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I, Sara E Gusler, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies.

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Mothers' Experiences of the Pandemic and the Home Literacy Environment of Preschool-Aged Children: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study

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Mothers' Experiences of the Pandemic and the Home Literacy

Environment of Preschool-Aged Children:

An Interpretative Phenomenological Study

A dissertation submitted to the

Graduate College

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Doctor of Philosophy

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by

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Abstract

While much attention has been focused on the benefits of the home literacy environment to young children's literacy development and the importance of the mother-child interactions within this space prior to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in January 2020 (Neuman et al., 2018; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014), little research has been conducted on the impact of the pandemic on the role of working mothers in the home literacy environment. This dissertation presents an interpretative phenomenological analysis exploring how working mothers of preschool-aged children describe the pandemic's impact on their role in the home literacy environment and how family literacy experiences change during the pandemic in this context. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, videorecording, field notes, and journaling. The analysis resulted in five superordinate themes, including: working mothers' roles in the home literacy environment, barriers to their role fulfillment, their focus on both time and development in their family literacy practices, beliefs about and influences of family literacy practices, and the interactions and materials that comprised their experiences with their children in the home literacy environment in the pandemic context. Recommendations are made for future research focusing on the connection between role and practice in the home literacy environment, the exploration of the impact of practices with others in the home beyond mothers, technology as a literacy practice, and the optimal frequency of engagement in literacy practices.

Keywords: home, literacy, environment, family, practices, working mothers, phenomenology

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my God, my family, and my friends. My faith has given me the purpose and the strength to see this through. To my husband, Matthew: you have been and continue to be my best friend and number one cheerleader, frequently reminding me that I could do this even when I felt like I couldn't. You also had to sacrifice time to make this a possibility for me and for that, and for your love, I am eternally grateful. To my son, Ezra: your first year of life has coincided with this writing. You bring me joy every day – your smile and laugh light up my world. I wanted to finish this work so that you know that in anything you do, if you have faith and determination, you will get there, inch by inch. To my mother, Jo Anne, who always encouraged me to be a lifelong learner and to always be able to support myself and my family, and who modeled this advice through her pursuit of education and a new career in teaching when I was in elementary school. To my brother, Michael, who lovingly teased me to uplift my spirits and whose tireless pursuit of his own dreams is an inspiration. To Matthew's parents, Lisa and Tim, who always checked in on my progress and have cheered me to the finish line. To Grandma Gusler, whose excitement, prayers, and reassurance were appreciated throughout this process. To all my extended family and close friends who have cheered me, supported me, and listened. Finally, to my father, Randy Kelly. You were the first of your family to attend college and your work in school and your career helped to pave the way for me. I carried your joy, love, and strength of spirit in my heart for this journey and in every other I will take in this life. Your unwavering faith and love for others will always inspire me. To all of you: I love you and would not be here today without you.

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Introduction

In December of 2019, some individuals in the city of Wuhan, China began to show symptoms of a respiratory disease that did not respond well to standard treatments. In early January 2020, public health officials in China discovered that the disease was a novel coronavirus, later named COVID-19. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the United States was detected later that month on January 20, 2020. By March 11, 2020, COVID -19 had spread to 114 countries and had caused 4,291 deaths worldwide, triggering the World Health Organization to formally declare COVID-19 a pandemic (Centers for Disease Control, 2023). As shutdown orders occurred across the United States, a "Stay at Home" order was issued in the state of Ohio beginning on March 23, 2020 (Centers for Disease Control, 2020). In Ohio and in many other states across the nation, businesses were shut down, public schools were closed, and daycares were only open if they were operating under a special pandemic license (Centers for Disease Control, 2021; Governor of Ohio, 2020).

The wake of the 2020 pandemic brought many changes and stresses to the lives of working parents of preschool-aged children in the United States (Zero to Three, 2020). Due to the shutdowns, numerous working parents were staying home with their children or having their work interrupted (Collins et al., 2020, Zero to Three, 2020). Of the parents who were working from home, women's work was found to be more greatly impacted than men's work. Women reported greater shares of housework and child care in the home and greater reductions in work hours overall, particularly women with young children (Collins et al., 2020; Dunatchik et al., 2021). With schools and workplaces closed, many working mothers reported helping their children learn while they were home (Hertz et al., 2021; Zanhour & Sumpter, 2022).

Before the pandemic, much research supported that home literacy environments uniquely impacted young children's literacy development (Neuman et al., 2018; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014). Both informal and formal interactions with parents and caregivers have been found to be related to children's literacy outcomes including children's expressive and receptive language development, reading, and writing (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014). What had yet to be explored was the impact of the pandemic on working mothers and their families within this space.

This qualitative investigation was specific to working mothers of preschool-aged children and was focused on mothers' lived experiences in the home literacy environment through the COVID-19 pandemic. This interpretative phenomenological research provides educators and researchers with an increased understanding of working mothers' lived experiences in the pandemic context so that they can support working mothers and their families more effectively within the home literacy environment.

Philosophical Foundation

Phenomenology was founded in the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) who believed that experience is best explored in the natural way it occurs without psychoanalysis or looking for cause and effect relationships (Husserl, 2017/1931; Larsen & Adu, 2022; Smith et al., 2009). Husserl believed that going back to the experience of our particular perceptions can enable us to understand the essence of an experience more fully as perception is intentional and therefore related to the content of consciousness (Husserl, 2017/1931; Larsen & Adu, 2022; Smith et al., 2009). Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger followed in his phenomenological footsteps but brought their own ideas that contribute to the diverse landscape of phenomenological philosophy (Larsen & Adu, 2022). A discussion of Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Paul Sartre, and

Martin Heidegger's contributions to the philosophy of phenomenology are discussed below, as theirs are the ideas that guide Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (or IPA), the chosen phenomenological method for this study. Each section finishes with examples of how the philosophical beliefs of phenomenology are applied within phenomenological research.

Husserl and Merleau-Ponty

Husserl defined his transcendental phenomenology as "a science of essential being; a science which aims exclusively at establishing 'knowledge of essences'" (Husserl, 2017/1931, p. 44). Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is considered to be an "epistemology of subjectivity" as he was mainly concerned with how cognition is possible (Larsen & Adu, 2022, p. 2). He was interested in consciousness and wanted to "access the pure intentionality of consciousness" (Larsen & Adu, 2022, p. 11). Husserl argued that this access was granted through epoché and phenomenological reduction (Husserl, 2017/1931; Larsen & Adu, 2022). Epoché is the suspension of judgement or the natural attitude of how one uses cause and effect in the process of sense-making, whereas phenomenological reduction involves avoiding psychoanalysis of experience through the process of bracketing (Husserl, 2017/1931; Larsen & Adu, 2022; Smith et al., 2009). Husserl juxtaposed his transcendental phenomenology with psychology, which focused on cognition rather than consciousness, and from a behaviorist perspective, which focused on perception only as it related to causality rather than intentionality (Larsen & Adu, 2022).

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological work was closely related to Husserl's, but his phenomenology was one of embodied consciousness, as he believed that the mind and body were not distinct from one another but intertwined (Larsen & Adu, 2022). He believed that the meaning of experiences was found through the analysis of perceptions. Merleau-Ponty's

phenomenology was also transcendental in that his analysis resulted in "an idealized body" (Larsen & Adu, 2022, p. 17).

In applying Husserl's philosophical principles to social science research, no theoretical frameworks should be used with phenomenology, as the use of a framework would not allow one to remove themselves from the situation being studied to truly discover the essence of an experience (Husserl, 2017/1931; Peoples, 2021). Bracketing is essential when engaging in phenomenological work in order to suspend one's own thoughts and attempt to remove oneself from the experience of focus (Husserl, 2017/1931; Peoples, 2021). Bracketing is the attempt to set aside preconceptions, either through writing them down in a journal throughout the research process or through intentionally reflecting upon your own thinking to suspend biases (Peoples, 2021).

Heidegger and Sartre

Husserl's student, Martin Heidegger, diverted from Husserl's focus on consciousness and instead focused on being (Heidegger, 1962/1927). Heidegger's phenomenology is considered to be both existential and hermeneutic phenomenology and is an "ontology of how being is to be understood" (Larsen & Adu, 2022, p. 2; Peoples, 2021). Heidegger posited that the phenomenon of focus was Dasein, literally translated as "there-being" (Heidegger, 1962/1927, p. 27; Smith et al., 2009). Dasein is comprised of the factual self, the "they-self", and the "authentic self" (Heidegger, 1962/1927, p. 167; Larsen & Adu, 2022). The "they-self" are the societal norms that people have assumed, which Heidegger argued conceals the authentic being (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Larsen & Adu, 2022). The ontological interpretation lies in trying to expose the authentic self. The necessity for interpretation in this process is where hermeneutics entered Heidegger's phenomenology; he saw the language a person uses as the disclosure of what their

being was being drawn to, and this language was therefore able to be interpreted like a text (Larsen & Adu, 2022).

Jean Paul Sartre also focused on existential phenomenology and built on Heidegger's work by focusing on the development of being as well as the significance of nothingness (Sartre, 2018/1943). In contrast to being, which involves context and relationship to others, nothingness is the absence of being and can also influence meaning. Sartre placed emphasis on the presence and absence of others and how they shape our experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

In the application of existential and hermeneutic phenomenology to research, Heidegger disagreed with Husserl's notion of bracketing and argued that one cannot remove themselves from the experience being studied, as every person brings their own foresight to the study of experience (Heidegger, 1962/1927). In lieu of bracketing, preconceptions are acknowledged and made explicit in the research process (Peoples, 2021). Heidegger's phenomenology in the uncovering of Dasein requires interpretation (Larsen & Adu, 2022; Smith et al, 2009). This interpretation is often enacted in research through the analysis of participant language and, in the case of IPA, in the interpretation of the participants' interpretations (Peoples, 2021; Smith et al., 2009).

Summary

Phenomenology is based in the work of two main philosophers: Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Husserl, 2017/1931). Husserl was focused on the meaning of thinking, whereas Heidegger was focused on the meaning of being (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Husserl, 2017/1931; Larsen & Adu, 2022).

My interpretative phenomenological research was influenced by the works of these philosophers on which IPA is based (Smith et al., 2009). The theoretical framework for all

phenomenological studies is phenomenology (Peoples, 2021). As the nature of my research question relates to the meaning of being, rather than the intentionality of consciousness (Larsen & Adu, 2022), and due to my belief that I am not able to remove myself from the essence of the experience being studied (Peoples, 2021), Heidegger's existential/hermeneutic phenomenology was selected as the theoretical framework for this study.

Theoretical Framework

For this qualitative, phenomenological study, the theoretical framework was hermeneutic phenomenology (Peoples, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation of texts and focuses on how meaning is derived through interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutic phenomenology considers interpretation a process of constant revision, which is expressed in the hermeneutic circle (Peoples, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). The hermeneutic circle is how Heidegger determined the essence of the phenomenon at hand (Dasein), as it involves a process of revision with the whole informing the part and the part informing the whole (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Peoples, 2021; Smith et al., 2009).

A key distinction of hermeneutic phenomenology over other forms of phenomenology is the belief that bracketing, or the removal of oneself from the research, is not possible (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger (1962/1927, p. 27) argued that we are "Dasein," a term he used to describe the unique contextual nature of human beings as always part of the world. Therefore, we constantly have "fore-sight," or preconceived knowledge, that we always bring with us as we engage in interpreting the surrounding world (Heidegger, 1962/1927, p. 191). Some scholars argue for the preconceptions to be acknowledged as part of the hermeneutic circle (Peoples, 2021), while others argue that epoché and phenomenological reduction still exist and must be present within Heideggerian phenomenology but are found in focusing on subjects' ways of

being and in Heidegger's view of temporality (Larsen & Adu, 2022). As this study was focused on working mothers' ways of being and focused on being from the viewpoint of temporality, as well as explicitly acknowledging preconceptions, the nature of the research aligned with both viewpoints.

Fore-sight

I brought to this research my experiences as a teacher and as someone who was also currently living through the COVID-19 pandemic. My fore-sight included my experiences as a preschool teacher working with families in the spring of 2020 and the challenges some of the families were facing that were either exacerbated, or newly created, by the pandemic (Heidegger, 1962/1927). I knew mothers with preexisting medical conditions who were sole providers that were afraid to go to work. I talked with parents in households where both parents needed to work and who were struggling to provide care for their children.

As someone who was also living in the time of the pandemic, I also brought the knowledge of my friends and family who had struggled during this time, who had lost jobs, become ill, and died. I had the fore-sight of my own responses – a necessity to push forward and continue to live while still maintaining an appropriate level of caution to protect myself and those I loved. The nature of Dasein is that these versions of myself, and others which were yet be revealed, were brought with me to the pursuit of this research study (Heidegger, 1962/1927).

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Study Purpose

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This section addresses the problem that was the catalyst for this interpretative phenomenological investigation, the purpose of this study, and the significance of this study to the field of early childhood literacy. This study was conducted with permissions from the University of Cincinnati's Institutional Review Board under IRB 2020-1154 (see Appendix A).

Statement of the Problem and Aims of Research

At the time of the study, parents of preschool-aged children in the United States were experiencing shifts in schooling in the wake of the pandemic that impacted their home environments (Centers for Disease Control, 2020; Misirli & Ergulec, 2021; Zero to Three, 2020). Many families experienced a change in the amount or quality of schooling and experts were concerned that these changes might impact children's academic and social learning (Centers for Disease Control, 2020; Misirli & Ergulec, 2021). While all parents had been impacted by the changes in schooling, studies demonstrated that women's work was disproportionately impacted (Clark et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020).

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to address this problem by exploring how working mothers of preschool-aged children describe the pandemic's impact on their role in the home literacy environment and to explore how family literacy experiences changed in the context of the pandemic.

Significance of Study

Interviews provide profound insights into a person's experience (Smith et al., 2009); thus, an investigation using phenomenological methods is best to explore the specific issues of working mothers who experienced the impact of the pandemic on their home literacy environments. Through the documentation of the experiences of these mothers, this interpretative phenomenological study provides direction for the types of supports that schools, and others who support the families of young children, can provide families during crises. The documentation of working mother's experiences also illuminates the roles of mothers in the home literacy environment, the impact on family literacy practices, and the effects of limited access to early care and education within this context.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation study is organized into five chapters: 1) Introduction, 2) Literature Review, 3) Methodology, 4) Findings, and 5) Discussion. The first chapter is an introduction to the problem that was the catalyst for this study and to the philosophy of phenomenology. The second chapter is a review of the literature situating the study within the contexts of home literacy environments, relevant historical events, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The third chapter describes the methods used to carry out the IPA study, including a detailed account of the participants, the data collection, and the data analysis. The fourth chapter presents the study findings, acting as a stage for the participants' accounts. The fifth chapter discusses these findings in conversation with the literature on home literacy environments, the COVID-19 pandemic, and through the lens of hermeneutic phenomenology.

Definitions of Key Terms

The following terms are defined as they are used in this study.

COVID-19 is:

> a respiratory disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, a coronavirus discovered in 2019. The virus spreads mainly from person to person through respiratory droplets and small particles produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks. The virus spreads readily in crowded or poorly ventilated indoor settings. Illness can range from mild to severe, though not everyone infected with the virus develops symptoms. (Centers for Disease Control, 2022, para 1)

Dasein is a term Heidegger used to described human being, translated as "there-being," and is the phenomenon of focus for Heidegger's phenomenology (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Larsen & Adu, 2022; Smith et al., 2009).

Disciplinary Literacy differs from the "traditional" notion of literacy in that it includes not just reading and writing, but rather "the distinct ways of knowing, doing, and communicating used by scientists, historians, literary critics, and other disciplinary experts" (Siffrinn & Lew, 2018, p. 326).

Environmental Print describes print in the environment outside of books, magazines, or digital media, such letters on labels or signs, or interacting with recipes (Liebeskind et al., 2014; Schick & Melzi, 2016).

Family Literacy Practices include both the practice of discrete literacy skills (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014) and the transmission of values and beliefs about literacy (Taylor, 1998/1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

Home Literacy Environments are considered in this study to be the environment or environments where children live with their families and engage in literacy practices together (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014).

*Pandemic "*refers to an epidemic that has spread over several countries or continents, usually affecting a large number of people" (Centers for Disease Control, 2012, para. 3).

Preconception is also called "fore-conception" by Heidegger and involves the prior knowledge, assumptions, and experiences that a researcher brings with them to the process of interpretation of being (Heidegger, 1962/1927, p. 191; Peoples, 2021; Smith et al., 2009).

Visual literacy is "the process of generating meanings in transaction with multimodal ensembles, including written text, visual images, and design elements, from a variety of perspectives to meet the requirements of particular social contexts" (Serafini, 2013, p. 23).

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Research demonstrates the significant role the home literacy environment plays in young children's learning and development (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic caused changes in both the home and school environments (Centers for Disease Control, 2020; Zero to Three, 2020). This review explores what benefits home literacy environments afford young children who are culturally diverse as well as synthesize the research surrounding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on families with young children.

The Home Literacy Environment

Home literacy environments are the environment(s) where children live with their families and engage in literacy practices together (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014). The research on home literacy environments (HLEs) and their impact on literacy learning in early childhood is extensive (Bojczyk et al., 2015, 2019; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). This review synthesizes the research on environmental factors that are evidenced as part of a quality home literacy environment for young children in culturally diverse homes. The review first explores the impact of literacy materials, literacy activities, and parental characteristics, then concludes with a discussion of family literacy practices. The research regarding home literacy environments is mainly quantitative, while the research regarding family literacy practices is primarily qualitative in nature. Both areas of research make an important contribution to the understanding of children's literacy development within the familial context.

Literacy Materials in the HLE

The literacy materials that parents and caregivers provide young children influence their literacy development (Harvey, 2016; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; van Bergen et al., 2017). Books and digital media are two materials that both parents and research have indicated are

important to their child's learning in the home (Huber et al., 2018; Park, 2008; Rideout, 2017; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Studies have found positive associations between the number of books in the home and literacy outcomes, including an increase in the amount of parent-child read-aloud interactions and the number of books predicting both reading fluency and reading success in grade three (Harvey, 2016; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; van Bergen et al., 2017). Access to books in the home has also been associated with knowledge related to concepts about print and expressive language development (Friedlander; 2013; Schick & Melzi, 2016). In addition to having books in the home, access to books has also been considered as children's opportunities to visit the library. Children's visits to the library with their family, as a facet of print exposure, have been associated with reading skills (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Despite these positive findings, studies and interventions have found that the number of books in the home is not always enough to better children's outcomes (Friedlander, 2013; Neuman, 2017). Thus, the positive outcomes that are associated with books in the home likely stem from the type and quality of interactions the books facilitate rather than the presence of the books alone (Neuman, 2017).

Digital media is another material used by families for literacy learning in the home environment (Huber et al., 2018; Liebeskind et al., 2014; McPake et al., 2013). While not a material of focus for many home literacy studies in early childhood, digital media has been more often explored in early childhood classroom research in relationship to literacy development (Dashti & Habeeb, 2020; Fantozzi, 2018; Trotti et al., 2017; Willoughby et al., 2015). In the home, different types of digital media have been utilized frequently by children under eight years of age (Rideout, 2017). In both the United States and Great Britain, parents reported that they feel their children learn from the use of educational media in the home (Huber et al., 2018;

Rideout, 2017). McPake et al. (2013) found that preschool-aged children connected speech, print, and digital media in the course of play and exploration, such as when a video that was viewed prompted a child to read a paper-based book about the same topic.

Taken together, while parents indicate that digital media is important for their children's learning at home, we do not yet know the types of digital media, frequency of usage, or quality of interactions with digital media use that are important for a high-quality literacy environment in culturally diverse homes. High quality literacy environments for culturally diverse children have access to books and printed materials, but the type and quality of interaction with those texts is crucial for children's success.

Literacy Activities in the HLE

While scholars have categorized the literacy activities occurring in the home in a variety of different ways (e.g., Puglisi et al., 2017; Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013), Sénéchal & LeFevre (2002, 2014) characterize activities and interactions within the home environment as both formal and informal. Formal literacy practices or activities involve families explicitly teaching literacy skills such as reading or writing letters or words (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 1998, 2002, 2014). Informal literacy practices involve print but include no explicit teaching such as a parent reading aloud a storybook for enjoyment where print isn't the focus (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014). The following section will discuss both informal and formal literacy activities that are associated with a high-quality environment (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014).

Storybooks. As an informal literacy practice, children's interactions with storybooks as part of shared reading with an adult has been found to be a predictor of growth in English vocabulary from preschool to first grade, and a predictor of later reading fluency (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014; van Bergen et al., 2017). More formal interactions with storybooks include read-

alouds where specific concepts are being taught (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014). These formal interactions with storybooks have been linked to higher outcome scores for children in letter knowledge, word identification, and concepts about print, as well as decreased likelihood of children becoming struggling readers (Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2015).

Parents modeling language and engaging their child in conversations inside of and outside of storybooks has been found to impact children's literacy outcomes (Britto et al., 2006; Leseman et al., 2007; Neuman et al., 2018). Conversations in the home literacy environment can be both informal and formal (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002), and have been linked to expressive and receptive vocabulary (Britto et al., 2006; Neuman et al., 2018). For children who are multilingual, conversations in their home language and interactions with texts that represent both children's home language and second language are important contributors to first and second language development (Bitetti & Hammer, 2015; Roberts, 2008).

In addition to the type and make-up of interactions, the frequency with which children engage in literacy experiences in the home literacy environment has been found to be important. The frequency of storybook interactions, both formal and informal, has been linked to positive outcomes, including expressive language skills and emotional regulation (Schick & Melzi, 2016). Many studies of the home literacy environments of young children have found that the more time and opportunities children have for storybook experiences in the home learning environment, the more likely children are to have positive literacy outcomes (Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Hood et al., 2008; Liebeskind et al., 2014; Yeo et al., 2014).

Explicit Teaching of Literacy Concepts. Formal literacy experiences can occur through teaching that happens in storybook interactions, as previously mentioned, but formal experiences

can also occur in adult-child interactions outside of books (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014). Formal experiences outside storybooks are important as parent-child reading experiences and parent-child teaching experiences have been found to be largely independent constructs that are related to different literacy outcomes in children (Hood et al., 2008).   Parents who engaged children in active teaching of emergent literacy skills such as teaching the alphabet, or writing their own name or other words, were associated with expressive and receptive language development and emergent reading skills (Hood et al., 2008; Yeo et al., 2014).

The use of environmental print has been explored as one non-book print resource that parents utilize in formal experiences to teach specific skills. The use of environmental print in interactions, such as using letters on labels and signs or interacting with recipes while cooking, were correlated with language development and print knowledge (Liebeskind et al., 2014; Schick & Melzi, 2016). Interestingly, one cross-national study found that the frequency of formal and informal home literacy activities for young children did not contribute significantly to children's reading performance in Colombia (Park, 2008).

