment of reading led to greater participation and outcomes in reading in mainstream students. Nina, likewise, used three different approaches to learning reading for her three children, each proving what she felt was a successful response to each child's interests and learning style. For example, her son was interested in Minecraft, so his reading was focused around that, whereas her eldest daughter preferred nature-based learning. Love of reading was also fostered by interest-based education (McGeown et al., 2015; Merga & Mat Roni, 2018). Ursula's son found motivation to read through his love of *Dog Man*, while Annie's son loved trucks, cars, and magazines.

This focus on individualised learning also encouraged parents to modify their learning styles and methods. Mary's son was stalled with whole-language readers, so she moved him to a more structured phonetic approach that better suited his learning style, while her oldest daughter was better suited to the whole-language readers and sight words. Ursula and Nina implemented approaches where their children set the pace, and reading was a natural part of their lives. "I kind of intuitively felt that I would know when he was ready to learn to read. I would see that he was showing interest. I would pick up on it and then I would tackle it." Reilly (2007) found that home educated parents had undivided one-on-one time which allowed for parents to diagnose problems and adjust the child's learning accordingly as seen here in a

reading context. Additionally, Neumann et al. (2013) found that the quality of parent–child reading interactions in early childhood and the creation of a literacy-rich HLE supported positive reading experiences and reading success, as indicated by the parents interviewed.

Nina, who was a professional child development psychologist, explained the pressure she sometimes felt to align with mainstream learning goals and timings rather than following her child’s needs. She found that social media was a positive reinforcer by seeing other home-educating families allowing their children to develop and learn at an individual pace, which indicated the importance of home education networks in helping parents have the confidence to individualise education (Safran, 2009). In addition, Myrtle and Annie both felt some internal pressure to keep up with the mainstream, while Ursula referenced external pressure from extended family members who wanted to see her child reading. This highlighted that even the most confident home educator experiences pressure to conform to social norms, even though they highly value individualised learning. This was also found by Thomas and Pattison (2007) among U.K. unschoolers, especially with pressure for “early reading,” yet could be minimised by providing an authentic and engaging reading environment based on the individual child. Home-educated children themselves were also reportedly not immune from comparison pressure. Sarah’s son compared his reading ability to friends who attended mainstream, using it as a catalyst to learn to read. Meanwhile, Mary’s children felt comparison between siblings who were learning alongside each other.

In summary, while each family utilised their own styles and educational philosophies, as reflected by the theoretical framework established in Chapter 3, it emerged from the cross-case analysis that each family individualised the experience of learning to read for each of their children. The approach taken varied in each family, but the learning experiences and resources were tailored to meet the needs of each unique child. This meant that within each

family, a variety of approaches was used. Parents also indicated the importance of monitoring their child's learning and adjusting to provide this high level of individualisation.

### **5.8.2 Facilitation: guiding reading education**

Parents interviewed represented seven different approaches to reading instruction, all of which ranged from highly structured to significantly unstructured. Yet each parent explicitly or implicitly viewed themselves as a facilitator of learning rather than as a "teacher" of reading. The Macquarie Dictionary (n.d.) defines a facilitator as "a person who assists others to learn by adopting a teaching approach in which the participants in a course are actively engaging in the process of discovery rather than being passive recipients of information." For example, Ursula stated,

I see myself as a facilitator for their learning. I see myself as the person who can make learning available to them and offer them experiences that are of interest to them and also offer them experiences in life for them to try things to see what they might be interested in.

This was echoed by Myrtle, Annie, and Sarah who all identified facilitation as providing opportunities for their children to engage in reading experiences and provide access to a wide range of engaging resources. Nina called herself an "anchor of our rhythms" and the "inviter," reflecting the role of facilitation as being the person responsible for directing and guiding learning. Conejeros-Solar and Smith's (2021) analysis of gifted homeschoolers found that the role of facilitator included not just learning, but also facilitating relationships (both within and outside the CoP) as well as physical and community resources.

Mary and Wanda both identified themselves as more structured in their approaches, using systematic content and materials with more relaxed processes (Neuman & Guterman, 2017). While neither identified themselves as a "facilitator," they both used language choices

that pointed to this as a function of their role. Mary described herself in a way that indicated she was a problem-solver, watching her children and jumping in when needed to redirect her child's learning or identify an issue. She talked about "throwing everything at them until something sticks," which indicates her role as a facilitator of resources and learning experiences. Likewise, Wanda explained that the use of a systematic reading program allowed for confidence to guide her children without feeling stressed that she was "missing something or stuffing it up."

Barratt-Peacock (2003), in his model of Australian home education, found that one of the functions of the home-educating parent is to serve as a tutor, someone who guides the child's learning and provides real-life authentic practices (p. 106). Ursula echoed this sentiment by highlighting herself as a "mentor" who made experiences of interest available. McCabe et al. (2021) also highlighted that parents were not "providers of education" but rather facilitators of real-world skills and learning opportunities. Annie provided a clear example of this style of reading instruction, as she highlighted the environmental print her son used while travelling Australia and New Zealand, for both learning to read and practical safety. "He learnt how to read the word 'carpark' before he could read anything else because it was always 'get yourself back to the car park if you're lost'."

Another finding in this theme was that the parents' approaches to facilitating learning evolved over time. McKeon (2007) also noted that while previous literature indicates parental educational style is stagnant, their study found that of 12 respondents who began as structured or traditional learners, seven evolved to eclectic home educators, thereby indicating that the parental learning approach evolved over time. Through learned experiences and individual child differences, the parents interviewed in this study adapted and evolved both their beliefs and their practices. Rothermel (2011) similarly found this

among home-educating parents, as their initial motivations and intentions changed over time. Wanda began as a very strict and structured home educator but loosened up over time in the process of learning while still using a structured content of learning, as reflected in the conceptual framework by Neuman and Guterman (2017). Wanda noted,

[With my eldest] I made myself quite anxious about it, and I think I made him anxious too. By the time I got to the last one, I was much more comfortable about the fact that simply surrounding them with words and a systematic process for learning would be sufficient.

Likewise, Sarah and Mary both started with highly structured, academic programs but switched to facilitating reading in ways that supported both the needs of the family and the interests of the child. This may be a reflection also of parental confidence, which was referred to within the parent narratives as increasing with time spent as a home educator. This confidence may increase parental engagement as a facilitator of learning who provides rich, individualised reading experiences.

### **5.8.3 *Cultivation: parental choices influencing culture and values***

Parents in the home education environment serve an important role as both a facilitator of learning and an individualiser of the child's reading instruction. This is not a one-way process. Each parent stated clear goals, philosophies, and values that influenced the way they facilitated and individualised their child's learning. This theme shows that the parents intentionally and unintentionally made choices that cultivated a reading culture within the home, based on their values.

Each parent self-identified a home education philosophy, and this was clearly aligned with the choices they made when teaching their child to read. Ursula identified herself as an unschooler and subsequently did no formal reading instruction or planned reading

experiences with her child. She felt this was successful, and her son learnt to read when he was interested. This reflects the findings of Thomas and Pattison (2007) and Riley (2018) who found that children could successfully learn to read through informal processes where parents followed their child's cue and promoted a reading culture. Myrtle identified herself as an eclectic homeschooler who used reading aloud as her main approach. This use of reading aloud reflected the family culture she purposefully grew, one where books were a meaningful and consistent part of family life, which subsequently motivated her children to read. Similarly, Gilmore (2003) found that reading aloud was an important tenet of home education, suitable for providing a rich reading culture.

All seven parents indicated either that they were a reader or that they felt compelled to be a reading role model for their children. Even Ursula, who self-identified initially as a nonreader, subsequently explained she consumed a large amount of online and audio texts. This is a higher percentage than was identified by Brown et al. (2012) who found that 50% of mainstream Australian parents read for pleasure, with 80% reading every day across digital, traditional, and environmental print. The parents interviewed in this study all indicated the importance of their children learning to read and seeing it as a valued part of everyday life. This echoes Brown et al. (2012) who found that parents' reading habits reflected the disposition their children had towards reading.

Each parent also had clearly identifiable goals, as shown in Table 5.1. These reflected both the individual needs of their child and the parents' educational values, attitudes, and beliefs. For example, Wanda noted, "I can choose where our focus is so that I can say this is what's important for us as a household right now, and this is what we'll focus on learning."

**Table 5.1***Goals for reading*

Parent	What would you say is your ultimate goal when it comes to reading in your children's education?
Annie	<p>I want him to be able to do it. I want him to enjoy it if he chooses to do it as a past-time that would be great. I come from a long line of domestic readers.</p> <p>My ultimate goal is that he is completely proficient, capable. It's not going to be his reading that prevents him from doing anything else.</p>
Nina	Love of reading and the ability to do the things that they love.
Myrtle	That they can. [Laughter] That they can, and that they don't have baggage around it, just that reading is a tool both for utility and for loveliness.
Mary	<p>I want them to be able to read to learn.</p> <p>I want them all to be able to be functional readers, to be able to live in our society as adults and it'd be wonderful if they could progress to reading to learn. And then reading to relax and enjoy.</p>
Sarah	<p>For him to be able to read independently and to assess what he is reading.</p> <p>Well, firstly, basic comprehension would be able to understand what he's reading and then eventually to be able to analyse what he's reading and work out, whether it's something that he agrees with or disagrees with and why or knows how to search for more information, whether that's through online searches or looking stuff up in a book or going and writing a letter to someone who knows, sending an email to someone who might know about it.</p> <p>So, to be able to use reading and writing for everyday communication and to also be able to use it to find out more about things that he wants to know. And to not feel that it's just something he is obliged to do.</p>
Ursula	<p>I guess that he can read and just, you know, he can read and he can research, and it's a tool for him to go forward in the world, in whatever further education he wants to take on board and or jobs that he wishes to go in. I wish for my children to be 100 percent literate.</p> <p>And I wish for him to do with it what he wishes to do with it. I want him to have the power to know how to read.</p>
Wanda	I want my child to feel confident, look at a totally unknown text and feel confident that they will be able to make at least basic sense of it. I want them to feel comfortable that even if it is a totally unknown text that they will be able to work out enough words to comprehend meaning or if they can't work out enough words to know where they should look for the additional information to comprehend meaning.

Collectively, the home-educating parents wanted their children to be confident readers, prepared for future experiences and to enjoy reading. Myrtle summarised that

“reading is a tool both for utility and for loveliness.” The goals presented by the parents reflect both a practical use of reading as well as an aesthetic view.

When cultivating a family culture, the parent considers not just the individual child but also the whole family dynamic and their values. All parents interviewed indicated a strong family culture with an emphasis on the relationship between the parent and child, as well as between siblings. Sarah’s experience highlights that the reading experience must reflect the whole family. Gilmore (2003) found that this was a strength of home education, as siblings play an integral role in developing a family culture of reading and strengthening reading skills within the family unit. In the current study, it was observed that what was best for the individual child did not always align with what was workable pragmatically for the family. Sarah changed both her methods and philosophical approach to reading instruction (from structured to play based) to better meet the needs of both her children. This reflected a family-centred reading culture developed by the parent to make home education workable and successful.

#### **5.8.4 Connection: building and responding to external networks**

In Australia, home education is legal in all states, but requirements are set and enforced by individual states and territories. The final theme in the interview data arose from how reading education is influenced by external and community stakeholders. This is inclusive of both mandatory government requirements and voluntary community and social networks.

While the state or territory a parent lived in did influence the educational choices made, parents appeared to prioritise their educational philosophy and find a way for government requirements to fit into their individual homeschool style. For example, South Australia has a rigorous system of home education registration, requiring site visits, Australian Curriculum compliance, and reporting (Government of South Australia, 2023). Ursula found

this an impediment to home education but managed to meet the requirements by shaping them around her philosophical unschooling approach. Wanda from NSW also experienced a very high level of government requirements (Drabsch, 2013) but found it reassuring that children were learning and meeting the required standards, aligning with her more structured approach. In contrast, Tasmania has a more student-focused process of registration (Office of the Education Registrar, 2017), and Myrtle's own child-centred approach and deep understanding of her children were reflected in her planning and reporting.

Parents also reported home education to be a more efficient form of learning than mainstream education. Myrtle did 30 min of formal instruction, balanced with life learning, unschooling, and interest-based exploration. Likewise, Sarah felt that 15-min blocks of one-on-one instruction was more efficient than a one-size-fits-all lesson to a classroom of 30. This efficiency of learning also opened more time for community interaction and homeschooling networking.

