

HOMESCHOOL CURRICULUM CHOICES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Sarah Jeanne Pannone

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the

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APPROVED BY:

James A. Swezey, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Gary Smith, Ed.D., Committee Member

Mary C. Draper, Ph.D., Committee Member

Scott B. Watson, Ph.D., Associate Dean, Advanced Programs

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices. Within the study, three research questions were asked: 1) How do select home educators describe the factors that influence their curricular choices? 2) How do select home educators' beliefs affect their selection of curriculum? 3) How do select home educators' teaching styles and methodologies affect their curricular decisions? To best address these questions a transcendental phenomenological approach was used to examine the shared curriculum choice experiences of 10 home educators. Data was collected by means of surveys, interviews, and a focus group and then analyzed by identifying and combining significant statements in the data into themes. The following themes were identified from participant statements: (a) recommendations are an important part of choosing a curriculum, (b) religious and moral beliefs factor heavily in the curriculum choice process, (c) curriculum that held a student's interest and was something the child wanted to do was important to participants, (d) there is no one-size-fits-all approach to homeschooling and homeschool curriculum choices – every child is different, (e) keeping a positive relationship with their children was important to participants, (f) seeking outside help when necessary was an essential teaching method that participants used, and (g) curriculum changes as you homeschool.

*Keywords:* homeschooling, homeschool, curricula, curriculum choice, choice processes

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Background

While homeschooling is an educational practice that has been employed since ancient times, the modern homeschool movement has experienced tremendous growth over the past several decades (Russo, 2008). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2009) homeschooling has grown from 850,000 students in 1999 to 1.5 million students in 2007. Waddell (2010) notes that the practice of home educating is something "that an increasingly large proportion of the population chooses" (p. 541). Educational researchers have noted the growth of homeschooling, and in the past 40 years, a variety of research has been done examining the practice of homeschooling (Collum, 2005).

Specifically, research on homeschooling has centered around three main areas: teaching style (Cai, Reeve, & Robinson, 2002), motivation to homeschool (Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Patterson, Gibson, Koenigs, Maurer, Ritterhouse, Stockton & Taylor, 2007), and academic outcomes (Cogan, 2010; Barwegen, Falciani, Putnam, Reamer, & Stair, 2004; Duvall, Delquardi & Ward, 2004). Missing, however, from the research is information regarding the factors influencing home educators to choose curricula. The importance of choosing quality curriculum is emphasized in a variety of research, with Schmoker (2011) finding that curriculum may be the single largest school factor that affects learning, intellectual development, and college and career readiness and Bernstein (1977) maintaining that curricula is one of the primary message systems of schooling. Since curriculum is so important, the decisions regarding the selection of the curriculum also become important. Currently, however, only a few studies (Anthony & Burroughs, 2012; Hanna, 2012) address the place of curriculum in homeschooling, and even

those studies do not explicitly address what influences home educators to choose one curriculum over another.

Because of this gap in the literature, focusing on the factors that influence home educator's curriculum choices will be the focus of this study. Identifying aspects that influence homeschool curriculum choices will be helpful for two reasons: first, understanding what influences home educator's curriculum choices can help home educators become self-aware of why they are choosing a particular curriculum, and if the reasons are valid. Secondly, describing the factors that influence home educators' curriculum choice processes may help educators and curriculum publishers better understand what home educators value in a curriculum

### **Situation to Self**

As a former homeschooled student, I am motivated to understand what processes homeschool parents go through in picking out curriculum and what most influences their decision. For example, in my own homeschool experience, my mother, the main educator for my schooling, researched various curricula options at homeschool curriculum fairs and talked with other homeschool families to see what curricula they would recommend. While my mother employed these methods in helping her choose curricula, I think it would be worthwhile to see if other home educators utilize the same methods, and if not, what methods they instead use to choose curriculum.

Additionally, while I do not currently have any children, I do plan to homeschool my future children. While I will certainly research what type of curriculum I use with my future children, from personal experience I already have positive experiences with several curriculum

publishers, including Saxon math and John Wilson Swope's Ready-To-Use Activities for Teaching. The positive experiences I have felt with these curriculum publishers comes from high academic achievement, as measured by test scores, self-reported student satisfaction, and ease of use.

Furthermore, as well as choosing the topic of homeschool curriculum choices because of my background as a former homeschool student, I am also motivated to understand homeschool curriculum choice processes because of my role as a high school educator. As an educator I have always had my curriculum picked out for me by either the curriculum director or school head. Because of this, I have not had the chance to experience the processes behind choosing curricula and therefore I find the process of choosing curriculum an intriguing topic.

### **Problem Statement**

Becoming aware of the factors influencing curricular decisions is something that would be useful to educators. Indeed, Siraj and Abdullah (2011) state,

Observation on best future choices is not something that happens by chance; in fact, it should be carried out through careful planning driven by research.

Therefore, observation on future curriculum would also involve in-depth research on future possibilities and their impact. (p.226)

Additionally, while understanding the factors influencing curricular decisions is important in all educational circles, understanding the curricular decisions of home educators is particularly interesting because as evidenced by Hanna's (2012) longitudinal study on homeschool methods, materials, and curricula, homeschooling families today tend to choose very specific methods and

materials for instruction; an occurrence that suggests that curriculum choice may be influenced by specific factors. Reich (2002) agrees, stating, “Homeschooling represents the apex of customization in education” (p. 56). In the same vein, research on homeschool curriculum shows that home educators not only choose specific methods and materials for instruction, but they also choose an eclectic array of curriculum options (Hanna, 2012; Meighan, 1995).

Unfortunately, however, other than a select few studies (Anthony & Burroughs, 2012; Hanna, 2012) little recent research has addressed the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices. Indeed, Cochran-Smith (2000) calls for research that describes the “assumptions, attitudes, beliefs and practices about schools, teaching, students and communities” that influence educators' instructional decisions (p. 158). Waddell (2010) also notes that there are "serious questions" being raised about home educators "crafting a curriculum that may or may not be in the child's best interests" (p.541).

As a result, this study will seek to address the problem of the lack of research surrounding the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices. Describing the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices will help to provide a more complete picture of the curricular choice process. It will also allow educators to better understand what home educators value in a curriculum.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the factors influencing the curriculum choices of the 10 home educators that participated in this study. In this study, curriculum will be generally defined as the materials comprising a course of study.

## **Significance of the Study**

Within the existing literature of homeschool education, this study is significant because it elaborates on a little discussed topic – the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices. Indeed, similar research articles recommend additional research in this area (Anthony & Burroughs, 2012; Van Galen, 1988). Prime and Miranda (2006) also note that while there are a number of studies on teacher expectancy and efficacy, there is a lack of research that links educators' beliefs with their curricular practices.

Identifying the factors influencing curriculum choice is also important because curriculum choice has been correlated with student achievement (Brown, Anfara, & Roney, 2004) and the choice of a school curriculum largely determines what learning experiences educators plan for their students (McCutcheon, 1980). Additionally, curricula is one of the largest school factors that affects learning, intellectual development, and college and career readiness (Schmoker, 2011), is also one of the primary message systems of schooling (Bernstein, 1977), and is an integral part of school-to-work initiatives (Ellibee & Mason, 1997). Furthermore, in examining the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices, this study may also help educators better understand the priorities of homeschool educators. Understanding the priorities in homeschool curriculum selection may serve to help improve the quality of curriculum choices made by educators, which in turn, could help improve the overall academic outcomes of homeschooled students.

## **Research Questions**

The following questions framed this study:

How do select home educators describe the factors that influence their curricular choices?

Finding out what factors influenced homeschool curriculum choices was important for several reasons. First, recent literature does not explicitly address the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices, instead it only addresses the wide array of options available for homeschooling families. For example, Hanna (2012) states that homeschool “curricula became as creative as parents chose to be, with choices ranging from printed materials to computer-generated programs, libraries/museums, field trips, resource facilities, networking opportunities, and public school resources” (pp. 612-613). Hanna (2012) also noted, however, in her study of 250 home educators, that home educators are increasingly turning to the Internet as both a means of locating curriculum and as an actual curriculum. Investigating the factors that select homeschool educators describe as influencing their curricular choices may help to reinforce Hanna's findings about the prevalence and importance of the Internet. Secondly, knowing the predominant influences in homeschool curriculum selection will help educators identify if the focus of the chosen curriculum is age and culturally appropriate, an important concept, especially in early childhood (Moore, 1999).

Sub-Question 1: How do select home educators’ beliefs affect their selection of curriculum?

Answering this question was important because, according to Rudd and Hillison (1995), the choice and implementation of a curriculum largely depends on an educator’s personal theories and beliefs. Collopy (2003) also noted that teachers’ knowledge and beliefs influence change by acting as a filter through which curriculum content can be interpreted. Identifying how educators' beliefs affected their selection of curricula will help home educators better understand what is important to them in a curriculum. It may also help traditional educators

recognize what factors home educators' value in a curriculum and how those values translate into the actual selection of curriculum. Indeed, Knobloch (2008) found that educators' beliefs influence how they connect academic content to real-life applications beyond the classroom. Collopy (2003) echoes this sentiment, stating, "Teachers' beliefs and knowledge about subject matter, pedagogy, and learners may influence teachers' responses to curriculum materials including how to use materials and what they learn from them" (p. 289). Knobloch (2008) also found that "Teachers are more likely to adopt a non-required topic and integrate it in their classroom and the school curricula if they perceive it has educational value and would fit within the content areas in which they teach" (p. 537). In the same vein, Lawrenz (1985) found that educators will not choose educational curriculum for their students if they are not convinced of the worth of the curriculum or they are unsure of how to use the curriculum. However, Darr (1985) found that when educators believe that a change in the curriculum would be beneficial to their students, they are more willing to implement a new course of action.

Sub-Question 2: How do select home educators' teaching styles and methodologies affect their curricular decisions?