Overall, informal and formal literacy experiences in the home environment are both essential to children's development and should be paired for effectiveness, as the informal practice of reading storybooks without the explicit teaching of literacy skills has been shown to have limited impacts on children's outcomes (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014). When considering literacy activities, a quality home literacy environment for culturally diverse children includes frequent opportunities to interact with storybooks with adults, conversations inside and outside of stories with adults who model language and ask questions of the children, and explicit teaching of literacy skills.

Familial Characteristics

Familial characteristics have been shown to impact children's literacy outcomes (Bojczyk et al., 2018; Yeo et al., 2014). While research has found associations between the socioeconomic status of families and their children's literacy outcomes, it has been discussed that these factors aren't as easily impacted by interventions to support the home environment (Bojczyk et al., 2018). Due in part to this, recent studies of home literacy have focused on parental affect and skills, as these are more easily targeted variables for change (Bojczyk et al., 2018).

Parental Affect. The domain of parental affect can include parents' interest in and beliefs about literacy as well as parents' self-efficacy in literacy (Bojczyk et al., 2018; Weigel et al., 2006b; Yeo et al., 2014). Parents' beliefs about literacy and efficacy regarding literacy learning have been shown to impact the home literacy environment (Bojczyk et al., 2018; Weigel et al., 2006b; Yeo et al., 2014). Self-efficacy related to literacy has been associated with greater engagement in literacy activities and thus, more positive reading outcomes for children (Bojczyk et al., 2018; Yeo et al., 2014). Weigel et al. (2006b) found that mothers who held the belief that they had an important role in their child's literacy learning had children who demonstrated greater print knowledge than children of mothers who did not hold this belief.

Parental Skills. Parental skills are comprised of parents' reading level, reading fluency, and their success in effectively modeling reading behaviors (van Bergen et al., 2017; Yeo et al., 2014). Parents' own skills and habits in reading have a demonstrated influence on children's literacy development (van Bergen et al., 2017; Yeo et al., 2014). In one study, parent reading fluency accounted for a significant portion of the variance in 6-15 -year-old children's reading fluency (van Bergen et al., 2017, p. 153). Fathers' frequency of personal reading habits (e.g., reading for pleasure or learning) was highly related to children's reading fluency while parental

modeling of literacy behaviors in both parents had small, but positive impacts (van Bergen et al., 2017; Yeo et al., 2014).

Family Literacy Practices

The term "family literacy" entered the lexicon of research through the work of Dr. Denny Taylor who conducted ethnographic works focusing on the literacy practices of families in a suburban area and families who lived in an urban area (Taylor, 1998/1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Through her work, she observed the role of parents and family members in their children's literacy learning, identifying the longitudinal practices in which families engaged over several years, as well as the challenges that families faced, and how those challenges might have impacted their role. Across all contexts, literacy was found to be a part of children's everyday lives in the home. However, her work also demonstrated how practices varied in unique ways in different homes (Taylor, 1998/1983, Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

More recently, Reyes & Esteban-Guitart (2013) discussed how traditional literacy— a focus on reading for knowledge, writing, and critically thinking about printed material — is crucial across cultures for success in school and in the majority culture. However, while this knowledge is essential to both survival and academic success, what comprises a successful literacy practice may uniquely vary by context (Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013). In other words, the ways that an individual or group arrive at this result may differ. These variations, or multiple literacies, have been described through the terms "literacy ways," "literacy usage," "literacy involvement," and "literacy models" (Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013, p. 158). These multiple literacies may be similar to, or different from, traditional literacy. The current literature on family literacy practices summarized below illustrates these multiple literacies.

Literacy ways refer to practices that favor oral literacy or written literacy (Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013). While the importance of writing and experiences with print are clear for the academic success of young children (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014), some studies have found that certain cultural contexts may put a greater emphasis on oral traditions of literacy (Gonzalez et al., 2016; Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013). Oral traditions of literacy include the use of transmitting literacy knowledge through language without a focus on print (Gonzalez et al., 2019; Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013). Mothers who were homeless in Canada discussed oral storytelling as an important part of their preschool children's literacy learning (Di Santo et al., 2016). Oral storytelling in the form of songs were utilized by immigrant families from Vietnam living in Taiwan and by Mexican families in the United States (Bridges et al., 2015; Gonzalez et al., 2019; Hsin, 2017).

Literacy usage refers to the ways that families employ literacy activities in the home and literacy involvement is how frequently the literacy usage occurs (Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013). Contrary to data that indicate ethnic minority families in poverty in the United States lack literacy experiences or materials (Neuman et al., 2018; Neuman & Moland, 2016; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2015), Jarrett et al. (2015, 2017) found that African American mothers reported frequently engaging their children with printed materials and the explicit teaching of literacy concepts. The literacy usage of biliterate families have included reading and discussing text, but also acting out the story (Bauer & Mkhize, 2012). While these both align with traditional literacy through their focus on reading and print, some families have discussed their own practices being different from the traditional literacy (Hoffman & Whittingham, 2017; Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013; Whittingham et al., 2018).

In the United States, family members of African American preschool children expressed the necessity to teach their children to switch between "African American language" and "Dominant American English" based upon context in order to know the language of school (Whittingham et al., 2018, p. 469). As noted earlier, some cultures place emphasis on oral language traditions and therefore the explicit teaching of literacy concepts without the use of print may be overlooked (Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013).

Parents' models of literacy usage also go beyond the reading and writing behaviors previously mentioned. Parents, as literacy models, demonstrate their beliefs about and values regarding literacy by modeling literacy in their own schooling, work, and hobbies (Hsin et al., 2017; Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013). Literacy models have been shown to be intergenerational with grandparents or other family members' practices influencing parents' current practices (Swain et al., 2017). Other times this intergenerational modeling is more direct, with partners, grandparents, or aunts interacting with children in the home environment as models of literacy beliefs and values (Jarrett et al., 2015; Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013; Swain et al., 2017). Intragenerational modeling of literacy practices also occurs with siblings acting as models of beliefs and values (Jarrett et al., 2015; Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013). In addition to family members, family friends in the community have also been discussed as literacy models for young children (Jarrett et al., 2015; Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013; Hsin et al., 2017). The modeling of literacy by a variety of different adults and children contrasts with research that has focused mainly on mother-child dyads in literacy interactions in the home literacy environment (Britto et al., 2006; Quiroz & Dixon, 2012; Weigel et al., 2006b).

While most of these literacy ways, literacy usage, literacy involvement, and literacy models have not been widely explored in association with children's literacy outcomes, the

practices within each are important considerations in what literacies contribute to high-quality literacy environments in culturally diverse homes. For example, translanguaging has specific impacts on families whose home language is not the dominant language of the majority culture; learning how to switch between languages well is articulated as an important feature of a successful home literacy environment in this context to give young children access to the language of school. However, this particular skill may not be as relevant in another context where the language of the speaker is the same as, or more closely mirrors, that of the dominant culture. While reading for knowledge, writing, and critically thinking about written material are essential for academic success, other literacy ways, literacy usages, literacy involvement, and literacy models are essential for success in particular cultural contexts (Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013).

Summary

Families engage in many practices that are important to young children's literacy development. Parents provide children with materials and interactions that uniquely contribute to children's literacy learning (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014). Parents' role as models of literacy usage in the daily lives of the family aid in young children's learning, both in regard to literacy knowledge and skills (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014), and in the value and relevance of different literacy practices (Bojczyk et al., 2018; Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013; Weigel et al., 2006b; Yeo et al., 2014). The home environment is an essential context for young children's literacy learning (Bojczyk et al., 2015, 2019; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002).

COVID-19 and Impacts on Families and Early Education: What We Know

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated shifts in the day to day lives of people in the United States and other nations. As the pandemic continued into 2022, the available research

was limited but progressing about the well-being of families and young children from the pandemic's onset and through the present. In the early months of the pandemic in the United States, much child care was suspended for varying durations of time (CDC, 2020). As early care resumed, many changes were made including reduced class sizes, hours of care, and whether care or learning was remote or in-person (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020). In 2021 and part of 2022, early care continued but faced similar challenges as children remained unvaccinated, leading to continued shutdowns and uncertainty regarding early care and education (Kamenetz, 2022). This portion of the review summarizes historical perspectives and the current state of our research base at the time of this writing on the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on families with young children.

Historical Perspectives

Prior to the pandemic of 2020, other historical events have impacted the home literacy environments of young children. In the United States, most education occurred for the general population within home environments until the founding of the Common School, and for young children, day nurseries, in the 1830s (Center on Education Policy, 2020; Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2007). However, many children were either excluded from or had barriers to receiving education in public or private schools due to discriminatory policies or socioeconomic status (Center on Education Policy, 2020; Kamerman & Gatenio-Gabel, 2007). Regardless of the level of access to public schooling, children still learned within their home environments. This section focuses specifically on how home literacy was employed in the United States during the Great Migration, the Great Depression, and the 1918-1920 Influenza Pandemic. While home literacies have occurred in other contexts throughout history and in modern times (e.g., Hassunah-Arafat, Aram, & Korat, 2021; Kirk and Winthrop, 2008; NeCamp, 2019; Williams, 2005), these specific

events situate the current study's context within the scope of similar historical situations within the United States. In each of these historical events, families in the United States were forced to educate their children within their home for varying durations, in addition to the learning in the home that occurs during the normal routines of family life. Within these contexts, the role of working women is addressed as well as access to public education. The Great Migration and the Great Depression are discussed initially, finishing with a discussion of the Influenza Pandemic of 1918.

The Great Migration, The Great Depression: Women's Work and Home Literacy.
Many historians designate the Great Migration as happening from 1915 to 1965, although migrations occurred before and after these years in the United States (Gregory, 2005). Many people migrated from the south to the north during this time, but The Great Migration specifically focuses on African Americans migrants who moved from the southern states to the northern states (Crew, 1987; Gregory, 2005). While stories of migration have been told (see Adams, 2010; Gregory, 2005), many stories focus on men rather than women and children and little information was found at the time of this writing on the day-to-day activities of families during migration (Bunch-Lyons, 1997; Richardson Amos, 2005). However, what is known is that the motivations for migration varied but were often due to the desire for opportunities that would provide a better life for individuals and their families and, for some women migrants, the hope of a better education for their children (Bunch-Lyons, 1997; Tolnay, 2003). While the people who migrated during this period frequently brought few belongings with them, some accounts of items included a family Bible (Wilkerson, 2010; Richardson Amos, 2005). The Bible functioned as a tool for home literacy and for social connection, as church was one of the foundations of social life for many African Americans during this time (Bunch-Lyons, 1997). Women migrants

were often employed in domestic work because they were frequently excluded from other work due to discriminatory hiring practices (Bunch-Lyons, 1997; Scharf, 1980). While children had opportunities to go to school, the schools for African American children in the south were underfunded (Bunch-Lyons, 1997). The migration north often meant access to better-resourced schools but migrating north, moving to other cities, and meeting the needs of the family all may have caused disruptions in children's schooling (Bunch-Lyons, 1997). Sometimes children took on more adult responsibilities in the home to ensure the education and well-being of their family (Bunch-Lyons, 1997). One woman from Cincinnati, Ohio named Neddie R., described her experience as such:

> My oldest brother, really my half-brother, moved to Cincinnati before 1938, he had
> family there. Mother and the rest of us, she had six children, I was the oldest, came in
> thirty-eight. I was the oldest girl, so I had a lot of responsibility. Mother worked at
> Phillip Perry and I took care of the house and my younger brothers and sisters. I dropped
> out of school so I could work and make sure the other children went to school…The
> younger children loved going to school. There was a gym, auditorium, and other things
> we didn't have in the rural district back down south. (Bunch-Lyons, 1997, p. 11)

The Great Depression was a long period of economic downturn following a stock market crash in 1929 in the United States that lasted until 1933 (Eichengreen, 2015). The effects of this were widespread in the United States and around the world (Eichengreen, 2015; Kyvig, 2004). For American families, their lives were upturned due to lack of financial resources (Kyvig, 2004). Families experienced food scarcity and many families lost their jobs (Kyvig, 2004). The lack of money impacted many areas of life, but one area that had specific impacts on both families' and women's work was the lack of ability to pay teachers (Scharf, 1980). The lack of pay caused

some schools to close, or to be understaffed, for varying lengths of time (Scharf, 1980). Like in the current pandemic where women's work hours were reduced (Collins et al., 2020), women lost out on work or income in multiple professions (Scharf, 1980). These losses were not necessarily regained during the recovery era (Scharf, 1980). Little information could be found on literacy practices in the home, but what is known is that after the 1920s, family life for most American families became more school-centered, with public education becoming a daily part of the lives of children (Kyvig, 2004). Culturally, young children were treated with more affection and less harsh punishment (Kyvig, 2004).

The Great Migration and Great Depression had major impacts on American families (Bunch-Lyons, 1997; Kyvig, 2004). Both events impacted children's schooling and changed the routines of life during the periods that they were experienced (Bunch-Lyons, 1997; Kyvig, 2004). Both events also impacted women's work, with the Great Depression leading to job losses and reductions in hours or income (Scharf, 1980).

The Influenza Pandemic of 1918. The 1918-1920 influenza pandemic was a major stressor to the world. The exact numbers are not known but estimations of deaths worldwide are around 40 million people, or 2.1% of the world's population at the time (Barro et al., 2022). In the United States, conservative estimates are that around 550,000 people perished from influenza (Crosby, 2003).

While numbers are helpful in painting a picture of how widespread the impacts of the Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1920 were, they do not tell the stories of the ways in which this pandemic impacted individual families and working mothers. The information that does exist about families from the United States is derived mainly from major cities where newspapers provided information and visiting nurses who went door to door to check on the ill shared their

stories (Crosby, 2003). From this information, we know about some of the pandemic's impact on women's work. Both nursing and teaching were affected during the 1918-1920 pandemic; while not exclusively female professions, women mainly occupied these roles at this time in history (Scharf, 1980). In some major cities in the United States, schools were closed for varying durations during the pandemic, putting teachers out of work. In contrast, nurses were in high demand and there were shortages across the country (Crosby, 2003). Nurses were even called upon to come out of retirement and some called for any women who were able to volunteer their time to help:

> Women of San Francisco. We Beseech Your Help. You Can Save as Many Lives Today in San Francisco as You Could in France. The Afflicted – Children, Men, Women, The Bread-Winners of the Family – Are Calling for Your Merciful Ministrations. (San Francisco Chronicle, 1918, as cited in Crosby, 2003, p. 97).

Thus, during the influenza pandemic, certain women were out of work, others were working more than usual, and some women answered requests to give of their time to help those who had fallen ill in various ways, such as driving cars to aid doctors and patients (North, 2020).

In addition to impacting women's work, children and families were also impacted by the disease. While seasonal influenza and other diseases are usually riskier for the very young and very old, one of the unique features of 1918-1920 strain of influenza was that it caused severe illness and death to many people in their 20s and early 30s (Richard et al., 2009). Thus, the parents of many young children were stricken with illness and numerous traveling nurses found families in dire situations – not just with disease overtaking the households, but with no adults well enough to care for the children – resulting in food scarcity (Crosby, 2003; Farmer & Schoenfeld, 1919). With schools closed many children were at home, particularly during the

second wave which had more far-reaching impacts (Centers for Disease Control, 2018; Crosby, 2003). Many aid organizations participated in helping families (Crosby, 2003), and while this help varied geographically, some organizations, such as the Children's Aid Society of Boston, installed home libraries in some neighborhoods for the children of that area to utilize (Farmer & Schoenfeld, 1919). This work of establishing neighborhood libraries initiated before the pandemic, but continued throughout to help children that were "destitute, homeless, wayward, defective, or exposed" (Directory of Charitable and Beneficent Organizations – Boston, 1907, p. 5-6). Many children were also orphaned during this time and changed households (Crosby, 2003). Due to fears of the disease spread, orphaned children were often placed with neighbors rather than being put in an orphanage (Crosby, 2003).

Overall, the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 had far-reaching impacts for families in the United States. Families' health, finances, and day-to-day lives were upended, particularly with the second wave of the disease (Centers for Disease Control, 2018; Crosby, 2003). Like with the current pandemic, schools were closed for varying durations, families missed work due to illness or closures, and the education of children primarily occurred in the home.

COVID-19 and the Loss of Early Care

The current COVID-19 pandemic impacted the lives of many families in the United States and across the world with significant changes to children's schooling (Pramling Samuelsson, 2020; Springer, 2020). The changes that occurred led to concerns from health professionals, educators, and educational researchers about children's development physically, social-emotionally, and academically (Adams, 2020; McCoy et al., 2021).

Physical concerns stemmed from the fact that many children in the United States relied on schooling and early care for their meals (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Adams (2020) found increased food insecurity for families during the pandemic and that the total amount of food in the home had decreased for those families experiencing very low food security.

Schools' closures or instructional adaptations led to children being unable to interact socially with friends, which raised concerns about children not being able to participate in these and other socially beneficial activities (Springer, 2020). Online learning was implemented in some places for children as young as preschool and parents of preschool-aged children expressed concerns over its developmental appropriateness (Dong et al., 2020). In addition, the trauma of the pandemic caused concern that preschool-aged children could experience maladaptive social-emotional effects and that families may not have had the necessary information to recognize children's behavior as a response to trauma (Walters, 2020).

In early childhood, academic concerns stemmed from the loss of time spent in preschool and how this may impact children's futures (McCoy et al., 2021). One simulation study estimated that for children 6 and under worldwide, that 167 million children lost access to early childhood education during March 2020 to February 2021 (McCoy et al., 2021). McCoy et al. (2021) estimated that the potential impacts of this educational loss could be far reaching, including negatively impacting children's developmental outcomes and potentially negatively impacting their future earnings when they leave school and enter the workforce.

As the pandemic continued, data about children's performance in public school settings in the United States demonstrated the validity of these concerns, showing deleterious effects on children's learning and development (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022; Ohio Department of Education, 2020, 2021). Around 76% of public schools nationwide reported increases in chronic absenteeism in the 2020-2021 school year when compared to school years before the pandemic

(Institute of Education Sciences, 2022). Many public schools also reported that the pandemic played a role in students being behind grade level at the start of the school year (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022). The fourth-grade students assessed in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2022) demonstrated statistically significant declines between their reading test scores in 2022 from the reading scores of fourth grade students in 2019. Head Start, a national program serving children from birth to five, did not mandate data collection at the beginning of the pandemic (Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2022) but in Ohio the assessment for children who were entering Kindergarten, the KRA- Revised, demonstrated adverse impacts also. This assessment showed increases in the percentage of students who were not on track in their literacy development: 39.8% of assessed students were categorized as "Not On-Track" in the 2019-2020 school year and 47.9 % of assessed students were categorized as not on track in 2020-2021(Ohio Department of Education, 2020, 2021).

While these outcomes were concerning for all families with young children, they were particularly concerning for families in poverty, families who relied on services for children with special needs or health conditions, families who lived in rural areas, and families who faced marginalization in the United States (Springer, 2020). There were concerns that these families may be more vulnerable to lack of access to resources and disproportionately impacted by some of the negative outcomes on families and children, like decreased work hours and wages (Collins et al., 2020; Gunther-Bel, 2020; Springer, 2020). This concern was also confirmed in children's KRA test scores, where the percentage of students of color, with disabilities, or who were economically disadvantaged that scored at the lowest level of performance entering Kindergarten increased from 2021 to 2022 (Ohio Department of Education, 2020, 2021; McCool-Myers et al. 2022).

Parents' Work and Relationships during COVID-19

School closures impacted more than the children who were not attending; the closure of early care and education also affected the families of these children. Since the onset of the pandemic in the United States in March 2020, the continued shutdowns of early education and care impacted both parents' work and families' interpersonal relationships (Collins et al., 2020; Gunther-Bel et al., 2020; Zero to Three, 2020).

One parent early in the pandemic described her own experience:

Due to the pandemic, our daughter's child care will be closed indefinitely. Since we are under contract, we will still have to pay child care fees on weekly basis. Because of our nation's lack of paid leave and affordable child care, my husband and I had to make a decision. My husband will stay home with Ava which means cutting our income to one. And with one income we still have to pay the same amount of monthly expenses including child care fees.- Shiela, parent from Bridgeport, CT. (Zero to Three, 2020, para. 18)

This story was reflective of the literature on the difficult decisions and impacts of the pandemic on U.S. parents' careers both at the beginning of the pandemic and as the pandemic continued into 2021 (Collins et al., 2020; McCool-Myers et al., 2022). Families in the United States reported having to adjust their work to provide care for their children who were home and some studies indicated that women's work had been impacted more significantly than men's work (Collins et al., 2020; Zanhour & Sumpter, 2022). Women who were working with children ages 1-5 in the home saw their work hours reduced 1.8 hours per week from February to April of 2020 in one study (Collins et al., 2020). Women who were working reported spending more time caring for children and more time on housework than prior to the pandemic (Dunatchik et al.,

2021). In addition to decreased hours, some women reported having to leave their jobs or move to part-time to care for their children (Clark et al., 2020). Working women who were interviewed about their experiences with worker culture in the summer of 2020 described conflicts that arose between their work and caring for their children, particularly when working from home (Zanhour & Sumpter, 2022).

In addition to the impacts on work, there have been impacts to family relationships. One mixed-methods study from Spain investigated the impacts of the pandemic on parental functioning and found that the qualitative theme of perceived deterioration regarding family dynamics was associated with families who had preschool-aged children (Gunther-Bel et al., 2020). Other negative impacts included increased household chaos during the pandemic, defined as disorganization, instability, noise, and crowding in the homes of young children (Johnson et al., 2021). However, not all impacts have been negative, as some families indicated that there were certain positive effects of the pandemic on their family and spousal dynamics including more connection and communication (Gunther-Bel et al., 2020).

Conclusion

In summary, high quality home literacy environments are essential to the development of young children (Neuman et al., 2018; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014). A high quality environment involves interactions with materials, certain familial characteristics, and formal and informal interactions with caregivers (Bojczyk et al., 2018; Harvey, 2016; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014; van Bergen et al., 2017). In historical contexts such as the Great Depression, the Great Migration, the Influenza Pandemic of 1918, and during the current COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, families had to adapt their lives to adverse circumstances and women had to adjust to their roles at work and at home (Bunch-Lyons, 1997; Crosby, 2003; Scharf, 1980). Due to the

importance of the home literacy environment and the widespread impacts of the pandemic, it is

essential for researchers and educators to know the potential impacts of the pandemic on this

environment. Working mothers' lived experiences during this pandemic provide much needed

insight into the home literacy environment and into the role that mothers play within this space.

The results of this study can provide direction for the types of support schools should provide

families during times of crisis and provide insight into the benefits and challenges of this

pandemic for working mothers of preschool-aged children.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The research questions that were the focus of this study are:

Overarching: During the pandemic, how do working mothers of preschool-aged children describe its impacts on their role in the home literacy environment?

Sub question: How do family literacy experiences change during the pandemic in this context?

