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# How do Home Educating Families' Experiences of Information Literacy Relate to Existing Models?

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**Abstract.** In this paper the researcher discusses the findings of a small research project which explored the information literacy experiences of five home educating families and shows how these findings can be related to existing research on information literacy. The research was constructivist with a grounded approach to data analysis and involved in-depth interviews with family groups. This paper suggests that models of information literacy that focus on the situated and the transformative have resonance for the experiences of home educating families.

**Keywords:** Information literacy, information practices, home education.

## 1 Introduction

Home education in the United Kingdom is a growing phenomenon [1] and is a potentially interesting information literacy landscape to explore as research from an educational perspective suggests that it offers different information experiences from school based learning [2]. Kunzman and Gaither [3] argue that home education has much to teach us about education generally and this argument can then be extended to information literacy. Research in this area can therefore be seen as a response to Tuominen, Savolainen, and Taliija's [4] suggestion that we need to understand how information literacy works in new environments.

## 2 Literature Review

This research takes the communicative approach in framing information literacy as a social practice [4]. It follows Lloyd's work [5] in interpreting information literacy as a meta-practice that only exists in its particular context. This approach informs much of the current study as it is concerned with the participants' constructions of their information literacy practices in a previously underexplored landscape. Lupton and Bruce's [6] argument that information literacy has three perspectives: the generic (skills based); the situated (socially constructed) and the transformative, was also useful for this work. This third perspective contains within it the generic and situated

but extends this to a model of information literacy as a critical practice. In this way they consider information literacy to have the potential to empower individuals and groups and challenge existing power relations.

Home education is legal in all of the United Kingdom and home educators have considerable freedom particularly in relation to some other European countries [7]. In England and Wales, parents and carers have a duty to provide their children with a suitable education but there is no indication of what this “suitable education” is, and they do not have to register or prove that they are providing such an education [8]. This status has been criticised [9] but is fiercely defended by many home educators [10]. As there is no system of registration there are no reliable figures about the number of home educated children in England and estimates vary between 45,250 and 150,000 [11]. However there is general agreement that this figure has risen consistently since the 1970's [3]. There is also no reliable information about the demographics of home educators although research suggests they are a diverse group [12]. The reasons families choose to home educate are equally numerous but include religious or ideological reasons as well as unhappiness with the school curriculum, bullying, and school refusal [1], [13].

There is an increasing literature on home education in the UK. However a considerable proportion of this is written by and for home educators [14-16]. Kunzman and Gaither's [3] systematic review of the emerging literature shows that most research is from the United States and much of it is advocacy based with little or no large scale quantitative research. There is then, limited research on the kinds of learning that home educators engage in. What is known is that there is a continuum of learning styles from a structured programme similar to that followed by schools to an education without a timetable, curriculum or fixed outcomes [17]. The latter style is the focus of much home education research and is often known in the UK as autonomous education. Nevertheless, as Arora's [18] research shows, many families do follow structured programmes and so it is important not to typify all home educators as autonomous. There is however evidence that over time families tend to move from structured to unstructured learning [2], [19]. There is also little certainty about the educational outcomes for home educated children. Three North American studies written from outside the home educating community demonstrate this giving a varied picture of academic outcomes [20-22] which suggests more complexity than the positive outcomes found by researchers closer to home educating communities [23].

Thomas and Pattison [2] never use the term information literacy but look at home educated families' information practices as part of their study of informal learning. The children are self-directed learners; “*they don't take in information they put it together... pull it apart again.*” Conversational learning and good information seeking skills play a central role and informal learning is seen as akin to new knowledge formation. Parents mediate knowledge but the parent-child relationship is one of co-learning as well as apprenticeship. Thomas and Pattison [17, p.152] argue that a community of practice provides a useful way to understand how home educated children learn and they conclude that “*our research challenges the view of learning as*

*a separate, definable, deliberate activity and suggests that learning itself needs to be problematized in a very radical manner.*" This has much in common with Lloyd's description of how workplace information literacy challenges the neatness of formal academic models.

Safran [24, p.245] writes of home educating parents as a community of practice through the *"joint enterprise of educating their children, mutually engaging and developing a shared repertoire."* She does not use concepts related to information literacy but explores the different ways parents identify as home educators, making particular note of how becoming a home educator is an apprenticeship and a transformative experience. Thomas and Pattinson, and Safran both draw on Wenger's [25] definition of a community of practice as people with a common interest who learn together how to do it better, with a shared identity, shared activities and shared tools. It is this definition that is used in the discussion section of this paper.