As a newer home educator, Sarah found the Northern Territory to have a large, supportive network that made her decision to home educate easier. Safran (2008) found that home education support groups were not uniform but reflected the shared educational values of its group members and provided ongoing support, especially to new home educators. Sarah found that her home education group enabled practical support as it enabled excursion opportunities and social meetups to complement the family culture and learning goals. Likewise, Ursula spoke of the importance of a home education community and how this enhanced their family's home-educating lifestyle. As the number of home educators in Australia continues to grow rapidly, so do the opportunities for engagement and extension of learning. Wanda, who had home educated for 8 years, noted a big change in resources and supports. She had four children on the autism spectrum and found home-educating networks

to be very supportive and socially inclusive. In contrast, Kidd and Kaczmarek (2010) interviewed Australian home-educating mothers of children with autism and found that they often lacked support and inclusion in social networks. Wanda's experience provides an alternative experience and may indicate a positive shift towards inclusive home education networks. This warrants further research.

#### **5.8.5 *Multicase study analysis summary***

This section outlined the themes prevalent within the seven qualitative interviews with home-educating parents. From this, it was seen that the home-educating parents individualised their children's reading education to both reflect the child's learning style and interests and respond to their challenges and successes. Second, parents viewed themselves as facilitators of learning who guided students and provided opportunities for their children to learn to read. As the facilitators, they sought to create a reading culture that reflected their philosophies and values. Furthermore, they responded to and engaged with a variety of external networks to support their children's education.

### **5.9 Conclusion**

This chapter presented the case studies formed from Phase 2 qualitative interviews. Each of the seven case studies outlined a unique CoP that was formed by each family and within which children learnt to read. Each one was unique and involved an interplay between family, sibling, parent, and societal factors. This reinforces the conceptual framework of the study, whereby Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1935/2011) advocated that children learn through the interplay of environment and social dynamics. The multicase study analysis highlights the collective experience of home-educating parents providing reading education, which is a focus on individualising learning, facilitating reading, cultivating a culture of reading, and connecting with external community influences.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

The research data from Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the project were presented in previous chapters. Chapter 4 outlined the findings from an Australia-wide quantitative survey of home-educating parents. Chapter 5 presented qualitative interviews with seven home-educating parents who shared their experiences teaching their children to read and the rationales behind their chosen content and processes. This chapter brings together the results from both the quantitative and qualitative phases to present a discussion about the mixed methods used to answer the key research question and subquestions as outlined below.

The overarching research question to be addressed was “How do parental beliefs about reading influence the teaching of reading within the home education setting?”

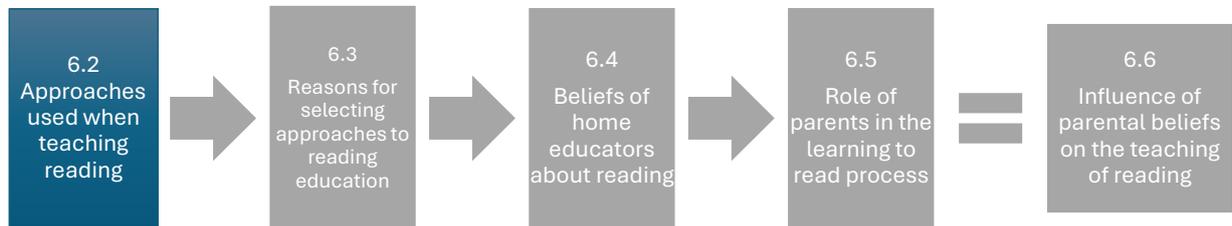
Subquestions that informed the mixed methods study were as follows:

- a. What approaches are used to teach reading in the home education setting?
- b. Why do home educators select these approaches?
- c. What do home-educating parents believe about learning to read?
- d. What do home-educating parents believe about their role in the teaching of reading process?

In this chapter, each subquestion is answered according to the data collected and analysed as outlined in Table 3.2. Figure 6.1 illustrates the sequencing of this chapter.

**Figure 6.1**

*Overview of Chapter 6: Approaches used when teaching reading*



## **6.1 Approaches used when teaching reading**

Various approaches to teaching reading in mainstream education are offered in the literature. These include synthetic phonics (Johnston & Watson, 2014), whole language (Pressley et al., 2001), and analytic phonics (Gallagher-Mance, 2023). However, these tend to focus on those methods utilised in schools (Rowe, 2005; Taylor et al., 2005). This research project addresses a major gap by identifying the approaches used by Australian home-educating parents to teach reading and the underpinning beliefs that led to the adoption of these approaches. There was limited research on home education and reading to draw on (Jackson, 2021), prompting the use of established literature about learning to read in early childhood and mainstream education to develop one of the instruments administered in Phase 1: HERP (Home Education Reading Practices). The literature review identified and outlined seven key methods of teaching reading in the home education context. These are whole language (Goodman, 2005; Johnston & Watson, 2014), synthetic phonics (Johnston et al., 2012), analytic phonics (Gallagher-Mance, 2023), unschooling (Riley, 2018), environmental print (Neumann et al., 2013), reading aloud (Gilmore, 2003), and a simple alphabetic phonics approach (Johnston & Watson, 2014). The literature highlights that more than one approach is often used in mainstream learning (Rowe, 2006), which is referred to as “balanced literacy”; however, since the introduction of the Australian Curriculum (Version 9.0), most states and

territory schools have moved to a singular mode of reading education, namely, synthetic phonics, as preferred by ACARA (Henebery, 2022). This research adds value to the literature by determining which approaches home educators are utilising to teach their children to read.

Table 6.1 shows the key findings from the mixed methods analysis in relation to the first research subquestion: “What approaches are used to teach reading in the home education setting?” It outlines the methods of teaching reading that were synthesised from the Phase 1 quantitative survey and the qualitative responses from parents in the Phase 2 interviews.

**Table 6.1***Approaches used to teach reading in the home education setting*

Domain	Quantitative (Phase 1)	Qualitative (Phase 2)	Mixed methods inference
Primary method of teaching reading	Synthetic phonics was the most used primary method of teaching reading (38.7%), while unschooling (6.9%) was the least used primary method.	Each of the seven parents identified one of the seven primary methods of teaching. However, their explanation did not always align neatly with the theory of that approach.	Home-educating parents did not conform to a single approach to teaching reading but rather utilised a balanced approach to literacy that included adopting a variety of methods and the best fit for each of their children.
Prevalence of specific reading approaches in home education	<p>Total frequency of use (combining both primary and secondary methods):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• synthetic phonics (71.1%)</li> <li>• whole language (70.5%)</li> <li>• environmental print (69.3%)</li> <li>• simple alphabetic phonics (44.5%)</li> <li>• analytic phonics (43.3%)</li> <li>• reading aloud (37%)</li> <li>• unschooling (21.9%).</li> </ul> <p>Every parent surveyed reported using more than one approach for teaching reading.</p>	Each parent identified a primary method of reading instruction but in practice incorporated at least one other method of teaching. Interviewees emphasised the importance of their child learning to read but also enjoying reading.	

As shown in Table 6.1, one finding from this research is that home-educating parents use a balanced approach to literacy, which includes the adoption of different reading methods and tools for their child’s reading education, and differs across individual families according to their unique context. This highlights the impact of each family’s unique CoP and sociocultural context (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky 1934/2011). Every parent interviewed indicated that

they used a primary method, as well as at least one additional method for teaching their child to read. These findings reflect the National Enquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (Rowe, 2006), which showed that while synthetic phonics was most successful, children in a classroom setting did better with a balanced approach to reading. This is significant given the current push in the new Australian Curriculum (Version 9.0) to emphasise synthetic phonics as the key, and in many cases only, approach to teaching reading (McDonald, 2023). The new version of the Australian Curriculum has removed the “three-cuing system” and “predictable texts” from the updated version, emphasising phonics decoding and encoding skills instead. This indicates that home educators embrace a broader range of reading methodologies than those currently being used in Australian classrooms (Henebery, 2022; Queensland Government, 2023b). This is a consideration for home educators and mainstream educators as children transition between home education and mainstream; for example, Wanda’s children entered and exited three times over their schooling. These findings also add to the public debate regarding the most effective forms of reading instruction (Henebery, 2022).

As examined in the Chapter 2 literature review, the colloquially named “reading wars” identified whole language and phonics as the dominant methodologies in Australian schools. It is apparent from this research that whole language and phonics are also the most prominent methodologies of teaching reading in home education. However, holistic approaches such as environmental print and reading aloud are significantly influential approaches and were adopted within participants’ home learning environments at 69% and 37%, respectively. The literature review highlighted the importance of the HLE in early childhood research, but less literature was found about the impact of the HLE when a child starts mainstream schooling. It was queried in the literature review whether the HLE would remain an important or impactful element for home-educating families since the learning takes place in the home environment.

The findings of this research indicate that purposeful HLEs remain an important component of home education past the early years when mainstream peers transition to day school. This aligns with the conceptual framework of this study, which follows the sociocultural theory that advocates the environment as an agent influencing a child's learning potential (Vygotsky, 1932–1934/2020, 1935/2011). Substantial research indicates the importance of a literature-rich environment in a child's reading development (Brown et al., 2012; Hood et al., 2008; Neumann et al., 2013), and this research highlights the intentional continuation of this within home education. The HLE of a home-educated child may include the resources available, both human and material, and the purposeful integration of rich literature and environmental print to support reading education (Brown et al., 2012).

A natural tension was also noted in the research between structured and unstructured reading methods. In Phase 2 interviews, parents were allowed to expand on their choice of reading method, and those who selected highly structured approaches emphasised the importance of a systematic method, while mothers who used a more unstructured approach felt that learning to read was a natural process that required little intervention. This tension is also present in the literature, with mainstream educational reading research emphasising the importance of systematic reading instruction (Queensland Government, 2023b; Rowe, 2006; Taylor et al., 2005). In contrast, unschooling home education researchers advocate that home-educating students require no formal processes or methods to learn to read and that reading is a sociocultural process (Thomas & Pattison, 2007) that can be naturally acquired through unstructured literacy-rich environments (Riley, 2018). Myrtle's, Ursula's, and Nina's experiences align with the views of Riley (2018) and Thomas and Pattison (2007), as their children learnt to read through either unschooling or literacy-rich environments. Furthermore,

34 parents in the Phase 1 survey also used unschooling or natural–environmental print as the primary method by which they asserted their children learnt to read.

Although there is tension between unstructured and structured reading methods in the literature, it is important to note that Neuman and Guterman (2017) did not intend for it to be a binary concept. Instead, they conceptualised their research on home educators as a spectrum, ranging from very structured to very unstructured, a conceptualisation that was confirmed through the seven qualitative interviews. While Wanda self-identified at the highly structured end, and Ursula educated her children in a very unstructured way, the other parents were located midway along the spectrum. Notably, the home-educating interviewees often began as very structured and systematic early in their home-educating journeys but became more relaxed and balanced over time, which has been noted in other studies regarding home-educating approaches more generally (Barratt-Peacock, 1997; Croft, 2012; Rothermel, 2011).

The individualisation of reading approaches is also a key finding from this research. This reinforces the existing premise from the literature that home-educated children learn to read at their own pace (Hempenstall, 2016; Pattison, 2016). Sarah planned to use a synthetic phonics approach with her child and teach the 44 phonemes of English as the basis for learning to read, but she found that this approach did not work within her family unit due to having a younger child for whom the activities were unsuitable. As a response, she shifted her approach to one that was more heavily reliant on environmental print and hands-on activities. Likewise, Myrtle attempted a structured phonics approach but found that her children “were all so bored,” prompting her to shift to a reading aloud approach in response to her children’s learning styles and her family’s lifestyle. She found this instead focused on texts that they “really, really loved and used.” These parental responses echo the research from Thomas and

Pattison (2007) that highlighted how parents followed a child's cues to promote a love for reading. The concept of individualised learning is also found in Ampuja's (2021) study where every home education "participant 'followed the child' when selecting instructional methods and materials for literacy" (p. 62). Each of the Phase 2 interviewees outlined the varied ways they selected approaches uniquely fitted to their child and family circumstances. The choices parents made were informed by the needs of the child and family, which influenced the educational approach within their CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thus, each parent reinforced a key tenet of Vygotsky's theory, which is that the environment of a child dynamically influences the child's cognitive development and learning (Vygotsky, 1932–1934/2020) and that the social resources available to a child (in this case, their parent) helps to maximise their learning potential through their parent supporting their ZPD (Daniels, 2008; Vygotsky, 1924–1934/1997). These findings confirm the foundational conceptual framework of this research that the child influences the parent, which influences the educational choices and the wider communities that the family engages in.