Phenomenological Design

My overarching research question dealt with a homogenous group of participants experiencing the same specific phenomenon. A qualitative approach was particularly suited to answer such a question, as the phenomenon of the experience of the pandemic in the home literacy environment for families with young children had not been widely explored (Creswell, 2015).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the qualitative methodology selected and utilized for this study (Smith et al., 2009). Broadly, phenomenology aims to understand the lived experience of human beings (Peoples, 2021). Phenomenology began with the work of Edmund Husserl and his transcendental phenomenology, in which he argued that we need to suspend our own conceptions to understand the essence of a phenomenon (Peoples, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). IPA is built upon the works of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and is based within hermeneutics (Peoples, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). IPA is distinct from other phenomenological approaches in its idiographic nature and its focus on the exploration of when lived experiences take on a particular meaning and significance for the people who are living them (Smith et al., 2009). Interpretative phenomenology assumes that all

people try to make sense of their experiences and therefore, a detailed examination of each person can illuminate their sense-making process surrounding certain experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, IPA allowed for an in-depth examination of working mothers' sense-making process around their experiences in the HLE during the pandemic. The sense-making process also applied to myself as a researcher where, within the iterations of interpretative phenomenological analysis, I applied my own sense-making processes in the analysis of participants' experiential accounts (Smith et al., 2009; Peoples, 2021).

Both the strength and the weakness of interpretative phenomenology is the idiographic nature of its methodology. The strength is that it allowed for an in-depth exploration of a small, homogenous group of working mothers which permitted detailed exploration within and across the experiences of this group (Smith et al., 2009). A limitation in utilizing an interpretative phenomenological approach is the fact that such studies do not lend themselves to external generalizability; however, this is not the purpose for which these studies are conducted (Maxwell, 2013).

Sample/Participants

Participants were recruited using a flyer (see Appendix C) sent via email to parents from a local preschool in Cincinnati. The director of the preschool gave site permission after Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix B). All the working mothers who responded had a child who attended the preschool site. The preschool served children aged 3-5 years old. Phenomenology requires a homogeneous sample (Smith et al., 2009), which I ensured through the purposeful sampling of participants from one preschool site meeting the following selection criteria (Creswell, 2015; Peoples, 2021):

1. Mother of a Child Attending Preschool.

2. Working Mother (full or part-time).

3. Child experienced a change in care during the pandemic (e.g., care was shut down, shortened, or changed to a different learning environment, such as remote learning, for a period of time).

4. Mother had a preschool-aged child in school in March 2020 and now has a preschool-aged child in school in fall/winter 2020.

5. Mother lives in the same home as their child.

6. Mother is a primary caregiver for this child.

7. Mother and child currently reside in the greater Cincinnati area.

The reasoning for this selection criteria, beyond ensuring a homogenous sample, was that the research stated that families who were working, especially mothers, were acutely impacted by the pandemic's changes (Collins et al., 2020; Dunatchik et al., 2021). The study recruited n= 6 participants. Of these six participants, five met the selection criteria. During the interview process, one had technological difficulties, resulting in n =4 participants. Four participants fell within the recommended range of 3-6 participants by Smith et al. (2009) for interpretative phenomenological studies to ensure the rich analysis of each participants' lived experience and to provide enough data for researchers to establish similarities and differences among the participants' cases.

The participants received information notifying them of the study's purpose and their rights as participants to withdraw at any time (see Appendix D). These rights were reviewed again before beginning the interview process. All participants were offered a $10 gift card for their participation in the study.

Data Collection

Data collection for this phenomenological study was carried out by me as the principal investigator. The instrumentation included interviews, follow-up interviews, demographic data, researcher field notes, and journaling.

A visual of the timeline of data collection and analysis is seen in Figure 1. Each step is discussed below. The hermeneutic circle, the act of moving from part to whole, is shown underlying the timeline (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Smith et al., 2009). This movement happens repeatedly in IPA and did so in this study: moving from the whole of what someone said to the part in focusing on a word in a follow up question in the interview, moving from the part back to the whole in the answer provided to that question; moving from the single word in analysis to the sentence in a transcript; moving from emergent themes to superordinate themes (Smith et al., 2009). While this action occurred repeatedly throughout the research process, this diagram specifically demonstrates how it operated at a larger level in the analysis.

Figure 1

Research Timeline for Mothers' Experiences of the Pandemic and the Home Literacy Environment of Preschool-Aged Children: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
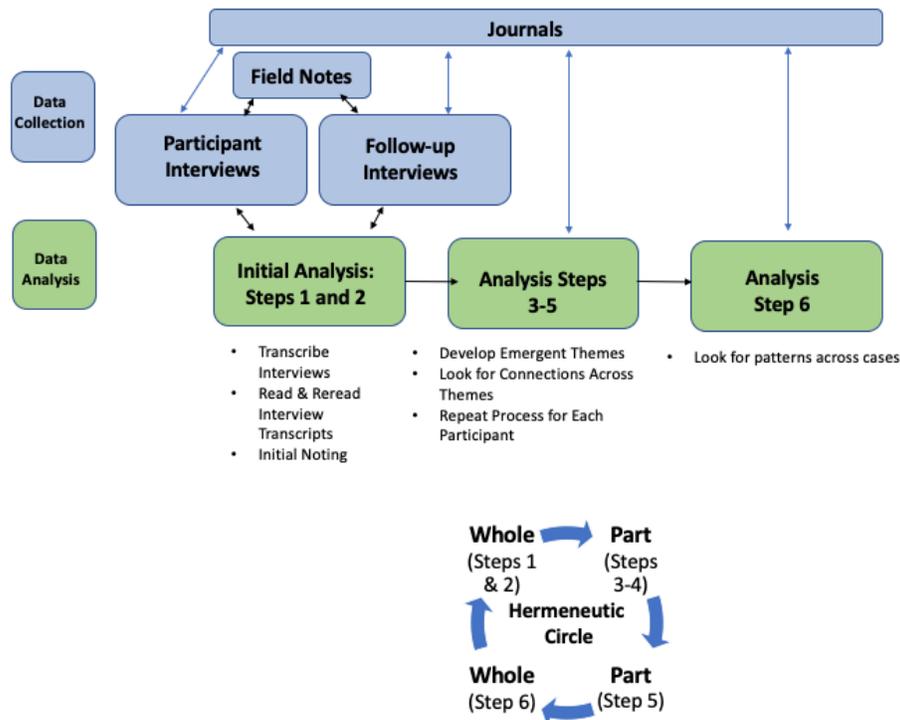
Interviews

Interviews were conducted one-on-one with participants via videocall over the WebEx platform and were recorded using the computer's local QuickTime player video recording software and an additional audio-recording application for back-up, in case the first recording method were to fail. A semi-structured interview protocol was used (See Appendix E) as this type of interview ensured that the focus of the study was addressed during the interview while still allowing for the participant to discuss other experiences that might hold relevance for the study (Peoples, 2021). These interviews lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and questions focused solely on participants' experiences.

Video Data

During participant interviews, I asked the participants to show on camera some of the materials in their home that they felt related to their preschool-aged child's literacy development: "Could you show me some of the items in your home that you feel help contribute to your child's literacy learning?" (see Question 8 under "Education in the Home Environment" in Appendix C). Asking this question helped to gain further insight to the lifeworlds of the participants (Gibson, 2012) and the materials which participants felt supported their child's literacy learning in the home environment. Two of the participants' narration and labeling of the materials as they were holding them up to the camera were transcribed and included in the analysis. Two participants were unable to be at home for the semi-structured interview and described these materials in their home environment, which were also transcribed and including in the analysis.

Follow-Up Interviews

The use of a single interview with follow-up interviews occurring only as needed is a unique feature of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Alase, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). Follow-up interviews within phenomenology are for purposes of clarification but also for purposes of saturation when more information may be needed to gain the full picture of a participant's experience (Peoples, 2021). After the reading, rereading, and initial noting of each transcript was complete, I determined that clarification on points discussed in the interviews was not needed as clarification was sought during the interview and the participants' responses provided sufficient insight into the research questions. However, when participants were asked to verify the accuracy of their transcript as part of maintaining trustworthiness, they were asked if there was anything they wanted to add to their account. The three participants who engaged in transcript review did not have any additional information they wished to provide. The fourth participant did not respond to the transcript review request.

Demographic Data

Demographic data were collected to ensure that parents met the homogenous sample requirements. The data collected included the sex of the parent, employment status, and what they identified as the shift (or shifts) in care that occurred for them which confirmed that their child was attending preschool.

Field Notes & Journaling

Field notes were taken to notate key words from participants for prompting within the interview as well as to notate participants' nonverbal communication and pauses where deemed important (Peoples, 2021). IPA focuses on the particulars of language and field notes allowed me to follow up on language that the participants used during the interview, including their usage of metaphors or other descriptors, asking questions such as, "What do you mean when you say [metaphor, key term]?" (Smith et al., 2009).

I also kept a journal that allowed me to record my own pre-conceptions throughout the research process (Peoples, 2021). Smith et al. (2009) suggested using a modified form of bracketing for IPA research for both data collection and analysis, as the method is based in both the philosophy that one cannot completely set aside one's preconceived ideas, thoughts, and values but that the attempt should still be made when approaching each participant's account. Bracketing in its original form in phenomenology was proposed by Husserl (2017/1931) who argued that you could set aside these preconceptions by physically writing and bracketing them and must do so to fully and truly understand a participant's experience. Heidegger, in contrast, argued that one cannot remove themselves from the experience being studied, as every person brings their own foresight to the study of experience (Heidegger, 1962/1927). In the application of Heidegger's philosophy, in lieu of bracketing, preconceptions are acknowledged and made

explicit in the research process (Peoples, 2021). As I believed that my preconceptions could not be set aside or bracketed, I utilized the journal to acknowledge these preconceptions and to notate the process of revision of biases before data collection began, during the interview process- both before and after each interview- and during the process of analysis as new preconceptions were formed or revised based on new understandings from the participants' accounts (Peoples, 2021). As the research process progressed, journaling allowed for both the acknowledgement as well as the revision, of my preconceptions through the generation of new questions, connections, and through clarification of meaning as part of the hermeneutic circle (People, 2021). While it is not possible to note every preconception one has, as there are some that researchers may be unaware exist, this process of documentation of the formation and revision allows the preconceptions that were noted to be explicit for those reading this study (Peoples, 2021). A discussion of the process of the revision of preconceptions is found in Chapter 5 of this work.

Data Analysis

Smith et al. (2009) break down interpretative phenomenological analysis into six steps on which the analysis of data for this study was based. Steps 1-5 involved the analysis of each individual participant's lifeworld and Step 6 involved comparisons being drawn across participants (Smith et al., 2009). For this study, I transcribed my own data, as this allowed me to immerse myself in each participant's account. Scholars well-versed in phenomenological analysis strongly recommend avoiding qualitative analysis software or the use of computers (Peoples, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, computers were used solely for transcription and to create tables for analysis but the process of commenting and thematizing was completed by hand. Rather than utilizing qualitative analysis software, I engaged in noting and the development of themes by writing on the transcripts, which were set in a table at the center of the

page with spaces on either side for both the noting and thematizing. Following these recommendations allowed me as the researcher to remain close to the data and to ensure that my process, including acknowledgement of preconceptions, was well-documented (Peoples, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). In the following section, each of the six steps for analysis in IPA are detailed.

Step 1: Reading and Rereading

The first stage of analysis involved immersing myself in the original interview transcripts of an individual participant, through reading and rereading their account, in order for the participant to become the focus of the analysis (Smith et al., 2009). This meant that each participant was treated as their own case and analysis of each case occurred separately, rather than simultaneously. During this stage, I read the transcript and notated my observations as well as any recollections about the interview that had been written in my journal. This journaling enabled me to take note of preconceptions while not losing sight of the participant as the focus (Peoples, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). Entering the participant's lifeworld through the study of the transcript is best done through repeated readings of the transcript. I engaged in multiple readings of each transcript as this facilitated the observation of connections among the individual participant's narratives, going from the whole to the particular and the particular to the whole (Smith et al., 2009).

Step 2: Initial Noting

Initial noting "examines semantic content and language on a very exploratory level" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). This stage occurred in concert with the first, as notes were made on the transcript when reading, and more were added with rereading. The purpose of this initial noting stage was to begin to identify the ways in which the participant talked about and thought

about their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). In considering the hermeneutic circle, this process of initial noting was beginning to move from whole to part (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Smith et al., 2009). Here I began to make phenomenologically based descriptive notes detailing the participant's key "relationships, processes, places, events, and values and principles" and what meaning the participant ascribes to these (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). These descriptive notes were based in the language of each participant and involved descriptive comments which focused on content, linguistic comments that focused on word choice (e.g., commenting on metaphors the participant chooses to use), or conceptual comments that engaged in questioning (Smith et al., 2009). These comments illuminated similarities and differences, contradictions, and allowed for dialogue with the transcript in a double hermeneutic of myself as the researcher engaging in meaning making of the participants' meaning-making processes (Smith et al., 2009). At this time, I also revisited my field notes in case they were useful in providing additional commentary. Additionally, I reached out to participants to verify the accuracy of the transcripts and offered an opportunity for participants to add to their account (Peoples, 2021). Three participants responded to requests for verification and all three verified the accuracy of their interview transcript. No participants added information to their initial accounts. The fourth participant did not respond to the transcript review request. Exploratory comments in initial noting were made in a column to the right of the transcript while emergent themes in the next stage were noted to the left of the transcript.

Step 3: Developing Emergent Themes

The development of emergent themes within the individual participant's account began after the transcript had been expanded with initial noting. The creation of emergent themes involved both the transcript and exploratory comments in the generation of phrases that spoke to

the essence of the section of the transcript (Smith et al., 2009). The emergent themes aimed to be "[particular] enough to be grounded and [abstract] enough to be conceptual" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 92). The themes were particular in their relationship to the original words of the participant but conceptual in their interpretative nature in the double hermeneutic.

Step 4: Looking for Connections Across Emergent Themes

The next step involved looking for connections among all the emergent themes across the individual participant's account. All of the themes were typed up in chronological order as they occurred in the transcript, read, and grouped based off of shared connection. Multiple grouping and regroupings occurred to generate higher level analyses, when appropriate (Smith et al., 2009). Connections of themes were made via abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeration, or function (Smith et al., 2009). Abstraction is the generation of an overarching theme that describes a cluster of emergent themes whereas subsumption is an emergent theme that becomes an overarching theme with analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Polarization identifies emergent themes that are in opposition (Smith et al., 2009). Contextualization looks at the chronology of experience across themes (Smith et al., 2009). Frequency of occurrence in support of a theme, or numeration, was also used (Smith et al., 2009). A final technique that was employed involved looking at the meaning, or function, the themes hold (e.g., positive and negative experiences) (Smith et al., 2009). This portion of the analysis concluded with the compiling transcript extracts to represent each superordinate emergent theme and a graphic representation of the themes with the page/line and keywords from which the themes were drawn (Smith et al., 2009).

Step 5: Repeating the Process for Each Case/Participant

Steps 1-4 of the analysis were repeated for each case individually, with each case

(participant) being treated as its own account (Smith et al., 2009). This process lent itself to the emergence of new themes within each account (Smith et al., 2009). During this stage, I notated my preconceptions in my journal, so they were not part of the initial noting, unless deemed beneficial. After each individual participant's account was analyzed, I met with a neutral colleague to discuss the analysis process and emerging conclusions to help ensure trustworthiness in a study conducted by a single researcher (Peoples, 2021; Shenton, 2004).

Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases

At this stage of analysis, the graphic representation of each case was utilized to look for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009). Some of the same strategies mentioned in the development of emergent themes were utilized with the goal of finding aspects of each case that are shared, while maintaining the themes that may be unique to participants (Smith et al., 2009). In considering the hermeneutic circle, at this stage I was moving from part back to the whole in generating final themes which represent the essence of the experience for all participants (Smith et al., 2009). These superordinate themes that represent the essence of participants' experience, were the results of the study. After these themes were established, I met for a second time with a neutral colleague to discuss the analysis process and conclusions. (Peoples, 2021; Shenton, 2004).

Role of Theoretical Framework

The chosen theoretical framework of hermeneutic phenomenology was interwoven into both the methods of data collection and analysis. During data collection, hermeneutic phenomenology was on full display in the exploration of each participant's understanding and interpretation of their experiences (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Peoples, 2021). The exploration of their sense making processes allowed insight into the meaning these participants ascribed to their

experiences (Peoples, 2021). In addition, giving the participants the opportunity to provide follow-up data allowed for clarification and the development of meaning making on the part of the participants if they deemed it necessary (Peoples, 2021).

During data analysis, the hermeneutic circle was exemplified by how the whole informs the part in the creation of emergent themes and how the part informs the whole as connections are made across individual participants that demonstrate the essence of the phenomenon (Peoples, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). Interpretative phenomenology also employs a double hermeneutic (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The double hermeneutic occurs as "the researcher is making sense of the participant, who is making sense of x" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). The role of the hermeneutic circle at a larger level in the analysis process was represented in Figure 1 above.

Constraints of the Study

One barrier to this study was the technology required to participate due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of technology for interviews was employed during this study for participant safety to minimize risk of infection during the time of the pandemic. Not all families who received information about the study may have had access to technology for video conferencing and so this may have been a barrier to some families' participation who would otherwise be willing. Also, one participant had technological difficulties during the interview and thus the data from that interview had to be excluded.

Data Management

I protected participant anonymity by ensuring that all data was stored on a password protected external hard drive and accessed through a password protected computer. The external hard drive was placed in a locked filing cabinet. The only person who was able to access the

locked data was me, as the principal investigator. Video and audio recordings were deleted or destroyed at the point of study completion. Field notes and journals were kept in a locked filing cabinet. All transcript hard copies were de-identified and were also be kept in a locked filing cabinet. All data was de-identified for participant anonymity and will be stored for five years beyond the duration of the study. Participants and others mentioned during the interviews were given pseudonyms for use in both the analysis and reporting of results. Participants were given an opportunity to choose different pseudonyms, if desired, during the verification of transcripts. The analysis of data occurred on a password protected computer and using hard copies of transcripts. The hard copies of transcripts were kept in a locked filing cabinet.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness has been posed as an alternative to the often quantitatively-laden term validity, and involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004; White et al., 2012, p. 249). Credibility of this study was ensured through the adoption of interpretative phenomenological analysis, a well-recognized approach within the field of qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). Member checking occurred in asking participants to verify the accuracy of the transcripts (Peoples, 2021). I engaged in peer review by meeting with a neutral colleague to have them ask questions about the nature of the methods, results, and emerging conclusions (all participant data de-identified) for purposes of accountability and to ensure honest interpretation in a study being conducted by a single researcher (Peoples, 2021; Shenton, 2004). The peer review occurred twice during the study's duration: 1) after the analysis of individual participant accounts and 2) after the final themes were established looking across all cases. The criterion of transferability was met through a detailed description of the homogeneous sample and the context of the study to ensure that others

can decide if comparisons can be made to their own context (Shenton, 2004). I ensured

dependability through a detailed description of the data collection and analysis that allowed for

other researchers to replicate this study (Shenton, 2004). The final criterion of confirmability

was addressed through journaling to speak to my own preconceptions as researcher (Peoples,

2021). In addition, I also considered and shared both the strengths and limitations to this study

and provided the diagram shown in Figure 1 to illustrate my research plan to make the process

transparent and replicable (Shenton, 2004).

Summary

This chapter presented the details of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study,

including the data collection, analysis, an overview of the philosophical foundations of IPA, and

the role of the hermeneutic circle in the study's design. Additionally, the study's constraints,

data management, and criteria for trustworthiness were established. The choice and

implementation of IPA as a phenomenological method was essential in meeting the study's

purpose, which was to explore how working mothers of preschool-aged children described the

impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their role in the home literacy environment as well as how

literacy practices did, or did not, change over time in this context.

Chapter 4

Findings

This chapter details the findings from all four mothers' accounts of their experiences during the pandemic in the home literacy environment gathered during virtual interviews. In this chapter, I will briefly revisit the setting, participant demographics, data analysis, and then discuss the final themes that emerged from the mothers' experiences. To maintain anonymity, all mothers, their children, and other significant people mentioned in the interviews are given pseudonyms.   The four mothers are Maria, Tasha, Nicole, and Darya.

The findings of this study address the following research questions:

Overarching (RQ1): During the pandemic, how do working mothers of preschool-aged children describe its impacts on their role in the home literacy environment?

Sub question (RQ2): How do family literacy experiences change during the pandemic in this context?

Setting

Mothers were recruited from a preschool site in the Cincinnati area that served 3–5-year-old children. Cincinnati is classified as an urban environment and is a mid-size city with an estimated 308,935 residents in southwestern Ohio (United States Census Bureau, 2021). The preschool from which the participant families were sampled included children that were funded through Head Start and paid tuition.

Participant Demographics

All four mothers met the homogenous sampling criteria. The mothers were working full or part-time throughout the duration of the pandemic. All four mothers lived in the same home

as their preschool-aged children and were primary caregivers for that child. All four mothers had their children enrolled in preschool before and during the pandemic and experienced a change in care at some point between March 2020 and late February or early March 2021, at the time the interviews were conducted.

While each mother met the homogenous sampling criteria, there were differences in occupation and family structure. Three out of four mothers were married. All four mothers had more than one child, including the preschool-aged child that was part of the homogenous sampling criteria. At the time of the interview, the siblings of the preschool-aged children varied in age and grade level from infancy through middle school. Information about each mother, their career, and their children are found in Table 1 below. If exact ages of children were given, they were put in parentheses and are representative of the child's age at the time of the interview. The preschool-aged child meeting the requisite sampling criteria at the time of the interview is found in bold. Pseudonyms were given to the preschool-aged children and to family members who were frequently referenced by name.

Table 1

Mothers' Careers and Family Members

Mother's Name	*Occupation at Time of Interview*	*In-Household Family Members*
"Maria"	Advanced Practice Nurse Practitioner	Husband
		First Grade Son
		"Nick," Preschool Son
		Young Son (2 years)
"Tasha"	Nurse/Nurse Coordinator	Middle School Daughter
		"Beth," Preschool Daughter

"Nicole"   Sign Language Interpreter   Husband

                                                        "Kayden," Six-Year-Old Son

                                                        "Skye," Kindergarten Daughter (5 years)

                                                        "Will," Preschool Son (3 years)

"Darya"   Professor   Husband

                                                        "Patrick," Preschool Son

                                                        Infant Daughter

Generation of Themes

The themes that were generated during the analysis process were drawn from looking across all participant cases after analyzing each individual participant's account (Smith et al., 2009). The initial analysis of the four participants' individual accounts resulted in 501 emergent themes total. Each of these emergent themes were analyzed for patterns within each case which resulted in between 5 and 11 superordinate themes per participant.

These superordinate and emergent themes were then represented in a graph for each participant to facilitate the analysis across cases (Smith et al., 2009). This final stage of analysis resulted in five superordinate themes with sixteen corresponding subthemes, or categories for organization, that are the results of this study and represent the essence of the phenomenon for these four mothers. Each theme is represented with quotes from at least half of the participants which is the recommendation for IPA studies with 4-8 participants (Smith, 2011). Some of subthemes were only applicable to two participants, and some represent conflicting narratives,

which are presented in the interest of accurate representation of rich data and the exploration of contradictions or negative cases (Smith et al., 2009).