### **3 Methodology and Methods**

This research was intended to follow the principles of constructivist grounded theory [26] as an inductive method that moves towards the generation of theory through a process of coding. Charmaz's significant break from earlier grounded theorists is her adoption of a constructivist perspective. However the limited nature of this research project means it should be seen as grounded analysis rather than grounded theory [27] particularly because it was not possible to reach theoretical saturation. The researcher then recognises her own role in the process of the "mutual shaping" of the participants' constructions of their own information literacy practices [28]. The interview and the research therefore become a "negotiated text" where all are involved in the "meaning making process" [29]. The research also has an affinity with child centred [30] and feminist research methods [31] which emphasise the importance of giving a voice to the participants as well as adapting a reflexive stance as a researcher.

Participants were recruited through an Internet mailing list and visits to local groups. The recruitment process was slow but reached a tipping point when an early participant shared her positive experience of being interviewed. The home educating community has been identified as difficult for researchers to access [3], [11] and so it represents a considerable privilege to have gained access to these families' lives. The research consisted of four in-depth interviews with individual home educating mothers and their children aged between eight and seventeen and one interview with a mother by herself. The interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. The researcher prepared question prompts inspired by Bruce's questions in her seminal work [32], and each interview moved from narrative through discussion to reflection [26]. However each interview assumed a very different shape as the researcher and participants constructed meanings together. The most productive question for all interviews was the concluding one; *"is there anything else you want to tell me?"* The success of this question demonstrated that some of the other questions were unsatisfactory possibly either too technical or too tangential. This is further

demonstrated by how the mother in one interview adapted and elaborated on the researcher's questions to help her children answer them.

The decision to interview parents and children together was a decision determined by the ethics of working with children. However it became fundamental to shaping research outcomes showing how families construct information literacy together. As Barbour [33] argues, focus groups or group interviews show how knowledge is constructed within that group; they do not necessarily show individual subjective experience. A different interview method would have produced different results; a child interviewed with her family is different from a child interviewed alone [34]. The complexities of using group interviews should not be underestimated, but as the family rather than the individual lies at the heart of this research, it is fitting that this is mirrored by the research method.

The interview transcripts were the texts used for analysis. The researcher followed the process of analysis outlined by Charmaz [26] moving from initial to focused codes and then to categories with constant comparison a significant part of the research. The process of coding was challenging. It was difficult to leave behind the participants' voices to move to a more theoretical level. Beyond this, negotiating a reflexive understanding of the subjective and situated position of the researcher [35] in shaping the analysis was a significant undertaking. Three major themes emerged from the analysis and these are discussed below. The relationships between these themes are not however fully realised in this current project.

## **4 Findings**

### **4.1 Digital Minds: Central Importance of Digital Information**

All the families saw computers, primarily the Internet, as central to their information landscapes. The young people in particular saw using the Internet as so ubiquitous that it resisted definition; *"I don't really know because I use it [the Internet] all the time. I use it for socialising, for research; I use it for gaming, for absolutely everything"* (Eleanor). This does not mean that families did not use other information sources; more in-depth discussion showed books were also very important; however the first association was between the Internet and information.

The Internet seemed in particular to mediate the home education experiences of these families (perhaps unsurprisingly as they were recruited through a mailing list). There was evidence that the mothers saw themselves as part of an online community of home educators. They were all active users of the Internet; they planned, organised and shared their experiences as home educators using a range of Internet tools. They then mediated this knowledge to their children. The young people displayed pride in their experience of using technology and expressed the belief that home education provided valuable opportunities for digital learning. Mia remembered using computers at school; *"we were told to use the website and we'd just guess, click on something funny and then do anything else."* The parents were more ambivalent in their attitudes to the Internet

and defined an interesting set of oppositions; it both saved time and wasted it, it was easy to use but needed to be carefully taught, it provided a wealth of information but also information overload. Three out of the five mothers expressed concerns; Siobhan commented *“that's the other thing if it isn't on the Internet they can't be bothered.”*

The ubiquity of the Internet meant that the families initially found it difficult to talk about the digital aspects of their information literacy. Emma, a mother expressed this when talking about information seeking; *“Libraries are a step back [from the Internet] ...usually it's very difficult to find information in a library.”* However within the narrative of the interviews there was a point when most of the children started to recognise that their use of the Internet was not natural and involved conscious strategies. All the children even the youngest were able to talk about a range of strategies they had learnt to employ. These strategies seemed to have been developed within the individual families learnt by observation and explicit teaching as well as by experimentation, as Siobhan comments *“my oldest daughter now I think is navigating the Internet in a way that I think is as good as I can.... she's just watched me do it lots of times and has experimented herself”*. There was then evidence that families constructed their digital literacies; *“so that for us that became the way to do it”* (Joanne) and shared their practices. Within the world of the interview the young people therefore moved to a conscious recognition of their digital literacies.