Addressing how the teaching styles and methodologies of home educators affect curricular decisions was important because home educators tend to demonstrate a wide variety of teaching styles and methods (Avner, 1989; Bauman, 2001; Davis, 2011). Additionally, when compared to public school educators, home educators tend to demonstrate a more controlling motivational teaching approach, an event that is worth investigating (Cai, Reeves, & Robins, 2002). Home educators also tend to supplement prepared curriculum with everyday experiences (Avner, 1989; Kleist-Tesch, 1998), place an emphasis on reading (Yambo, 2002), and

increasingly, integrate technology into their curricular plans (Davis, 2011; Kleist-Tesch, 1998). Rivaro (2011) also noted that successful home educators' teaching styles consisted of patience, practice in the arts of homeschooling and parenting, and persistence in adversity. Together, these occurrences suggest that home educators have specific teaching styles and methodologies such as daily life experiences, and an emphasis on technology and reading instruction that affect their curricular decisions.

### **Research Plan**

As a qualitative transcendental phenomenological study, my study focused on understanding and describing the shared lived experiences of homeschool families in regards to the factors influencing curriculum choices. Utilizing a phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study because according to Creswell (2009) "Phenomenology is a research strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants" (p. 13). A transcendental approach was also appropriate for this study, because according to Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology involves setting aside prejudgments. Moustakas (1994) also notes that the aim of phenomenological research is to

determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the essences or structures of the experience. (p. 13)

Additionally, because the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choice are a phenomenon, it is a suitable starting point for my investigation as Moustakas (1994) notes that that the study of a phenomenon is an appropriate place to begin phenomenological research. Next, to understand the factors influencing curriculum choices, the data was collected by way of surveys, interviews, and focus groups; all after IRB approval was secured. After it was collected, the data was organized into significant themes and then reduced to find the heart of the phenomenon.

### **Delimitations**

To help define the boundaries of this study several exclusionary and inclusionary delimitations were put in place. First, only home educators with at least three years of homeschooling experience were used in this study. Excluding educators who had taught less than three years helped to reduce curriculum choice process findings that would have been linked to inexperience and/or ignorance. Secondly, this study focused exclusively on the factors influencing curriculum choice in homeschool families, thus excluding factors that influenced home educators in other areas, such as the decision to homeschool. Lastly, this study was limited by only including the interview and survey questions that were surveyed and approved by the expert panel, thus excluding some questions.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations existed for this study. First, the study was limited in its ability to generalize to the public because of the use of a purposive sample (Schutt, 2012). Secondly, because snowball sampling, a type of purposive sampling that utilizes referrals from existing

participants to recruit future participants, was used, it is impossible to confidently say that my sample of homeschool families represents all homeschool families; therefore, generalizations are tentative (Schutt, 2012). Additionally, because the initial contact in my snowball sampling shaped the rest of the sample, some members of the homeschool population may have been excluded from the study (Schutt, 2012).

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

Homeschooling, according to Cogan (2010), is a practice of education in which education occurs in the home with a child's parent or guardian serving as the main educator. Collum and Mitchell (2005) elaborate on this definition, stating, "Home schooling is both a means of educating children according to parental standards and an alternative social movement embracing a unique set of cultural norms and values" (p. 274). While the practice of homeschooling has been in place since ancient times, the modern homeschool movement began in the 1970s (Kleist-Tesch, 1998). Today, homeschool families are primarily White, middle-class, Christian, and conservative (Masters, 1996), although that composition is increasingly becoming more diverse (Kunzman, 2009; Welner, 2002) and heterogeneous (Collum, 2005; Collum & Mitchell, 2005). However, while the background of homeschool families is becoming more diverse, Yang and Kayaardi (2004) found "that there were no significant differences in demographic, socioeconomic status, family structure, or religious affiliation in families choosing to homeschool" (p.231). Romanowski (2006) also contends that homeschooling appeals to "a demographic diversity that includes virtually all races, religions, socioeconomic groups and political viewpoints. There are conservatives who consider public education too liberal, liberals who consider it too conservative, and those who are driven by religious convictions" (p. 82).

With homeschool families becoming increasingly more varied, researching this diverse population is notoriously difficult (Stevens, 2001). Indeed, Collum (2005) states, "Research on homeschooling has proliferated in the past decade or so, because of parents', educators', and policymakers' interest in this growing phenomenon. Yet homeschoolers are a difficult

population to study and much of the existing research is limited” (p.307). Furthermore, even with the influx of new research on homeschooling, data on homeschooling is still scarce in many areas (Isenberg, 2007; Martin-Chang, Gould, & Meuse, 2011).

Because of the difficulty in researching homeschool families, several gaps in the literature pertaining to homeschooling exist. One such gap is that of homeschool curriculum choices and the factors influencing those curriculum choices. To date, only a handful of studies have explicitly addressed the topic of curriculum choices in homeschooling and these studies provide only a cursory look at the factors influencing homeschool curricular choice (Anthony & Burroughs, 2012; Hanna, 2012; Van Galen, 1988). From these studies, however, several findings have emerged.

First, home school families have become more creative with their curriculum choices (Hanna, 2012). Examples include computer programs, libraries, museums, and field trips. This is in keeping with the new, expanded view of curriculum which includes “all the planned learning experiences of a school or educational institution” (Prideaux, 2003). Secondly, homeschool families have more curriculum choices available to them than they did in the past (Hanna, 2012; Patterson, Gibson, Koenigs, Maurer, Ritterhouse, Stockton & Taylor, 2007). With this increased availability, homeschool families also tend to choose “very specific methods and carefully selected materials for their children’s instruction” (Hanna, 2012, p.627). Furthermore, within these specific methods, homeschool families tend to run their home schools using a blend of both traditional and progressive strategies and rely heavily on reading as an instructional method (Anthony & Burroughs, 2012). Cai, Reeve, and Robinson (2002) do note, however, that while homeschool families do have more choices available to them today,

“religiously motivated homeschool educators routinely opt for a relatively narrow, religiously affiliated curriculum” (p.373).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

While the reasoning behind choices is often varied and complex, examining the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices in light of social cognitive theory help to explain why homeschool families make the choices they do when it comes to curriculum. Social cognitive theory, originating with theorist Albert Bandura, stresses a triadic reciprocal model of human behavior that is comprised of the environment, observed behaviors, and personal factors (Bandura, 2001). In this triad, the environment, observed behaviors and personal factors all influence behavior, and subsequently, choices (Bandura, 2001). Anderson, Winett, and Wojcik (2007) describe social cognitive theory as delineating “the presumed sources and mediators of behavior and behavior change” (p. 306). In the same vein, Spera (2005) notes, “A primary way parents socialize their children is by communicating the goals they want their children to attain, the aspirations they want their children to fulfill, and the values they want their children to internalize” (p.130).

In addition to a triadic reciprocal model of human behavior, social cognitive theory stresses the importance of self-efficacy, or the measure of one’s ability to succeed in tasks and reach objectives (Bandura, 1989, 1991, 2001). According to Bandura (1977), expectations of personal efficacy come from four areas: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states. For example, as it pertains to the factors influencing

curriculum choices, Bandura would most likely contend that homeschool parents who did well with a particular curriculum in the past (performance accomplishment) would feel a high degree of efficacy, and would therefore most likely choose the same curriculum again. In the same vein, homeschool parents who saw the success of a curriculum in another family (vicarious experience), felt good about a particular curriculum (physiological state), or were persuaded of the effectiveness of a curricula (verbal persuasion) would also be influenced to choose a particular type of curricula. Echoing this idea, Bandura (1982) found that verbal persuasion in the form of encouraging words could contribute to a person attempting a new strategy or choosing a different direction. Bandura (1977) also contends that when self-efficacy is firmly established, it will remain resilient in the face of adversity: “Efficacy expectations determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences” (Bandura, 1977, p. 194). Zimmerman (1989) also notes that “self-efficacy serves as a sort of thermostat that regulates strategic efforts to acquire knowledge and skill through a cybernetic feedback loop” (p.331). Moseley, Reinke, and Bookout (2002) add that behaviors like persistence, risk taking, and use of innovations are correlated with the degree of personal efficacy one perceives and make educators more likely to use inquiry and student-centered teaching approaches.

Related to self-efficacy, social cognitive theory also describes human agency, the belief that people “can effect change in themselves and their situations through their own efforts” (Bandura, 1989, p.1175). Mayr (2011) elaborates on this concept, stating that in human agency, human agents have active, intentional reasons for behaviors that are part of the natural order of things. Rottschaefter (1991) also contends that social cognitive theory, and specifically, human agency, provides support in the examination of “important philosophical problems in

philosophical psychology” (p. 155). Bandura and Wood (1989) also note that the higher someone perceives their self-efficacy to be, the higher they will set their goals, thus reinforcing their personal concept of human agency. Transferring this idea to the educational world, Prime and Miranda (2006) found that educators with high expectations for themselves and their students tend to teach more challenging curriculum because they believe in their students' self-efficacy.

Furthermore, central to social cognitive theory is the idea of self-regulation. Defined by Bandura (1991) as the systemic self-observation and audit of one's performance and by Forgas, Baumeister, and Tice (2009) as systemic thinking and the use of conscious will, self-regulation is essentially the capacity for altering behavior (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005). In the same vein, Forgas, Baumeister, and Tice (2009) state, “The ability to control and regulate our actions is perhaps the quintessential characteristic of human beings. Indeed, the capacity to engage in effective self-regulation is probably one of the defining features of our species” (p.1). Anderson, Winett, and Wojcik (2007) also comment that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and self-regulation all work together to directly influence behavior. Bandura (1977) also states that along with the "capacity to represent future consequences in thought" goal setting and self-evaluation are a major source of an individual's motivation in choosing or doing something (p.193).

### **Ecology of Human Development**

In addition to examining the factors influencing home school curriculum choices in light of social cognitive theory, examining the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices from an ecology of human development perspective also helped to explain key factors in the curriculum choice process. The field of ecology of human development, while championed by

several researchers (Barker & Schoggen; Hawley) was primarily developed by psychologist Uri Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s. While regarded by some as a theory of human development, it is perhaps better described as "a point of view or definition of a field of inquiry that aids in question formulation" (Garbarino, 1980, p. 437).