To give the results context, this section includes brief narratives of each mother and their family's lives during the pandemic. This section includes information about each mother's career and their family and a brief overview of the shifts in care that occurred for them. The details of their experiences are expounded upon later in this chapter's results.

Maria

Maria was a working mother of three children. She was married and both her and her spouse were working during the pandemic. Maria continued to go in person to work as an advanced nurse practitioner and had weekends and Tuesdays off from her job where she was home with her family. Her husband began working from home at the onset of the pandemic in the spring of 2020 and was still working at home at the time of the interview in late February 2021. There were three days of their work that overlapped and the other days she and/or her husband were home with their children. During the beginning of the pandemic, all three of her children were home. All her children's schooling, including her son Nick's preschool, shut down in spring of 2020. Nick had virtual school meetings in the spring and in-person school resumed in the fall. A nanny, one of their extended family members, helped with care for their children in the spring and part of summer 2020. The children's grandparents typically assisted with her children's care a few days per week but were unable to at the beginning of the pandemic, due to concerns for COVID-19 infection. The grandparents resumed helping in the care of her children three days per week in summer 2020. The most salient experiences for Maria were her stress surrounding her newfound role of teacher in the HLE and the pressures she felt regarding her preschool child's virtual schooling.

Tasha

Tasha was a nurse coordinator and a working mother of two children both before and during the pandemic. She was working from home during each workday at the beginning of the pandemic, then went back to in-person work on Mondays only at the end of summer 2020. At the time of the interview in early March 2021, Tasha was going into work on Monday and Friday and was working from home the other weekdays, except Thursday. At the time of the interview, she was working Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday. Her mother helped some days with the care of her preschool-aged child, Beth, prior to the pandemic and continued to do so in the spring and over the summer while Tasha worked. Beth's preschool shut down in spring of 2020 and her grandmother took care of her during Tasha's workdays for spring and summer 2020. In the fall, in-person preschool resumed but Tasha became concerned with the increase in COVID cases and the potential exposures that occurred at school a few months into the school year and opted to keep her daughter home due to her daughter's health diagnosis. From that time to the time of the interview in early March, her daughter participated virtually through a preschool website where she could access materials, such as songs they would sing, and would join group time virtually. While home in fall/winter 2020 and spring 2021, her older daughter helped with the care of Beth upstairs for part of the day while Tasha was working downstairs, as the older daughter had virtual school in the mornings but was free in the afternoons. The most salient experiences for Tasha were taking on the role of teacher in the HLE during the pandemic, her experiences having more time allowing for more practices, and the benefits she experienced her daughter gain from utilizing screen technology as a care support.

Nicole

Nicole was a working mother of three children. She was married, and her husband continued to work outside of the home throughout the pandemic. Nicole's jobs changed over the course of the pandemic due to circumstances related to the pandemic and with the completion of her schooling. Nicole was in school and held three jobs over the course of the pandemic. Nicole was finishing up her degree to become a sign language interpreter in spring 2020. However, she opted to take an incomplete due to the circumstances surrounding the pandemic and finished her degree in December of 2020. While a full-time student, she was also teaching through an online language learning program and continued this job during the pandemic but cut back her hours with the company from 20 hours to 10 hours per week at the beginning of the pandemic when her children were home. She continued to work for them part time after beginning her new job as an interpreter in February 2021. All her children lost access to in-person preschool and elementary school during the spring of 2020. When her children's schools shut down, she decided to open a child care in her home for other children who didn't have in-person school. She indicated that she had worked with young children providing child care in her home in the past, but it had been quite some time since she had provided that service. After her son's preschool resumed in-person in fall 2020, she continued to provide care for her older children and children from other families who had virtual school until she began her job in January 2021 as a sign language interpreter in an educational setting, working five days per week. At that time, another adult took over the care of her children and the other children in her home, as her older children were only attending school in person a few days per week. For Nicole, the most significant experiences were the barriers to her role in the HLE in the pandemic context and her guilt surrounding utilization of screen technologies for care support.

Darya

Darya was a working mother of two children and was married. Darya was working as a professor at a university both before and during the pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, her husband was home on paternity leave with their infant daughter and she was working. When she began to work from home when shutdowns occurred in the spring of 2020, she and her husband split care duties starting at 8:30 a.m., with one of them working in the morning and the other working in the afternoon while the other parent provided care until about 4:30 p.m. Darya said they would then have evening family time and would sometimes continue to work in the evening after their children were asleep. Over the summer, a babysitter helped with care until the babysitter contracted COVID and could no longer provide support. A different babysitter started in the fall for her infant daughter and her preschool-aged son Patrick's school resumed in the fall. The babysitter continued to care for their infant daughter as mom and dad both returned to work. When preschool resumed, there was an instance of COVID exposure at Patrick's school that coincided with the babysitter getting COVID in February of 2021. Darya and her husband opted to keep Patrick home for two weeks and resumed splitting care duties the same way they had done at the beginning of the pandemic. Outside of this time, she and her husband were working their normal hours again. For Darya, the most salient experiences discussed were barriers to her role in the HLE and her perceptions of more time allowing for more literacy practices at home in the pandemic context.

Themes

The following section details the five superordinate themes that are the results of the study: A Focus on the Self as a Care Provider, A Focus on Barriers to Care Provider Role, A Focus on Time & Development in Literacy Practices, A Focus on Mother's Beliefs and the Influences of Family Literacy Practices, and A Focus on Interactions and Materials. The themes are

represented in Table 2 with an X indicating that a participant's account was represented within that theme. The parentheses indicate which research questions are addressed by each of the super-ordinate themes. These themes represent the essence of the phenomenon of working mothers' experiences in the home literacy environment during the pandemic which was the focus of this study.

Table 2

Results from the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Mothers' Experiences

Themes	Darya	Maria	Nicole	Tasha
A Focus on the Self as a Care Provider (RQ1)				
Perceptions of Role in the HLE	x	x	x	x
Supportive Relationships as Key to Role Fulfillment	x	x	x	x
A Focus on Barriers to Care Provider Role (RQ1)				
Perception of Home and Work Roles in Conflict	x	x	x	x
Perception of Work/Home Roles as in Conflict with the Self	x	x	x	x
Loss of Care, Relationships, Routine, and Expectations	x	x	x	x
A Focus on Time and Development in Literacy Practices (RQ1 and RQ2)				
Perceptions of the Impact of Time	x	x		x
Perceptions of the Impact of Development	x	x		
A Focus on Mothers' Beliefs and the Influences of Family Literacy Practices (RQ2)				
Beliefs About Literacy and Literacy Practices	x		x	
Beliefs About the Role of School	x		x	x
Influences of Literacy Practices	x	x		
A Focus on Interactions and Materials (RQ 2)				
Family Literacy Practices as Materials	x	x	x	x
Family Literacy Practices as Mostly Informal	x	x		x
Literacy Practices as Focused and Active		x	x	x
Technology as Educational vs. Problematic Tool and Care Support			x	x
Practices in the Home Beyond Parents: Other Family Members and School	x	x	x	x
A Focus on Disciplinary Literacy		x	x	

Theme 1: A Focus on the Self as a Care Provider

This first theme addresses the main research question of the study and captures what participants viewed and experienced as their role in the home literacy environment both during and outside of the context of the 2020 pandemic. Within this theme, the mothers described both their perceptions of their role and conveyed how the fulfillment of their role was supported by others.

Perceptions of Role in the Home Literacy Environment (HLE). While all the mothers described aspects of their role, the mothers had both shared and different factors that they described in the accounts of their experiences. The roles the mothers described inhabiting within this space were the role of observer, role of facilitator, role of teacher, and a role of ensurer of their children's well-being.

One of the shared roles noted by three of the mothers was the role of an observer of their child. The mothers shared their observations of their children's learning and development and talked about observing as one of the things they were doing to monitor and facilitate their child's literacy learning and development in the home, as well as other areas of development.

While talking with Darya, she described experiences with crayons in the home during the pandemic and her own observations:

> *I think his fine motor skills are developing, uh, because I see him hold a crayon*
>
> *differently…He used to be like this [hold pen in fisted grip/palmar grasp], you know, and*
>
> *now it's slightly more like this [shows a four/three finger grasp].*

Maria described watching her son during different activities in the home during the pandemic, including her child's planning and creation of a zipline: *"I would say, like just seeing him be, you know, get warmed up, everything started out, and him just running in and out of the basement door and like getting this supply and that, and measuring."*

Tasha also described being able to watch her daughter during her time at home: *"So um, seeing, like watching her grow, and like I've been able to notice like the shows that she's watchin'."*

All the mothers described that an aspect of their role was one of facilitating experiences for their children, and one mother gave an example of how her observations helped with her

interactions in the HLE. The specifics of the families' literacy practices will be discussed later when addressing the second research question. The description, however, demonstrates the intentional, active role that these mothers each described inhabiting within the HLE and how they facilitated activities.

Tasha continued in her description of her observation and how her observations helped to facilitate her child's learning:

> *So um, seeing, like watching her grow, and like I've been able to notice like the shows that she's watchin' - like they were talkin' about colors and like, she's pickin' up on all of her colors. She knows all of them, so I've gotten some flashcards to help like reinforce that, and so now I've got the flashcards with the colored, uh, shapes, and so we're trying to kind of expand and work on shapes a little bit. Um, same thing with the letters. Um, she has this chart that she looks at, it's you know, A to Z, and then there's like A has the apple and B has the ball, and so she'll go through and like pick out, you know, the letters and identify what picture goes with that letter, and so, like if I see somethin' on TV or even somethin' in the house, like around the kitchen, like I'll hand her a plate and I'll say, 'This is a plate. P for plate.'*

The other mothers also described inhabiting a role of facilitator. Nicole conveyed that she often set out materials that gave her children *"an invitation to play…I don't ever give them any instructions or tell them what they need to do."* Darya described setting out materials, as well: *"We always have crayons out."* Maria talked about facilitating the exploration of videos related to topics of her preschool son's interest: *"…finding some video on YouTube. Like obviously we would never let him surf it on his own, but um, to kind of show him what it is."*

While all the mothers facilitated activities for their children, only three of the mothers described viewing themselves as a teacher in their experiences in the home literacy environment. Tasha stated that she *"really relied on the school..."* prior to the pandemic to provide learning experiences and activities for her to do with her child at home. However, during the pandemic, she indicated a shift in her role: *"You know, it is up to me to do that now."* With this perceived change in the context of the pandemic, she described herself as a teacher within the experiences she provided for her child: *"...making sure that she's, you know, learning, you know, what she can and I'm doing the best at teaching, you know, those things that she needs to learn."* Nicole also described herself as inhabiting the role of teacher in the home literacy environment giving specific experiences, but also her assessment of herself in that role, both with her own children and in the care of other children: *"I'm a really good child care provider. I'm a really good teacher."* A third mother, Maria, also mentioned the role of teacher being expected of her in the context of the pandemic but it was a role that was perceived to be problematic: *"Like you're trying to be things that you're not really trained to be, like a teacher..."*

Beyond their child's learning in the home literacy environment, one of the mothers, Tasha, also described responsibilities related to her child's well-being to ensure her health and development. During the pandemic, Tasha indicated that her preschool-aged daughter, Beth, was *"...still getting outpatient speech therapy*," and that *"medically, she's busy, too"* as she took her daughter to different follow-up appointments on a regular basis. Tasha also mentioned her ongoing effort to *"[work] on like resources, trying to figure out, you know, like what's available to her through the [Name of] County DDS."*

The working mothers in this study discussed experiences where they occupied the role of observer, role of facilitator, role of teacher, and a role of ensurer of well-being in the HLE.

Outside of the experiences that illuminated the roles the mothers inhabited in the HLE, the mothers discussed the importance of different key relationships as essential to fulfilling these roles.

    Supportive Relationships as Key to Role Fulfillment. All the working mothers indicated that other people played an essential role in supporting them and their children in the home literacy environment during the pandemic. Maria discussed her spouse and how *"we're really good at…equally sharing the responsibilities."* She talked about how he did a variety of things such as transporting children and helping with cleaning and meal prep. Maria also discussed the children's grandparents playing a key role, but some of the interactions she described were at the home of the grandparents. Darya described how her spouse *"…ended up trading back and forth…"* with her so they could both have time for their work and to spend with their children. Darya also mentioned *"…the babysitter…when she is with him…"* who primarily cared for her younger daughter when preschool resumed but also cared for her preschool-aged son, Patrick, and the support the different sitters provided throughout the pandemic. During the pandemic, Tasha relied on Beth's older sister while she worked from home: *"her sister kind of watches her for me for the afternoons."* All the mothers also described literacy practices that these key people engaged in with their children, which will be discussed later.

    The support from these relationships enabled the mothers to accomplish their own goals and added to the home literacy environment for each family. Mothers felt that the shared act of child care through the time spent with these key people was beneficial to their fulfillment of their roles at work and at home.

Theme 2: A Focus on Barriers to Care Provider Role

A second theme that emerged from the mother's accounts further expounds upon the main research question of the study and focuses on the mothers' experiences of pandemic-specific barriers to the fulfillment of their role in the home literacy environment. All four mothers discussed experiences of their home and work roles in conflict with each other, experiences of their work/home roles as in conflict with the self, and experiences of pandemic-related losses, including the loss of care, relationships, routine, and expectations.

Perception of Home and Work Roles in Conflict. One category of barriers the mothers experienced was a perception of their home and work roles in conflict. All four mothers described experiences that outlined these conflicts during the pandemic, but for three of the mothers - Darya, Nicole, and Tasha - the experiences discussed were related primarily to each of them having to both work from home and care for their children at home at different points throughout the pandemic. This change was due to school closures as well as the loss of other people who had previously provided care support.

Darya, a professor, talked about the challenges of working from home at the beginning and throughout the pandemic and how hard it was for her to accomplish work tasks while at home: *"if we have both kids home, then, uh, I'm lucky to get four hours, you know, during the day, to get anything done."* When COVID cases caused her son's preschool to shut down in winter 2021, she states her family:

> *kind of went back to how we had been operating last March where my husband and I*
> *basically just split our days in half. One of us worked in the morning, one of us worked*
> *in the afternoon. Um, and we all worked from home and uh…just made it work.*

Nicole, who prior to the pandemic was going to school full-time and worked teaching online part-time, had to figure out how to be home with her children and not lose any money from her jobs:

> *I was the one that had to rearrange my schedule…and make it work. And still, somehow, have the same amount of income. And go to school. Uh, it was very stressful. So anyway, I rearranged all of my hours, like I said- I started working at night instead of during the day with [online teaching company]. So that started March 15th, I switched to nights with [online teaching company] and reduced my hours. And then, um, the following week, I had kids back in my home again.*

In addition to the reduction in her normal hours, which Nicole said went from 20 to 10 hours per week with the online teaching company, she also took on a new job role. The kids back in her home in the above quote were not just her children but other children whose parents needed care for them during the day, so she began to run an in-home child care, which was something she had done in the past: *"A Waldorf/Montessori-inspired child care."* She also made the decision to take an incomplete in school for spring semester 2020: *"I couldn't finish. I was supposed to be graduating and I couldn't finish because…I couldn't get everything done. I didn't have enough hours in the day anymore because I didn't have any child care."*

Tasha, who worked from home, like Darya, mainly got her work done in the afternoons when her older child could provide care support after her virtual schooling. She described how her work and care roles in the home literacy environment were difficult to balance:

> *I always feel like there's so many things open…like left to do. And so, like, I've started to try…I set a goal, or like a list of things for the day that I like, have to get done, and then knowing that everything else will still be there the next day and it's totally fine. But, um,*

being okay to follow up with that on another day. Um, 'cause, I mean, it can get

overwhelming, just knowing that, you know, there's so much on you at work, and then at

home, and then personally, and with school for both of the kids, it's just…it can be a

lot…so it's just learnin' how to like, prioritize to get done just for today.

Maria continued to go into work as a nurse practitioner in the medical field throughout the pandemic but also felt her own added pressures during the pandemic when she had work demands in the evening at home:

so good and bad day I would say centers around, maybe how, I don't know it's kinda

vague, but how we're all feeling, or like how much burden [my husband] or I have with

work, in juggling, you know, outside stuff. Like I would say, like this week, each of us

actually had um, for whatever reason, randomly, we each had a video meeting one night

this week, so, you know, it just happened to be like every other…you know, he had one

last night, I had one Tuesday.

Perception of Work/Home Roles as in Conflict with the Self. Maria, Tasha, Nicole, and Darya also described pandemic-related experiences in which the fulfillment of their roles at work and in the home literacy environment conflicted with their sense of self or their own markers of well-being. They all described experiences during the pandemic within their perceived role in the HLE to which they attributed negative effects on their physical and mental health.

Maria discussed feelings of pressure and anxiety over what she felt was her role in the home literacy environment in getting her son to participate in his virtual preschool at home in the beginning of the pandemic:

And I know me, probably me a little more than my husband, was like, 'He's gotta get on

this Zoom' and you know, let's make sure he's like interacting, just kind of like he's gotta

get…almost like my own anxiety…like he's gotta get the most out of this, like he's got to

connect, and then, so I would say in the very beginning, it was a little pressure from me,

or internal pressure, to… make sure he was engaging with his preschool.

Darya shared experiences of how she felt the build-up of work over time both in her career

and in the home during the pandemic made her feel drained:

I think day-to-day, um [pauses] there's a part of me that's just surviving. And there's a

part of me that's just living my life, enjoying time with my kids. A bad day is spending

more time, like, caring for my kids than getting any work done, so…um, so it's not all

bad, right? It's like a lot of fun, cute playing, and you know? So it's not like…I don't feel

actively bad about it. What I think happens to me more is sort of like the slow build of

like, um, getting behind on work and having a house that's a total disaster because-

that's the other thing, when my kids are home all day, all the time - my house is always a

mess. So again, like, any given day maybe none of that…is so extreme, but after, you

know, like several days of that or after a year of that, um, there is definitely like a buildup

of being behind on work and uh, having my house in a disaster, and like playing

Pokémon for the millionth time, you know; it's all the little things that start to build up

and just make me feel more drained, maybe.

Tasha talked about how she was so busy with work for her job and work in caring for her

children at home during the pandemic that she was unable to take care of herself:

Um, and then for me, like, my work um, pretty much, work is it. Like, I haven't

personally, like followed up with any of my doctor's offices visits- I just don't have time.

Um, like, my dentist, I've cancelled that several times. Um, I don't know, there is really

no time for me to take a break for myself. So, yeah…a lot of time tryin' to organize

everything.

Nicole brought up the importance of mental health and talked about her experiences of her

work and home roles as detracting from her mental health using a metaphor of drowning:

At the beginning of the pandemic, in April, I started taking, um, [depression medication].

Because like I said, everything was so crazy and I felt like the stigma with mental health

is getting better but it's still something that needs to be talked about. And so I just wanted

to make sure I mentioned that that changed everything completely for me. And really, oh

my gosh, I would not have gotten through this pandemic without it. So, it's been a game

changer because it was so, so, so hard, at the beginning. Um, so, that also helped with

getting in the routine, and like, you know. I guess- I guess it was May because I think it

was about two months after the pandemic started and I was just drowning… Oh my gosh,

it was so hard. It's really hard. To go from like, having some free time and like, kind of

feeling like you're finally…getting where you want to be and like everything is kind of

fitting so nicely. And you have child care worked out and you know, whatever. And then

all of a sudden, having nothing, but still having the same amount of responsibilities. It

was just like..it was just so much.

She went on to discuss taking an incomplete in school that semester and thus, missing out on

a job she was supposed to start in September 2020, as experiences that were particularly difficult,

but that starting depression medication helped her to reframe her experience:

So [depression medication]. That's all I have to say about it. You know it didn't fix it of

course, but it certainly helped my mental state be able to frame it in a better way that did

help me fix it. I went from feeling like, 'Nothing is ever gonna be successful and I can't

do this and now I'm just gonna be stuck, you know, in a bullshit job or whatever for the

rest of my life' to being like 'Okay, cool. It's just a few months, cool. And I can like

make something better.' And I did! And it worked. And I was actually really happy

doing what I was doing.

While the conflicts surrounding each of their roles and their own well-being differed, each working mother felt that at some point in the pandemic that the fulfillment of their role in the HLE, as they each defined it, impacted their welfare.

Loss of Care, Relationships, Routine, and Expectations. In this last category of barriers to their care provider role in the HLE, all the mothers discussed pandemic-related losses that impacted their role in the home literacy environment. These losses included the shutdown of preschool and support of other care providers, the loss of relationships due to pandemic precautions, the loss of a normal routine, and a loss of expectations, or what the mothers had envisioned would be happening instead, during the pandemic.

Loss of Care. The four mothers all experienced a loss of in-person preschool due to shutdowns at the beginning of the pandemic. They described the shutdowns lasting from March until schools resumed in the fall, with some families participating in a virtual option for varying periods of time in March-May 2020. However, Tasha and Darya gave examples of experiences at other times after the initial shutdowns that their children lost in-person preschool. Tasha, whose child had health issues, became concerned once cases started increasing again in late fall 2020:

I don't know, it was…it was before Thanksgiving – like all the numbers started

increasing and everything, um, and there were some exposures, like at the school, um,

like, potential exposures…I guess- some employees, um, had come in. So I just wasn't

comfortable, like with her health, um, diagnosis and all. Um so, I pulled her out of in

person, just kind of until that, um, I guess…calmed down a little bit. So she's been doing,

uh, virtual preschool, um, still Wednesday and Thursday.

Tasha's daughter was still attending virtual preschool at the time of the interview, so she had

been home again for about four months.

Darya also experienced additional losses of preschool beyond the beginning of the

pandemic through shutdowns related to exposures in her son's classroom: "*January and*

February between the weather and then um, [Patrick] was out of school for a couple of weeks

because of a COVID exposure." Darya's family also relied on the support of a babysitter in

summer 2020 but lost care again when the babysitter got COVID: "*she was a college student so*

at some point in the summer... I think she actually got COVID over the summer, so she stopped

coming. So then we were without child care again for a while through the summer."

Loss of Relationships. Another loss described by the mothers was the loss of

relationships in the HLE due to pandemic precautions. Maria and Nicole described the loss of

grandparents for varying lengths of time during the pandemic, when they had been a regular part

of their children's lives prior to the pandemic. Nicole's mother used to come over to watch her

preschool-aged son from the time he was small but stopped with the pandemic: "*He lost his*

grandma for a year after seeing her three days a week, just the two of them, for two years."