When examining the approaches used by Australian home-educating parents, this research study found that the parents used a balanced approach to literacy by selecting more than one method. They individualised the methods and resources based on the needs of the individual child and the family. Each family existed on a spectrum ranging from structured to unstructured, and this often changed over time to reflect the changing needs of the child and parent.

### **6.1.1 Reading interactions**

Parents were asked in the Phase 1 survey to indicate the frequency with which they read to their children and, conversely, had their child read to them. It was found that home-educating parents frequently read to their children, with more than 80% engaging in reading

aloud more than 4 days per week. The average time parents stated they spent reading to their child in one session was 33 min. This indicates both frequency of reading and time invested in reading with their child and thus supports the findings of Gilmore (2003) that reading aloud is a highly valued process in home education. Gilmore's study also found that siblings played a positive role in helping children learning to read, and this was echoed by parents in the Phase 1 study ( $n = 7$ ) who, without prompting, highlighted that siblings were a positive catalyst and likewise by the interview respondents ( $n = 2$ ). This supports the conceptual framework that home-educating families exist as a CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where siblings and parents are key stakeholders in a child's education and that learning to read exists within this sociocultural context and is influenced uniquely by these relationships.

In 2016, Scholastic Australia conducted nationwide research of 1,748 parents and children to determine the reading habits and factors that influenced their reading engagement. While caution must be taken when comparing the findings of Scholastic (2016) to the current research project due to the 6 years difference between the studies, it provides a relevant framework to discuss differences between broader Australian reading experiences and home education. The Scholastic survey was implemented online and included both parents and children from Australia-wide contexts, and as such, it may include responses from home-educating families. Thus, the Scholastic survey is referred to as "Australian parents," while this thesis refers to "home-educating parents."

To begin, the experiences of parents reading aloud to their children can be examined between this research project and the Scholastic (2016) study. The current study found that 80% of home educators read aloud to their child frequently (more than 4 days), whereas the Scholastic study found 40% of participating Australian parents read aloud frequently to their children. This indicates home-educating parents in this study claimed more engagement in

reading practices with their children, possibly due to the increased time spent with their child or the responsibility felt as the primary educator, both of which were indicated as reasons for choosing home education found by McCabe et al. (2021). The Scholastic (2016) survey showed that 34% of 6- to 8-year-olds and 48% of 9- to 11-year-olds were read to less than twice a week. In contrast, the Phase 1 survey showed that only 6% of home-educating parents read aloud to their child less than twice a week. Furthermore, all parents interviewed ( $n = 7$ ) in Phase 2 expressed regular reading practices with their children as part of their everyday home-educating environment. Collectively, these results indicate reading is a habitual practice built into most home-educating families' culture.

Using regression analysis, the Scholastic survey found three predictors of how frequently school-aged children read: the frequency of parents reading aloud, the child's enjoyment of reading, and the child's knowledge of their reading level or ability. It was also found that children were more likely to read for fun when parents encouraged reading through parenting strategies, such as limiting screen time, making reading a part of the daily routine, and reading with their child. Table 6.2 summarises the frequency with which parents read aloud to their child in both the general population and home education, as well as the percentage of children deemed frequent readers.

**Table 6.2**  
*Summary of reading frequency in home education and general population*

	Home education (current research project, 2022)	General population (Scholastic 2016 study)
Parent reads aloud more than 4 days per week	80%	40%
Child reads more than 4 days per week	52%	37%

The Scholastic survey further found that as Australian children aged, an increasing engagement in other activities crowded out the time they had available to dedicate to reading. This was also found by Merga and Mat Roni (2017) who noted one way to encourage reading for enjoyment was to provide more time for free reading. None of the seven parents interviewed for the current study indicated that time restraints limited their ability to read aloud to their child, nor for their child to be able to read freely. This may indicate that home-educated children have more time to pursue reading for enjoyment and less pressure to fit in other activities, such as homework and home duties around a mainstream school day. In support of this, the study by McCabe et al. (2021) found that parents cited wanting more time with their children as a reason to home educate and that at the end of their home education journey, they enjoyed the additional family time and bonding as a result. The Phase 1 survey found that 95.7% of parents believed they had a responsibility to be engaged in their child's education. Simply put, home education appears to provide children with more flexible time in their day and may increase the available time for reading education and reading for enjoyment. This illuminates the interconnectedness of the values within the family's CoP and the learning experiences provided for the child.

### **6.1.2 Resources used**

Home-educating parents reported using a wide variety of physical and electronic resources when supporting their child in learning to read. Novels, games, and simple readers were used by a majority of families, while hands-on materials were also highly valued. These resources may be a formal part of the child's reading education (such as curriculum, novels, or flashcards) or informal resources (such as street signs, picture books on the bedroom shelf, or boardgames).

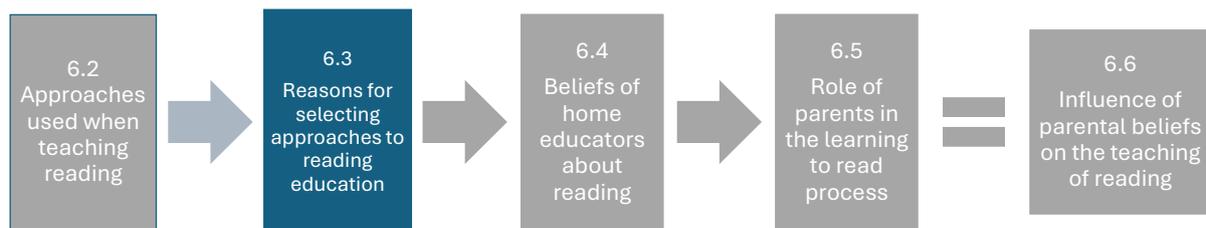
Notably, the Phase 1 survey found that ebooks were the lowest reported resource at 14.5%. This is compared to physical books, which was the most used resource for 77.5% of families. The qualitative interviews provided one possible explanation for this response. A number of mothers ( $n = 3$ ) spoke about the importance of using physical books instead of ebooks to ensure modelling for their children. It was noted by parents that children cannot discern the difference between a parent scrolling social media or reading an electronic book. This reinforces the importance of role modelling as a core process of home education from the conceptual framework (Barratt-Peacock, 2003). Annie, who was a travelling parent, noted that keeping a stockpile of books was burdensome in a small space but critical to creating a culture of reading. Brown et al. (2012) hypothesised that there would be increase in the use of technological modes of reading by parents and children, while Merga and Mat Roni (2017) found that most parents in their research still used physical books, and it was yet to be determined how the rise of electronic texts would impact emerging generations. Phases 1 and 2 of this research indicated a low reliance on electronic texts by home educators. Interestingly, Ciampa's (2016) research found that the use of ebooks increased intrinsic motivation in mainstream Year 1 students, which contrasts to the opinions of parents in this research.

The Scholastic (2016) survey found that 33% of Australian children had read an ebook, but 79% of children said they preferred to read print books, even if ebooks are available. This aligns similarly with this research that showed that among the home-educating population of Australia surveyed, physical resources and books were still the dominant resource, preferred over digital modes. While ebooks specifically were used by less than 20% of families, apps were found to be a popular form of literacy learning, with almost half the families (49.1%) using them as a reading resource. Two mothers interviewed expanded on the motivation that their sons found from technology in that they needed to be able to read in order to engage

with electronic apps and gaming. Both mothers viewed this as a positive. McGeown et al. (2016) conceptualised that as children aged, they were increasingly motivated by digital texts. This may be an area for further research and consideration.

**Figure 6.2**

*Overview of Chapter 6: Reasons for selecting approaches to reading education*



## **6.2 Reasons for selecting approaches to reading education**

The second research subquestion, “Why do home educators select these approaches?” aimed to use the qualitative interviews to gain a deeper understanding into why parents selected specific approaches to reading in their home education. Despite the seven parents interviewed having different educational philosophies and approaches to reading, there were four key domains that drove their educational choices when selecting a reading approach: parent considerations, child considerations, family considerations, and external or government considerations. There was no one singular reason a parent chose their approach, even if they had an initial intention in mind. Rather, it was the interplay between these domains of life that merged to shape how reading instruction looked in each family unit. As a result, it can be concluded that learning to read in home education is a dynamic process where an interplay of factors influences the approach a parent takes when teaching their child to read. This section summarises the parent-driven, child-driven, and family-driven reasons for approaches to reading education and addresses the external factors impacting home education reading approaches.

### **6.2.1 Parent-driven reasons**

Parents interviewed for this research designed their approach to reading based on their goals for each child, their personal capacity as the primary educator, and their beliefs about reading.

The parents interviewed ( $N = 7$ ) all expressed clear goals for their children, which influenced the reading choices they made. In mainstream education, goal setting has been shown to increase reading attainment and comprehension (Dotson, 2016; Förster & Souvignier, 2014). Phase 2 parents in this research created affective goals ( $n = 7$ ), such as enjoying reading, as well as proficiency goals ( $n = 7$ ) to ensure they were capable of reading. Future orientated goals ( $n = 3$ ), such as being able to read for work or future opportunities, were also identified. Parents often entered into home education from a variety of starting points; some chose to home educate, while others represented “accidental educators” who felt they had no option other than home education or who found it a viable option during the COVID-19 pandemic (English, 2021). Of the parents interviewed, there were both purposeful and accidental home educators, but all seven had clear goals for their reading approaches. Gambrell (2015) insisted that teachers “have two equally important reading goals: to teach our students to read and to teach our students to want to read” (p. 259), which easily summarises the dichotomy present in parent-driven goals for reading in home education.

A further finding of this research was that 100% of the parents surveyed in Phase 1 said they wanted their children to love reading, and this was confirmed in the qualitative interviews. This resounds research from Croft (2012) that found home-educating parents wanted learning to be a joyful lifelong experience. Parents in this study expressed a variety of ways their children engaged with reading, and they believed that the method they chose for their child should, first, help them learn to read and, second, foster an enjoyment of reading.

Having clear reading goals, as found in this study, can improve reading skills and increase enjoyment of reading (Springer et al., 2017). Mainstream researchers, such as Green (2022), advocate that reading programs should incorporate reading for enjoyment as it increases literacy outcomes. This is a belief that the home-educating parents in this study visibly put into practice.

The finding that home-educating parents desire for their children to love reading echoes the Scholastic (2016) survey that found 90% of mainstream parents believed it to be important for their child to read books for fun, and 66% believed strong reading skills to be the most important skill to have. However, that same survey found that 78% of parents noted they “wish their child would read more books for fun,” indicating that parental belief may not match practice. In comparing this research project with the Scholastic study, it is noted that no home-educating parent expressed a desire or need for their children to read more. As expressed in Section 6.2.1, home education provides more time available for children to read and explore interests (McCabe et al., 2021), which may account for this difference.

Parental capacity was also cited as a reason for choosing a specific reading approach. Wanda expressed concern about her capacity to teach her children to read and chose a systematic, highly structured approach as a result. In contrast, Nina was a highly qualified child psychologist who felt confident in applying her knowledge of child development to a naturalistic, child-led approach to reading development. The results of this research showed that parental capacity increased and values changed over time as parents became more comfortable in their skills and knowledge, which was reflected in their decisions about teaching reading. A tendency to become less structured is a common experience among home educators who evolve over time (Neuman & Guterman, 2017; Rothermel, 2011). Parents in this study were driven by their educational philosophy as well. A parent who aligns with

attachment parenting and natural styles of parenting are more likely to reflect these beliefs in their child's education, such as choosing an approach like unschooling or environmental print (English, 2015b). Phase 1 data also showed some correlation between unschooling parents and their approach to reading. However, these correlations are weak and should be regarded with caution. Nina and Ursula reflected this, as they both expressed natural styles of parenting and chose unstructured approaches (environmental print and unschooling, respectively). In comparison, Annie and Wanda both had experiences with their child in the traditional school setting for part of their education and expressed they valued a more structured, academic style of learning. This indicates that parental philosophies and educational philosophies may intersect to influence the choices parents make when choosing a reading approach (Riley, 2018; Rothermel, 2003).