Regardless of the viewpoint, the ecology of human development stance stresses the effect of interdependent systems on the development of a person (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). According to Bronfenbrenner (1975), "Ecology comes from the Greek root "oikos" meaning "home." With reference to human growth, an ecological perspective focuses attention on development as a function of interaction between the developing organism and the enduring environments or contexts in which it lives out its life" (p.439). Bronfenbrenner (1975) also contends that "Ecology implies a fit between the organism and its environment. If the organism is not only to survive but to develop, the fit must be even closer" (p. 439).

However, while the theory of ecology of human development emphasizes the interdependence of various systems in influencing behavior and development, it places special emphasis on the influence of the microsystem, or the family/school unit (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). According to Ungar, Ghazinour, and Richter (2013) the microsystem represents "activities, roles and interpersonal relations where the developing person is directly involved with particular physical and material features like the family, school class, neighborhood or church" (p. 352). Bronfenbrenner (1977) believed that these immediate activities, roles, and relationships within the microsystem were vitally important in influencing a person's behavior and subsequent decisions. Indeed, Eddy (1981) in examining the theory of ecology of human development, states, "The most powerful aspects of the environment are those that have meaning to the

person” (p. 643). In later years, however, Bronfenbrenner (1988) clarified his earlier emphasis of the microsystem, instead explaining that no one system was subordinate to another.

In addition to the microsystem affecting the development of a person, the viewpoint of ecology of human development also details the importance and interrelatedness of three other systems: the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), the mesosystem affects a person’s development through major settings occurring at a particular point in a person’s life, while the exosystem works as an extension of the mesosystem and shapes a person through specific social structures. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979) these social interactions in the exosystem, while important in shaping the behavior of a person, influence the development of a person indirectly, while the social interactions of the microsystem provide the most direct social influence. However, Bronfenbrenner (1979) also contends that the exosystem shapes the quality of interactions within both the microsystem and mesosystem. Ungar, Ghazinour, and Richter (2013) illustrate the far-reaching effect of the exosystem by explaining, " For example, communities that facilitate social networks between parental microsystems provide caregivers with a set of potentially supportive relationships that makes it easier for them to sustain the provision of quality childrearing" (p. 354). The last and biggest system, according to Bronfenbrenner, is the macrosystem. The macrosystem encompasses all of the other systems and shapes development through culture and subculture patterns, all while interacting with the other systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

At its core then, the stance of ecology of human development stresses both the uniqueness and interdependence of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner (1979) himself pictured the various environments as a nested structure, much

like Russian Matryoshka dolls. Belsky (1995) reiterates this idea of mutual interaction, stating that the three major themes of Bronfenbrenner's theory are methods and pathways of development, context, and thirdly, the interaction of context (the systems) with the methods and pathways of development.

### **Related Literature**

Within the realm of curricula, and the choice processes behind choosing curricula, many topics in the literature arise. To begin, however, in this literature review, a description of the importance of curricula is undertaken, followed by a look into the research surrounding homeschool teaching style and methodology. Next, the motivation to homeschool is examined, along with reports on homeschool academic achievement coupled with parental involvement. Standards based curriculum, a hot topic in today's society, is then examined, along with curriculum orientations and their significance in education. Lastly, a description of three models of decision making is given, followed by a summary of the significance of curriculum and curriculum choice processes in education.

### **The Importance of Curricula**

Choosing appropriate, quality curricula is an important part of any educational system. Indeed, curriculum may be the single largest school factor that affects learning, intellectual development, and college and career readiness (Schmoker, 2011), is one of the primary message systems of schooling (Bernstein, 1977), and is an integral part of school-to-work initiatives (Ellibee & Mason, 1997). Indeed, Crawford and Snider (2000) found in their research that curriculum is a "critical factor in student achievement" and that while teacher skill, dedication,

and compassion are important educator qualities, educators "can produce better educational outcomes if they also have access to "tools that work"" (p.122). Furthermore, Dodge (1995) notes that without an appropriate curriculum framework, educators may introduce potentially harmful practices to students. Nathan, Long, and Alibali (2002) also found that curriculum significantly determines not only what students do academically, but it may also significantly influence educators' lesson plans and coverage of content.

Because having a quality curriculum is so important, research points to several common features quality curriculum possesses. Pill (2004) states, "Quality curriculum is – aligned with curriculum and standard frameworks, based on student-centered outcomes, developmentally appropriate with consideration for different learning styles, all areas of the program are integrated, supports student choice in content, assessments, and reporting of achievements" (p.13). Dodge (1995) echoes Pill's call for developmentally appropriate curriculum, stating,

One effective strategy for achieving a quality program is the use of a developmentally appropriate curriculum. A well-defined curriculum framework, based on child development theory, provides early childhood educators with a structure for planning a program that encompasses all aspects of a child's development and meets professional standards. (p. 1171)

Meighan (2005) also stresses the importance of choosing curriculum that accounts for varying learning styles, stating, "Given the fact that we are able to locate over 30 differences in individual learning styles, any uniform approach to the curriculum or to learning is intellectual death to some, and often most, of the learners and is therefore suspect" (p.285).

Furthermore, the quality of curriculum is increased through following specified standards and content criteria (Ellibee & Mason, 1997; Penney, Brooker, Hay, & Gillespie, 2009) and constructing appropriate formative and diagnostic assessments rather than an over-emphasis on summative multiple-choice testing (Yates, 2013). Prideaux's (2003) research states, "The curriculum must be in a form that can be communicated to those associated with the learning institution, should be open to critique, and should be able to be readily transformed into practice" (p.269). Clark (1997) agrees with Prideaux's research, stating that curriculum should factor into account the individual interests, needs, abilities, and learning preferences of students, and Dodge (1995) also echoes the idea of communicable curriculum, stating, "The curriculum must also be *individually appropriate*, for each child is a unique person with his or her own temperament, interests, learning styles, and cultural background" (p. 1179). Research supporting a Christian approach to curriculum suggests, however, that curriculum should factor in the economic, social, political, cultural, and religious context of the supporting community, all while including content that deals with all facets of reality (Van Brummelen, 2002). Still other research states that quality curriculum should help students build from their prior experiences, show connections between subject areas, and relate the material to real life (Ladwig, 2009) all while facilitating reflection of habitual learning (Nygaard, Højlt, & Hermansen, 2008). Indeed, Sun, Chen, Zhu, and Ennis (2012) state,

An effective curriculum must take into account what learners know and can do presently and what social interaction condition the curriculum will create to allow others (teachers and peers) to lead a learner through the ZPD [Zone of Proximal Development] to realize his or her potential. (p. 225)

Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) caution, however, that while “Quality curriculum should play a central role in meeting the core needs of students... it is the teacher’s job to make the link between the basic human needs of students and curriculum” (p.16). Stenhouse (1975) describes a quality curriculum in a more humorous fashion, stating that curriculum

can be criticized on nutritional or gastronomic grounds – does it nourish the students and does it taste good? – and it can be criticized on the grounds of practicality – we can’t get hold of six dozen lark’s tongues and the grocer can’t find any ground unicorn horn! A curriculum, like the recipe for a dish, is first imagined as a possibility, then the subject of experiment. The recipe offered publicly is in a sense a report on the experiment.

Similarly, a curriculum should be grounded in practice. It is an attempt to describe the work observed in classrooms that is adequately communicated to teachers and others.

Finally, within limits, a recipe can varied [sic] according to taste. So can a curriculum.  
(p.4)

In addition to having a quality curriculum, curriculum should also help to accomplish educational outcomes. For example, the choice of a particular curriculum is often based on what the intended outcome is (Ladwig, 2009; Van Brummelen, 2002). Indeed, defined outcomes can provide the foundation for choosing and organizing curriculum (Ladwig, 2009). The intended outcome of a curriculum, or a curriculum orientation, is described by Van Brummelen (2002) as a set of basic worldview assumptions and view of knowledge and people that guide the overall vision for education. Tyler (1949) also elaborates on the idea of utilizing outcomes to choose curriculum in his famous principles on curriculum and instruction, stating that educators should consider what educational purposes they are trying to attain, how those purposes can be attained

and organized, and how to assess the attainment of those performances when choosing a curriculum. For example, if the intended outcome is success in college and/or career, research suggests that educators implement curriculum that is coherent, content rich, and full of opportunities for reading, writing, and discussion (Conley, 2006). Ennis (2008) also stresses the need for a coherent curriculum, arguing that for learning to take place students must have a coherent learning experience brought about by a coherent curriculum. Indeed, Ennis (2008) goes on to say, "In outstanding programs, curricular coherence is likely central to the perception of quality and engagement that pervades these programs" (p.73). Ennis does note, however, that "Coherence can be illusive and dependent on educational participants' subjective perspectives" (p.73).

Lastly, in addition to being coherent, research on middle school curriculum suggests that a strong information literacy component in the curriculum is necessary to help middle school students develop analytical skills that will carry over into the rest of their lives (Bucher, 2000). Additionally, students create subjective meanings of learning situations based on prior experiences and future expectations (Nygaard, Højlt, & Hermansen, 2008) so choosing a flexible curriculum is an important component in the curriculum choice process because every student's learning process changes over time (Nygaard, Højlt, & Hermansen, 2008).