Nicole said time together resumed once his grandmother received the second round of her

COVID-19 vaccination in February 2021. The grandparents of Maria's children also missed out

on time together at the grandparents' home:

I guess, in the beginning of the pandemic, we…we were not…we stopped using

grandparents….because of fear of giving them anything, so we switched to paying a

> *nanny, well… a cousin, but we used her as a nanny to come into the house three days a*
>
> *week, instead of using the grandparents for those days.*

Outside of grandparents, two of the mothers discussed the loss of peers and other adults in the lives of their children. Virtual preschool allowed for peer connections in the home for Tasha's daughter, Beth, but she felt that there was still a loss of physical connection due to her experiences:

> *Like I know, like she misses her friends, so like when they do the group time on tablet,*
>
> *like all her friends are coming up and then [Beth] kisses like the screen, you know, she's*
>
> *wanting to like hug and kiss everybody, so it's like, um, I know she misses actually*
>
> *physically being around her friends and um, like making those connections, probably,*
>
> *yeah- I know she misses that.*

Maria talked about how, outside of the pandemic, her children would have had interactions with other adults and peers both in and outside of the home: *"they had time with other adults like at school, or friends' houses…or…not that we, it's not like we were having sleepovers really."*

Loss of Routine. With the loss of school and the fluctuating state of the pandemic, three of the mothers described experiences with loss of a steady routine at home. Nicole described her feelings surrounding the shifts in routine for her and her family in general and gave an example of her experience with changes in routine in coordinating drop-offs for her children after preschool had resumed full-time and her older children's school moved to a hybrid model (some in-person and some online), when she was working her new job as an interpreter in January/February 2021:

> *And I feel like every time we get into a routine- and we get a nice rhythm, and everyone is*
>
> *really succeeding, finally – something changes again and it's like ah, shit. Like I have to*

find new child care, or we have to change our days that kids are coming over, or I have

to change my work schedule, or my husband has to figure out how to get home early

because now we have to do this, and this, and this and… Like getting the kids to school

right now is really complicated. [pauses] Um, and that's been really frustrating because

there hasn't been before-school care and I have to be at work at 8:30 and my kids don't

start school at [Montessori school] until 9:15. And they used to be allowed to be dropped

off at 8:45 and so [husband] could do it, but now they're not allowed to be dropped off

until 9 and he has to be at work at 9. And even with (Will), I literally have to drop him off

exactly at 8 a.m. Like we're sitting in the parking lot at 7:50 every morning [pause] so I

can get to work on time.

Tasha said *"there's been so many changes, it's hard, really, to keep track"* when

thinking of her experiences of the pandemic overall and described how it was hard to maintain a

routine, particularly at the pandemic's onset, because she couldn't plan:

Um, I couldn't plan, like, too far in advance, 'cause you know, it was hard to know

whether or not things were open, or what schedules were gonna be like. It was really just

kind of a day-to-day operation…every day brought something different, it seems like.

She talked about how this lack of a stable routine continued throughout the pandemic and was

difficult for Beth:

It's hard to say that we like have a routine, I mean, because we really don't. Um, and like

I said, it (laughs) flows from one day to the next; we just have to figure it out as we go.

So, I know that's hard for her, like, not having a routine. And so, like sometimes she

fights that a little bit. Which I mean, I understand it…it's just (laughs) kinda how things

are going right now.

Darya also talked about losses in routine due to shutdowns and how the shifts in schedule cause difficulties during the pandemic. She described each day without care as triage:

...I feel like I have no sense of typical right now because it's like every day, we have to sort of look at the calendar and figure out...it's like triage. I guess it's constant triage: What do you have that you can't miss? What do I have that I can't miss? And how do we make it all fit together?

Darya also talks about how tenuous she felt any adherence to a routine was and the difficulties when things had to change:

I think the worst days are where there are like meetings scheduled that have to get cancelled or shifted or rearranged because that creates some additional stress, um...just because of having to coordinate with other people's schedules, you know? Um, yeah, it's all...it's just all about time, I think, right now. There's just not enough time. If things [pause] if-if the plans don't go as planned, then it's sort of like everything blows up. It's all held together by very thin threads right now, I think.

Loss of Expectations. Nicole discussed the expectation of time to herself while at home and how the pandemic had altered that reality. She talked about how she used to have two hours of time to herself on Wednesday afternoons and how that expected time was gone with the loss of school and care:

It was one of the most...like dramatic changes of my life. Because one day I woke up having, like I wouldn't say all this time to myself but as you can see on my Wednesday schedule it was packed, yes, but I had that two hours of time to myself from 2 to 4. That was like my time, you know? And then all of the sudden, I had like zero, none, zero.

Maria discussed a loss of expectations about her time spent at home with her children, as well. The weekday she had off continued during the pandemic but the loss of expectations came in having all three of her children home, rather than just her youngest child:

> *I guess an example is like the day I'm home with all three of the kids. I think maybe it is a little bit of grief over what I expected, you know, for this year. Like I expected to have a first grader in school all day on Tuesdays and my preschooler, you know, half the day at preschool, and I would have that quality morning with my two-year-old. And instead, my Tuesdays are…and I can find the silver lining in it but…you know, I'm popping up and down to make sure my first grader is doing his work all day, my three-year-old is, or two-year-old at the… I guess most of the year, is you know, emptying the freezer of all its contents when I'm not there, and then my preschooler is just drawing, like he's generally really easy-going but it..it...I think it feels…I like…I feel like I'm one of those clowns, like kind of truly just like the juggling thing of like oh, running to put laundry in, running to start dinner, making sure someone doesn't get killed or hurt, and then make sure like [oldest son's name]'s learning what an adjective is, like, for an example. So I would say when I finish that day in the moment, I might, you know, get angry or frustrated or have to take a time out for myself. And then I.. But then I would say by the end of it that I'm sort of an optimistic person, so I...usually by the end of it when everything is tidied and done, and we've all survived and everyone's peacefully sleeping, I usually have a sense of like, 'That was a decent day…'*

The mothers all experienced the loss of preschool and other forms of care at various points in the pandemic and three of the mothers experienced working from home for some, or

most, of the pandemic. These changes in the HLE presented barriers to their perceived success in their role fulfillment within this environment.

Theme 3: A Focus on Time and Development in Literacy Practices

The mother's accounts of their experiences brought to light "A Focus on Time and Development in Literacy Practices," further illuminating their perception of the pandemic changes to their role as well as specific literacy practices within this context. This theme addresses both research questions in further discussing the mother's roles and in examining the changes over time in literacy practices in this context.

While there were many barriers discussed, one of the changes that mothers indicated was a positive and had a major impact on their family literacy practices in the home during the pandemic was more time. Darya and Tasha talked about how, when working from home, they had more time together to spend with their children and to engage them in activities. Tasha described many of the practices she engaged her child in and noted that she had time to *"make those connections more"* with her preschool-aged child and that *"The pandemic really has caused us to like slow down, take a step back, and kinda see, you know that takin' a break from things is okay. And like focusing on other things is okay, too."* Darya talked about how she felt the activities she engaged her preschool-aged son in didn't change much but that the time the pandemic allowed her contributed to more interactions within the HLE: *"It was just more of the things we would generally do any other day of the week, so more reading because we had more time together at home."* Maria did not work from home during the pandemic, but also described some of the activities that her children were getting to do more often because they had more time at home: *"time outdoors…a lot of creative play and time to explore, and, you know, do art."* These mothers felt this time at home contributed to more literacy practices being engaged in by

their children, and for the mothers working from home, more opportunities for them to initiate and participate in these practices with their children.

A second factor that both Darya and Maria identified as impacting their practices in the HLE, was their child's development. Before discussing some of the changes in the interactions or activities they engaged in, Darya noted that the changes over time within the pandemic with her son were related to his development rather than any pandemic-related factors: *"so I would say the…the things that have changed…and I don't think this is pandemic-related so much as just the fact that he's gotten older…"* Maria also noted the role of development as necessitating some changes in practices and that what they were doing at the time of the interview versus before the pandemic and earlier in the pandemic was *"…Kind of similar [to before] but just he…you know, he's a little further along."*

For these mothers, both having more time with their children, as well as their child's individual development, played a role in influencing literacy practices over time during the pandemic.

Theme 4: A Focus on Mothers' Beliefs and the Influences of Family Literacy Practices

A fourth theme that emerged from the working mothers' accounts of their experiences which helps to answer the second research question of this study was the mothers' beliefs about literacy and literacy practices. This theme demonstrates both changes that occurred during the pandemic in their beliefs and what remained consistent over time. None of the mothers were asked specifically about their beliefs surrounding literacy but three of the four mothers talked about these beliefs during their interviews. These mothers talked about their beliefs about literacy and literacy practices, beliefs about the role of school, and the influences of literacy practices.

Beliefs About Literacy and Literacy Practices. Both Nicole and Darya talked about their beliefs about literacy and literacy practices during the interview. Darya's beliefs surfaced when she defined the term literacy during the interview: *"When I think of literacy, I'm thinking of reading and language"* and then tied this definition back to her experiences with literacy practices in the home.

Nicole talked about academics and their beliefs surrounding when academic learning begins: *"...for our family, like academics doesn't really start until first grade. It's like cool if they learn stuff along the way and I set up a lot of learning opportunities but it's not like [karate chop motion], you know."*

Beliefs About the Role of School. Three of the four mothers talked about their beliefs about the role of school and how that juxtaposed their beliefs about how and when they engaged in family literacy practices in the HLE.

Nicole talked about her beliefs about the role of preschool: *"But again, for us, preschool's always been about play, and the social-emotional and we've never felt like our kids needed it for academic reasons..."* Despite her feelings about children not needing preschool for academics, at another point in our discussion, she also indicated a reliance on preschool for academics once preschool resumed in the fall of 2020: *"Now, since he's started (preschool), since September, I don't think I've done any [Montessori] works with him at all. But that's why we send him to school."*

Darya described her perception of the differences in activities between home and preschool as unstructured and structured, respectively:

> *I think when he's at school, there's more of a schedule, where it's like now we're doing*
>
> *this, now we're doing that. Now, you know, there's more activities- there's more*
>
> *structured activities. When he's at home, we haven't done a lot of structured activities.*

When describing her experiences with activities at home in support of this, she talked about following her son's lead and having that direct the choice of activities.

For Tasha, her beliefs about her role in the home literacy environment and the role of school changed over the course of the pandemic:

> *I was trying – like mostly reliant on like school and therapists and those things. And they*
>
> *would give me things to work on, which I would, but it probably wasn't as focused, as it*
>
> *has been since. You know, it has been up to me to do that now.*

Influences of Literacy Practices. Both Darya and Maria brought up the influences of literacy practices in the home and how for them, child interest was a driving force. Maria talked about how they would seek out books or digital media based on her preschool-aged child's interests:

> *And trying to get stuff in front of him that he enjoys. Or you know if he wants to learn*
>
> *about a new, he's you know really into space for a couple months, and then he's really*
>
> *into, you know, he likes numbers…and how big are things. You know, trying to get books*
>
> *from the library about topics or finding some video on YouTube.*

Darya talked about how her preschool-aged child's interests aligned with her husband's interests: *"[Patrick]'s interests are very much aligned with my husband's in that my husband grew up reading comic books and playing like these…I guess what are called World Building Games."* Her description also shows the generational sharing of interests in literacy experiences.

Overall, from the working mother's accounts, their beliefs remained the same during the pandemic, except for Tasha, who felt the need to do more at home when the role of the school was altered by the pandemic.

Theme 5: A Focus on Interactions and Materials

The final theme is the mothers' focus on interactions and materials in their family literacy practices in the HLE and addresses the second research question, focusing on how literacy practices changed in this context. The mothers talked about the materials they utilized and the interactions that occurred within this environment both before and throughout the pandemic. The mothers talked about literacy materials in the home, the types of interactions that occurred, the role of technology, practices with other family members and from school, and disciplinary literacy.

Family Literacy Practices as Materials. All four mothers discussed, and some showed on video, materials in their home that they felt were related to their child's literacy learning. The mothers didn't indicate that the materials had changed since the pandemic, except for some select materials in relationship to their child's interests and development. This subsection of this theme focuses on the 'what,' or the tools, that the mothers and children were using in the HLE.

Maria walked through her house and shared the following items: *"workbooks…pens," "pencils, crayons, markers," 'art supplies," "books," "readers"* (beginning reader books), *"board games," "puzzles," "placemats,"* and *"a playdough drawer"* when talking about her materials that she felt helped her preschool-aged child's literacy learning. When mentioning books, she also mentioned the location of the books: about how there were books on different levels of her home, upstairs and downstairs. The placemats shown on the family's dining table

were from a recent interest in space and had both illustrations and information about space: *"they've been into these like placemats that teach them about space."*

Tasha recalled different tools in her home during her interview, including: *"flashcards with the colored shapes," "[alphabet] chart," "book[s]," "dry erase boards," "flipbooks, where you're supposed to identify different things in pictures," "tons of crayons," "she's got paper all over, we've got construction paper,"* and *"loop scissors."* She mentioned that the loop scissors were given to her during the pandemic by her daughter's school so that she could work on cutting at home.

Darya discussed having a lot of books in their home, and the different types of books she had, including *"chapter books"* and a *"....comic strip…is bound into books…"* She talked about how they moved from picture books, to comic strip books, to chapter books based on her child's development and interest. In addition to books, Darya noted that *"crayons"* and *"…workbooks that have like mazes"* were materials in the home she felt contributed to her preschool-aged child's literacy learning.

Nicole, like the other mothers, also mentioned books as a material as well as worksheets that her older daughter's teacher would send home for her son at the beginning of the pandemic so he could also do worksheets like his sister if he wanted to do so. Nicole walked to her *"Montessori Room"* and began to show materials there that she felt benefitted her preschool-aged child's literacy learning: a *"moveable alphabet,"* an *"[alphabet] wooden puzzle,"* a *"puzzle where you can do blends,"* a *"wooden tracing board…the upper and then the lowercase"* and a matching puzzle with *"letters that go with the pictures."*

In their discussions of materials in the home, the working mothers all mentioned some common materials. First, all four of the mothers mentioned books of various forms as materials.

Other commonalities included listing materials for writing, including writing utensils and paper. Two of the mothers also mentioned toys and charts that focused on alphabet knowledge.

Family Literacy Practices as Mostly Informal. In describing their family literacy practices in the home, three of the mothers indicated that they felt that either some or all of the practices in the HLE were more informal, engaging in activities or interactions with their children as they naturally arose in the home, rather than approaching interactions with a specific plan for what would be taught during those interactions. Each of the three mothers - Darya, Maria, and Tasha- gave examples of experiences that they felt highlighted the informality of their interactions.

Darya indicated that she felt that all of the interactions that occurred in their HLE were informal both before and during the pandemic. She said: *"When he's at home, we haven't done a lot of structured activities. We sort of just follow him."* She talked about structured activities as those where there was a schedule, or a specific goal in mind. Rather than these activities, she mentioned *"imaginative play"* as an activity that occurred both pre-pandemic and at the beginning of the pandemic. She also discussed the informality of her families' literacy practices and mentioned reading, talking, and oral storytelling. One example she gave of the informal interactions involving reading was how they would read together often but explicit teaching only occurred in the moment rather than being a pre-planned part of the interaction both before and during the pandemic:

> *We read a ton with our kids and we always have, because we all enjoy it. We spend a lot of time talking, um…making sense of, I don't know, just like learning new words, talking about phrases – you know if there's like a phrase in a book or something, we talk about what it means... Um, he was just getting to the age- I mean, pre-pandemic, [Patrick] would have been three and a half- so we would talk about letters or sounds. All of this*

would just be as it came up in conversation, we never like sat down and tried to do a

lesson. Um, and then, on weekends we would do more like crafty things where we'd try to

make something out of cardboard or paint something, or... But again, the distinction

between like playing and trying to help him learn…was and is pretty blurry.

In addition to reading aloud, interactions surrounding print also occurred in the routine of the day-to-day as opportunities arose, such as when Darya recalled making breakfast at the beginning of the pandemic: "*This would be if like we were making like pancakes, or muffins, some kind of quick bread. He likes to measure things and dump them in the bowl. I would tell him the steps to follow,*" and indicated that she followed the recipe but would communicate the directions to her son. Oral storytelling was also a frequent occurrence in their household. Darya indicated that this began before the pandemic and continued throughout the pandemic:

We make up a story before bed. That's like the last thing we do before he goes to sleep.

And, um, he'll start with like, you know, these characters from, um, from whatever

universe he's interested in at the time, or sometimes he combines them, so there's some

Pokémon and some Mario. And then, makes up like this whole plot of things they're

doing and where they're going, and what's happening. And it's like a serialized story; it

goes from night to night, and he builds on it. Um, and it's always- usually it's my

husband who does this with him. Sometimes me. …And I think that sort of interaction he

probably only gets at home.

Tasha also described a few of the practices that occurred in the HLE as informal. She talked about "encouraging" reading and writing through trying to interact with books each day before the pandemic. Encouraging included book access as well as trying to read books together.

Interactions with books continued throughout the pandemic and Tasha described letting Beth take the lead during book interactions:

> *Oh! And the other thing, she's actually reading. Well, sitting down and lookin' through-pagin' through -books…that was…she never really did that (laughs/smiles). So, she's actually like taking time to look at pictures-talking about the pictures that she sees in the book, so that's neat, too, to watch her do.*

Tasha also described other activities that she felt were helpful to her child's reading and writing, including block play, painting, and imaginative play. Imaginative play for Beth took place in her play kitchen at home. She also listed putting on music that Beth liked as something she felt was helpful.

Maria also mentioned that some of the interactions with her child she felt arose naturally in the HLE and indicated that these practices occurred both pre-pandemic and during the pandemic. These interactions included having access to different materials that he could use at any time, daily read alouds, literacy in play, and using current interests to choose what materials to access. Maria mentioned that her son had "easy access" to materials like pens, pencils, crayons, markers, and activity books whenever he or his siblings wanted to use them and that they would sometimes encourage him to write for a purpose with the materials by making cards for friends and family. Maria had clarified that she felt that both of these activities weren't "overtly active."

Reading aloud daily with Maria's son was also brought up as a practice. She also mentioned two instances of literacy that came up during the pandemic in the context of her children's play, including using books to make *"a pathway to walk"* and how *"they have their list of things they want to get from [hardware store]"* in building their own zipline. Maria

indicated that following her son's interests were also key in practices that naturally came up, and she gave examples of experiences such as those in YouTube and books:

> *…and trying to get stuff in front of him that he enjoys. Or you know if he wants to learn about a new, he's you know really into space for a couple of months, and then he's really into, you know, he likes numbers, and kind of what things... how big are things. You know, trying to get books from the library about topics or finding some video on YouTube. Like obviously we would never let him surf it on his own but um, to kind of show him what it is.*

Maria described this practice of following interests as one of the "active" things they were doing but she didn't mention any explicit teaching of literacy concepts.

Darya, Tasha, and Maria all discussed informal practices. Darya felt that all her practices were informal in the fact that they happened as they just came up in their home, while the other two mothers described just some of their practices as happening in this manner. These practices included reading aloud, interactions with print in the day-to-day routine or when following their child's interests, fine motor activities like block building, and oral language in the form of storytelling, imaginative play, and music.

Literacy Practices as Focused and Active. In describing their family literacy practices in the home, three of the mothers indicated that they felt that some or all the practices in their HLE were focused and active, with the mothers focusing on whether there was intentional planning and explicit teaching involved in their interactions. Maria, Nicole, and Tasha all shared experiences where they engaged their children in activities with these focused intentions.

Maria. Maria described some of her practices in the HLE as "active" both before, and during, the pandemic and included instances of focusing on reading or spelling in her examples:

> *I'm trying to think of active things we were doing. Um, I would say, I mean, reading to*
>
> *him, you know, he tends…our preschooler now tends to want to know like oh, 'Well, how*
>
> *would you spell that?,' you know has expressed interest in that, so you know, just pointing*
>
> *him to like the workbooks we have…*

Maria indicated that they were intentional to read to Nick every day before the pandemic

began and that read alouds continued after the pandemic started. At the time of the interview,

her son was recalling language from the stories in his own retellings: *"…he says, 'Why don't*

you read this book to me and then I'll, you know, read (uses air quotes for read) it back to you?'

You know, he'll memorize it and then read it."

 Maria discussed that they *"didn't add anything major"* in their literacy practices during the

pandemic, except for the fact that she was actively working toward engaging her son in his

virtual preschool in the spring of 2020. *"There was a little period I think of stress that like we*

really wanted to engage with the…the virtual preschool." She talked about how the virtual

option lasted a couple of months and she really worked for him to participate for the first four or

five weeks but then:

> *I realized like, it wasn't…he didn't really want to, you know, but we would always offer it*
>
> *and then say, 'Oh, your class is meeting, do you want to get on for a little bit?' And*
>
> *sometimes he'd say, 'Yes,' and sometimes he'd say, 'No, I'm already playing.'*

Nicole. When Nicole discussed practices with her family both before and during the

pandemic, she felt like they weren't doing much before the pandemic began. However, at the

beginning of the pandemic and throughout the pandemic, she described intentional interactions

involving alphabet knowledge (letter identification and letter-sound correspondence) and fine

motor activities to help her preschool-aged son with writing.

For supporting alphabet knowledge as part of emergent reading, she showed some of the materials in her home and described the use: *"So we have a moveable alphabet. So he can…he can't do the moveable alphabet but we support those letters… with growth. So identifying just the letters."* Nicole would work with her son on letter identification with the Montessori moveable alphabet. She also described a puzzle where they worked on letter sounds: *"[Will] was like, 'This is /a/' (made short vowel sound) 'Put the /a/ where it goes.'"*

Nicole also described the use of writing utensils and hole punches to support emergent writing skills at the beginning of the pandemic with her daughter and at the time of the interview with her preschool-aged son:

> *We were doing a lot of tracing, so…to strengthen those fine motor skills. Um, so like I'd draw a line, and then a curvy line, and then like a zigzag line and then she would have to trace the line and then use a hole punch, a pin punch, and punch along the lines, which also strengthens those fine motor skills. And that's what [Will] is doing now. So [Will] can do that now. But that's like early literacy. Early writing. So... we did that.*

Tasha. Before the pandemic, Tasha felt like she just encouraged reading and focused on activities from the school, whereas during the pandemic, she became more intentional about the interactions: *"It probably wasn't as focused, um, as it has been since. You know, it has been up to me to do that now."*

Tasha discussed specific activities that she and her daughter would focus on, including alphabet knowledge and oral language: She used an alphabet chart in which they would *"identify what picture goes with that letter."* They also worked with *"flipbooks, where you're supposed to identify different things in pictures"* and *"flashcards"* for color identification. She

also would show her daughter letters and have her identify them: *"I can show her any letter in the alphabet and like, she knows what that letter is."*

Tasha also discussed writing skills:

> *I would sit with her and like write with her or like show her: 'Well, here's a straight line. Can you do this?' Or we've got, like one of those, um, I don't know what you call them-like Etch a Sketch, well not the Etch a Sketch but the dry-erase boards, um, so we like play with that sometimes. Or um, just more of, I guess, activities that I could do with her.*

Many of the practices described occurred as part of the routine, but were moments where Tasha intentionally incorporated literacy learning. One literacy practice was when they spent time in the kitchen: *"like around the kitchen, like I'll hand her a plate and I'll say, 'This is a plate. P for plate.'"* Tasha mentioned that generally if they are together, she will label or discuss objects in the environment: *"if we see things, um, talking about it and trying to like identify things for her."*

Three of the mothers felt that the practices in their HLEs were focused and active, with the mothers describing the intentionality behind the activity and the explicit teaching involved in their interactions. Maria, Nicole, and Tasha focused on oral language development, alphabet knowledge in the form of letter identification and letter-sound correspondence, and fine motor activities that supported their children's writing.