Finally, parents were also influenced by their own disposition towards reading, including their past experiences of learning to read, and they were found to be shaped by their own reading experiences, irrespective of whether they were positive or negative. Most of the parents interviewed ( $n = 6$ ) had positive experiences of learning to read or learnt to read easily. However, three parents indicated difficulty with the mainstream system of learning to read (Wanda, Mary, and Sarah). Research by Weigel et al. (2006) proposed two types of mothers: facilitative mothers, who have positive reading experiences and are engaged with their children's learning, and conventional mothers, who have lower education levels and less engagement in early literacy activities with their children. Six of the seven parents in this study appeared to be facilitative mothers who had positive reading experiences and enjoyed reading, while the seventh had a poor experience learning to read but still took on the characteristics of a facilitative mother. Six of the seven parents interviewed in Phase 2 enjoyed reading for recreation, although while Ursula said she did not enjoy reading, she did engage

in podcasts and other forms of digital literacy regularly. It can thus be surmised that all seven of the interviewees appeared to be facilitative mothers, as defined by the attributes outlined by Weigel et al. (2006).

To further examine whether the home-educating parents were facilitative in their approach to reading, the Phase 1 survey highlighted that 98% of parents reported they enjoyed reading with their child. Furthermore, participating home-educating parents felt that they played an important role in their child's learning (90%), and the scatterplot analysis of the parental reading beliefs (Figure 4.2, Chapter 4) as a whole showed that 98% of parents placed a high value on reading education. It is possible that parents who choose to homeschool tend towards being facilitative parents who are engaged in their children's education and enjoy learning themselves. This is an important consideration when examining the home-educating family as a CoP. It is possible that having an engaged, facilitative parent is an integral part of forming an effective, dynamic CoP. This warrants further research.

To summarise, parents chose their approach to reading education as a reflection of their goals for their child, their desire for their child to love reading, and how capable they felt to facilitate reading education.

### **6.2.2 *Child-driven reasons***

One finding of this research was that all parents surveyed ( $N = 185$ ) and interviewed ( $N = 7$ ) used more than one reading approach when educating their child. The interviews illuminated that this was due to parents tailoring reading instruction to the individual needs of the child. Mary specifically stated, "I just throw everything at them" to find what worked for each individual child. All seven mothers interviewed showed a deep understanding of their child and their preferred means for learning. Slater et al. (2020) identified that one of the four main reasons Australian parents choose to home educate is the ability to choose a curriculum

and a “preference for child-centred pedagogies” (p. 277). A theme demonstrated in the Phase 2 qualitative interview responses was that parents individualised their child’s learning to match their interests and abilities. They chose the reading methods that best suited their child’s learning ability and interests. Home-educating parents have the freedom to change course at any time and try something new (Rothermel, 2011). One parent, Sarah, spoke about putting resources away that were not working and trying them again in a few months when the child had developed. In this way, parents became experts in their child and monitoring their learning.

### **6.2.3 Family-driven reasons**

Sibling dynamics also influenced the reading approach taken. The multiage nature of home education, as well as diverse needs within families, was found to change the way parents catered for their children’s reading. As hypothesised, home-educating families appeared to form CoPs where the needs of the whole family were taken into consideration (Barratt-Peacock, 2003). Similar to the findings of Gilmore (2003), siblings sometimes encouraged each other and were a catalyst towards reading, or conversely, sometimes siblings made a selected approach unrealistic, and pivoting ensued. This was Sarah’s experience, who changed her eldest son’s reading program in response to the needs of her younger child. Home education was found to represent a balancing process, where the presence of siblings may influence or restrict which curriculums or methods are suitable in a particular family environment, but this was balanced by the benefits of family togetherness and opportunities for sibling tutoring and bonding (McCabe et al., 2021). Thus, sibling factors were found to sometimes influence the reasoning behind the reading approaches parents chose.

Family circumstances were also a minor factor expressed in the interviews that sometimes influenced how parents taught reading. Slater et al. (2020) found that 19.7% of

Australian home educators chose to home educate due to life circumstances, such as travelling, religion, or financial constraints. Annie was part of a travelling family, and this influenced how their family integrated learning to read into their everyday travelling lifestyle, as well as influencing which resources were available. Specifically, she had to consider space in a campervan and also the capacity to be “offline” for extended periods of time. Another example was Nina who was a foster parent and had to consider the varied needs of children in her home and modify the approach to reading as a result. These examples illustrate the wide variety of family circumstances that influence how parents include reading in their home education program and further reflects the uniqueness of each family as a CoP.

#### **6.2.4 External factors**

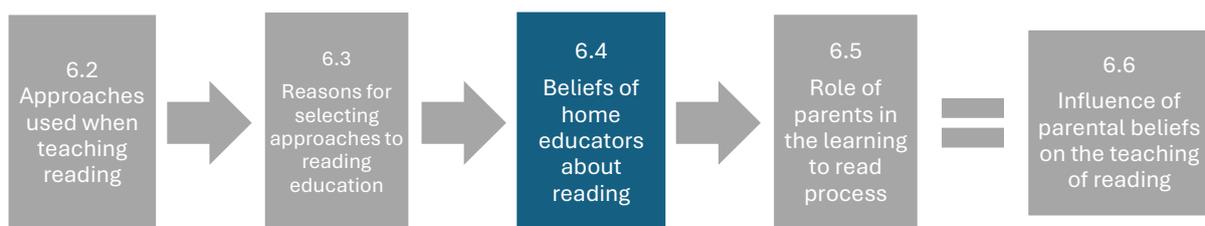
While less significant to the justification of reading methods, it is still worth mentioning that external factors were found to be a consideration for home-educating families. As outlined, each state and territory of Australia sets their own requirements for home education. Some states required extensive curriculum-based planning and reporting, while others focus on a more holistic approach to child learning and development. No parent interviewed found their state requirements overly stressful or insurmountable. Ursula felt that the South Australian requirements were quite demanding and curriculum focused, yet she was still able to find a happy medium where she met the requirements within her unschooling home education philosophy. Myrtle felt that the child-centric focus of Tasmania reflected the needs of her children well and allowed her to focus on her child rather than a curriculum. As such, the external requirements upon a family were seen to be a consideration but were given less weight than factors such as individualisation or family dynamics.

### 6.2.5 Summary of reasons for selecting approaches to reading education

Overall, the reasons given by parents showed a balance of flexibility and adaptation. Parents were flexible in their implementation of reading education in response to the needs of the child, the family, and external requirements. However, they also showed adaptation over time. Parents evolved their approach and became less structured and more confident in their approaches and their underlying reasons for these methods. It was also found that learning to read in home education included both formal and informal opportunities for learning to read. It was noted that parents often began with an idea in mind but reevaluated based on both their child's interests and their capacity. This highlights the dynamic and interconnected relationship of factors outlined in the conceptual framework. Reading methods, conditions, and resources changed over time according to the needs of the child, parent, and family.

**Figure 6.3**

*Overview of Chapter 6: Beliefs of home educators about reading*



### 6.3 Beliefs of home educators about reading

The third subquestion of this research was “What do home educators believe about learning to read?” Through analysing the qualitative interviews and examining the PRBI subscales of positive affect and verbal participation, three key parental beliefs about reading were synthesised. First, home-educating parents believed the child must be ready to learn to read and that the learning to read process should follow their interests and pace. Second, the

parents maintained that enjoyment of reading has priority over proficiency during the learning to read phase. Finally, they believed that learning to read is multimodal and should be embedded in daily life. These findings were reinforced by the interviewees.

Regarding the first belief, all seven of the interviewees spoke about a child-centric approach to learning to read. Regardless of methods, the key ingredients were that the child shows readiness to start learning to read and that the reading process follows their interests. All the home-educating parents believed that learning to read should not be pushed or artificially paced. This contrasts with mainstream literature that indicates the reality of the “forth-grade slump” and the importance of learning to read early to avoid systemic disadvantage (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2008; Stockard, 2010). Wanda spoke of how she pushed her eldest to start reading too early, at age 5 years, because that was “expected,” and with her subsequent children, she learnt to follow their lead, which made learning to read more enjoyable and successful. The only research to support this approach is a small pilot study in the United States by Keys and Crain (2009) and in the United Kingdom by Thomas and Pattison (2007) that asserted there was no disadvantage to home-educated children who learnt to read later than their mainstream peers as long as they were allowed to progress at their own pace.

Second, the data showed that, in general, home-educating parents believed that enjoyment of reading should take priority over proficiency of reading. This was seen in the research project through high reading aloud rates, as well as 100% of home-educating parents desiring for their child to love reading. In addition, the Phase 1 survey showed that 92% of parents believed their child enjoyed being read to. It is demonstrated in the literature that children’s enjoyment of reading correlates with better attitudes towards reading and increased attainment of reading skills (McGeown et al., 2015). Home-educating parents in this research emphasised that this was their experience. Through the results of Subscale 3, verbal

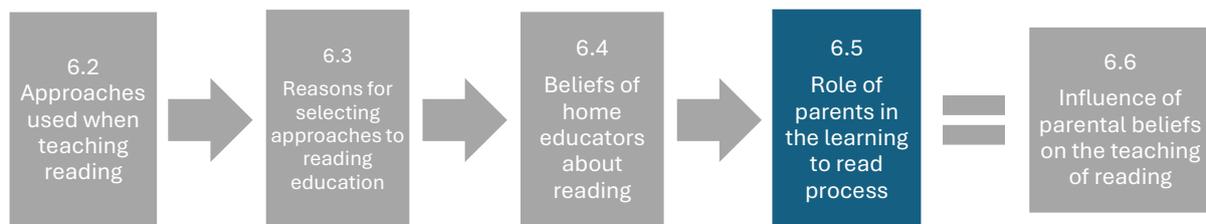
participation, it was shown that most home-educating parents actively engaged in reading experiences with their children, using reading aloud as a teaching moment and a bonding experience. This indicates that parents focused on the affective aspects of reading first and supported this with the practical skills and methods necessary to learn to read. This further aligns with the concept of a literature-rich HLE being an important part of reading development, which is well established in the literature for early years learning (Brown et al., 2012; Neumann et al., 2013). However, the home-educating parents interviewed indicated that they continued with a literacy-rich HLE well into the primary education years and beyond. Longitudinal analysis of HLE research by Lehl et al. (2020) found that, in general, parents who provided a stimulating early years HLE would continue to do so after children commenced mainstream education. The authors also concluded that the benefits of a strong early years HLE would continue into adolescence for mainstream secondary school students even if the attributes of the HLE change (Lehl et al., 2020; see also Sammons et al., 2015).

The final belief was that learning to read in home education did not take the form of a single reading program or approach. Learning to read was shown to be multimodal and could be done through books, digital technologies, games, and life experiences (Watts-Taffe, 2022). The parents who participated in this study found ways to intentionally and thoughtfully incorporate learning to read into everyday life, such as reading signs on nature walks and during car trips. Parents took advantage of opportunities to learn wherever and whenever they were with their children. Even a parent who used a structured program, such as Wanda, integrated reading opportunities into everyday life. Embedding learning into everyday life helps children to see the applicability of the skills they are learning (McCabe et al., 2021). This finding also parallels two of the four tenets of Barratt-Peacock's (2003) model of Australian

home education being domestic occupation, which incorporates learning into real-life opportunities, and parents acting as learning guides.

**Figure 6.4**

*Overview of Chapter 6: Role of parents in the learning to read process*



## **6.4 Role of parents in the learning to read process**

The final subquestion of this research was “What do home-educating parents believe about their role in the teaching of reading process?” To elicit the answer to this question, the results of Subsection 1 from the PRBI were considered, with the interviews serving an explanatory role. The Phase 1 survey showed that home-educating parents believed their role to be important in their child’s learning and that they had a responsibility to be involved in their child’s learning. Mainstream literature shows parental involvement and attitudes towards reading have a positive impact on a child’s reading (Brown et al., 2012; Lehl et al., 2020; Sammons et al., 2015), and it is clear from Phase 1 data that home-educating parents deeply value their role and take it seriously. To understand what this role looks like, the seven interviews were examined.