### **Homeschool Teaching Style and Methodology**

Because the choice of a homeschool curriculum is often naturally based on the teaching style of the educator, an examination of homeschool teaching style and methods is appropriate. In a well-known study, Knowles (1988) found that home school educators formulate their teaching methods largely from personal experience in their own educational history and that their

role as an educator was “largely a product of biography” (p.81). Knowles (1988) also found that the experiences homeschool educators most often relied upon to form their teaching methods were a combination of child-family relationships, teacher role models, school memories, and the influence of significant people or experiences. Other studies report, however, that there are a wide variety of homeschool teaching styles, with many homeschool educators choosing a prepared curriculum as a starting point, and then complementing the curriculum with teaching through everyday experiences (Avner, 1989). Davis' (2011) findings echo Avner's research, with homeschool families adopting a wide variety of teaching methods. Indeed, according to Davis (2011), "Many parents opt for a blended approach and use a number of sources to develop their curriculum" (p. 29). Davis (2011) elaborates on this idea, stating,

there are a number of methodologies that parents adopt in their teaching methods, including trivium classical education, quadrivium classical education, Charlotte Mason, school-at-home, Thomas Jefferson education, multiple intelligences, constructivism, unschooling, radical unschooling, and Montessori. Many parents opt for a blended approach and use a number of sources to develop their curriculum. (p.29)

In his 2001 study Bauman also found that home educators use a variety of curriculum options, with 78% of home educators using a public library, 77% using a homeschool publisher or individual specialist, 68% using retail book stores, 60% using a non-homeschool book publisher, 50% using a homeschool organization, 37% using curriculum from a religious institution, 23% using curriculum from the local public school district, 41% using distance learning, 20% using media such as television, video, or radio, 19% using eLearning, and lastly, 15% using distance

learning through homeschool correspondence. Kleist-Tesch's (1998) study also found that many homeschool educators enhance their pre-packaged curricula with daily life experiences like cooking and going to the bank. However, Kleist-Tesch (1998) did note that while homeschool teaching styles vary from structured to unstructured, most homeschool parents choose a structured approach. Medlin's (1994) study of 27 homeschool families agrees with Kleist-Tesch (1998), when Medlin found that 61% of homeschool parents implemented traditional instructional practices similar to the public school, while only 19% described their instructional practices as more relaxed and creative. Kleist-Tesch (1998) also found, however, that increasingly more and more homeschool educators are incorporating technology into their educational plans. Davis (2011) notes, "The Internet has become an invaluable opportunity for homeschooling parents to broaden their child's education and expand opportunities for their child to learn through auditory, visual, and kinesthetic methods" (p. 29). Even with the increased use of technology in homeschooling, an emphasis on the basics, however, does not seem to have been diminished. For example, reading often, both to and with homeschooled students, is a teaching style that Yambo's (2002) study found contributed to homeschooled students' success in learning to read and was a popular method of teaching. Knafle and Wescott (2005) also found in their longitudinal study of homeschool literacy instruction that phonics instruction was the method most preferred by homeschooling mothers in teaching reading, but that reading comprehension was not emphasized.

Furthermore, Cai, Reeves, and Robinson (2002) found that when compared to public school educators, homeschool educators demonstrated a relatively more controlling motivational style in their teaching approach. However, when dealing with gifted and learning disabled students, Ensign (1998) found that home educators tend to emphasize: "(1) a focus on the whole

child rather than primarily on the child's disability or extreme ability; (2) individualized attention; and (3) care, patience and respect for the child that leads the teaching in both the timing and content of instruction.” In the same vein, Rivero (2011) found that regardless of giftedness or disability, a successful home educator’s teaching style consisted of patience (both with the student and educator), practice in the skills of homeschooling and parenting, and persistence in adversity.

### **Motivation to Homeschool**

The motivation to homeschool and the methods used by homeschool families are highly variable (Winstanley, 2009), however, in a study by Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse (2011) they found that home educators could be grouped by how well they identified with the role of teacher. According to Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse (2011),

the majority of the homeschooling parents reported that they "often" or "always" used premade curricula or structured lesson plans to teach their children. This group adhered loosely to a "school-at-home" methodology (Taylor-Hough, 2010), where the parents/teachers set out clear educational goals for their children and offered structured lessons in the form of either purchased curricula or self-made lesson plans (often some combination of both). The main defining characteristic of this subgroup was that the parents viewed themselves as important contributors to their children's education. (p.197)

However, other research has shown that homeschool educators make the decision to homeschool largely because they believe they are responsible for their child’s education, have the ability to

carry out that education, and can do the best job of accomplishing that education (Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Ice & Hoover-Dempsey, 2011; Kunzman, 2009; Patterson, Gibson, Koenigs, Maurer, Ritterhouse, Stockton, & Taylor, 2007). Green and Hoover-Dempsey (2007) state, “Homeschool parents appear to decide to homeschool not so much because they believe that public schools cannot educate their children but because they believe that they are personally responsible for their child’s education and they are capable of educating their children well in ways consistent with their priorities” (p.278). Hurlbutt (2010) also notes that the decision to homeschool is a “lifestyle choice, not just an educational choice” (p. 20). Indeed, many Christian educators point to Deuteronomy 6: 4-7 (KJV) as confirmation of a parent’s responsibility to educate their child –

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

Mazama and Lunday (2013) also found that in the African-American homeschooling community, while a concern with the quality of education being provided in traditional schools was a motivation to homeschool (23.2%), the second most cited motivation to homeschool was the desire to strengthen family bonds (13.7%). Mazama and Lunday (2013) also went on to say that “Many parents felt that an investment in time, especially at the early stages of a child’s life, would avoid subsequent difficulties” (p. 132). Mazama and Lundy’s (2013) study also found that there was a general dissatisfaction in the African American homeschool community with the

traditional European ethnocentric curriculum found in most schools and that because of this, their child should be home educated.

Additionally, parents of gifted children tend to make the decision to homeschool because their child does not 'fit' in the school system, therefore making homeschooling the only viable alternative (Winstanley, 2009). Other studies also found, however, that while dissatisfaction with other educational options was not paramount in the motivation to home school, it was present (Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Knowles, 1988; Patterson, Gibson, Koenigs, Maurer, Ritterhouse, Stockton, & Taylor, 2007). Welner (2002) does give greater credence to public school dissatisfaction as a motivation to homeschool than other studies, finding that in addition to religious convictions, dissatisfaction with public schools was a prominent factor in the decision to homeschool. Isenberg also notes in his 2007 study that the top three reasons that motivated people to homeschool in 2003 were "concern about environment of other schools, dissatisfaction with academic instruction at other schools, and to provide religious or moral instruction" (p. 399). Isenberg (2007) also found that "Parents make school choice decisions based on preferences, the quality of local schools, and constraints of income and available leisure time" and that "there is also a significant number homeschooled due to physical or mental health/behavioral problems or other special needs" (p.396). Conversely, in his study on parent's rationales for homeschooling Knowles (1988) states, "overwhelmingly, past experiences seemed more important than present public school problems as motivations for home schooling" (p.75). Hills and Taylor's (2004) research agrees:

Parents' own experiences as students shape their involvement in their children's schooling. As a parent prepares a child to start school, the parent's memories

of his or her own school experiences are likely to become reactivated and may influence how the parent interprets and directs the child's school experiences. (p.162)

Collum and Mitchell (2005) sum up the research on motivation to homeschool, stating, "Overall then, there is a general consensus among researchers that the decision to home school is motivated by four broad categories of concern: (a) religious values, (b) dissatisfaction with the public schools, (c) academic and pedagogical concerns, and (d) family life" (p.277).

### **Homeschool Academic Achievement/Parental Involvement**

The ability of educators to cultivate academically high-achieving students is an important topic in today's educational world. Researchers have devoted particular attention to homeschool academic achievement and how homeschool educators affect that achievement. Several studies point to the high achievement of homeschool students, particularly in regards to standardized tests like the ACT (Cogan, 2010). Taylor-Hough (2010) goes so far as to say, "if parents choose to homeschool because they are looking for increased academic achievement as measured by standardized tests, the research shows that any method of homeschooling will most likely raise their child's test scores above those of their traditionally schooled counterparts" (p. 6). Ray (2004) also notes, "In study after study, the homeschooled scored, on average, at the 65th to 80th percentile on standardized academic achievement tests in the United States and Canada, compared to the public school average of the 50th percentile" (p. 6). Blok (2004) takes a more cautious stance in his research, but still supports the academics of homeschooling, stating, "Scientifically speaking, there is nothing to support the view that home schooling is an academically inferior educational option . . . learning is possible – if not more effective – at home" (p. 50).

However, additional studies have found that the distinguishing feature between low and high academically achieving students has less to do with the type of education and more to do with a parent's involvement and expectation for their student's academic achievement (Barwegen, Falciani, Putnam, Reamer, & Stair, 2004; Dye, 1992; Fan & Chen, 2001). For example, parental involvement has been found to improve student attitudes toward school, homework practice, school attendance, and academic achievement (Desimone, 1999; Feuerstein, 2000) and is therefore a "valuable component of any students' education" (Desimone, 1999). Hill and Taylor (2004) state, "It is well established that parental school involvement has a positive influence on school-related outcomes for children" (p.161). In his meta-analysis of parental involvement literature Jeynes (2011) found that in both elementary and middle and high school students there was a relationship between parental involvement and student achievement. Jeynes (2011) also found that parental involvement is associated with "higher achievement for racial minority students and for both boys and girls. Statistically significant results emerged consistently across the various kinds of academic measures, although there was some degree of variation in the effect" (p.43).

What constitutes parental involvement varies considerably, however, across the literature, and therefore the findings of parental involvement studies are often challenging to compare (Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). When examined as a multidimensional concept, however, parental involvement has the biggest effect on academic achievement when the involvement is accomplished in the home, rather than the school (DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Ray (2010) also found that three variables of interest were positively associated with student achievement on academic tests:

greater structure in the program, more funds spent on educational materials (e.g., textbooks, tutoring), and more time spent in "structured learning time" (defined as "time during which the child is engaged in learning activities planned by the parent; it is a time during which the child is not free to do whatever he or she chooses. (p. 19)

However, while several studies do tout the positive academic effects of homeschooling, Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse (2011) point out that two of the most cited studies regarding homeschool academic achievement, Rudner's 1999 study and Ray's 2010 study, have methodological flaws. For example, Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse (2011) state,

Rudner compared the scores of a specially selected group of homeschooled children to test norms established with a general population of public school children [and] Ray's (2010) study was subject to many of the same limitations as Rudner's (1999). Specifically, the population comprised only those homeschoolers who used the services of academic testing companies. (pp. 195-196)

Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse (2011) do go on to say, however, that while Rudner (1999) and Ray's (2010) studies did have problems, Rudner's data did show that students who had been exclusively home educated had higher overall academic achievement than students who began their education in a traditional public school and then transitioned to homeschooling. Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse (2011) also found that Ray's (2010) study was accurate in its assessment of the positive effects structure had on a student's academic achievement. In their own study, Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse (2011) found that "structured homeschooling may offer opportunities for academic performance beyond those typically experienced in public school" (p. 200), but suggest that additional research be done in this area.