Technology as Educational vs. Problematic Tool and Care Support. A theme that emerged within the conversations with the mothers were the role of technology or digital media in the context of the pandemic. Tasha and Nicole described the use of technology in keeping their children occupied. However, one of the mothers felt that it was educational, and the other mother felt conflicted and guilty about using technology for this purpose.

Tasha. Tasha worked from home throughout the pandemic and was still working from home three days per week at the time of the interview. Tasha described the use of digital media in helping her get work done: *"When I'm trying to work and do some things, she really pretty much either stays on her tablet or she has her shows to keep her occupied."*

When asked about what she played or watched on her tablet, Tasha responded:

> *So her playlist consists of, um: Bounce Patrol- that's like a YouTube, um, they're like four or five people and they sing all kinds of songs and they dance and um, she loves that. Cocomelon, um, she loves all their songs. Um, who else? Um, Elmo- Sesame Street, has always been big. Um, oh, and then there's…it's called 'See It, Say It, Sign It'- I forget the man's name who does it, but um, he does sign language, um and like, sings to like different songs, and puts the hand signs with it; she likes watchin' that. Um, really anything with music.* (Bounce Patrol, n.d.; Cocomelon, n.d.; Hartmann, n.d.; Sesame Street, n.d.).

Her daughter would also access a website with virtual school supports:

> *They loaned us a tablet, so we just click onto the website – um, [teacher name] actually created that website, it's really neat, um – we just click on it, um, for the Zoom link and so it takes us right in and then there are, um, like reading activities, books, um her teacher is like reading books. Um, there's all the songs that they do for group times, so she'll play those and sing those. Um, it's interactive, I like the site.*

Overall, Tasha spoke positively about her daughters' experiences with her tablets and digital media. She felt that the technology was helpful both in keeping her daughter's attention and in helping her child learn and have school experiences when she was absent from the physical classroom for health reasons.

Nicole. Nicole was also working from home during the pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, she was balancing her work, her college coursework, and her children at home. She said that *"the kids watched so much TV. Like I just couldn't…"* at that time when she was trying to accomplish her schoolwork and maintain her other roles. Nicole discussed how the use of television was different during the pandemic - an indicator of a bad day - and the guilt she felt in using it:

> *A bad day is when we're all fighting and we have nothing to do and I have to put on…well, a bad day is always when I choose to put on the TV.. We all… So typically, before pandemic in our house, we only watch TV on the weekends. And that's any screens at all. So we don't do any screens at all on weekdays [text removed…] Um, so a bad day is when everyone is fighting and I put on a show…because no one ever wants to turn it off, including me. Because it's such, like a…mindless activity and it keeps them quiet, and I can just do whatever I want. So, it's always hard for all of us to turn it off. And then it ends up being two hours and then I just feel incredibly guilty and terrible. That's a bad day. That's a really bad day…I always feel bad about that.*

The use of technology in the home literacy environment as a caregiving tool was used during the pandemic by Nicole and Tasha. Both mothers indicated that the television and tablet were used during the pandemic to help occupy their children when other tasks needed to be accomplished. However, one mother felt her child benefitted from the usage of this technology, where the other mother felt her children did not benefit from the time spent with these devices.

Practices in the Home Beyond Parents: Other Family Members and School. All four mothers discussed practices that occurred in the home literacy environment beyond their own, or their partners', interactions with their children. All four mothers discussed other family members

who played a role in their children's learning at home. Siblings, grandparents, and cousins were all mentioned as key people who the mothers felt contributed to their children's learning in the home literacy environment. One of the four mothers also discussed the influence of school on their literacy practices.

Maria, Tasha, and Nicole all mentioned the influence of grandparents in the home environment. Maria mentioned that her children's *"grandpa reads to them"* and that the grandpa had shared an interest in trains with her children. The grandpa engaged her preschool-aged child and other children with books, magazines, and videos about trains:

> *Um, they set up train sets. They set up like specifically one like kind of Lionel train set. And they…actually both grandpas do have…one has…the one he gets babysat by has like a smaller trainset and the other one has a bigger…and they, um. There's, uh…he has like a train magazine he subscribes to so they like read that together and like look at videos of different train engines and you know, um, yeah, like learn about, yeah like, different trains. They tend to get books about trains for their birthdays and stuff.*

Tasha talked about how her daughter's grandmother engaged her with music and dance and would sing with her: *"So with grandma…um, they do music and dance, um, singing. Grandma sings and [Beth] likes to kind of sing, too, with her."*

Nicole talked about her mother who used to be a teacher and provided what she felt were experiences that helped her child's learning:

> *Um, my mom is an early childhood, um, special educator, um…and she does just a lot of reading, mostly, with them. A lot of explaining- oh my gosh- she's so patient. She does a lot of cooking with them. But mostly she just answers all of their questions and gives them*

definitions to words and uses a big vocabulary. And yeah, she's amazing. She definitely

contributes to his education.

Other family members that were influential included siblings and cousins. Tasha said that Beth's

older sister engaged in literacy practices with her at home:

...Her older sister- um, so she does take time with her. I mean, um, they'll sit and they'll

read books. Um, she'll try to show her letters, they'll paint- they are painting now.

(laughs) Um, she's helpful, yeah, and I think [Beth] likes it because like if its something

that [her sister]'s doing, like, she wants to do it, too. So, I try to tell her, I was like, 'Use

that! Teach her things, too.' So, it's working out.

Nicole and Darya also felt that siblings were influential in the practices that occurred in

the home literacy environment. Darya indicated that using writing utensils was not a preferred

activity for Patrick but that his sister *"colors all the time."* Due to this, at the time of the

interview, her son also participated more often than he ever used to: *"So I think part of it is just*

that like somebody else is doing it, so he wants to, at home." Nicole said that *"my oldest reads*

really well now so he actually reads to [Will] now, which is super sweet."

Maria mentioned her son's cousins contributed to his learning at home:

I mean I would say he really is very close especially to his cousins…my sister's, uh, kids

who are his age. You know, just all around, you know…two years older, two years

younger. So, I do think they take a lot from each other. Um, they play together, you know,

a lot of like them running off and like, out in the yard, or down in the basement and kind

of…I'm not always sure what they're playing but they seem to like get along, and they'll

play pretend and so I think that probably contributes.

Tasha also mentioned that some of her practices prior to the pandemic were activities that the school or therapists had given her to do with her child. While the relationships differed, all the mothers discussed experiences involving other people that they felt were beneficial to their children within the HLE.

A Focus on Disciplinary Literacy. Nicole and Maria mentioned literacy practices that included disciplinary literacy or included methods that were not standard literacy practices when asked about materials that support their children's literacy learning at home. All the mothers mentioned experiences where learning happens outside of what they considered to be literacy when talking more generally about their children's learning at home. However, these two mothers mentioned practices that they categorized as literacy that fell outside of frequently studied family practices involving reading and writing.

Nicole showed a number puzzle where there were spaces to put balls that corresponded to the printed number: *"This is our numbers [holds up number puzzle] and flips over and this is counting and we have wooden balls."* She also showed a hundreds board: *"This is our hundreds board [pause] which has wooden numbers. So, you can count by ones, fives, tens, sixes, whatever."*

After showing some of the books in her house, Maria commented as she held up or highlighted some other materials that she felt contributed to her children's literacy learning:

> *I mean my kids are very []…like very engineering minded, so we have a lot of like building tools, like Kapla blocks and um…and like, you know, workshoppy-type areas (she showed a play workbench with tools).*

Both mothers included mathematics or science materials in their discussion of the items in the home that they felt contributed to their children's literacy learning.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented information on the four participant mothers and the study findings. All four mothers shared experiences that highlighted the pandemic's impact on their role in the home literacy environment as well as experiences that demonstrated how practices evolved or were sustained over the course of the pandemic until the time of the interview. The findings of the study revealed that the mothers felt the impact of the pandemic on their roles in the home literacy environment, sharing that it impacted who they were as care providers as well as pandemic-specific barriers to the roles they inhabit. The mothers also shared experiences where time and development were the main impetuses for change in practices over the course of the pandemic. While this held true for some of their family literacy practices, other experiences shared, such as technology as care support, emerged as changes during this crisis.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This chapter includes a discussion and interpretation of the findings of the mothers' experiences in Chapter 4 through the lens of hermeneutic phenomenology in dialogue with the current literature related to home literacy environments and the pandemic. The purpose of this study was to explore how working mothers of preschool-aged children described the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their role in the home literacy environment as well as how literacy practices did, or did not, change over time in this context.

While ample research on the importance of home literacy environments regarding children's development exist; at the time of this writing, home literacy environments had not been explored in the unique context of a global crisis such as the pandemic, nor had mothers' perceptions of their role in this environment been the foci of home literacy environment (HLE) research. As HLEs are essential to the development of young children's oral language, early reading, and early writing development (Bojczyk et al., 2019; Levin & Aram, 2012; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014), exploration of this gap in the literature was necessary to provide insight into the experiences of this specific population of mothers and their families to help inform decisions by schools, policy makers, and other stakeholders as to how to best support families of young children during times of crisis.

The final stage of analysis resulted in five superordinate themes with sixteen corresponding subthemes or categories for organization that were the results of this study and represented the essence of the phenomenon for these four mothers. The five themes were: 1) A Focus on the Self as Care Provider, 2) A Focus on Barriers to Care Provider Role, 3) A Focus on Time and Development in Literacy Practices, 4) A Focus on Mothers' Beliefs and the Influences

of Family Literacy Practices, and 5) A Focus on Interactions and Materials. A discussion and interpretation of each of the five superordinate themes follows. The theoretical framework of hermeneutic phenomenology guided the interpretations in addition to current literature. The revision of my conceptual assumptions as researcher are discussed after the findings.

Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study provided insight into the experiences of working mothers of preschool-aged children in the HLE during the pandemic. The study aimed to answer the research questions: 'During the pandemic, how do working mothers of preschool-aged children describe its impacts on their role in the home literacy environment?' and 'How do family literacy experiences change during the pandemic in this context?'

For the first research question, two mothers described inhabiting the role of teacher, which was new in the pandemic context. The mothers also encountered pandemic-related challenges to the fulfillment of their role in the HLE: their work roles conflicted with their role in the HLE, the fulfillment of their work and home roles was in conflict with their sense of well-being, and certain pandemic related losses, especially the loss of preschool and the loss of certain key relationships, made it a challenge to fulfill their roles within the home literacy environment. The mothers also discussed how more time at home, which was unique to the pandemic context, allowed them more opportunities to engage in their roles within the HLE.

For the second research question, the mothers noted the importance of time and development in literacy practices. Having more time at home allowed for an increased frequency of the literacy practices in which they were already engaging in with their children. While development wasn't unique to the pandemic context, it was notable that the mothers saw progress in their children despite the circumstances of the pandemic. One mother's beliefs about

the role of school changed during the pandemic which coincided with an increase in her literacy practices in the home. Two mothers' practices shifted in the pandemic to being what they described as more focused and active, with one mother trying to engage her child with his virtual preschool at the beginning of the pandemic and one mother having more intentionally planned interactions. Technology also played a unique role in the pandemic context as a caregiving tool for two mothers within the home literacy environment; some practices with extended family members were lost for certain parts of the pandemic. Lastly, math and science materials were discussed as helpful to literacy learning by two mothers, but it was not stated if all were new to the pandemic context.

From a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, the mothers Dasein or "being-in-the-world" with others as well as their preconceptions were evidenced within the study results (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Peoples, 2022). Mothers described key relationships which helped to define their being in the HLE. Mother's preconceptions, or "fore-conceptions," were illuminated in their reflections as they discussed how their ways of being shifted within the HLE.

Theme 1: A Focus on the Self as Care Provider

The first theme that emerged from the mothers' accounts were the mothers' experiences in the role of care provider. The mothers discussed perceptions related to their own role in the HLE as well as how this role was actualized by being in relationship with others who also cared for their children (Heidegger, 1962/1927). Their experiences demonstrate the roles, chosen and forced, that they inhabited during the pandemic and the necessity of certain key relationships in their role fulfillment.

Perceptions of Role in the HLE. In the first part of this theme, the mothers gave their own perceptions of their role, or roles, within the home literacy environment. The mothers

discussed their perceptions of their own role in the HLE, inhabiting the roles of observer, facilitator, teacher, and ensurer of their children's well-being. The role of observer included experiences where they were watching their children and noted their development and learning at home, such as a child's fine motor development, the process of creating a zipline, or the digital media with which they were engaged in the home. The role of facilitator involved providing materials or activities for their child to engage in within the HLE, such as art materials, crayons, and finding digital videos. The role of teacher involved experiences where the mothers engaged in explicit teaching in the HLE, particularly teaching that they expressed previously belonged to their children's experiences in the preschool classroom. The role of ensurer of their child's well-being pertained to experiences that supported the child's development outside of literacy practices in the HLE, such as continuation of speech services.

While mothers' literacy beliefs have been explored in research, most of the focus has been on mothers' feelings about or uses of literacy (Bojczyk et al., 2018; Weigel et al., 2006b; Yeo et al., 2014), rather than the roles as described by the mothers in this study. Three of the mothers described observing their child's development to guide activity choices. For example, Tasha observed how her daughter was starting to learn color names through a show she was watching and purchased flash cards with colors to help extend this learning.   She also noticed she was beginning to learn letters through experiences with an alphabet chart they had in the house and then started to connect letter names to objects in their home, like *"p for plate."*

Developmental observations have been noted by parents in some studies (Jarrett et al., 2015; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014), with some parents adjusting the frequency of teaching in relationship to their child's reading skills (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014). All of the mothers also described the intentionality of facilitating activities for their children, which aligns with research

that parents across differing nationalities and socioeconomic backgrounds facilitate literacy

activities for their children (Park, 2008; Jarrett et al., 2015, 2017). In addition, the intentional

teaching of literacy concepts in the home environment has been found to be essential for

expressive and receptive language development and emergent reading skills (Hood et al., 2008;

Yeo et al., 2014). Intentional teaching in the HLE, what Sénéchal & LeFevre (2002, 2014) call

formal literacy practices, involves not just reading for enjoyment but purposeful engagement in

the teaching of literacy concepts such as reading or writing letters or words during read alouds or

other literacy activities.

Three of the mothers described themselves as inhabiting the role of teacher. However,

this role was new to the pandemic context for Tasha and Maria, with Tasha feeling that she

fulfilled that role in the HLE while Maria felt she was trying to be something she was not,

expressing that she did not have the training to fulfill that role. In early childhood, parents are

discussed as being children's "first teachers" (Biermeier, 2015), and this holds true in studies of

mothers' beliefs about literacy in the HLE (Weigel et al., 2006b). When mothers felt that their

work with their children was important, this belief led to better literacy outcomes for children in

their print knowledge (Weigel et al., 2006b). While their experiences inhabiting this role

differed, both Tasha and Maria indicated that this role was a change for them and unique to the

pandemic experience. The change of role is notable, in that while research demonstrated the

importance of mothers in their children's literacy learning (Bojczyk et al., 2018; Yeo et al.,

2014), this also aligns with Weigel et al. (2006b) who found that some mothers didn't know the

value of their interactions with their children regarding literacy learning and other areas of

development, believing that schools were where teaching happened. These scholars found that

the mothers who held the belief that teaching was the job of the school also more often reported

that they felt that preschoolers were too young to learn about reading and were more likely to report barriers to reading at home with their children (Weigel et al., 2006b).

The last role that was discussed was brought up by Tasha who brought up other health needs of her child and how part of her role was ensuring her development and her health. At face value, this did not seem to be directly related to the HLE; however, if these needs weren't met, such as speech therapy, her child's development within the HLE could be impacted as oral language is a predictor of later reading outcomes (Casbergue & Strickland, 2016).

The mothers discussed experiences where they inhabited the role of observer, role of facilitator, role of teacher, and role of ensurer of their child's well-being. The mothers' Dasein was evidenced through the shared experiences where they enacted these roles, or in the case of Maria and the role of teacher, experiences where she had to take on a role that she didn't feel prepared to inhabit. The hermeneutic circle was also evidenced in Tasha's description of her experiences of the pandemic context. Tasha changed her preconceptions of her role in the HLE, adopting the role of teacher, when she previously indicated she had relied on the school to guide her choice of activities in the home (Heidegger, 1962/1927).

Supportive Relationships as Key to Role Fulfillment. A second part of the first theme that emerged was supportive relationships as key to the mothers' role fulfillment. These relationships provided the mothers the necessary assistance so that they were accomplishing the tasks of their home and work roles. The mothers discussed spouses, grandparents, babysitters, and siblings as being helpful to their child's literacy learning at home. To date, research on home literacy environments and family literacy practices has primarily focused on mothers and fathers (Bojczyk et al., 2018; Park, 2008; Swain et al., 2017; Weigel et al., 2006a). Although the mothers participating in this study indicated the importance of their support, grandparents,

babysitters, and siblings have not been a primary focus of many studies of the HLE (Jarrett et al., 2015; Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013). Many studies focus on components of parent/child or mother/child interactions in the HLE and associate those interactions, or lack thereof, with young children's outcomes in differing assessments of reading, writing, or oral language (Neuman et al., 2018; Weigel et al., 2006a). However, other studies of the HLE have indicated that other people may play an important role in this environment. For example, Taylor (1998/1983) found that siblings and friends used print in the context of their social encounters in the home environment. Grandparents, siblings, aunts, and family friends have been discussed by participants of other studies as contributing to their child's literacy learning at home (Hsin et al., 2017; Jarrett et al., 2015; Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013; Swain et al., 2017). While other supportive relationships in the HLE are noted in this study and others, the impact of these interactions has not been widely explored.

The mothers being with, or relying on, others in the HLE demonstrated the key relationships that helped to further define the role of the mothers in this space. These key relationships are an essential part of Dasein and are crucial to the understanding of lived experience (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Smith et al., 2009). Maria, Darya, and Nicole used statements where the definition of their roles was based not only on not the activities in which they engaged but in being in the HLE with their spouses, and thus, were defined in conjunction with that relationship. The decisions regarding the division of some activities allowed for a clearer understanding and fulfillment of their own role in the HLE. The mothers also gave examples of other relationships, such as grandparents, babysitters, and siblings who they also felt helped with their children's literacy learning. These relationships acted as care supports for

mothers to be able to accomplish their goals and to be able to better fulfill their roles both at work and in the HLE.

Theme 2: A Focus on Barriers to Care Provider Role

A second theme that emerged from the mothers' accounts were the mothers' experiences of barriers to the fulfillment of their role in the home literacy environment in this context. The mothers discussed three different experiences with conflict: the conflict of work and home roles, the conflict of their fulfillment of these roles with their sense of self or well-being, and pandemic-related losses. These different barriers demonstrated the impacts on their role in the HLE in the pandemic context and illuminated the challenges to the actualization of their roles.

Perception of Work and Home Roles in Conflict. While all four mothers discussed experiences that demonstrated their work and home roles in conflict, many of the experiences highlighted were those where mothers had to work from home and care for their children at home at different points throughout the pandemic. Three of the four mothers discussed experiences where it was challenging to both fulfill their roles at work and care for their children at home. The mothers discussed the demands of their jobs and how it was hard to accomplish work throughout the day. Two mothers discussed having to reduce the number of hours they worked during the day. For most of the mothers, the difficulty of this balance of work and home roles was particularly apparent in the early days of the pandemic. These findings coincide with research on women's work during the pandemic, where women with young children reported reduced work hours and job conflicts surrounding the care of their children who were also at home (Collins et al., 2020; Zanhour & Sumpter, 2022). While the mothers who worked from home in this study focused on difficulties completing work tasks, some mothers who worked

from home in other studies additionally reported their work as seeping into their family life, which caused them stress (Hertz et al., 2021; Zanhour & Sumpter, 2022). The impact of competing roles for working mothers was demonstrated in the context of this pandemic and historically, where some scholars consider the cultural beliefs surrounding women's work in the United States and about whom should bear the responsibilities of child care, as well as pre-existing gender inequalities in the workforce, to have had disproportionate impacts on women's careers (Scharf, 1980; Yavorsky et al., 2021; Zanhour & Sumpter 2022). The collision of those roles, and the environments that encompass them, have the potential to impact the HLE.

Perception of Work/Home Roles as in Conflict with the Self. All four mothers also shared experiences where the fulfillment of their home/work roles conflicted with their sense of self or well-being. Maria discussed the anxiety she felt surrounding her child's virtual preschool at the beginning of the pandemic. She felt as though she needed to make sure he was interacting with his class on Zoom, stemming from her desire that he get the most out of the experience and connect with his classmates; this desire was challenged when her son was not always interested. Darya discussed how the time with her children was enjoyable but caused the build-up of other home tasks. She talked about this build-up being "drain[ing]" to her, as it accumulated over days or even over the course of the year since the pandemic had begun. Tasha gave examples of her experiences canceling her own doctor's visits because there just wasn't enough time for her to go to the appointments. She said she cancelled her own doctors' visits, dental visits, and how *"there is really no time for me to take a break for myself."* Nicole talked about her mental health and how experiencing the pandemic made her feel like she was "drowning." She discussed how it was particularly difficult going from having child care and some free time for herself to having neither. Overall, these stressors were reflected in other literature that showed parents as being

strained and experiencing reduced mental and physical health during the pandemic (Collins et al., 2020; McCool-Myers et al., 2022). This finding also has implications for the HLE as some studies have found that mothers' mental health difficulties, such as depression, are associated with participation in fewer literacy enriching interactions with their children (Bigatti et al., 2001; Son & Morrison, 2010).

Loss of Care, Relationships, Routine, and Expectations. All four of the mothers discussed pandemic-related losses that impacted their role in the home literacy environment including the shutdown of preschool and support of other care providers, the loss of relationships due to pandemic precautions, the loss of a normal routine, and a loss of expectations during the pandemic.

All four mothers experienced a loss of care during the pandemic. This included a loss of in-person preschool at varying points in the pandemic and one mother experienced the loss of at-home care when her babysitter contracted COVID. The mothers also described the loss of relationships such as the loss of a child's relationship with their peers when participating virtually and the loss of grandparent interactions due to concerns regarding COVID spread. In addition to the relational loss, the grandparents of Maria and Nicole's children had also been providing child care, which resulted in compounding losses for them and their families. A loss of routine was also experienced during the pandemic, with all the mothers having to constantly adapt their schedules to changing home, work, and school/care scenarios. The mothers gave examples of not being able to plan due to each day or week being different and used metaphors and comparisons like "blowing up," "constant triage," and "a day-to-day operation," displaying not only the changes that occurred, but the stress of those changes on the home environment of the family. Lastly, Nicole and Maria gave examples of a loss of expectations, which is the loss of

what the mothers had envisioned would be occurring. Nicole described the loss of protected time to herself during the week as one of the dramatic changes that occurred during the pandemic. Maria expected to have dedicated time with her youngest child on her weekday off work but instead had all three of her children at home.