The resounding answer to questions regarding parental role was that most home-educating parents viewed themselves as facilitators rather than teachers delivering direct instruction, which confirms previous research about home educators (Carpenter & Gann, 2016; Matlubah, 2023). The role of a facilitator, as defined by Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries (n.d.), is “a person who helps somebody do something more easily by discussing problems,

giving advice etc. rather than telling them what to do” (para. 1). Ursula referred to her role as a “facilitator” and “mentor” who offered her children experiences and “intuitively” knew when they were ready to read. Wanda wanted a very structured approach initially, but as she gained confidence, she was more willing to let the structure loosen and shift from “systematically teaching them” to facilitating learning experiences for her children. This once again reflects the commonly held understanding that structured educators often become less structured over time as their confidence increases (Neuman & Guterman, 2017; Rothermel, 2011).

Facilitation of reading can be formal, through the use of curriculum or flashcards, or informal, such as by the provision of resources or games (Riley, 2018). Participating parents who leaned towards unschooling or environmentally based methods tended to emphasise informal facilitation, while parents who were more structured utilised formal methods of facilitation (Gray & Riley, 2015). Thus, their role was to provide reading opportunities consistent with their beliefs and the child’s learning needs. For example, Sarah felt she was facilitating, rather than teaching, by finding resources and providing learning possibilities to her child, such as laying out reading activities or games that her child could choose to engage in. There was also a premise presented from Sarah and Myrtle that a role of the home-educating parent was helping the child become aware of what they did not know. They said it was their responsibility and opportunity to open up new worlds and interests to their child that they might not know about. This could be through formally introducing new books or reading experiences or through informal experiences and exposure to resources or people that could spark their interest in reading. In this way, parents situated reading within the wider learning of lifelong skills (McCabe et al., 2021). Parents were also tasked with providing appropriate learning experiences that supported a child’s capacity or ZPD in line with the

conceptual framework of this study (Daniels, 2008; Vygotsky, 1926/2004). This required a deep understanding of each child and then facilitating learning opportunities to support these needs.

From the interviews, it was clear that there were two main areas where facilitation of reading occurred in the participants' home education: interest and proficiency. First, parents used a variety of approaches to facilitate their child's developing interest in reading and to help them find enjoyment in it. Second, they facilitated opportunities for their child to gain the skills necessary to learn to read. These skills could be facilitated on either a micro level, such as targeted learning opportunities for individual skills like phonics, comprehension, and phonological awareness (Konza, 2014), or a macro level through reading experiences from within which those skills were gained (Riley, 2018).

Home-educating parents also took on the role of facilitating interest in books and learning to read by providing resources and learning experiences for children to choose from. They were able to adjust the environment to best suit the needs of individual children (Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010) and provide engaging materials for them. These resources could be formally introduced as part of focused reading learning or informally used as part of everyday life. Annie highlighted that it was integral that she facilitated the provision of resources, emphasising that without books and without environmental exposure, her son would not have anything to learn to read from. The provision of time and engaging resources were consistently mentioned by home-educating parents as a way to increase a love for reading and interest in learning to read (McCabe et al., 2021; McGeown et al., 2016). There was also a reciprocal process whereby children selected resources and advocated for their learning needs so parents were better able to facilitate their learning, such as Ursula's son who requested to learn to read and to be provided with specific texts of interest.

Home-educating parents facilitated the practical skills of learning to read as well as promoting enjoyment. Nina described it as being an “anchor of our rhythms.” She set out activities and provided an “invitation” to learn. Parents provided the structure from which children drew their capacity to learn and grow. Structured parents likewise took this approach, with Wanda providing formal curriculum that enabled her children to learn sequential reading skills. Regardless of how formal or informal the learning experiences and resources were, home-educating parents took on the role of facilitator rather than teacher, which increased independence in their children and encouraged them to want to read and to take ownership of their learning (Carpenter & Gann, 2016; McCabe et al., 2021).

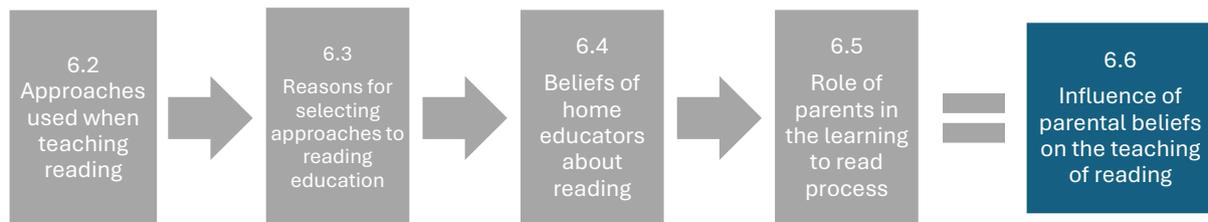
It has been found that taking on the dual role of parent and teacher can be a major stressor for home-educating parents because of the complexity of providing an education for their children while simultaneously running a household and meeting the emotional needs of the family (Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010). This was a challenge of the role as expressed by Mary until she realised that teaching a child to read is “an extension of my role as a mum.” McCabe et al. (2021) found that home-educating parents said it was a joy to home educate rather than a sacrifice and that they received a lot out of it too. The parents in this study spoke positively about their role as a facilitator of reading in home education. They did not find it burdensome but a positive experience (Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010).

In summary, home-educating parents mostly viewed themselves as facilitators of reading education rather than as teachers. Instead of relying on direct instruction, parents provided both formal and informal opportunities for children to learn. They focused their role on both facilitating an interest in reading and facilitating the opportunity and methods within which children can learn the skills of reading. This can also be considered in terms of parents being a “guide,” as outlined by Barratt-Peacock (2003) in his model of Australian home

education. The parents in the current study spoke positively about their role as facilitator of their child’s reading education.

**Figure 6.5**

*Overview of Chapter 6: Influence of parental beliefs on the teaching of reading*



## **6.5 Influence of parental beliefs on the teaching of reading**

The overarching question of this research project was “How do parental beliefs about reading influence the teaching of reading within the home education setting?” In answering this question, it was established in Section 6.2 how home educators taught reading and in Section 6.3 why such approaches were used. It was further illustrated in Section 6.4 what home-educating parents believed about learning to read and in Section 6.5 what they believed about their role in this process. This was synthesised to herein respond to the overarching research question.

In the Phase 1 quantitative survey, no significant statistical correlation was found between parents having a high belief about the importance of reading and the type of approach they took to teach reading or the amount of time they spent reading with their child. However, collectively, the data showed that there were trends among the home-educating parents surveyed, indicated by high mean results and explanatory methods utilised through qualitative interviews. The majority (98%) of parents surveyed held high parental beliefs about the importance of reading, based on a priori assumptions in the PRBI tool (DeBaryshe & Binder, 1994). This indicates that home-educating parents are more likely to be facilitative

parents (Weigel et al., 2006) who value reading (100%) and believe they play an important role in the process of learning (90%). Analysis of the qualitative interviews confirmed that the parents took their role as primary facilitator seriously and were purposeful in their decision-making to ensure their child learnt to read effectively.

A parent's beliefs about reading and their past experiences did appear to influence the methods they chose to start with and the types of resources they provided. However, this research shows that it is the interplay of the family dynamics, the child's needs, and social networks that shape how the teaching of reading changes over time in order to best suit the child, parent, and family unit. This finding aligns with the principles of Vygotsky's (1934/2011) sociocultural theory and highlights the influence parents and their environment have on a child learning to read. For example, Ursula built a CoP that included parents, siblings, and extended family members. She felt this positively motivated her son to want to learn to read and see the purposive nature of it, thus reinforcing Vygotsky's view (Vygotsky, 1932–1934/2020) that “man [*sic*] is a social being” requiring social input for learning and growth (p. 82).

To a minor extent, external considerations also shaped a parent's approach, such as state requirements influencing parent obligations towards their child's learning. However, most parents interviewed indicated they relished the freedom to work their personal philosophies into external requirements. This was evidenced by Ursula who lived in a state requiring more stringent academic requirements, yet she was able to mould those requirements around her unschooling philosophy by matching the requirements to the life experiences and learning opportunities her children chose to engage in.

Home-educating parents used a plethora of reading education methods and resources. In keeping with an understanding regarding the uniqueness of pedagogical approach in each

home, there was no dominant method of teaching identified. However, what was identified was that 100% of home-educating parents surveyed ( $n = 185$ ) in this research used multiple methods to provide a balanced approach to reading (National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, 2005). It was further identified through the qualitative interviews that a parent's beliefs about learning and reading appeared to influence whether they took a more formal or informal approach to learning to read. For example, Sarah found learning to read as a child in mainstream schooling boring, so she utilised an engaging, hands-on approach. Ursula believed her son would tell her when he was ready to read, so she did no formal learning and trusted her son would learn on his own (Riley, 2018). While not all interview respondents, such as Wanda, believed children are able to learn to read without any purposive reading education or just through exposure to reading in their sociocultural environment (Riley, 2018; Thomas & Pattison, 2007), they all appeared to place the child at the centre of their decision-making. This involved prioritising the learning needs of the child and protecting their enjoyment of reading in the process. As previously outlined, parents held firmly to the belief that they wanted their children to love reading. This was reflected in the choices they made when selecting instruction methods and resources, as well as providing time for reading and fostering a lifestyle of reading.

## **6.6 Reconceptualising the conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework of this research was synthesised into a visual diagram in Figure 3.1 (Chapter 3). It integrated three pillars of theoretical underpinnings and combined them into a functional model of home education. Vygotsky's (1934/1999, 1926/2004) sociocultural theory provided the fundamental understanding of how children develop cognitively and the integral influence social interactions have on their learning. He emphasised the importance of the child's environment as a dynamic coparticipant in development and

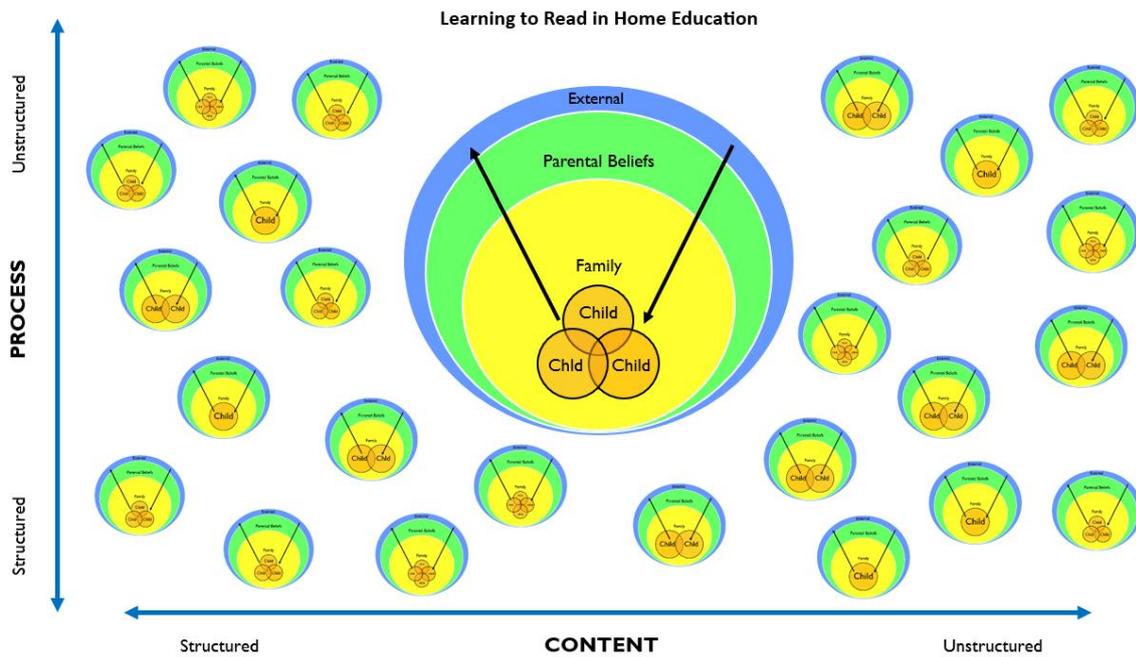
learning. The CoP framework by Lave and Wenger (1991) was also integral to this research. Based on the three attributes of a CoP, it was advocated that home-educating families form a CoP within which learning takes place. Both these theories were specifically applied to existing home education research, including the model for Australian home education developed by Barratt-Peacock (2003) and Neuman and Guterman's (2017) framework of structured and unstructured home education processes and content.