## Standards Based Curricula

In recent years, much attention has been given to standards based curricula and its benefits (and detriments) to the educational community (Pemberton, Rademacher, Tyler-Wood, & Perez Cereijo, 2006). Indeed, according to Steadman and Evans (2013)

the past 30 years have seen three major reform efforts shape American educational policy and implementation. The first, *A Nation at Risk*, and the second, the No Child Left Behind Act, were launched and supported by the federal government. The third and current educational reform effort is the Common Core State Standards. (p. 1)

According to the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association (NGA & CCSSO, 2010), the Common Core State Standards were created to “help ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy no later than the end of high school” (p.3). Davila-Medrano (2003) also comments on the standards the No Child Left Behind Act calls for, stating,

The No Child Left Behind Act calls for increased accountability and improved performance. At the heart of improved achievement is the curriculum - the road map guaranteeing that every student is given instruction rooted in national standards and based on outcomes. (p.40)

Marzano, Pickering, and McTighe (1993), describe curriculum standards as explicit expectations and goals that help students and schools have a common language in reaching those expectations and goals. Pemberton, Rademacher, Tyler-Wood, and Perez Cereijo, (2006) provide an example of this common language, stating, “For example, in the area of writing, curriculum standards are

designed to help students become successful writers. Consequently, the standards and indicators provide information on what to teach students to help them become successful writers" (p. 284). Other researchers also believe that standards based curriculum levels the playing field for all students (Swain & Pearson, 2002), ensures quality in education (New Standards-Based Curriculum Documents, 2005), and allows "for the creativity and art of teaching" (Williams, 2013, p.43).

Conversely, standards based curricula also has negative aspects reported. For instance, standards based curricula often involves high stakes testing, which can lead to undue pressure on educators and students, and can cause teachers to 'test-teach' (Rakow, 2008). Odvard (1997) also states that while curriculum standards are

inextricably linked to the quality of education...the problem is that myriad standards have been written at local, state and national levels, and are offered by numerous and often competing curriculum and professional organizations. Furthermore-and especially as technology is making dramatic changes in the curriculum standards are revised continuously and it is difficult to stay current. (p. 64)

Pemberton, Rademacher, Tyler-Wood, and Perez Cereijo, (2006) also point out that in order for a standards based curriculum to work, "standards must be matched with formative assessments and with teaching strategies designed to achieve the desired outcome" (p. 283). Despite the negative aspects, however, some educators believe standards based curricula is more effective than other types of curricula.

However, there is no definitive proof that standards-based curricula on its own is more effective than regular commercially developed curricula (Arbaugh et al., 2006; Charalambos & Hill, 2012; Tarr, Chavez, Reys, & Reys, 2008). Instead, research shows that standards-based curricula is only more effective than commercially prepared curricula when students engage in higher level thinking activities (Arbaugh et al., 2006; Tarr et al., 2008). Because of this, the role of teachers in implementing standards-based curricula is of the utmost importance. As an alternative, however, Rakow (2008) suggests that educators replace standards-based curriculum with standards-embedded curriculum. Standards-embedded curricula, according to Rakow (2008), differs from standards based curricula in its starting point: “Standards-based curriculum begins with the grade-level standard and the underlying assumption that every student needs to master that standard at that moment in time. In standards-embedded curriculum, the multifaceted essential question and students' needs are the starting points” (p.47). Starting from a question and then working backwards (a standards-embedded approach) is something Rakow (2008) contends will help alleviate the challenges of a conventional standards-based approach and provide a quality curriculum for all students.

On the other hand, while standards-based and standards-embedded curriculum is becoming commonplace in the majority of public schools today, homeschool students are not required to use standards-based curriculum. In fact, the standards, or regulations, for homeschooling varies considerably from state to state. Reindl (2005) notes that there is a “wide range of state regulation and oversight with respect to homeschooling – from virtually none to very significant” (p.35). In Florida, for example, there are only several requirements for families wishing to homeschool – a written notice of intent to homeschool sent to the school district superintendent, compulsory attendance between the ages of 6 and 16, a sequentially progressive

education that is documented in a portfolio, and an annual educational evaluation that includes either an evaluation by a Florida certified teacher or psychologist, or the completion of any nationally- normed achievement or assessment (FLDOE, 2014). Absent from these regulations are any requirements on length of the school day, education of the parent, or type of curriculum employed.

### **Curriculum Orientations**

A curriculum orientation, or a curriculum perspective, is the relationship between philosophical beliefs and education (Jenkins, 2009), and is an important part of the curriculum choice process. Ennis, Ross and Chen (1994) define curriculum orientations as "educational perspectives that influence the teachers' relative emphasis on the learner, the context and the body of knowledge" (p.38) while Johnson (1997) defines a curriculum orientation as a "philosophical, social or practical justification for what (and how) we teach" (p.43). Indeed, studies have shown that educators' orientations are decidedly influential in both curriculum selection and teaching methods (Ennis, 1994; Jenkins, 2009). Curriculum researchers also argue that curriculum orientations influence choices pertaining to content, pedagogy, and assessment (Curtner-Smith & Meek, 2000; Ennis, Ross, & Chen, 1992). ). Indeed, Bruner (1977) contends that curriculum is more for teachers than for students and that if the curriculum is going to have any effect on students, it will have it by way of the effect it had on teachers. Additionally, from a practical standpoint, Gillespie (2011) argues that curriculum orientations can serve as a "critical tool within teacher education that may provide insights into student teacher preferences and decisions relating to planning, pedagogy, content selection and practice, as these will be based on their particular set of beliefs and value orientation" (p.59). Ennis, Ross, and Chen (1992) also

note that "Value orientations represent philosophical perspectives that can be operationalized as educational goals for student learning" (p. 39). Furthermore, Van Brummelen (2002) contends that Christian educators must choose a curriculum orientation.

While there is some variation in the research concerning the types of curriculum orientations, research (McNeil, 1996; Tanner and Tanner, 1995; Vallence, 1986) generally holds to five major curriculum orientations:

(a) curriculum-making as a technological problem; (b) the curriculum as a means of developing cognitive processes in children; (c) the curriculum as a means of enabling students to reach their full self-actualized potential; (d) a social-reconstructionist view of the curriculum as the means for initiating social reform; and (e) the academic-rationalist view of the curriculum as the vehicle for the transmission of civilization's intellectual heritage. (Vallence, 1986, p.25)

However, additional orientations have been proposed, including a personal commitment curriculum orientation (Vallence, 1986) and a biblically-based curriculum orientation (Van Brummelen, 2002). Hull (2009) simplifies the number of orientations, however, by simply naming curriculum orientations as either traditional or nontraditional. In a traditional curriculum orientation emphasis is placed on technology and academic rationalism, while a nontraditional curriculum orientation values personal development and social reform (Hull, 2009). In today's educational world, the nontraditional curriculum orientation has found its voice in the progressive educational movement, and despite efforts to reconcile the traditional orientation with the nontraditional orientation, research generally views orientations as mutually exclusive (Hull, 2009; Vallence, 1986).

Regardless of the orientation, however, research has shown that teachers do more than simply implement a curriculum. Rather, teachers actively construct the curriculum through their beliefs and orientations (Connelly & Clandinin, 1986). Remillard (2005) sums up the research, stating,

When considered together, studies on the characteristics and resources that influence curriculum use highlight several themes. First, teachers matter in the curriculum-use equation. The individual resources and perspectives of teachers help to explain, in part, the differences seen across teachers in curriculum use, especially when they are working with the same curriculum. Second, patterns that exist across studies reveal the types of characteristics that are particularly prominent as influencing factors. Third, although knowledge and beliefs are the most studied of individual characteristics, a number of additional factors have appeared in the literature particular to teachers' curriculum use. These factors, including teachers' orientation toward curriculum and professional identity, have the potential to expand understanding in the field of the teachers' curriculum use. (p.229)

### **Choice Processes**

Decision making is an important part of any profession, but the decisions made in education are of particular importance, given the high stakes. According to Nutt (1976) decision making is defined as “the process of selecting a particular alternative for implementation” (p.84). As a part of this ‘process of selecting a particular alternative’, home educators must choose the curriculum. While many teachers outside of the home are not given the chance to choose their own curriculum, “generally speaking, as teachers know their students best, they

should undoubtedly be the best decision makers on the curriculum and pedagogy” (Allen, 2000, p.6). Because teachers, and therefore, home educators, are a crucial element in the curriculum choice process, examining the methods behind their decision making may shed light onto why home educators choose the curriculum they do. However, it is also important to note that educators who take an active part in choosing the curriculum are also more accountable for the quality of the education they provide (Allen, 2000). Additionally, homeschool educators are also accountable for the time and effort they put into choosing a homeschool curriculum, because “information processing (search, evaluation, and integration) is an integral part of decision making” (Cravens, 1970, p. 15).

There are a variety of theories in today’s research that seek to explain the decision-making process of individuals and groups. Traditionally, these models emphasize two factors: rationality and individualistic choice (Allen, 2000). Absent from many of these models, however, is the recognition of outside pressures such as information inadequacy, and societal, emotional, and ideological preconceptions (Allen, 2000). Ungureanu (2011) notes, “Classical theories of choice emphasize decision making as a rational process. In general, these theories fail to recognize the formulation stages of a decision and typically can only be applied to problems comprising two or more measurable alternatives” (p. 24). Because of the tendency to ignore these factors, many of the traditional decision-making models do not mesh well with the decisions involved in choosing a curriculum. However, several theories do take into account pressures and beliefs.

One such theory is the dynamical systems theory. While the dynamical systems theory is particularly prominent in math and science, it has also been used in educational circles.