The loss of care supports, routines, and key relationships inside the HLE for varying durations altered the structure of the environment and forced mothers to renegotiate their roles within this space. Many of these losses are reflected in the research on the pandemic and working mothers. The loss of care and of the normal routines of day-to-day life was widespread, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic (Collins et al., 2020; Hertz et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2022). The loss of grandparent relationships and caregiving during the pandemic was also reported by mothers in another study (Hertz et al., 2021). While some studies of the home literacy environment have noted the interactions between children and non-parent relatives (Jarrett et al., 2015), little is known about the benefits associated with these interactions in the HLE and thus any detrimental effects of the temporary loss of these relationships in the HLE during the pandemic are unknown.

The conflicts between the many roles that the working mothers inhabited is highlighted within the findings of this second theme. The conflict's addition, or alteration, of their activities and relationships impacted the way the mothers are "being with" in the pandemic context. The roles the mothers inhabit within the HLE are merely some of many they inhabit within each of their lifeworlds (Heidegger, 1962/1927). When the stressor of the pandemic occurred, roles had to be renegotiated, particularly for the mothers working from home. The roles mothers inhabit in the HLE and how these roles may influence one another and the interactions within this space is largely unstudied (Weigel et al., 2006b). These barriers also provided insight into the challenges

families faced with child care in the pandemic context and the impacts the barriers may have had on each HLE.

Theme 3: A Focus on Time and Development in Literacy Practices

In each interview, the mothers were asked about their literacy practices and how they helped their child's learning at home (with literacy and more generally) before the pandemic, at the beginning of the pandemic, and at the time of the interview. The mothers' responses to these questions provided insight into both the main research question regarding the impact of the pandemic on each mother's role in the HLE, as well as the study's sub question of how literacy practices may have changed over time in this context. Three of the mothers indicated that time and development were the main impetuses for change in this context.

When time was discussed by Darya and Tasha, the focus was on how the pandemic afforded them more time at home with their children and on their experiences with their children during this time. The additional time at home enabled them to observe their children's development in the HLE, increased their opportunities to engage them in literacy practices, and allowed them more time to fulfill the varying roles previously discussed within this space. Their experiences indicated that the amount of time they had with their children was a factor of change in frequency of literacy practices during the pandemic. Of the three mothers, Maria had the same amount of time at home with her children, as she was still working out of the home, but still felt that her children having more time at home allowed her children to engage in more literacy practices, including play and art.

Overall, the three mothers' shared experiences demonstrated that their children's increased amount of time at home allowed for more time spent in the literacy practices that were already occurring in this environment. From the literature on HLEs, we know that the explicit

teaching of literacy concepts as well as interactions with language and print where teaching isn't the focus are both important to children's development (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Silinskas; 2010). Research has also shown that greater frequency of engagement in literacy activities generally leads to better literacy outcomes (Park, 2008; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014; Yeo et al., 2014), but little is known about the exact amount of time or how frequently parents should be engaging in these activities outside of the frequency of read-alouds (Hood et al., 2008). This information may be particularly important for working parents or caregivers who may have less time in the home environment with their children than caregivers who are home with the child.

Development was also mentioned by Darya and Maria as a factor influencing the changes in literacy practices that occurred in their home environments. While development is an ongoing process from birth until death (Woolfolk, 2019), what is notable is that the mothers shared experiences where they saw progress in their children despite the unforeseen circumstances of the pandemic. This finding is contrary to much of the literature on children during the pandemic which shows stagnation, or in some cases, the loss of learning (Ohio Department of Education, 2020, 2021; Institute of Education Sciences, 2022). The continuity the mothers described could be due to a variety of factors but one possibility that warrants further exploration could be the home literacy environment acting as a buffer to learning loss in the pandemic context. Just as they would have outside of the pandemic context, their experiences with and observations of their children demonstrated that they were continuing to grow and develop, which in some cases necessitated a change in their practices in the HLE. This finding is also consistent with Sénéchal & LeFevre (2014) who found that parents engaged in responsive practices by adjusting their teaching in the HLE based on their child's progress.

Theme 4: A Focus on Mothers' Beliefs and the Influences of Family Literacy Practices

A theme that emerged during the analysis was mothers' beliefs and the influences of their family literacy practices. While these were not the focus of planned questions within the semi-structured interviews, three of the mothers discussed their beliefs surrounding literacy and learning. Literacy beliefs include, but are not limited to, beliefs about literacy learning, beliefs about the parent's role in their child's literacy learning, and the parent's self-efficacy related to literacy (Bojczyk et al., 2018; Weigel et al., 2006b; Yeo et al., 2014). This theme helped to answer the second research question of the study, as the beliefs held by the mothers influenced their practices and, for Tasha, how her beliefs and frequency of practices changed in the pandemic context.

Nicole and Darya both discussed beliefs about literacy and learning that influenced the practices in their home. The term "literacy" is much debated in social science research (Dobinson & Dunworth, 2019; Kendall Theado, 2010), but generally includes reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Gipe, 2014). Darya defined literacy as "reading and language" and then gave examples of practices related to both of these facets of literacy. Nicole talked about how she felt that academic learning wasn't a focus until first grade and, thus, the activities she provided for her children in the HLE were opportunities rather than requirements.

Nicole, Darya, and Tasha also discussed their beliefs about the role of school. For Nicole, Darya, and Tasha, preschool was where most academic learning should occur and in the case of Darya, was where more structured activities took place. For these three mothers, it wasn't that academic learning didn't occur at home, but it wasn't a focus. Darya and Nicole indicated that they experienced a sustainment of this through the pandemic, where Tasha felt that it was up to her to provide these academic experiences for her child in the home environment due to lapses in her daughter's schooling during the pandemic. This aspect of this theme supports Hoffman &

Whittingham (2017) who found that parents in their study held a belief that children should be learning in child care settings. In contrast, however, the parents in their study also expressed a belief that teaching their children was a primary role (Hoffman & Whittingham, 2017). Research has demonstrated that mothers' beliefs about the importance of their involvement is associated with children's development of print knowledge (Weigel et al., 2006b). While these three mothers didn't completely discount their own involvement, their accounts did seem to deemphasize their influence, which may mean they did not know the importance of the interactions they were having with their children in the HLE. Parental engagement with their children in read-alouds, through conversations, with environmental print, and specific emergent literacy skills (e.g., teaching the alphabet, writing words) all have the potential to benefit young children's literacy outcomes (Britto et al., 2006; Hood et al., 2008; Liebeskind et al., 2014; Neuman et al., 2018; Schick & Melzi, 2016; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014; Yeo et al., 2014). Read alouds without explicit teaching have been found to be predictive of growth in English vocabulary from preschool to first grade, and later reading fluency (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014; van Bergen et al. 2017). Conversations in the HLE during and outside of read aloud experiences have been linked to expressive and receptive vocabulary (Britto et al., 2006; Neuman et al., 2018). The use of environmental print in interactions has been correlated with language development and print knowledge (Liebeskind et al., 2014; Schick & Melzi, 2016), while the teaching of specific emergent literacy skills (e.g., teaching the alphabet, writing words) has been associated with expressive and receptive language development and emergent reading skills (Hood et al., 2008; Yeo et al., 2014). Thus, the mothers' engagements with their young children were essential experiences for their literacy development, both when literacy teaching was explicit and in instances where it was not, such as reading experiences or conversations.

Lastly, Darya and Maria both brought up their children's interests as a driving factor for their literacy practices. Choices in oral storytelling, the books they read, or videos they watched were guided by these interests. While reading or literacy interest has been explored in relationship to literacy outcomes and the quality of the HLE (Carroll et al., 2018; Ricci, 2011; Yeo et al., 2014), the relationship between parents following children's general interests in the HLE and literacy outcomes has yet to be explored.

The significance of the mothers revealing their beliefs about literacy, the role of school, and the importance of child interest is the connection of those beliefs with how they identified their role(s) in the HLE, and the relationship of the beliefs to family literacy practices. While mothers' beliefs about the importance of their impact have been shown to be vital in HLE research (Weigel et al., 2006b), the potential connection between belief and practice in the HLE has yet to be explored. Mothers' self-assessment of not just the importance of their role, but how their role should manifest within the space has the potential to impact children's literacy outcomes. Some of the mothers also juxtaposed their role with the role of school and talked about the different experiences they gave their children from what they thought their children were getting in school. While this view of role aligns with research that shows different literacy outcomes associated with the interactions in home and school environments (Neuman et al., 2018), this view of their role could also be problematic if the beliefs that are held about the frequency and quality of children's literacy experiences in the preschool classroom are not the reality of what is occurring.

Theme 5: A Focus on Interactions and Materials

The final theme is the mothers' focus on interactions and materials in their family literacy practices in the HLE and addressed the second research question: how home literacy practices

changed in the context of the pandemic. The mothers talked about the materials they utilized and the interactions that occurred within the HLE both before and throughout the pandemic. The mothers shared experiences with literacy materials in the home, the types of interactions that occurred, the role of technology, practices with other family members and from school, and disciplinary literacy.

Family Literacy Practices as Materials. The four mothers described materials in their home that have been the focus of HLE research (Harvey, 2016; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; van Bergen et al., 2017). The materials of focus for HLE research that the mothers in this study discussed were primarily books; environmental print has been discussed in the literature, as well, but within the context of interactions (Harvey, 2016; Liebeskind et al., 2014; Schick & Melzi, 2016; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; van Bergen et al., 2017). All of the mothers mentioned some type of books in their homes. Access to books in the home has been associated with knowledge related to concepts of print and expressive language development (Friedlander, 2013; Schick & Melzi, 2016). The number of books in the home has predicted both reading fluency and reading success in grade 3 and is associated with an increase in parent-child read alouds (Harvey, 2016; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; van Bergen et al., 2017). The mothers also mentioned other materials that feature print such as letter puzzles, letter matching games, board games, placemats with words, and one mother mentioned the use of flipbooks in which the child was supposed to use language to identify the pictures. The use of environmental print in interactions, or print activities that did not include books, has been correlated with language development and print knowledge (Liebeskind et al., 2014; Schick & Melzi, 2016). All four mothers also described different writing materials they had available for their children in the home, including writing implements (e.g., pencils, crayons, markers), paper, art supplies, dry ease boards, and workbooks/worksheets.

Some of the mothers described materials in addition to these that supported fine motor development, such as playdough and scissors.

The mothers did not indicate that the materials had changed since the pandemic, except for some select materials in relationship to their child's development and for two mothers, their current interests.   For Maria, these included the addition of placemats with space information in following with her children's interests in outer space. Darya increased the complexity of the books she was reading aloud to her son based on his interest and development. Loop scissors were an addition to the HLE for Tasha's daughter, Beth, and worksheets for Nicole's son, Will, both of which were materials received from school. Overall, several of the materials mentioned by the mothers, such as books and environmental print, have been found to be beneficial in the literature, whereas others, like the number of writing materials, have not been the focus of many HLE studies.

Family Literacy Practices as Mostly Informal. Darya, Maria, and Tasha described their experiences in the HLE and how the practices that occurred there were either all, or partly, informal. The informality was defined by the mothers as engaging in activities or interactions with their children as they naturally arose in the home, rather than approaching interactions with a specific plan for what would be taught during those interactions. The mothers indicated that the informal nature of practices was not a change in the pandemic context but rather, something that was sustained from before the pandemic, apart from the reading experiences Tasha discussed where Beth is describing the pictures. Informal interactions in the HLE where explicit teaching was not the goal, such as in shared reading for pleasure, have been predictive of growth in English vocabulary from preschool to first grade and of later reading fluency (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014; van Bergen et al., 2017).   The mothers in this study did bring up reading

together, but also brought up other informal practices, such as: play (including what parents

called "imaginative play" and block play), conversations, and oral storytelling. Play has been

mentioned in some studies focusing on family literacy practices in home environments but has

not been widely explored as a literacy activity (Bauer & Mkhize, 2012; Weigel et al., 2006a).

While not extensively studied in the HLE in association with literacy outcomes, children

engaging in oral storytelling and story acting in the preschool classroom has been associated with

improved narrative comprehension and print and word awareness (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015).

Play-based instruction in classroom environments has also been associated with oral language

development (Stagnitti et al., 2016). In the HLE, Neuman et al. (2018) found that parent

language within interactions was associated with young children's expressive vocabulary. They

also discussed activities that were a normal part of the day-to-day such as open access to certain

materials in the home, following a recipe to make food, making cards for family and friends, or

following interests that come up in searching out books or videos. Young children's interest in

literacy activities has been shown to be a stronger predictor of early literacy outcomes than

socioeconomic status or parent reported HLE measures (Carroll et al., 2018). Young children's

literacy interest has also been associated with children's phonological awareness (Baroody &

Diamond, 2016).

   Literacy Practices as Focused and Active. Maria, Nicole, and Tasha all shared experiences

described by two of the mothers as "focused" and "active" where they interacted with their

children in activities that involved intentional planning and/or explicit teaching. Pandemic

related changes to these family practices included Maria's pursuit of her child's participation in

virtual preschool at the beginning of the pandemic and Tasha sharing how her practices shifted to

being more intentionally planned during the pandemic. Sénéchal & LeFevre (2002, 2014) called

activities where literacy skills were explicitly taught, like teaching the alphabet, writing, or reading words, "formal literacy." The mothers described such intentional planning or teaching through 1) reading aloud and having their child "read" to them, 2) alphabet knowledge in the form of letter identification and letter-sound correspondence, and 3) fine motor activities and spelling that supported their children's writing.

While all the mothers mention reading aloud as important and described intentionally planning to read aloud with their children, three of the mothers didn't describe intentional teaching during those read alouds. Darya talked about focusing on the alphabet during read alouds but didn't describe the intention to teach during a read aloud, rather allowing it to happen spontaneously as the opportunity arose. While intentional teaching may have been occurring, the lack of focus on this aspect of the reading experience may mean the mothers did not realize the importance of intentional teaching in some of their read aloud interactions. Focusing on literacy skills during read aloud experiences has been associated with higher outcome scores for children in letter knowledge, word identification, concepts about print, and decreased likelihood of children becoming struggling readers (Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2015).

Most of the "focused" and "active" activities mentioned occurred outside of the read aloud context, with mothers discussing other tools, like workbooks, flipbooks, puzzles, or interactions surrounding other materials where literacy skills, such as alphabet knowledge and writing support, were explicitly taught. Parents' intentional teaching of emergent literacy, such as alphabet knowledge or how to write their name or other words, were linked to expressive and receptive language development and emergent reading skills (Hood et al., 2008; Yeo et al., 2014). Fine motor activities such as the ones described by the mothers are important to later

writing development (Dinehart, 2015) and graphophonemic support in writing has been linked to both decoding and fine motor skills (Bindman et al., 2014).

Technology as Educational vs. Problematic Care Support. An interesting theme that emerged within the exploration of family's practices in the home was two of the mothers' focus on experiences with screen technology (televisions and tablets) and its usage as care support. This theme illustrated the contrast that the mothers felt in their experiences utilizing these technologies with their children in the context of the pandemic. Both mothers used technology such as digital media or television as care support when they needed a break from child care to accomplish tasks at home.

Nicole expressed guilt in using the television, talking about how screen time was normally limited to weekends before the pandemic but was used, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, when she perceived that a day was going poorly and she needed something to occupy her children's focus. She indicated guilt regarding this experience and referred to it as a "mindless activity," indicating that she felt there was very little her children were getting from watching the television.

Tasha, in contrast, talked about the videos that her child would watch through YouTube on her tablet as well as virtual school supports when her daughter wasn't attending school and how she felt that her child learned things from watching the different shows and interacting with the school site. In the pandemic context, her daughter's tablet and shows were primarily used for care support. The shows Tasha mentioned included "Bounce Patrol," "Cocomelon," "Sesame Street," and "See It, Say It, Sign It" (Bounce Patrol, n.d.; Cocomelon, n.d.; Hartmann, n.d.; Sesame Street, n.d.). Tasha shared different aspects of language development she felt Beth had learned through her time watching these shows including the language to songs and sign

language. For the school website, her daughter could watch her teacher read aloud and engage with group time songs.

Digital media that is meant to be educational has been reported to be beneficial by some parents in the United States and the United Kingdom (Huber et al., 2018; Rideout, 2017). McPake et al. (2013) found that preschool-aged children connected speech, print, and digital media in the course of play and exploration, such as when video viewing prompted a child to read a book about the same topic. In contrast to these findings, some research has found that not all media, including educational content, is beneficial to young children. Hutton et al. (2019) found that greater use of screen-based media was associated with a decrease in the integrity of white matter tracts that support language and early literacy skills. Background television or television viewing have been associated with reduced frequency and quality of parent-child interactions and poorer theory of mind and executive functioning skills in preschool-aged children (Kirkorian et al., 2009; Nathanson et al., 2013, 2014). Alternatively, when parents discussed television programming with children, theory of mind skills were found to be improved. Likewise, viewing programming on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) was found to be more beneficial to executive functioning skills than viewing educational cartoons (Kirkorian et al., 2009; Nathanson et al., 2013, 2014). Certain facets of executive functioning have been related to, or predictive of, literacy outcomes for young children, including print knowledge, phonological awareness, and language (Fuhs et al., 2014; Purpura et al., 2017). Conflicting feelings around screen usage during the pandemic was also noted by mothers in another study during the pandemic (Findley et al., 2022). Therefore, the research reflects truth in both mothers' experiences in this study. Further research is needed to determine what types of

media and supportive parent-child interactions in conjunction with media are most advantageous to young children's literacy development.

Practices in the Home Beyond Parents: Other Family Members and School.
Siblings, grandparents, cousins, and school staff were all mentioned as people whom the mothers felt contributed to their children's learning in the home literacy environment. The changes in practices that occurred within this subtheme were the absence of some family members and school-related activities in the home for periods of the pandemic.

The mothers gave several examples of key people they felt were beneficial for their children's learning in the home literacy environment in addition to the children's parents, including siblings, grandparents, and cousins. These family members provided experiences with novel topics about which children learned more through print and media, participated in discussions together, read books, painted, colored, and played with the children. In the United States, most families with children have more than one child in their household and from 2017 to 2021, 7.1 million grandparents lived with their grandchildren (United States Census Bureau, 2021b, 2022a), demonstrating that many households have the influence of siblings and grandparents. To date, studies of HLEs have focused primarily on mothers and fathers with only a few studies demonstrating grandparents or other family members acting as models of literacy beliefs and values (Jarrett et al., 2015; Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013). As other immediate or extended family members may be involved on a regular basis in the home environment, the practices that are introduced, sustained, or excluded during children's time with these key people may help to provide deeper insight into the quality of young children's home literacy environments. Additionally, children may inhabit other home environments during the time their parents are working; more research is needed on how these environments might support the HLE

or differ from the HLE in their influence on young children's development. Neuman et al.

(2018) found that the school environment and the home environment contributed to young

children's letter-word identification and expressive vocabulary respectively, showing the

synergistic nature of the environments of young children.

Tasha mentioned that practices in the home environment before the pandemic included

activities that were provided by the school or therapists. Research looking at school-based

programs to provide support for the home literacy environment of young children have found

that providing families support can enhance their HLE, and some metanalyses of such

interventions have found that the use of specific literacy activities and dialogic reading were

particularly beneficial (Mol et al., 2008; Sénéchal & Young, 2008). As previously mentioned,

school environments have been found to contribute to young children's literacy learning but in

different ways than the home environment (Neuman et al., 2018). Due to the success of some

HLE interventions and the relationship families develop with teachers and other school staff, it

stands to reason that when access to school is limited, schools could help families by providing

supportive activities and resources for the HLE to help assuage potential losses that could occur

from gaps in schooling and to aid in reducing the burden on parents.

A Focus on Disciplinary Literacy. Nicole and Maria included mathematics or science

materials in their discussion of the items in the home that they felt contributed to their children's

literacy learning. These materials were present during the pandemic, but it was not stated if all

of the materials mentioned were new to the pandemic context. While neither of the mothers

expounded upon what outcomes related to literacy they thought their children gained through

interacting with these materials, it is interesting that both mothers stated that math and

engineering play materials contributed to their young children's literacy learning. Nicole and

Maria mentioned materials, such as a number puzzle, hundreds board with wooden numbers, building tools, blocks, and a work bench with tools. Rather than being materials like books and writing implements that are more commonly the focus of HLE research, these materials fell into what some would consider to be disciplinary literacy, particularly in the interactions between parents and children that could occur with these toys (Wright & Gotwals, 2017). Disciplinary literacy differs from the "traditional" notion of literacy in that it includes not just reading and writing, but rather "the distinct ways of knowing, doing, and communicating used by scientists, historians, literary critics, and other disciplinary experts" (Siffrinn & Lew, 2018, p. 326). While not usually a focus with young children or in HLE research, interactions with such materials have the potential to introduce young children to language, texts and tools, and thinking of different disciplinary areas which have the potential to contribute to young children's literacy learning (DeSutter & Stieff, 2017; Siffrinn et al., 2018; Sullivan & Bers, 2018).

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore how working mothers of preschool-aged children described the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their role in the home literacy environment as well as how literacy practices did, or did not, change over time in this context. This study was necessitated due to the lack of research on the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the role of working mothers in the home literacy environment and the importance of home literacy environments to young children's literacy development.

In this study, the mothers' experiences illuminated continuities in the HLE as well as pandemic-related changes within this space. The four mothers discussed inhabiting the roles of observer, facilitator, teacher, and ensurer of their child's well-being. The role of teacher was mentioned as a new role by two of the mothers within this space. The mothers discussed how

within and outside of the pandemic context; the role of other key relationships was essential to their role fulfillment as well as discussed pandemic-specific barriers to their role in the HLE. In considering how practices changed over time in this context, three of the mothers felt that the changes were related to time and development more than the pandemic. However, the mothers discussed beliefs, interactions, and materials, some of which had changed during the pandemic apart from having more time to engage in practices and changes in practices based upon the development of their children:

> 1. Tasha believed that her daughter's learning fell within the role of school, but in the pandemic context this belief changed in that she felt it was up to her to provide learning experiences at home.

> 2. Two mothers received materials from school that their children used at home during the pandemic; one mother discussed experiences with virtual preschool while another discussed experiences where her practices became more intentional during this time.

> 3. Two mothers discussed the use of technology as a care support, which was necessitated by the pandemic context.

> 4. The mothers discussed the loss of some practices during periods of the pandemic due to the absence of extended family members or school supports.