This discussion chapter has unpacked the findings of this mixed methods research in unison with the existing literature. In response to the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 3, it is consistent that children learn to read within the sociocultural context of their family and wider community influences (Barratt-Peacock, 2003; Smagorinsky, 2011; Vygotsky, 1935/2011). When learning to read, the family CoP incorporates siblings, parents, and, to a smaller extent, wider external networks, as the original model visualised.

The theoretical framework from Chapter 3 was reconceptualised to adjust for the findings of this research in Figure 6.3. Parents in this study emphasised the importance of considering the individual child as well as sibling influences. The refined figure reflects that each family CoP will have a different interplay within family dynamics and that while the individual child is a central concern when making decisions about reading, this will also be influenced by the needs of siblings (where relevant).

**Figure 6.6**

*Factors that influence learning to read in home education*



From the findings of this research, it can be seen that the needs of the family unit play a large role in how children learn how to read. This may include work commitments, travel, caring responsibilities, or geographical location, all factors influencing the needs of the family unit that in turn influence the child's experience of learning to read. Parental beliefs are also a factor, with a parent's beliefs about reading and their chosen approach shaping the family unit and facilitating how the child learns to read. External and community factors do influence the teaching of reading but in a much less significant way than the needs of the child and the needs of the family.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

This chapter brought together the findings of the mixed methods Phase 1 survey and Phase 2 interviews to answer the four subquestions proposed by this research and ultimately to address the overarching research question. As a result, this study demonstrates that

parents use a balanced approach to reading education by selecting a variety of resources and reading approaches reflective of child, parent, and family factors. Parents see themselves as facilitators of reading who help their children develop both literacy skills and a love for reading.

The conclusion of this project is that parental beliefs alone do not direct the teaching of reading. They do, however, influence where parents place their emphasis, whether it be informal or formal approaches, structured or unstructured methods. Parents adjust and evolve their approach to reading education based on the individual child, the needs of the family, and, to a lesser extent, the surrounding external influences. Home education choices are multifaceted and dynamic, changing constantly and evolving from lived experiences. As conceptualised by Barratt-Peacock (2003), families create a CoP, and their decisions about reading take place within this ecosystem. This places the needs of the child at the centre of home education, with the family provides support to meet these needs.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This research study sought to capture a previously uncharted picture of the teaching of reading in Australian home education. Through a nationwide survey, a robust image of what reading education looks like in the homes of Australian home-educating families was collected. Following on from this survey, qualitative interviews with seven home-educating parents provided a more in-depth exploration of parental beliefs and how they influence the choices made to teach reading in the home education context.

This chapter shares the study's conclusions by providing a summary of the thesis chapters and an overview of the project. Furthermore, key findings, limitations, and implications of the research are presented, as well as recommendations for future research.

### 7.1 Thesis summary

To begin, Chapter 1 introduced the research problem and provided context for this research. Home education research has been growing over the past 25 years, while at the same time, the numbers of home-educated children have been rapidly expanding, particularly in more recent years following the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter contextualised the state of modern home education and the particular need for this research.

Chapter 2 presented the key literature relevant to contextualising this research problem. Existing research about home education models, motivations, and demographics was presented to give an overview of the empirical literature to date. This was then expanded to include the diverse beliefs and motivations of home educators with regard to broad educational philosophies and practices. No research was found specifically about reading in Australian home education, so existing research about reading methodologies and approaches in mainstream education was presented. Also examined was literature regarding the mainstream beliefs and attitudes of parents towards reading and early literacy practices.

From this, the gap in the literature was illuminated and the focus of this research established to focus on the beliefs of home educators and the impact these have on the teaching of reading at home.

Chapter 3 presented the conceptual framework and methodological framing of this study. It was an important dimension of this study to recognise home education as distinct from institutional learning and to approach it with an awareness that practices can be as diverse as the home environments in which they arise. As such, home education was understood through this lens as a form of sociocultural practice (Neuman & Guterman, 2017) in which children are cognitive apprentices (Barratt-Peacock, 2003), which was derived from the work of Vygotsky (1932–1934/2020) and Lave and Wenger (1991). The suitability of this conceptual framework was presented, as well as its limitations. From these theoretical underpinnings, the explanatory sequential mixed methods approach was presented and justified. This provided for both breadth and depth of understanding of the research problem to fully answer the research questions. Phase 1 comprised a quantitative survey of 185 Australian home-educating parents, while Phase 2 included qualitative interviews with seven home-educating parents who each used a different approach to reading.

Chapter 4 presented the Phase 1 results of this research. It outlined the quantitative analysis of the survey results from both the PRBI and the HERP surveys that comprised the bulk of the Phase 1 survey. Also presented were the qualitative answers to two optional research questions that provided respondents the opportunity to expand on their answers if desired. These results showed that there was no significant statistical correlation between parental beliefs and the method of reading instruction or the time spent teaching reading. However, mean data did indicate that, on the whole, home-educating parents in this study held a high parental reading belief, meaning that they valued both reading with their child and

their role as parents in the reading process. Furthermore, analysis revealed home-educating parents used a balanced approach to the instruction of reading, using multiple methods and resources to help their children learn to read. These included varied combinations of different methods including synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, simple alphabetic approaches, whole language, environmental print, reading aloud, and unschooling.

Chapter 5 communicated the individual case studies of seven parents who were interviewed about their experiences teaching their children to read. Each parent's own words were used to illuminate their approach to the teaching of reading, their beliefs about reading, and their own personal experience with reading. Using Yin's (2018) approach to multiple case study analysis, key themes from these seven interviews were drawn out of the transcripts to show commonalities among the participants. These themes were individualising reading, facilitating readers, cultivating a culture of reading, and connecting with external communities.

Chapter 6 brought together the mixed methods findings to merge into an explanatory response to the research questions. The research subquestions were answered individually and then synthesised to form an overarching response to the guiding research question. The findings suggested that parental beliefs are a starting point for a parent's home education decisions but that teaching a child to read is a dynamic process, influenced by a broad number of factors.

The current chapter aims to conclude the research by summarising its key findings, and making recommendations regarding its usefulness and future research opportunities.

## **7.2 Overview of the research project**

As highlighted in Section 1.1, this research emerged from both personal and professional experience as a home-educating parent and literacy educator. My dual roles as

an educator both in the home and at a school emphasised a visible lack of clarity about how Australian home-educated children learn to read and the role that home educators play in this process. I recognised that home education in Australia is at an important juncture. The numbers have increased exponentially; Queensland has seen an increase of 200% in the past 5 years alone (Halliday, 2024). Nationwide, home-educating registration numbers are in excess of 40,000 students and now represent more than 1% of the school population (Cassidy, 2023; Halliday, 2024). This has caused parents and decision-makers alike to delve deeper into what modern home education looks like in current-day Australia (English & Gribble, 2021), and it was the intent of this project to contribute meaningfully to this aim. Reading is a key skill (OECD, 2021; Ritchie & Bates, 2013) and a much-discussed learning area in the development of the Australian Curriculum v9.0 (ACARA, 2022; Green, 2022). This emphasises the importance of fully understanding how reading is taught in both mainstream schooling and home education. However, there is limited understanding of how Australian home-educated children learn to read or the role their parents play in this process (Jackson, 2021). The current research contributes original knowledge to this discussion. Building on early years research on the importance of parental beliefs of and attitudes to literacy development (DeBaryshe et al., 2000; Hood et al., 2008; Neumann et al., 2013), this research fills an important gap in current understanding by seeking to understand how home educated parents' beliefs and attitudes influence their children's experience of learning to read.

To do this, it was first determined which methods and resources are utilised when children learn to read, as well as the role of the parent and the beliefs they hold about reading. This was then synthesised to elicit what impact parental beliefs have on the teaching of reading in home education. The research was guided by an overarching research question:

“How do parental beliefs about reading influence the teaching of reading within the home education setting?”

The findings of this research show that parental beliefs provide a starting point for parents’ approach to their child’s reading education, but learning to read is a dynamic process impacted by factors beyond parental beliefs. For example, a parent who highly values structured, systematic learning may begin with formal curriculum and learning to read processes. However, this adapts and changes over time as they become more confident and consider the individual needs of the child and the family unit.

Seven approaches to the teaching of reading used in this research were elicited from the existing literature from the fields of both reading and home education. These were whole language (Goodman, 2005; Johnston & Watson, 2014), synthetic phonics (Johnston et al., 2012), analytic phonics (Gallagher-Mance, 2023), unschooling (Riley, 2018), environmental print (Neumann et al., 2013), reading aloud (Gilmore, 2003), and simple alphabetic phonics (Johnston & Watson, 2014). No other specific methods of reading were identified among participants in this research project; however, the research found that no parent ( $N = 185$ ) solely relied on a single approach. Instead, parents in this study opted for a balanced approach to reading instruction (Rowe, 2006). The research also found that formal approaches to reading tended to be more parent led, structured, and preplanned, while informal approaches encapsulated both spontaneous opportunities for reading and child-initiated reading experiences. It was also noted that resources were both formal and informal, from the formal use of organised curriculum or reading resources, such as books, flash cards, and so on, to informal texts, such as reading street signs or labelling items around the home. A family may use different reading approaches with different children because the needs of each child was considered when facilitating a child learning to read. Thus, parents facilitated a reading

education that accounted for the child's individual needs and used a range of formal and informal resources to support them to learn to read.

When examining what home educators believe about reading, it was found overwhelmingly that parents valued reading, and 100% of home-educating parents wanted their children to love reading. In essence, they believed that children should enjoy reading and be skilled at it. This balance of proficiency and interest reflected the beliefs espoused by the parents interviewed for this study. To support this, most parents facilitated the creation of a strong reading culture within a literature-rich home learning environment, which included multimodal texts and the integration of reading into everyday life as a reflection of their beliefs about reading.

### **7.3 Key findings**

This section presents the key findings drawn together from the mixed methods analysis. A model of reading in home education is also presented as a conceptual summary of the research findings. The four key findings are as follows:

1. Learning to read in home education prioritises the needs of the child.
2. Learning to read is a dynamic process.
3. Home-educating parents function as facilitators of reading.
4. Home-educating parents build a culture of reading.

#### **7.3.1 *Learning to read in home education prioritises the needs of the child***

Regardless of a parent's beliefs about reading, the needs of the child were at the centre of decision-making about learning to read. In general, home-educating parents became experts in their child's needs as a learner. They expressed the need to differentiate curriculum, resources, and methodologies to meet the needs of their individual child (Rothermel, 2011). The parents interviewed also expressed that it was unnecessary to place pressure on children

to learn to read in a predetermined time frame. Instead, home-educated children were allowed to develop at their own pace across time and in their own way (Pattison, 2016; Riley, 2018). Further, meaningful learning experiences were matched to each child, including travel, nature, and special interests. This reinforced existing understandings in the literature about the individualisation of home education (McCabe et al., 2021; Queensland Government & Enhance Research, 2022; Rothermel, 2003)

### **7.3.2 *Learning to read is a dynamic process***

The results of the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews both showed that there was no dominant method or approach to learning to read. Home-educating parents used a balanced approach with a variety of methods and resources to support a child to learn to read. These methods and resources could be formal or informal based on the needs of the child and the beliefs of the parent. This is an example of home-educating parents operating within their child's ZPD and providing the learning experiences necessary at a particular point in time (Smagorinsky, 2011; Vygotsky, 1924–1934/1997). This research shows that learning to read at home is not simply about selecting a curriculum or a reading approach; it is an organic process that is ever evolving based on individual child, family, social, and governmental influences (Jackson, 2008). Parents must consider the needs of the whole family when designing a child's education, including siblings and parent work dynamics. They also factor in their beliefs about reading and learning and the legal obligations of their state or territory. The interplay between stakeholders creates a dynamic approach to reading that evolves over time in response to the needs of the child, parent, family, community, and external stakeholders. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1932–1934/2020) belief that the child's environment forms an integral part of their learning and influences their cognitive and social development. This means learning to read cannot be as simple as selecting a curriculum but

is a reflection of the sociocultural circumstances of each family. Therefore, each CoP is a unique and dynamic influence on a child's journey of learning to read.