According to Ungureanu (2011), dynamical systems theory “is based on the fact that the functioning of a system is represented by the knowledge of the interactions between the information fluxes, commands, human resources and material resources, etc” (p. 23). In its essence, this theory is used to study change and predict what might change as a result of certain actions (Ungureanu, 2011). Additionally, this theory recognizes the interrelatedness of every aspect in a setting, but places special emphasis on educator’s beliefs, ascribing them the most influence in the decisions educators make (Ennis, 1994). Indeed, while teachers may have similar knowledge, it is their differences in beliefs that influence how teachers select and teach content (Ernest, 1989). According to Prideaux (2003) curriculum is the outcome of human agency, and is “underpinned by a set of values and beliefs about what students should know and how they come to know it” (p. 269). Another important component of the dynamical systems theory is the idea of coupled systems. In this perspective, independent systems that “exhibit ongoing mutual causal influence” can for all intents and purposes be thought of as a unified larger system (Rupert, 2009, p. 131). For example, an educator’s religious predilections may couple with the educator’s curriculum preferences, essentially making the two independent systems a single system and thus causing the educator to choose a curriculum that matches with his or her religious convictions, such as science curriculum with a creationist viewpoint or a history curriculum that emphasizes America’s religious heritage.

Another theory that helps explain the decision-making process behind curriculum choices is the model of rational choice, also known as the synoptic or comprehensive model of decision-making. While this model does place an emphasis on rationality, as traditional models often do, it is slightly different in that it does factor in outside relationships and pressures. In this model, individuals making a decision bring with them known objectives; i.e., ‘my student will be able to

understand his or her role as a Christian in society' (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992). With these known objectives individuals then determine the potential consequences of various actions and then choose the ideal action (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992). In a simplified version of this model, called Simon's behavioral decision model, acceptable alternatives, as opposed to optimal alternatives, are the first choice of decision makers (Nutt, 1976). Huber (1997) compares the selection of the first satisfactory alternative to chess: if a chess player finds a way to check mate his opponent, that way is chosen, with little thought for other alternatives that may also lead to a check mate.

In examining rational choice, Simon (1955) summarizes some general features of rational choice within his simplified version, features such as "(1) the set of alternatives open to choice, (2) the relationships that determine the payoffs ("satisfactions", "goal-attainment") as a function of the alternative that is chosen, [and] (3) the preference-orderings among pay-offs" (p. 100). Simon (1955) also notes that implicit assumptions are an integral part of the model of rational behavior. For example, assumptions are made as to what variables are able to be controlled and optimized and what variables remain fixed and unchanging. Cravens (1970) also elaborates on this idea, contending that decision makers tend to search for information to inform their decisions from a limited number of inside sources and will not usually seek additional information unless driven to do so.

A third model that helps to explain the curricular decision-making process is Skilbeck's situational curriculum model of decision-making. In this model, educators take the following consecutive steps: analyze the situation, define objectives, design, interpret and implement the teaching learning program, and lastly, assess and evaluate the appropriateness of the choice.

According to White (1989) this sequence of actions is useful because

First, we may use it to provide a resume, a kind of prospectus of tasks to be accomplished. Second, it can be the basis of agreed action and hence help in reducing arbitrary or authoritarian decisions, a matter of some importance when hierarchies may feel challenged by unstructured reviews and evaluations. Third, it will be useful if it encompasses, in simplified ways, crucial and productive kinds of action... Fourth, what is proposed is useful if it helps in the presentation and communication to interested parties of what is planned and is happening in the curriculum. (p. 90)

In addition to recommending a sequential order of decision making, Skilbeck's curriculum model also emphasizes the importance of context in decision making (Prideaux, 2003). For example, in this model, an educator would analyze the impact of various internal and external factors (context) on the type of curriculum chosen, and then assess the best curriculum choice from the situation. Central to this practice, however, is the idea of treating all factors of the curriculum as interrelated. Prideaux (2003) comments, "All the factors in curriculum design are linked. They are not separate steps... No one element—for example, assessment—should be decided without considering the other factors" (p. 268). White (1989) describes Skilbeck's model as a model that promotes understanding and improving the current educational environment, instead of promoting a hypothetical, future Utopian educational environment. White (1989) also notes that Skilbeck's model allows for utilizing an objective model or process model of decision making, depending on the needs and wants of the individual. In other words, Skilbeck's model takes an eclectic approach to decision making.

In addition to being eclectic, Skilbeck's model also advocates having students participate in the process of choosing a curriculum, and having educators acknowledge existing practices (Skilbeck, 1984). For example Skilbeck's model "does not begin with the assumption that curriculum proposals are to be written on blank slate--or even that what is already on the slate should automatically be obliterated" (White, 1989, p.89). Of course, as with other models of decision making, Skilbeck's model has drawn some criticism, particularly with regards to its oversimplification of complex processes and its tendency to turn curriculum decision-making and development into a mechanical process (Pennycook, 1990).

### **Summary**

Homeschoolers are a diverse, and difficult group to study (Collum, 2005; Stevens, 2001), and because of this significant gaps in the literature, particularly in regards to homeschool curriculum choices, exist. To better understand this population, a transcendental phenomenological approach was used, within the framework of Bandura's social cognitive theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development theory.

Next, research showed that having a quality curriculum that is both flexible and standards-based is important (Ellibee & Mason, 1997). Furthermore, as home schooling continues to be a viable option for education, choosing quality curriculum is an important part of helping homeschool education to succeed. Indeed, according to Crawford and Snider (2000) "curriculum is a critical factor in student achievement" (p.123). Additionally, because 75% to 95% of classroom instruction is centered on curriculum (Tyson & Woodward, 1989), appropriate curriculum choices are essential to the educational process. Carnine (1992) also notes, "Just like that of any other professional, teachers' efficacy is dependent on the tools at their disposal" (p.

13). Indeed, according to Schmoker (2011) curriculum may be the single largest school factor that affects learning, intellectual development, and college and career readiness, is one of the primary message systems of schooling (Bernstein, 1977), and is an integral part of school-to-work initiatives (Ellibee & Mason, 1997).

Additionally, upon examining the existing body of literature regarding homeschoolers three areas seemed to surface: homeschool teaching style, motivation to homeschool, and the academic achievement of homeschoolers coupled with parental involvement. In these areas researchers found that homeschool educators tend to teach based off of their own educational history (Knowles, 1988). Homeschool educators also choose to homeschool because of a) religious values, b) dissatisfaction with the current educational system, c) academic concerns, and/or d) family life (Collum & Mitchell, 2008), and while homeschoolers do tend to perform better than their public school peers on standardized tests, it has less to do with the type of education received and more to do with the level of parental involvement (Fan & Chen, 2001).

After the aforementioned areas of research were examined, a survey of various curriculum and decision-making issues were examined; including standards-based curriculum, curriculum orientations, and choice processes. Research showed that standards based curriculum, is only more effective than its counterparts when students engage in higher level thinking activities (Arbaugh et.al., 2006), that holding to a curriculum orientation is important (Van Brummelen, 2002), and that choice processes in the curriculum decision-making process are often varied, but can be partly explained through three different models: dynamical systems theory, the model of rational choice, and Skilbeck's situational curriculum model.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the factors influencing the curriculum choices of homeschool families. As such, a qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach was used to address three research questions: How do select home educators describe the factors that influence their curricular choices? How do select home educators' beliefs affect their selection of curriculum? How do select home educators' teaching styles and methodologies affect their curricular decisions?

### Design

In examining the curriculum choices of home school families, there are two discrete research methods available: quantitative or qualitative. As the name implies, quantitative research is focused on the statistics of a study, and is comprised of empirical research that is able to support or reject a hypothesis (Carlson, 2008). Qualitative research, however, focuses on discovering, describing, and explaining a phenomena (Carlson, 2008), and is particularly useful in “addressing complex situations where it is unclear what variables or relationships between variables are likely to be important or where the important issues are about subjective meaning or values” (Logan, 1997).

Because this study's goal was to describe the phenomena of factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices, a qualitative approach was appropriate. Specifically, a phenomenological qualitative study was appropriate, because phenomenology focuses on the shared, lived experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2007). Moustakas (1994) also notes, “Phenomena are the building blocks of human science and the basis for all knowledge [and] any

phenomenon represents a suitable starting point for an investigation” (p.26). However, within phenomenology two approaches are available: transcendental phenomenology and hermeneutical phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology focuses on simply describing a phenomenon without imparting meaning to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007), while hermeneutical phenomenology seeks to interpret the meanings inherent in a phenomenon (Guignon, 2010). Additionally, according to Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology involves setting aside prejudgments and utilizing intuition, imagination, and universal arrangements, all while implementing a systemic process of design. Indeed, Moustakas (1994) notes,

Phenomenology, step by step, attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, a readiness to see in an unfettered way, not threatened by customs, beliefs, and prejudices of normal science, by the habits of the natural world or by knowledge based on unreflected everyday experience. (p.41)

Because this study sought only to describe the curriculum choice processes among homeschool families, and do so from an open perspective, a transcendental approach, following Moustakas' procedures for analysis was most appropriate.

### **Research Questions**

How do select home educators describe the factors that influence their curricular choices?

Sub-Question 1: How do select home educators' beliefs affect their selection of curriculum?

Sub-Question 2: How do select home educators' teaching styles and methodologies affect their curricular decisions?

### **Participants**

Because this study was focused on the factors influencing the curriculum choices of homeschool families, the sample of participants was a purposive sample. Creswell (2007) describes purposive sampling as a type of sampling where the researcher “selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p.125). Purposefully selecting my participants, in this case, home educators, allowed me to understand what factors influence homeschool curriculum choices, a phenomenon that could not be understood from a random sample.

Furthermore, under the realm of purposive sampling, snowball sampling was also used to identify appropriate participants. Snowball sampling, according to Creswell (2007), is a type of sampling that “identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information rich” (p.127). Additionally, snowball sampling, compared to standard sampling, allowed me to reach participants I would not otherwise be able to reach (Handcock & Gile, 2011) and helped to keep the study cost-effective. Also, because this study was phenomenological in nature, I had ten home educator participants. This number of participants was in keeping with solid phenomenological research practices (Creswell, 2007).