#### **4.2 Information Literacy in the Wild: Challenging the Skills Model**

The concept of information literacy as information skills was a useful frame for the participants and researcher in the interviews and within this discussion of skills, information seeking dominated. The participants drew on ideas of expertise and critical skills to conceptualise their experiences and to demonstrate that they were information literate. This reliance on an information skills model possibly reflects the difficulty of talking about information literacy. This is demonstrated by the researcher re-framing her own questions as skills-based at moments in the interviews where there was a struggle to make meaning even though she had no intention to test the participants' information skills.

However each interview also saw the skills model challenged. While participants highlighted information skills that are necessary and useful they also all drew on their experiences of *“tick[ing] boxes”* (Siobhan) or *“play[ing] the system”* (Emma). All the families interviewed told of information literacy experiences that were outside of this skills approach. The concept of hidden learning; *“we learn things when we don't know it”* (Mia), was an important part of how the families conceptualised their experiences; *“you'll think they're doing nothing very much and suddenly they'll come out with something they've learnt from somewhere and you'll think where have they got that from?”* (Karen).

This is seen in how the mothers discuss teaching their children; there is an emphasis on a natural process rather than formal teaching. The young people are provided with opportunities to be information literate rather than formally taught. With this comes a tension between whether home education should be seen as hard

work or as *“nothing much really”* (Eleanor) both for the young people and for the parents. This was expressed by Karen as *“you’re constantly clutching at straws trying to find something they’ll like and they’re interested in”* which captures how the mothers seem to work hard to provide learning opportunities that are then seen as natural. Serendipity and chance assumed an important place in these families' information experiences. A holistic approach to information practices where the emphasis was on putting things together and following on was common across the families; *“It’s made me realise that you do gather stuff from so many different places”* (Siobhan). It was clearly important for these families to construct their experiences in this way, putting an emphasis on the holistic and the natural rather than on prescribed learning. Karen summarised her experiences of home education; *“it comes so natural if you carry on with it.”*

These practices were seen as different from school-based information practices; *“we don’t go home we carry on through our lives”* (Joanne). The information experiences of home educating families were perceived as being like life rather than based on artificial exercises. Learning was done in context with an interest in Harry Potter or a visit to a museum as the catalysts for further experience. The family who followed the national curriculum seemed to draw from school-based practices more; *“I do [work] books and if I don’t know the answer I look it up on Wikipedia and then I just put in the answer”* (Orla). But even within this family these practices were challenged: *“whereas I believed everything the school was doing and I didn’t really have an issue with the schools suddenly I find actually that they think differently now”* (Emma).

In all the families there was a strong emphasis on the child as confident and independent in learning and information literacy; *“It’s all about really them finding out stuff”* (Karen). Both parents and children narrate experiences where the child is a confident researcher, *“pretty quickly they can work out that this isn’t right that they’re not getting the information that they want”* (Joanne); who is responsible for their own information needs, *“the things that she’s interested in we spend hours doing”* (Siobhan). There was also recognition of an information world away from formal education. There was an emphasis on the practical and the real whether cooking, ice-skating or dress making. For example, Joanne expressed the importance of embodiment *“she uses expression her whole body is one big expressive thing that she uses everyday”* to her children's information experiences. The exploration of information literacy in the wild was strongest in the autonomous families but all emphasised literacies as a practice for life rather than just education.

### **4.3 Doing it Together: The Importance of Collaborative Information Practices**

Within each interview there was evidence that the young people's information literacy experiences were mediated by different groups; experts and families and the wider community. This is of course only a loose classification based on five families but it provides a frame for their experience. Experts such as teachers or tutors were the least significant of these groups. The two young people who were studying post sixteen had

moved to college and those who had studied or were planning to study GCSE's were likely to use tutors. The role of the tutors however seemed to be to tick the boxes and they were not given a significant role within the interviews.

The mother was the main home educator in all these families and fathers played an interesting role, often seeming to act as a bridge between the outside world of the expert or tutor and the internal family information literacy practices. The father draws on a different body of knowledge from outside the home and brings this back to the family. Karen commented *"when I don't know I used to say ask daddy because he knows a lot more or if we're in the house it's let's look it up, I don't know the answer"*. The role of the mother in the family's information practices was far more ambiguous and often seemed to be obscured and downplayed. She is not undervalued; her role is in the background. She creates opportunities and facilitates rather than leads. There is an emphasis on partnership *"we'll see how that goes, we'll get on with that now"* (Emma) or as mentioned above on the child as the leader. This is exemplified by two children reacting with humour at the idea that their mother could help them with their work. However the mother does mediate her children's information experiences. One manifestation of this was around issues of control, censorship and privacy. This part of the discussion was sometimes framed with humour, possibly signifying an underlying tension. While attitudes varied from no censorship through to a concern for age-appropriate material, all the families discussed similar practices, particularly in terms of digital technology. Proximity was an essential feature of Internet use while the children were young: *"till you were about fourteen you sat down in the room with us so we could have some idea of what she was doing"* (Sarah). There was a move away from these shared practices to more privacy as young people got older and the mother's role was renegotiated.