### **7.3.3 *Home-educating parents function as facilitators of reading***

This research aimed to find out how parents teach reading to children at home. Instead, it was determined that most home-educating parents see themselves not as teachers of reading but as facilitators. While previous researchers have noted the importance of facilitation (McCabe et al., 2021) and the benefit of facilitation to specific groups of home educators, such as parents of gifted children (Conejeros-Solar & Smith, 2021) or unschoolers (Gray & Riley, 2015; Riley, 2018), this research highlights the importance of facilitation in the learning to read process. This study found that the parents, regardless of how structured or unstructured their educational philosophy, took on the role of facilitator of learning. One parent described it as being an “inviter” of learning by setting up the resources and opportunities to enable a child to learn to read and then following the child's lead. This differs significantly from mainstream education, which focuses heavily on explicit instruction and intensive teaching of reading proficiency in the early years (Gallagher-Mance, 2023; Green, 2022; Queensland Government, 2023b). Parents facilitate reading in home education by providing formal and informal methods and resources, striking a balance between the child's need to gain proficiency in reading and maintaining their interest in and love for reading.

### **7.3.4 *Home-educating parents build a culture of reading***

One hundred percent of parents surveyed wanted their child to love reading. A common theme among survey and interview participants was the desire for their children to enjoy reading, and this was most often accomplished through intentionally establishing a family culture of reading. Parents spoke of the desire to model reading practices and to read regularly with their children. They wanted their children to see reading as both a tool for life

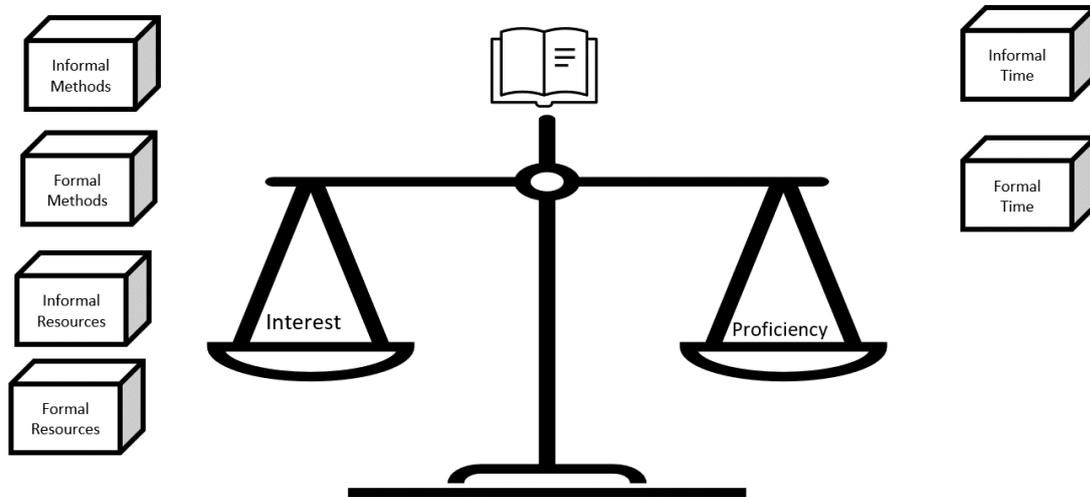
and an instrument of enjoyment. To this end, parents emphasised enjoyment of reading over proficiency, ensuring they provided a plethora of appropriate and engaging reading resources and kept their child engaged in reading, with the goal that this would lead to proficiency in reading skills. As part of family culture, parents provided meaningful opportunities for reading to ensure their children gained functional reading skills for life.

#### **7.4 A conceptualised model from the key findings**

As a summary of the findings in this research, learning to read in home education is conceptualised as a set of scales (Figure 7.1). Home-educating parents balance promoting a love for reading and maintaining their interest in learning to read, while providing them the skills they needed to read proficiently. Three key areas were identified as the building blocks of parental facilitation: time, resources, and reading methods. Each parent stacks the “scales” with building blocks of informal or formal time, informal or formal resources, and informal or formal methods of learning to read. These building blocks form a home-educated child’s reading education. Some parents focus more heavily on the affective parts of reading or on the skill-building areas, but this is determined by the individual needs of the child and the family as a whole.

**Figure 7.1**

*Facilitating Readers: A Model of Learning to Read in Home Education*



As stated in the conceptual framework of this study, Neuman and Guterman (2017) presented a theory of home education as a spectrum, ranging from unstructured to structured processes and from structured to unstructured content. While this encapsulates broad approaches to home education philosophy, this study found that to fully present a model of reading education, a more precise explanation of the building blocks of learning to read was needed; “content” and “processes” alone do not adequately relay how a child learns to read in home education.

At the most basic level, the content of learning to read is the ability to decode language and comprehend meaning (Konza, 2014; Westerveld et al., 2020). To learn this, home educators use a variety of methods or approaches (such as synthetic phonics, whole language, and unschooling). Facilitating this would also include the use of resources that support a child learning to reading (such as workbooks, environmental print, ebooks, novels). The processes of learning to read also encapsulates the type of method or approach chosen (e.g., the learning experiences aligned to synthetic phonics or unschooling) and the way in which

resources are used by families (e.g., playing games, reading aloud). This shows that while the structured and unstructured model (Neuman & Guterman, 2017) is useful for understanding the philosophy underpinning choices in home education, it is less so for providing a practical picture of how home-educating parents teach children to read.

Instead, three key areas expressed by parents in this research were identified, which contribute to building a reading education. These are methods, resources, and time. Methods have been well covered by mainstream research on the variety of ways children can learn to read: whole language (Goodman, 2005; Johnston & Watson, 2014), synthetic phonics (Johnston et al., 2012), analytic phonics (Gallagher-Mance, 2023), unschooling (Riley, 2018), environmental print (Neumann et al., 2013), reading aloud (Gilmore, 2003), and simple alphabetic phonics (Johnston & Watson, 2014). Home-educating parents stack a variety of these methods onto their scales. They also use a wide range of resources to facilitate reading, as demonstrated by the Phase 1 survey. A third area identified as important is time.

Research has established that the time a child spends reading increases reading ability and academic achievement (OECD, 2002; Renaissance Learning, 2015). In fact, the literature shows that finding enough time for the teaching of reading and reading for enjoyment is a challenge for mainstream educators (Green, 2022; Thomson, 2018). The building blocks of time in home education include the time the parent spends reading to child, the time the child reads aloud, independent reading, sibling reading, and the adult's role in modelling reading.

Each of the building blocks of learning to read can be achieved formally or informally. Formal learning is structured and most often includes a systematic approach to learning (Johnson & Majewska, 2022). Children are aware that there is a purpose to the activities they are engaged in because the learning is planned and intentional. In contrast, informal learning is not planned and relies on the learner's intrinsic motivation. It is not adult led and often

includes learning through doing (Johnson & Majewska, 2022). Additionally, the child may not even realise they are learning to read as a result of informal learning. Latchem (2014) found that 70% to 90% of lifelong learning can be categorised as informal learning. Folkestad (2006) synthesised the literature to outline four areas that determine whether learning is formal or informal: the situation (where learning takes place), the learning style, ownership (who owns the learning), and intentionality.

Formal methods, resources, and time are scheduled and planned, but more importantly, the child is aware that there is a goal of reading as part of the learning. Johnson and Majewska (2022) delineated that formal learning has clearly articulated goals and learning intentions for specific educational experiences, whereas informal learning does not. Parents in this study had clearly articulated goals for their children's reading, and this intentionality was present whether a parent was using environmental print or doing synthetic phonics. Conversely, informal methods, resources, and time are those that occur as part of everyday life and may form part of family rhythms or incidental experiences. Parents may facilitate this by providing opportunities or access to resources, but they are not leading or structuring the learning. This may look like a family boardgame night, reading signs on a family outing, or reading a book in the waiting room of the dentist.

As a facilitator of reading education, a parent's job is to place the blocks on the scale in a way that reflects the needs of the child. This is a dynamic process that considers the child's needs (such as the level of their reading proficiency or the types of texts they are interested in), as well as the family's needs and parental beliefs. It will change over time as the child's needs as a learner change. The facilitator of reading must also balance whether proficiency of reading or interest in reading takes priority. This is why this model is conceptualised as a scale. Parents may stack more "blocks" on the interest side to keep a child engaged, while still

developing skill. Alternatively, a parent with a voracious reader may stack more blocks on the proficiency side to help a child's skill catch up to their interest.

## **7.5 Limitations**

Limitations of this study are outlined for consideration in this section. While this research study utilised mixed methods to give breadth and depth to the understanding of reading in the home-educating community, it is acknowledged that each individual family is a unique CoP, and therefore, any transfer of the study's findings should be done so cautiously.

Both the survey and interviews relied on self-reporting for data collection. It is impossible to verify the identity of participants, and the data rely on the truthfulness and integrity of participants (Cohen, 2017). The representativeness of the participants is unknown due to the unquantifiable population of home educators in a country where an unknown number of them are unregistered with their state or territory (English, 2019; Slater et al., 2020). The survey participants were not asked to disclose whether they were registered or unregistered in the hope that this would not deter participation. The analysis of respondent data in Phase 1 indicated that the proportion of responses from each state and territory roughly mirrored the percentage of registered home educators across Australia. This is a positive sign that the survey was taken up by a wide representation across the country.

As the researcher, I am currently a registered home-educating parent, and I hoped that this would engender trust and encourage participation of home educators, who can sometimes be wary of external stakeholders due to past negative experiences (Jackson, 2015). To avoid interviewer bias, I used a semistructured interview process where all participants were asked the same key questions.

The PRBI (DeBaryshe & Binder, 1994) is an older tool created in 1994 and its applicability to modern forms of reading, including digital literacies, has not been established.

However, it has been used and its reliability confirmed by multiple researchers (Boomstra et al., 2013; Gonzalez et al., 2013; Mathieu et al., 2020) This tool was initially designed for early childhood and was adapted to suit the needs of home education research by selecting only four subscales to be used. The HERP survey tool was newly designed for this research. Future research may benefit from determining the validity and reliability of this tool.

Despite the limitations, the findings of this research make a significant contribution to the field of home education research. For the first time, a clear Australia-wide understanding has been elicited of how home-educated children learn to read and the influence of parents in this process.

## **7.6 Implications of the research**

The research findings have been synthesised into four realms that the research impacts upon: home educators, home education support networks, education regulators, and mainstream education.

### **7.6.1 *Implications for home educators***

This research reflects the diverse needs of home-educated children and the varied ways parents meet their educational needs in the area of reading. It provides a springboard from which home educators can understand their approach to reading and draw on it as a resource to understand and enhance their practices.

This research highlights that home-educating parents function as facilitators of reading. There is no one template or method that best suits every home-educating family, as advocated by the underpinning conceptual framework and reinforced by the findings of this research. Some parents in this study indicated a lack of confidence at the beginning of their journey, particularly if they were an “accidental” home educator (Coulter, 2020; English, 2021). The findings indicate that when devising an approach to reading, a home educator

should first consider the child and their unique learning needs, then the needs of the parent and family, to determine the best approach.

Parents can also be reassured that they will change over time (Rothermel, 2011). The decisions they make at the beginning of their educational journey are not permanent and can be changed according to the needs of the child and family unit.

### **7.6.2 Implications for home education support networks**

This study provides a comprehensive insight into the breadth of approaches Australian home educators take to reading education. The findings of this research will help home education support networks better understand how to provide individualised guidance and support to families. In particular, recognising that home-educating parents use a balanced approach to reading in terms of methods and resources may help networks provide better support to families and advocate for the needs of home educators with external agencies.

The presented model (Figure 7.1) also provides a visual resource to help support parents in understanding how to plan and balance an effective home education reading approach. It caters for all educational philosophies (from unstructured to structured) and approaches (formal and informal). It emphasises the interplay of proficiency and interest, which home educators expressed is important in helping home-educated children not only learn to read, but love doing so.

### **7.6.3 Implications for education regulators**

This research reinforces the key tenet that home education is a distinct paradigm of education and is not “school at home” (Barratt-Peacock, 2003). It also supports the view that families form a CoP through which children learn. This means that any approach to regulating home education must also consider the role of the parent in knowing the unique needs of the child and selecting an approach that best supports them to learn to read. This research

indicates that home-educating parents value reading as a key pillar of learning, with 99% of surveyed parents placing a high value on the importance of reading.