Within the context of purposive snowball sampling, the participants for this study shared several common features. First, each of the participants was a home educator who had homeschooled for at least three years. Delimiting the participants to home educators who had

homeschooled for at least three years helped to reduce curriculum choice process findings that may have been related to inexperience and ignorance. Secondly, each of the participants resided within a two-hour radius of Tampa Bay, Florida. Table 1 further outlines participant demographics.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Years of Experience
Rue	Female	Caucasian	23
Johanna	Female	Caucasian	6
Effie	Female	Caucasian	13
Cinna	Female	Caucasian	17
Katniss	Female	African-American	13
Gale	Female	Caucasian	5
Annie	Female	Caucasian	4
Mags	Female	Caucasian	12
Primrose	Female	Caucasian	9
Haymitch	Male	Caucasian	9

## **Setting**

Because each participant in this study was a home educator, the site for each participant varied. However, as an overarching site, the home was the setting for this study. Having the home as the setting for this study was appropriate because as a phenomenological study, the shared experience for each of the participants involved his or her home. However, in the data collection phase, the setting extended to areas outside of the home. For example, in the focus group discussion the participants gathered at a local restaurant. Similarly, for the interviews, some participants opted to hold the interview in their home while others chose to meet at a public place like a park or coffee shop. Additionally, the location of the completion of the survey was up to the discretion of the participant, as the results of the survey were reported electronically.

## **Procedures**

Before I gathered any type of data, my first step was to secure IRB approval for the study. This was done after my proposal defense was completed. After gathering IRB approval, I gathered participants for the study through snowball sampling. Once the participants had given their informed consent I gathered the data through three primary means: surveys, interviews, and a focus group. With the exception of the surveys, all of the data collected was audio recorded and then transcribed by myself. After a thick description of data was gathered, I analyzed the data using Moustakas' (1997) guidelines for transcendental phenomenology data analysis.

## **The Researcher's Role**

I am a private Christian high school teacher. I have taught for the past seven years in two different schools and have used a variety of curriculum. I am also a former homeschooled

student (K5-12) where I was exposed to an assortment of curriculum options. As a human instrument in this study, I listened, observed, and made alliances with my participants.

Additionally, as a former homeschooled student, I had a naturally positive bias to homeschooling so during the data collection and analysis process I had to be careful to be an objective data collector and let the participants' experiences speak for themselves. Lastly, as an educator, I assumed that curriculum choices matter to homeschool families and that curriculum choices are not made dismissively or flippantly.

### **Data Collection**

Three different data collection measures were employed in this study – surveys, interviews, and focus groups. This triangulation of the data is an essential part of qualitative research because it “increases the likelihood that the phenomenon under study is being understood from various points of view” (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorenson, 2006, p. 505). Lincoln and Guba (1985) also note that triangulation ensures that data is gathered and substantiated from multiple sources. Furthermore, triangulation helps to establish the validity and reliability of results (Wright, 1988).

### **Surveys**

As the first data collection measure, I had my participants complete a short descriptive survey in regards to the factors influencing their selection of a homeschool curriculum (Table 2, Appendix A). While surveys are typically a quantitative data collection method, descriptive surveys can be appropriate for a qualitative study and have been used to help triangulate data in other qualitative research studies (Glik, Parker, Muligande, & Hategikamana, 2005; Mitchell,

Smith, & Weale, 2013). The questions for this survey were examined by three college professors to help ensure face and content validity. The questions were also piloted with a homeschool mother that I personally know and who did not participate in the study so as to address any potential confusion with the questions.

## **Interviews**

To gain an understanding of how home educators describe their curriculum choice process and how their beliefs affect their selection of curricula, participants were interviewed in-depth using open-ended questions, as seen in Table 3 below. From the answers to these questions, I was able to better understand the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices. Using interviews in this study was appropriate because according to Moustakas (1994), “Typically in the phenomenological investigation the long interview is the method through which data is collected on the topic and question” (p.114). Creswell (2007) also notes, “For a phenomenological study, the process of collecting information involves primarily in-depth interviews with as many as 10 individuals” (p.131). Additionally, the use of open-ended questions is in keeping with current phenomenological practices, as Moustakas (1994) states, “The phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (p.114). Before actual use with the participants, however, the questions were piloted, after IRB approval, with a homeschool educator for clarification purposes. This home educator was an educator that I personally know and who did not participate in the actual study. The questions were also reviewed prior to dissemination by three college professors who acted as an expert panel to ensure clarity and adherence to the purpose of the study.

Table 3

*Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions*

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**Questions**

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*Homeschool Curriculum Choices*

1. Please describe a typical day of homeschooling at your house
  2. What factors influence your curriculum choices?
  3. What is most important to you when choosing curriculum?
  4. Please describe your approach to choosing curriculum.
  5. What educational outcomes are important to you?
  6. How is your teaching style and methodology influenced by your personal education experiences?
  7. What expectations do you have for yourself as an educator and for your students?
  8. How important is it for you to use a curriculum that follows the Common Core?
  9. Is there anything you would like to tell me about homeschooling that I may not have asked about?
-

The purpose of question 1 in Table 3 was to act as a broad question that helped to break the ice. Questions 2 and 3 in Table 3 were asked to better understand the primary motivations in homeschool curriculum choices and also helped to answer the main focus of this study and address a gap in the literature. The purpose of Table 3's question 4 was to ascertain whether homeschool educators use a particular framework (such as evidence based practice) for gathering curriculum or whether they rely more heavily upon personal biography and student interest. Curriculum decision literature reveals that both practices are common (Grady, Rozas, & Bledsoe, 2010; Hedges, 2012) so a better understanding of the rationale behind homeschool curriculum choices was necessary. Question 5 of Table 3 was used to help determine to what extent desired educational outcomes relate to curriculum choices. This is in keeping with Ennis (2004) and Jenkin's (2009) findings that educator's orientations, and therefore desired educational outcomes, are decidedly influential in both curriculum selection and teaching methods. The purpose of question 6 was to see if homeschool educators' educational backgrounds make a difference, a factor Knowles (1988) says plays a large part in teaching and methodology style selection. Question 7 in Table 3 was in keeping with Bandura's (1977) teachings on self-efficacy and also helped to address Prime and Miranda's (2006) reports that teachers with high self-efficacy tend to choose more challenging curriculum. The point of question 8 was to find out whether home educators value standards based curriculum, or curriculum that has personal value. Lastly, question 9 of Table 3 allowed me to obtain relevant information that was not discussed in earlier questions.

## Focus Group

To clarify and expound upon the information received in the interview stage, I also conducted a focus group, or an informal discussion about homeschool curriculum choices, with four of the participants using the questions in Table 4 below. These four participants were chosen based on geographical proximity to each other. Having a focus group was appropriate for my study because all of my participants shared a common bond through homeschooling and the interaction between these participants helped to provide a more complete picture of homeschool curriculum choices. Indeed, Creswell (2007) states,

Focus groups are advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information, when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other, when time to collect information is limited, and when individuals interviewed one-on-one may be hesitant to provide information. (p.133)

Table 4

*Standardized Open-Ended Focus Group Questions*

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Questions

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*Homeschool Curriculum Choices*

1. What are your experiences with choosing a homeschool curriculum?
2. What obstacles are there in choosing a homeschool curriculum?
3. What strategies do you use in choosing a homeschool curriculum?

4. What advice would you give to other homeschooling families choosing curriculum?
- 

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze my three different sets of data – surveys, interviews, and focus groups – I employed Moustakas’ (1994) guidelines for transcendental phenomenology. While Moustakas (1994) developed and employed two methods of data analysis – the Van Kaam (1959, 1966) method and the Stevick (1971), Colaizzi (1973), Keen (1975) method – the method I employed was the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. In this method, I began first by making an effort to set aside my prejudgments. According to Moustakas (1994) this initial step in data analysis is called the Epoche, a step where “the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and the phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego” (p. 33). In this Epoche, I attempted to bracket, or set aside, my personal opinions related to homeschool curriculum choices. Doing this helped me to be as bias free as possible in my study.

Next, following Moustakas’ (1994) guidelines for transcendental phenomenology I moved into compiling a textural description of the data. This compiling of data into a textural description is referred to by Moustakas (1994) as Transcendental- Phenomenological Reduction. In this step, researchers “derive a textural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon, the constituents that comprise the experience in consciousness, from the vantage point of an open self” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). To arrive at a textural description of the

phenomena, however, I began by horizontalizing the data, that is, “regarding every horizon or statement relevant to the topic and question as having equal value” (p. 118). To help in the horizontalization of the data, I coded each statement from the data transcripts. In this coding process I read through the data transcripts and highlighted statements significant to the phenomenon. Colaizzi (1973) described this process as extracting significant statements from the data. When significant statements from the data began to emerge, I was able to identify invariant horizons or statements. According to Moustakas (1994) if a horizon contains a “necessary and sufficient constituent” of the phenomenon it should be preserved. Those horizons that were necessary and sufficient were then clustered into themes and subthemes. Grouping common significant horizons together allowed me to identify the significant topics of the study. To make sure that a particular horizon or theme was indeed invariant, I asked myself the questions Moustakas (1994) posed about invariant horizons and themes – “Are the themes, as written, explicitly expressed in the transcription?” and “If they are not explicitly expressed, are they compatible with what is explicitly expressed” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121)?

Once the textural description of the data was obtained, I compiled a structural description of the data. Structural descriptions, according to Moustakas (1994), take place in the Imaginative Variation step. In a structural description example of insomnia provided by Moustakas (1994), structural descriptions provide a “vivid account of the underlying dynamics of the experience, the themes and qualities that account for “how” feelings and thoughts connected with insomnia are aroused, [and] what conditions evoke insomnia” (p.135). Indeed, in its essence, structural descriptions of the data help determine the possible meanings of the themes through the use of “imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities, and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles or functions”

(Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). Much like the textural description of the data, once a structural description of the data was gathered, structural qualities related to the phenomenon were then grouped into themes of invariant meanings.

As a final step, I integrated the structural essences found in the Imaginative Variation step with the textural essences formed from the Transcendental- Phenomenological Reduction step in order to arrive at a complete synthesis of the meanings and essences derived from my data. This synthesis of the textural and structural descriptions provided a composite description of the heart of the phenomenon and allowed me to thoroughly analyze each of my three forms of data – surveys, interviews, and focus groups – and synthesize the findings from each into a coherent whole.