As mentioned above siblings also mediate information for each other. This involves working together, sharing knowledge and teaching each other. This was viewed positively by the young people: *"I like it especially when we have help from each other"* (Mia). For many of the young people other figures such as aunts, uncles, grandparents or family friends played an important role. Different families have different practices but their information literacy is inherently social.

Beyond the family, participants talk about their information practices as part of a home educating community or communities. However while the children learn from each other; *"they've got you know things that they'll tell them and show them. It's really good then, different levels, ages, experiences"* (Karen) and socialise together, their relationships were not demonstrably significant in terms of information literacy. The home education community was more significant for the mothers in person and online. There was evidence of a strong community; *"I think I've just I've realised how much I draw on it recently and it's...like do you choose to be part of it or not"* (Siobhan) with evidence of apprenticeship; *"a home edder told me when I first started"* (Karen). The mothers also sought out those who shared the same philosophical position *"you need to find out who thinks like you"* (Emma) and discussed how they had been changed by home educating; *"so yeah for me I've changed completely and I love it"* (Joanne).

There is also evidence within the interviews of a collaborative meaning making

process where the interviewer and the participants construct their understanding of information literacy together. In this way within the interview Eleanor moves from seeing herself as independent in her information literacies to recognising the significance of others; *“pretty much by myself... My granddad, that's a good point my granddad actually is a big figure”*.

## **5 Discussion**

### **5.1 Information Skills Model versus Holistic and Potentially Transformative Information Practices**

There is a powerful narrative within existing research that home educated children are independent learners adept at handling information [2], [14], [16]. The young people in these interviews have similar constructions of themselves as confident and information literate. However this was not a stable construction. On reflection they expressed more uncertainty and talked about their difficulties as well as recognising the collaborative nature of their learning and information use. The interviews therefore became a place where the children could reflect on their information literacy.

Lupton and Bruce's [6] GeST model of information literacy offers one way to interpret information literacy in the context of home educating families. In this way the young people move from seeing information literacy as natural to recognising the skills they use to finally feeling that their information literacy is collaborative. There was then evidence that information literacies were socially constructed both within each family and within the home educating community. This sense of information literacy as socially constructed was however difficult to express and the skills model was also useful as a way to frame their experiences.

The third and outer layer of Lupton and Bruce's model is the transformative, and this potentially also provides a way to view these home educating families' information literacies. There was a tendency for the home educators in this study to favourably contrast their information literacy practices to school practices. This approach could be framed as a challenge to the orthodoxy of information literacy in education. We can see this played out if we look at the role of gender in these families; the mothers are responsible for the hidden holistic information literacy while the fathers are responsible for the more knowledge-based strand. This is an area that would merit further research as this is only a tentative finding.

### **5.1 Communities of Practice as Way to Understand Home Educating Families' Information Literacies**

Lloyd [5] uses communities of practice to understand workplace information literacy and this study suggests that they are equally resonant for home educating families. There was evidence that both individual families and the home educating mothers

could be seen as communities of practice. Identifying the families as a community of practice can help us to understand information literacy in the context of home education. The families are involved in the joint enterprise of learning and the families all shared agreed ways of working established over time, whether this was how to search on the Internet or how to choose a book to read. This potentially helps us understand the ambiguity of mothers as teachers and not teachers by showing how the information literacy relationship is co-learning as well as an apprenticeship. The concept of the family as a community of practice can also help us understand how home educating mothers control and mediate information for their children. This is exemplified by the two oldest children in the study who as they got older moved outside their families' community of practice. Equally if we see the mothers as part of their own community of practice we can understand their information literacy in the context of them learning how to be home educators. The mothers engage in a range of shared information practices developing a strong identity as "home edders" and seeing the act of home educating as transformative. This transformation includes a measurable difference in their interactions with information through the process of educating their children.

## **6 Conclusion**

The research provides rich detail about the information literacy experiences of these particular families but its findings are clearly local and limited. Nevertheless it is an exploration of information literacy experiences in a previously unstudied domain and makes parallels between the experiences of these families and existing concepts of information literacy. It can be therefore be seen to add to our understanding of information literacy as a sociocultural practice and to offer findings that may resonate with home educating families. It also suggests that further information literacy research with home educating families would be beneficial.

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