The findings also show that home-educating families individualise learning to meet the needs of the individual child. This has implications for regulators when designing legislation in terms of expectations about progress, age-based reading goals, and reporting or monitoring. In line with the current understandings of home education (Barratt-Peacock, 2003), families require a home education approach that is flexible and specific to the needs of the child. The Facilitating Readers: A Model of Learning to Read in Home Education (Figure 7.1) helps visualise this process for regulators and those outside the home education community.

#### **7.6.4 Implications for mainstream education**

While it is important to acknowledge that home education presents a different paradigm of education to mainstream education (Barratt-Peacock, 2003), the insight from this research yields valuable understandings for educators in general. First, mainstream policies targeted to improve reading (Rowe, 2006), as well as to close the gap (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020), aim to see every student succeed, and this research shows that a balanced approach to reading, which considers the individual needs of learners, is paramount to creating a healthy balance between proficiency and interest in reading. Second, there is concern in mainstream schools about students who are “left behind” and fail to read by Year 4, either due to cumulative disadvantage, such as the Matthew effect (Stanovich, 2009), or due to being a “late reader” (Leahy & Fitzpatrick, 2017; Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004). Home-educating parents in this study did not express the same concerns, as their children were not viewed as failures but as progressing on their own timelines in accordance with skill and interest. While not within the scope of this research to provide a reason for this difference, the implication for mainstream educators that there may be another way to approach the

“learning to read” timeline and the systemic disadvantages of a failure to read at an early age challenges current conceptions in mainstream education.

## **7.7 Recommendations**

This thesis presents an understanding of how Australian home educators facilitate reading and the role played by parental beliefs in this process, combined with the needs of the child. This provides a strong starting point to better understand the needs of home-educated children when learning to read and the outcomes from these approaches.

### **7.7.1 Recommendations for future research**

This research comprehensively presents the parental view of reading in home education. It is recommended that a student perspective also be sought. This would add another dimension to the working model from this study’s findings to expand on the home-educated child’s experience of learning to read and how the placement of metaphorical blocks (time, resources, and methods) on the scales impacts a student’s reading education and their desire to read.

Reading for enjoyment is another pivotal area that emerged from this study as a point for future research. All 185 parents surveyed wanted their children to love reading, and all seven Phase 2 interviewees prioritised their child’s enjoyment of reading. Eliciting the student viewpoint about reading for enjoyment would provide further data about how to help children become competent readers who also love to read, for life.

In addition, Australian data about late readers would be invaluable to research. Conventional literature advocates that mainstream students who fail to learn to read by Year 4 are statistically disadvantaged (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2008; Stockard, 2010). However, the parents who were interviewed in Phase 2 indicated that each child was on their own timeline and that later readers caught up to their peers and siblings. Overseas research has also

theorised that home-educated children who learn to read later than Year 4 do not experience the same disadvantage as their mainstream peers (Keys & Crain, 2009; Riley, 2018; Thomas & Pattison, 2007). However, no research has been conducted on this topic within Australia (Jackson, 2021). Further research is recommended to establish the outcomes for late readers in Australia and the mechanisms by which this advantage or disadvantage occurs.

### **7.7.2 Recommendations for application of the model**

Facilitating Readers: A Model of Learning to Read in Home Education (Figure 7.1) provides a practical tool for home-educating parents to plan their approach to teaching reading. It can be used as a teaching model and a guide for new home-educating parents who are overwhelmed by teaching reading or who are trying to devise an approach best suited to their child. The model also helps regulators of home education better understand how home educators teach reading and the ways to approach learning to read, recognising the variety of approaches home educators may successfully take in reading education.

Regulators should consider the flexibility that is inherent to home education that allows a stronger and more targeted learning environment for children. Understanding CoPs is inherent to understanding how home-educated children learn and, thus, how regulations for home education can best support the needs of home-educated children.

## **7.8 Conclusion**

Home-educated children represent 1% of the schooling population of Australia—a figure that is rising. This dramatic growth highlights the importance of understanding this unique paradigm of learning. Reading is one of the most important skills that humans acquire (OECD, 2021), and this research presents a clear image of the variety of ways home-educated children learn to read. Through an understanding of the complex and diverse paradigm of home education and the theoretical framework of sociocultural theory, the facilitation of

readers model has emerged as a snapshot of how home-educated children learn to read. Furthermore, it serves as an important guide and learning tool for the home education community.

This research stepped inside the world of home education, and while acknowledging the uniqueness of families as CoPs, it developed a clear perspective on home reading education to add to the literature. The impetus for this research was the lack of clarity as a home educator of the ways to teach my child to read, and I believe this research helped provide resolution to my quest. Above all else, home-educating parents value the individual needs of the child and facilitate the best ways for their child to learn to read through a balance of methods and a variety of approaches. This research highlights that for me, as a home educator, the enjoyment of reading matters and should not be sacrificed while proficiency is acquired. As Myrtle eloquently surmised, "Reading is a tool both for utility and for loveliness." This is a balance well captured by home educators in this research.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Phase 1 reading survey

### Survey Questions

#### Screening questions

Home education is a type of schooling where a child is educated at home by their parent or caregiver. This survey seeks responses from parents whose children are not enrolled in mainstream schooling and who choose to home educate (not families doing remote learning due to lockdown).

#### **Which best represents your situation?**

I currently home educate (homeschool) with or without registration

I currently home educate through distance education

My child is enrolled at a face-to-face school, but is learning at home because of lockdown - **screens survey participant out.**

I do not currently home educate - **screens survey participant out.**

#### **Which best represents your situation?**

I live in Australia

I do not live in Australia - **screens survey participant out.**

#### **Which best represents your role?**

I am the main educator for a child

I am the secondary educator for home educating a child (I help, but don't do most of the educating)

I am not responsible for home educating my child (another caregiver/person is) - **screens survey participant out.**

**How many years have you home educated for? \_\_\_\_\_ years \_\_\_\_\_ months**

**How many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_**

**What ages are your children? \_\_\_\_\_**

#### **Which answer best reflects your current circumstances in regards to teaching reading to a child?**

I am currently teaching a child to read

I have previously taught a child to read

I allow (or have previously allowed) my child to learn to read without my help

**I have not taught a child to read**

**Screens survey participant out**

Section 1 – PRBI (Parental Reading Beliefs Inventory)

For the remaining questions, please complete this survey about the youngest child you are currently teaching to read or the child you most recently taught to read.

**Teaching Efficacy** – partial questions

PB1 As a parent, I play an important role in my child’s development.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB3 My child learns many important things from me.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB5 I am my child’s most important teacher.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB7 Parents need to be involved in their children’s education.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

**Positive Affect**

PB10 I find it boring or difficult to read to my child.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB11 I enjoy reading with my child.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB12 I have good memories of being read to when I was a child.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB13 Reading with my child is a special time that we love to share.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB14 My child does not like to be read to.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB15 I feel warm and close to my child when we read.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB16 I have to scold or discipline my child when we try to read.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB17 I want my child to love books.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB18 I don’t read to my child because they won’t sit still.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB19 I read to my child whenever they want.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB20 When we read I try to sound excited so my child stays interested.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

**Verbal Participation**

PB20 When we read I try to sound excited so my child stays interested.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB21 Children learn new words, colours, names, etc., from books.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

B22 Reading helps children be better talkers and better listeners.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB23 My child knows the names of many things they have seen in books.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB24 When we read, I want my child to help me tell the story.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB25 I ask my child a lot of questions when we read.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB26 When we read, I want my child to ask questions about the book.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB27 When we read we talk about the pictures as much as we read the story.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

**Reading Instruction**

PB28 I read with my child so they will learn the letters and how to read simple words.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB29 Parents should teach children how to read before they start school.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB30 My child is too young to learn about reading.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

PB31 When we read, I have my child point out different letters or numbers that are printed in the book.  
strongly disagree      disagree      agree      strongly agree

**Section 2: Home Education Reading Practices**

This next section refers to your “youngest home educated child.” This may not be the youngest child in your home, but rather the youngest child that you have taught to read or that you are currently

teaching to read. This collects the most recent approach you have taken in teaching your child to read.

**HE1 In your own words, please describe how you teach/taught your youngest home educated child to read.**

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**HE2 Which reading approach do you use most often?** (select only one)

I teach my child the 26 sounds of the alphabet.

I use a phonics system to learn the 44 sounds of the alphabet.

I teach my child whole words and we work out the phonics patterns in those words.

We read simple books and/or learn sight words.

My child learns to read from the environment in our home (posters on the wall, catalogues, playing games).

The only planned reading instruction I do is reading to my child. (We read aloud).

I do not plan any activities or curriculum to teach my child to read OR My child will learn to read on their own.

**HE3 Which other reading approaches do you use in addition to your main method?** (tick all that apply)

I teach my child the 26 sounds of the alphabet.

I use a phonics system to learn the 44 sounds of the alphabet.

I teach my child whole words and we work out the phonics patterns in those words.

We read simple books and/or learn sight words.

My child learns to read from the environment in our home (posters on the wall, catalogues, playing games).

The only planned reading instruction I do is reading to my child. (We read aloud).

I do not plan any activities or curriculum to teach my child to read OR My child will learn to read on their own.

**HE4 How often do you typically read aloud to your youngest home educated child?**

Not at all

Once per week

2-3 days per week

4-5 days per week

7 days per week/ Daily

**HE5 On a typical home educating day, how many minutes do you spend reading aloud to your youngest home educated child? \_\_\_\_\_**

**HE6 In a typical home educating week, how often does your youngest home educated child read to you?**

Not at all

Once per week

2-3 days per week

4-5 days per week

7 days per week/ Daily

**HE7 Which statement best describes your approach to home educating your youngest home educated child? (select only one)**

I purchase commercial curriculum to use with my child

I use living literature/books to help my children learn

I don't use formal curriculum, but instead let my children decide what they will learn (unschooling)

I plan/create units of study around one theme/idea

I use a variety of curriculum and approaches to best fit my child

I follow a distance education program that is chosen for me

I follow a distance education program that is individualised for my child

None of these

**HE8 Which resources do you use to teach your youngest home educated child?** (select all that apply)

Sight word cards

Alphabet cards or charts

Games

Simple reading books (such as PM readers or phonics books)

Novels for reading aloud (by parent)

Novels for child to read

IPad Apps

Kindle/ebooks

Hands-on materials (wooden letters, salt trays, playdo etc.)

Purchased phonics or reading workbooks

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**What impact (if any) has Covid-19 had on home education in your family?**

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**Demographic information**

Thank you for sharing your views on reading in home education. Please complete these final demographic questions.

What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

Prefer not to say

Under 25

25-34

35-44

45-54

55-64

65+

What is your gender?

Male

Female

Non-binary

Prefer not to say

Which best describes your highest level of education?

Year 10

Year 11

Year 12

TAFE

Trade Qualification

Undergraduate at University

Post graduate at University

What is your total combined family income, before tax, for the previous financial year?

Less than \$49,999

50,000 to 74,999

75,000 to 99,999

100,000 to 124,999

125,000 to 149,999

150,000 to 199,999

Over \$200,000

Prefer not to say

What best describes your current employment status?

Home duties/not in paid employment

Working part time

Working full time

Casual work

Retired

Student

Which state/territory do you live in?

Queensland

New South Wales

Victoria

Tasmania

Northern Territory

Australian Capital Territory

South Australia

Western Australia

## Appendix B: Phase 1 interview questions

1. Tell me about yourself and your family.
2. Why do you home educate?
3. How would you describe yourself as a home educator?
4. What does learning to read look like in your home? Why do you approach learning to read this way?
5. What do you believe about learning to read?
6. Can you describe a reading experience you have had with your child recently?
7. What is your ultimate goal when it comes to reading in your child's education?
8. What was your experience of learning to read like as a child?
9. Tell me about your experience with reading now. Do you read regularly?
10. Do you love reading?
11. If you could give any advice to a new parent taking on educating their child at home, what would you tell them?
12. If you compared your family's home education to a book, which book would you choose?

*Thank you for your time and willingness to share. It has been a pleasure learning about your home education journey.*

*Would you like to select a pseudonym for yourself?*