Revising Conceptual Assumptions

My first conceptual assumption was that the pandemic was a trying time for everyone and would present unique challenges for families with young children. While all the mothers indicated different barriers to their role in the HLE, what was surprising to me was their roles in the HLE being in conflict with their sense of self as well as the unexpected joys that came with being home with their children during the pandemic. I expected stress between home and work

roles but not how the shift in balance among the different roles they inhabited would affect their well-being. The mothers all indicated this in different areas: discussing anxiety around virtual schooling, lack of time for themselves – their own healthcare or having downtime – and depression. The mothers also shared how having more time with their children was both stressful and joyful. The stress was because the time with their children made it more difficult for them to fulfill their other roles, but this time also brought joy in having more time together, and thus more time to engage in literacy practices. This new conception of enjoyment of this time and the benefits it brought in the pandemic context demonstrated my disregard of the bond of the parent-child relationship and the benefits of that time, where I instead was focused on the lack of time mothers had for work or for themselves. While the lack of time in both areas was demonstrated by the mothers who worked from home in the pandemic, Darya, Tasha, Maria, and Nicole all gave examples of experiences with their children that they indicated they enjoyed, through directly saying so or through their body language (smiling, laughing). I also assumed that within these challenges that all the mothers would be working from home at the beginning of the pandemic. Two of the four mothers were in healthcare and thus, one was never working from home, and the other was only working from home some of the time.

A second preconception regarding roles was my belief that mothers who viewed themselves as a teacher would be more likely to report formal literacy practices - those with intentional teaching. Two of the mothers felt they had taken on a teacher role in the pandemic context. My assumption here was found to be partially true, in that both mothers described experiences where they engaged in practices with and without intentional teaching. However, only one of the two mothers described her practices as moving toward being more intentional during the pandemic, coinciding with her newly adopted role of teacher. This was only one of the

mothers' experiences and, especially considering the small sample size, may not be true for other working mothers.

A third preconception was my belief that technology would be used during the pandemic but should be limited with young children, with my experiences leading me to believe that young children do not gain as much from it as they would from interactions with people, and that the mothers would feel this way, too. Maria discussed her son's disinterest in virtual preschool offerings and Nicole shared her guilt surrounding television usage, supporting this presumption. However, not all the mothers who shared about technology felt this way. In contrast, Tasha indicated that her daughter learned different concepts from the videos she watched on her tablet by herself. She gave examples of concepts, including oral vocabulary, that her daughter learned from her interactions with the technology. This new conception also demonstrated a lack of consideration of the potential benefits, and the interactions between a parent and child, that might stem from the use of technology or digital media in the home, or the other literacies that this interaction might support. My preconception of literacy had allowed for reading, writing, speaking, and listening, but had not considered visual literacies. Visual literacies include written text but also a variety of other modalities, including the process of interpreting videos and visual images, such as those that the mothers described their children engaging with on these devices (Serafini, 2013; Templeton, 2023).

A final preconception was that I may come across literacy practices that were not frequently included in HLE research due to the nature of the phenomenological design. All four of the mothers shared experiences supporting more traditional notions of literacy involving reading and writing, in contradiction to this notion, but emphasis was also placed on other practices. The role of oral language was demonstrated by the mother's accounts of practices like

oral storytelling, discussions or labeling during routines, and play. Of these, play was particularly interesting in regard to the HLE, but may have been influenced by the sample of working mothers who chose a play-based preschool environment for their children.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

This phenomenological study of working mothers in the pandemic highlighted several gaps in the literature on home literacy environments that warrant further exploration. First, while the importance of the role of mothers in the HLE in engaging their children in family literacy practices is widely known to be beneficial (Bitetti & Hammer, 2015; Britto et al., 2006), two of the mothers indicated that the role of being a teacher was not a role they felt they inhabited prior to the pandemic context. Further exploration of what mothers of preschool-aged children believe it means to be a teacher and the experiences that represent that role could aid schools and other organizations that support families in their children's development at home. Subsequent studies could also explore whether mothers seeing themselves in the role of a teacher in the HLE is associated with engaging children in more frequent or higher quality literacy practices, or whether viewing themselves as a teacher is associated with children's early literacy scores. We have seen that mothers' beliefs about the importance of their involvement in their child's literacy learning is associated with children's greater print knowledge (Weigel et al., 2006b) and thus it stands to reason that their perception of the roles they inhabit in this space could impact young children's outcomes. This finding also illuminates the need for reinforcement of the importance of the experiences that working mothers provide their children in the HLE and how these experiences aid in their children's literacy development. This reinforcement can occur through individuals in other environments that support the child (schools, daycare, pediatric care) that are a consistent presence in families' lives. Additionally, research focusing on how the HLE may

serve as a buffer to learning loss in the absence of school could be helpful for supporting families in crisis or without access to consistent schooling.

Secondly, the role of key people and devices that served as care support, and thus were regularly part of children's home literacy environments, warrant further exploration. We know that mothers and fathers can interact in different ways with their children (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2012; VanDam et al., 2022), and that siblings contribute through literacy practices that involve explicit teaching or stem from social interaction and play (Jarrett et al., 2015; Taylor, 1998/1983, 1988). However, there is little research on both of these key relationships as well as the role of grandparents in the HLE (Jarrett et al., 2015). With many U.S. households including family members beyond biological parents (United States Census, Bureau, 2022b), the exploration of how other people within the HLE might differentially contribute to children's outcome scores in measures of early literacy, such as oral language, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and print knowledge is warranted. Lastly, the investigation of the use of technology for the purposes of care support is necessary as it may replace some of the interactions between an adult and child in the HLE; further exploration is needed regarding what is learned through children's solo interactions with screen technologies, how these interactions compare to the interactions that occur with an adult in this space, and the types of interactions between an adult and child together with the technology that are most beneficial.

A final area for future research is focusing on time in relationship to the HLE from a broader cultural context. While we know that the frequency of certain practices, such as reading aloud, are important to young children's literacy development (Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Schick & Melzi, 2016), the working mothers in this study had many responsibilities they were balancing both before and during the pandemic which might make frequency of engagement difficult.

While more engagement is generally better, knowing the optimum amount of time spent reading aloud and engaging in other practices with preschool-aged children before there are diminishing returns might be helpful to working mothers and other caregivers who have many demands on their time. Additionally, as having more time at home was a benefit experienced by the mothers that was specific to the pandemic context, figuring out how to help working mothers and caregivers have more time outside of the pandemic context, such as a four-day work week, have the potential to benefit the HLE either directly with more time together or indirectly with other personal benefits, such as better mental or physical health (Fontinha & Walker, 2019).

Limitations

A limitation in choosing an interpretative phenomenological approach was that the study focused on the experiences of four working mothers in a particular context and such studies do not lend themselves to external generalizability (Maxwell, 2013). However, the study findings may be transferable to settings with a similar homogenous sample and context (Shenton, 2004). A second limitation was the virtual nature of the semi-structured interviews. While this method was chosen for safety reasons within the pandemic context and to provide more flexibility for working mothers, the mothers' level of comfort with videoconferencing technology as well as the distance between the researcher and participants may have impacted what was shared. Additionally, not all working mothers who received information about the study may have had access to technology for video conferencing and so this may have been a barrier to some working mothers' participation. A final limitation is the fact that socioeconomic status was not collected as part of the demographic data related to the sampling criteria. In addition, all the mothers interviewed for this study retained their jobs during the pandemic, and thus, the findings may not be transferable to mothers who lost or had to leave their jobs within the pandemic context.

Implications and Conclusion

This dissertation study demonstrated the experiences that represented four working mothers' roles in the home literacy environment during the pandemic context. The five superordinate themes that comprised the study findings illustrated experiences that exemplified each of their roles as a care provider in the HLE, barriers to the fulfillment of this role in the pandemic context, and how practices changed over time in this context, which had not been explored by existing research. The mothers inhabited varying roles in the HLE, including the roles of observer, facilitator, teacher, and ensurer their child's well-being. Their roles were actualized when they had the support of other key relationships in their lives, such as partners, grandparents, and siblings, who supported them in their work within the HLE. This study also established how more time with their children at home during the pandemic played a unique role in sustaining and, in some cases, increasing practices in the HLE. The mothers also discussed literacy beliefs and the intentional or emergent nature of their literacy practices. Some of the specific practices, such as reading aloud, were well-documented within the HLE literature, but others, such as play, have yet to be explored.

This study, along with other qualitative studies of the HLE and working mothers, have the potential to address barriers to the fulfillment of their roles within this space. The findings from this study can also aid organizations that serve families in helping support working mothers and other caregivers in their HLE practices, especially in understanding the essentiality of their role with their children in this space—in both the intentional literacy practices in which they engage their children as well as the practices that occur naturally within the routine of their lives.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

</div>

Dear Sara Gusler,

Institutional Review Board

FWA #: 00003152

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

Type of Submission: Initial Study	
Title:	Mothers' Experiences of the Pandemic and the Home Literacy Environment of Preschool-Aged Children: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
Investigator: Sara Gusler	
IRB ID: 2020-1154	
Funding: None	
Documents Reviewed:	• HRP-503 Protocol_Gusler_S_Dissertation_Jan 2021_Clean Version.docx; • Victoria Carr CV; • Gusler_S_IRB 2020-1154_Informed Consent_Update_Jan21.docx • Gusler_S_IRB 2020-1154_ Recruitment Flyer_Update_Jan21.docx ; • Gusler_S_Interview Protocol.docx ; • Site Support Letter
Type of Review: Exempt	
Review Category:	• (2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (low risk) • (2)(i) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (non-identifiable)

On **2/1/2021**, the IRB reviewed the above submission and determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review in accordance with 45 CFR 46.104.

The IRB has determined the following consent requirements:

- • The IRB has determined that informed consent must be obtained from all adult participants and that this consent must be documented by signature on the IRB approval consent form.
- • The Board determined that this study meets the criteria for enrollment of pregnant women/fetuses/neonates as described in UC Human Research Protection Program Policy V.01 and Procedures 308 and 332.

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v 2.12.20

PI Notification

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination.

Note: The exemptions at 45 CFR 46.101(b) do not apply to research involving prisoners, fetuses, pregnant women, or human in vitro fertilization, Subparts B and C. The exemption at 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2), for research involving survey or interview procedures or observation of public behavior, does not apply to research with children, Subpart D, except for research involving observations of public behavior when the investigator(s) do not participate in the activities being observed.

Thank you for your cooperation during the review process.

Appendix B

Letter of Site Support

Dec. 1, 2020

Dear Ms. Gusler,

We would be happy to work with you to recruit participants for your study (IRB: 2020 – 1154: *Parental Experiences of the Pandemic and the Home Literacy Environment of Preschool-Aged Children: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study*), when approved by the University of Cincinnati's Institutional Review Board. XXX has a long history of supporting doctoral students in their work and we will be glad to support you in your study. We understand that all participants will be protected per your protocol through the virtual nature of the interviews, gaining informed consent, ensuring participant anonymity, and through the proper management and storage of data.

Please let us know when you receive approval from the University of Cincinnati's Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely,

XXX Director

Appendix C

Recruitment Flyer

University of Cincinnati

Mothers' Experiences of the Pandemic and the Home Literacy Environment of Preschool-

Aged Children:

An Interpretative Phenomenological Study

VOLUNTEERS WANTED FOR RESEARCH STUDY

You are being invited to participate in a research study that seeks to investigate the lived experiences of working mothers of preschool-aged children during the 2020 pandemic. You will be asked to participate in one initial interview (approximately 60 minutes) and participate in a follow-up interview (approximately 30 minutes). The topic of both interviews is your experiences of being a working parent of preschool-aged child during the time of the 2020 pandemic. The interviews will be conducted via WebEx (videoconferencing software) and will be videotaped and/or audiotaped.

In order to participate, you must meet the following criteria:

1. Mother of a Child Attending Preschool

2. Working mother (full or part-time)

3. Child experienced a change in care during the pandemic (e.g., care was shut down, shortened, or changed to a different learning environment, such as remote learning for a period of time).

4. Mother had a preschool-aged child in school in March 2020 and now has a preschool-aged child in school in fall/winter 2020.

5. Mother lives in the same home as their child.

6. Mother is a primary caregiver for this child.

7. Mother and child currently reside in the greater Cincinnati area.

8. Mother is over 18 years of age.

Compensation

You will be paid a $10 Kroger or Target gift card (your choice) at the conclusion of participation in the study to thank you for your time and willingness to contribute. If you participate in the first interview but choose not to participate in a follow-up interview, you will still receive a $5 Kroger or Target gift card (your choice). The gift card will be emailed to you at a preferred email address, or if you prefer, a physical gift card can be mailed to you at a preferred mailing address.

Your Confidentiality

This study is not affiliated with any group, and no one will know you are participating, other than the researcher. Reporting of the results will not include any identifiers. All personal identifiers will be removed by the researcher, and all audio and videotapes will be destroyed immediately after the study.

If you are interested in participating in this study or would like more information, please contact:

Sara Gusler at (513) 556-3805 or guslerse@ucmail.uc.edu

_____

Appendix D

Informed Consent

**UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI SOCIAL, BEHAVIORAL, AND EDUCATIONAL
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

STUDY TITLE:	
Mothers' Experiences of the Pandemic and the Home Literacy Environment of Preschool-Aged Children	
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR NAME: Sara Gusler, M.Ed.	PHONE NUMBER (513) 556-3805
FACULTY ADVISOR (if PI is student): Victoria Carr, Ed.D.	DEPARTMENT: School of Education: Developmental & Learning Sciences

INTRODUCTION

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Please read this paper carefully and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

WHO IS DOING THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

The person in charge of this research study is Sara Gusler, M.Ed. of the University of Cincinnati (UC) Department of Education.
.
She is being guided in this research by Victoria Carr, Ed.D.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the lived experiences of working mothers of preschool-aged children during the 2020 pandemic.

WHO WILL BE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

About 4 people will take part in this study. You may be in this study if:

9. You are the mother of a child attending preschool.

10. You are a working mother (full or part-time).

11. Your child experienced a change in care during the pandemic (e.g., care was shut down, shortened, or changed to a different learning environment, such as remote learning for a period of time).

12. You had a preschool-aged child in school in March 2020 and now have a preschool-aged child in school in fall/winter 2020.

13. You live in the same home as your child.

14. You are a primary caregiver for this child.

15. You and your child currently reside in the greater Cincinnati area.

16. You are over 18 years of age.

WHAT IF YOU ARE AN EMPLOYEE WHERE THE RESEARCH STUDY IS DONE?

Taking part in this research study is not part of your job. Refusing to be in the study will not affect your job. You will not be offered any special work-related benefits if you take part in this study.

WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY, AND HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

You will be asked to participate in one interview (around 60 minutes). You will also be asked to participate in a follow-up interview, if needed (around 30 minutes). All interviews will take place online (through WebEx). You will be asked to confirm that the interview transcripts are correct.

- You will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview for around 60 minutes. You may be asked to participate in one follow-up interview for around 30 minutes. Both interviews are conducted remotely through video conferencing software. Your experiences as a working mother of a preschool-aged child will be the focus. You will only be asked for a follow-up interview if more information or clarification is needed. This follow-up interview will be within 4-6 weeks of the 60-minute interview.

- You will be asked to confirm your name, age, work, if you live with your child, and if there was a change in your child's care. These questions ensure you meet the criteria for participation.

- The online interviews will be conducted at a location of your choice. It is recommended to choose a comfortable location with few distractions. There will be no in-person contact.

- The online interviews will be audio and videotaped and then transcribed.

- You will be contacted to confirm that the transcripts are correct 4 to 6 weeks after the first interview, and 2 weeks after the follow-up interview. You will either be contacted by email, or email + phone.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO BEING IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?
The risk of participating in this study is not expected to be more than you would have in daily life.

There may be a risk of emotional discomfort in the discussion of your experiences as a working mother in the pandemic. You can refuse to answer any questions that you don't want to answer.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM BEING IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

You will probably not get any benefit because of being in this study. But, being in this study may help educators and stakeholders understand the experiences of working mothers and their families during a time of crisis.

WHAT WILL YOU GET BECAUSE OF BEING IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

You will be paid a $10 Kroger or Target gift card (your choice) at the conclusion of participation in the study to thank you for your time and willingness to contribute. If you participate in the first interview but choose not to participate in a follow-up interview, you will still receive a $5 Kroger or Target gift card (your choice). The gift card will be emailed to you at a preferred email address, or if you prefer, a physical gift card can be mailed to you at a preferred mailing address.

DO YOU HAVE CHOICES ABOUT TAKING PART IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

If you do not want to take part in this research study, you may simply not participate.

HOW WILL YOUR RESEARCH INFORMATION BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Information about you will be kept private by:

- using ID numbers instead of the participant's name on research forms
- keeping the master list of names and ID numbers in a separate location from the research forms
- limiting access to identifiable research data to only the principal investigator
- all identifying information about the participant and any others the participant talks about will be removed in transcription
- using a pseudonym when reporting research
- all identifiable information is held confidential by the researcher

1. Video files will be stored on an encrypted external hard drive in a locked filing cabinet.

Transcriptions will be stored on an encrypted external hard drive and in a locked filing cabinet. Consent documents, master lists of names, and ID numbers will be stored in a separate location in a locked filing cabinet.

2. Video files will be deleted after transcription. Signed consent forms will be kept for three years after the study ends and then the forms will be destroyed. The transcripts will be kept for 5 years after the study ends and then the forms will be destroyed.

3. The data from this research may be published, but you will not be identified by name.

4. Agents of the University of Cincinnati may check study records for audit or quality assurance purposes.

5. Your identity and information will be kept private unless the authorities have to be notified about abuse or immediate harm that may come to you or others.

6. The study data will not be used or shared for future research studies.

WHAT ARE YOUR LEGAL RIGHTS IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

Nothing in this consent form waives any legal rights you may have. This consent form also does not release the investigator, the institution, or its agents from liability for negligence.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, you should contact Sara Gusler, M.Ed. at guslerse@ucmail.uc.edu

Or, you may contact Dr. Victoria Carr at carrvw@ucmail.uc.edu or (513) 556-3805

The UC Institutional Review Board reviews all research projects that involve human participants to be sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, complaints and/or suggestions about the study, you may contact the UC IRB at (513) 558-5259. Or, you may call the UC Research Compliance Hotline at (800) 889-1547, or email the IRB office at irb@ucmail.uc.edu.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

No one has to be in this research study. Refusing to take part will NOT cause any penalty or loss of benefits that you would otherwise have.

You may skip any questions during the interviews that you don't want to answer.

You may start and then change your mind and stop at any time. To stop being in the study, you

should tell Sara Gusler at guslerse@ucmail.uc.edu OR Victoria Carr at carrvw@ucmail.uc.edu or (513) 556-3805.

Agreement:
I have read this information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will receive a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep.

Participant Name (please print) _____

Participant Signature _____   Date _____

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol: Questions, Follow-Ups and Prompts

Please note: This protocol is a guide for the questions to be asked and the types of follow-up probes to be used during the interview. Not all questions will be asked, since time is limited, but the questions listed here are used as a guide to the topics of interest for the interview. The questions will also be adjusted or reworded to help the participants understand the questions.

    Date/Time:

    Location:

    Interviewer: Sara Gusler

    Interviewee/Interviewee Positionality:

    Give Description of the Research Project: The topic of this interview is your experiences of being a working parent of a preschool-aged child during the time of the 2020 pandemic. This is an initial interview to find out about your experiences and should last around 60 minutes at most. I want to remind you that you are under no obligation to participate in this study; you are free to withdraw at any time.

    Confirm Heterogeneity Criteria:

1. Are you at least 18 years of age?

2. Are you a mother of a child attending preschool?

3. Are you a working parent (full or part-time?)

4. Was your child in preschool last March before the pandemic?

5. Is your child currently attending preschool now?

6. Do you live in the same household as your child?

7. Are you the primary caregiver for the preschool-aged child?

    Interview Questions:

Time Period (Before pandemic = BP, Early pandemic = EP, and Present situation= Now)

Topic: General

1. Please could you tell me what you do in your job?

   Follow-up: Have you had this same job throughout the pandemic?
   If no: Please could you tell me what you did in your prior job.

   Follow-up: When do you typically work and for how long?

2. Can you describe the change (or changes, if there is more than one) in care during the pandemic that occurred for you and your preschool-aged child during the pandemic?

   Follow-up: when did this happen?

3. **(BP)** Could you describe a typical day for you before the pandemic?

   Prompt: Tell me more about [particular event/practice].

4. **(EP)** Could you describe a typical day for you at the beginning of the pandemic? What did you and your family do?

   Prompt: Tell me more about [particular event].

5. **(Now)** Could you describe a typical weekday for you, now, during the pandemic? What did you and your family do?

   Prompt: Tell me more about [particular event].

Topic: Social Contacts/Affect

1. **(EP/Now)** What are the main differences between a good day and a bad day during the pandemic?

   Prompt: Tell me more about [particular event].

2. **(EP/Now)** How do you feel after a bad day?
3. Could you tell me about other people you and your child see outside of your immediate family?

   Prompt: How often do you see them?

Topic: Education in the Home Environment

1. Consider your preschool-aged child's learning. For you, what is the best thing about the pandemic in regard to your child's learning?

   Prompt: Can you give me an example of a time you felt [that way]?

2. For you, what is the worst thing about the pandemic in regard to your child's learning?

   Prompt: Can you give me an example of a time you felt [that way]?

3. **(BP)** What were you doing to help your child with their learning before the pandemic?

   Prompt/Follow-up: How did you come to [this practice]?

   Prompt: Tell me more about [particular event].

4. **(BP)** What were you doing to help them with reading and writing before the pandemic?

   Prompt/Follow-up: How did you come to [this practice]?

   Prompt: Tell me more about [particular event].

5. **(EP)** What were you doing to help your child with learning at the beginning of the pandemic last spring?

Prompt/Follow-up: How did you come to [this practice]?

6. **(EP)** What were you doing to help them with reading and writing at the beginning of the pandemic?

Prompt/Follow-up: How did you come to [this practice]?

Prompt: Tell me more about [particular event]

Prompt: You mentioned [particular event] before. Did that continue?

7. **(Now)** What are you doing to help your child with learning, particularly reading and writing, now?

Prompt/Follow-up: How did you come to [this practice]?

Prompt: Tell me more about [particular event].

8. Could you show me some of the items in your home that you feel help contribute to your child's literacy learning?

Follow-up: Tell me about an experience where you used the item with your child.

Prompt: Did the experience happen before or after the pandemic?

9. Could you describe any other people who play a role in your child's learning at home and what they do together?

Prompt/Follow-up: Was this before the pandemic, at the beginning of the pandemic, or now?

Prompt: You mentioned [person] and [practice/interaction] earlier when I asked about people beyond your immediate family that you see. Are there other activities they do together?

Prompt: You mentioned your child interacting with [person] in an earlier question. Do they contribute to your child's learning at home?

Tell me more about [particular event].

10. What do you think your family feels about the pandemic in regard to your child's learning?

11. How do you think your life would be if you and your family didn't experience the pandemic?

12. Is there anything I didn't ask or that we didn't talk about that you think I should know?

General Prompts:
Why?
How?
Can you tell me more about that?
Tell me what you were thinking?
How did you feel?

Thank the interviewee and remind about confidentiality. Remind them that if clarification about something discussed is needed, they may be contacted in the next 6 weeks for a follow-up interview and/or to verify the accuracy of the transcripts.

(adapted from Creswell & Poth, 2013)