### **Trustworthiness**

Several methods for increasing trustworthiness in my study were used. The first method that I used was the triangulation of my data collection. According to Wright (1988) “triangulation is a qualitative cross-validation of multiple data sources and entails collecting information from a variety of sources such as documents, journals, observations, and interviews. This strategy helps establish validity and reliability of results” (p.104). As a result, drawing my data from three different sources helped to make my research more credible. A second trustworthiness method that I employed in this study was member checks. Member checks, according Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller, and Neumann (2011), involves “sharing research findings with participants for methodological and ethical goals” (p. 390). Utilizing member checks was appropriate for this study because having my participants check the data for accuracy increased the dependability of the data. I also conducted an audit trail, thus ensuring both dependability

and conformability. Conducting an audit trail, according to Creswell (2007), helps to organize and outline the research process while also providing accountability. As another measure of trustworthiness, I also compiled thick descriptive data, thus providing transferability. Lastly, as a final measure of trustworthiness, I made my data available for peer review, a measure which helped ensure dependability.

### **Ethical Considerations**

To ensure that this study was done ethically, several areas were taken into consideration. First, all of the participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study. Obtaining informed consent from every participant helped ensure that the participants were voluntarily participating in the study and had full knowledge of the purpose, scope, and potential risks and benefits involved in the study.

In addition to securing informed consent from every participant in the study, I also took steps to secure the data collected from the participants. This meant that I stored the data on a secure, password protected computer, thus protecting the confidentiality of my participants. To further protect the participant's confidentiality I stripped the data of identifying information by assigning pseudonyms to the participants.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices. According to Moustakas (1994) phenomenological research helps

determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the essences or structures of the experience. (p. 13)

Creswell (2009) also notes, “Phenomenology is a research strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 13). As such, this transcendental phenomenological approach was used to capture the essence of the phenomena under study – homeschool educators’ descriptions of factors influencing their curriculum choices. With that in mind, in this chapter I will detail the findings from the interviews, focus group session, and surveys.

### Research Questions

To help describe the factors that select homeschool educators describe as influencing their curriculum choices, the following questions framed this study:

How do select home educators describe the factors that influence their curricular choices?

Sub-Question 1: How do select home educators’ beliefs affect their selection of curriculum?

Sub-Question 2: How do select home educators' teaching styles and methodologies affect their curricular decisions?

As a transcendental phenomenological study, this study was concerned with the subjective experiences of the 10 participants as it related to the phenomena under study – factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices.

### **Participant Summary**

Ten participants with at least three years of homeschooling experience participated in this study. Each participant resided within a two hour radius of Tampa Bay, Florida and voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. After receiving an informed consent form (Appendix C) from each participant I met the participants individually at the location of their choosing. Half of the participants chose their home as the interview location, while the other half picked public locations such as parks and coffee shops. The focus group session was held at a local restaurant where the four participants were treated to dinner. The completion of the surveys was done online at the convenience of the participant.

### **Participant Profiles**

1. Haymitch, a homeschooling father of two, has been homeschooling for nine years with one entering college. He has a degree in business and is a member of a local homeschooling group.

2. Effie, and her husband Peeta, have been homeschooling their four children for thirteen years. Paul has a degree in mechanical engineering and Effie has a degree in secondary English education. They belong to several local homeschooling groups.
3. Cinna has been home-schooling since 1996. She homeschooled four altogether with the two oldest presently attending colleges. She has a master's degree in business and belongs to three local home-schooling groups.
4. Johanna, a homeschooling mother of two, has been homeschooling for six years. She has a master's in business and is working on her master's in education. She is also a member of several homeschooling groups.
5. Rue holds a B.A. degree with a major in music. She and her husband (B.S. electrical engineering) have four home educated high school graduates and continue to home school their 9 year old. While their home schooling journey began in 1991, Rue chose not to belong to any home school group since her children were so active in athletic activities in the community and at area private high schools.
6. Katniss, mother of two, has been homeschooling for 13 years. Katniss is a chaplain and a retired police sergeant who served as a D.A.R.E. Instructor for public schools and taught at the Fire Academy and Police In-Service Training. She has taught various subjects at homeschool groups in Ohio and Florida, and she has facilitated workshops for homeschool mothers. She is also a member of a local homeschool group.
7. Gale, a mother of two elementary aged girls, has been homeschooling for almost five years. She has a bachelor's degree in elementary education and is a member of a local homeschool group

8. Primrose, a homeschooling mother of four, has been homeschooling for nine years, although she has been teaching children for 11 years through several volunteer programs. She is also a member of a local homeschool group.
9. Annie, a mother of one child, homeschools her 16 year old daughter. She has been homeschooling for four years and is a member of a local homeschool group. She has also worked as a hairdresser in different capacities for the last 34 years.
10. Mags, a homeschooling mother of two, has been homeschooling for almost 12 years. She holds a degree in marketing. While she does not belong to any homeschool group, she serves as a Davidic Dance Instructor at a local Messianic Synagogue

### **Interviews and Focus Group**

Each of the ten participants in this study chose the location for their interview. Half of the participants chose to meet at a public location such as a park or coffee house, while the remaining participants opted to meet at their home. Each participant was asked the same nine questions as outlined in Table 2; however, when clarification was needed, additional questions were included. The length of each interview varied from approximately 10 to 30 minutes, and every interview was then audio-recorded and transcribed just as they were recorded. Once the transcription process was complete, member checking of the transcriptions was also employed to help ensure validity. This member checking was accomplished by emailing the participants the completed transcription and requesting them to examine the transcription for accuracy and completeness (Appendix D). Other than a few grammatical issues that were subsequently fixed, all of the participants agreed on the accuracy of the transcriptions. Additionally, all of the participants except one agreed that their transcription was complete. The dissenting participant,

Cinna, emailed me an additional paragraph of information that she felt she should have been included in her interview. In her words – “Since you left our home, one particular anecdote about my curriculum choices has been re-playing in my mind. Since it keeps coming back, I figured I would just write and share it with you.” Also, in addition to checking the transcriptions for accuracy and completeness, each participant also emailed me their own participant profile to ensure accuracy. Some of the participant profiles were edited for length and style, but the content of each profile came directly from each participant.

While the participants chose their own location for the interviews, I chose the location for the focus group. This was because I was familiar with where the participants lived and wanted to choose a location that was convenient for everyone. The location I selected was a local restaurant that the participants could easily access and had a variety of food items to select from for their complimentary dinner. Out of the 10 participants for the study, four of the participants participated in the focus group. These four participants were asked to participate in the focus group mainly because of their geographical proximity to each other. All four participants who were initially contacted about participating in the focus group discussion agreed to do so and additional requests to other study participants were unnecessary. When the focus group discussion was coded, the same themes were identified as in the interviews.

Once all of the data was gathered, it was then analyzed using Moustakas’ methods for transcendental phenomenology. This involved describing the relationship between the phenomena under question –factors influencing curriculum choices – and the participants. This description involved both a textural and structural description which was then synthesized to arrive at a composite description of the essence of the participants’ experiences.

## Themes

To arrive at the following themes, the data was first coded. Coding in qualitative research, according to Saldana (2013), “is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p.3). In this study, I chose to first descriptively code the data and then pattern code the data for further refinement. Saldana (2013) states, “Descriptive coding summarizes in a word or short phrase – most often as a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data” [and] “Descriptive coding leads primarily to a categorized inventory, tabular account, summary, or index of the data’s contents” (pp.88-89). After I descriptively coded the data I was left with a large number of codes. This meant that I had to then take the similar codes and begin reorganizing and condensing the codes into smaller, more manageable sets of codes; in essence, I was finding the patterns in the codes. According to Miles and Huberman (1994) this process of pattern coding is like “pull[ing] together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis” (p. 69). Indeed, Saldana (2013) refers to second-cycle coding as a way of “reorganizing and condensing the vast array of initial analytic details into a “main dish”” (p. 208). At the conclusion of my pattern coding I was able to whittle down all of my codes to three main categories and seven subcategories, with several codes falling under each subcategory. An outline of these categories, subcategories, and codes is found below in Table 5.

Table 5

*Codes*

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Category: Factors influencing curriculum choices

Subcategory 1: Recommendations

Code: Reviews

Code: Opinions

Code: Ask questions

Code: Word of mouth

Subcategory 2: Religion/Morals

Code: Christian worldview/principles

Code: Follows the Bible

Code: Follows our religion

Code: Values/morals

Category: Beliefs affecting curriculum choices

Subcategory 1: Belief in individualized instruction

Code: Different

Code: Flexibility

Code: Best for child

Subcategory 2: Belief in the necessity of curriculum appealing to student

Code: Want to do

Code: Interest/passion

Code: Personality

Category: Teaching styles and methodologies affecting curriculum choices

Subcategory 1: Positive relationship with student

Code: Keep their love

Code: Fighting

Code: Keep their heart

Subcategory 2: Seeking outside help

Code: Deficiencies (educator and student)

Code: Fighting

Subcategory 3: Changing the curriculum

Code: Time

Code: Experience

Code: Learning styles

Code: Trial and error

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### **Research Question One**

Research question one was intended to gather information about what factors homeschool educators say influence their curriculum choices. Responses formed around two themes: recommendations are an important part of choosing a curriculum, and religious and moral beliefs factor heavily in the curriculum choice process. For the first theme, recommendations, every participant shared that they depended on recommendations for help in curriculum selection, and in the second theme, religious and moral beliefs, 8 of the 10 participants noted the importance of their religious and/or moral beliefs in the selection of curriculum.

#### **Recommendations.**

All 10 participants noted their reliance on recommendations for the curriculum choice process. In fact, for many, seeking recommendations was the first line of inquiry when choosing a curriculum.

For example, Rue stated: “One thing that I have done in the past and I have done for years is I have relied heavily on other people’s reviews.” Rue also noted “...but looking at it means a lot to me, those reviews. If it was something I did not know, you know, I would take those people’s reviews pretty seriously.”

Primrose simply stated, “I like to know what has worked for other people.” Upon elaborating, Primrose also shared that “... somebody might say ‘hey we are doing such and such, have you ever heard of that?’ and then I would look at it and go yeah, that is great. So it usually kind of happens like that.”

In a similar fashion, Effie shared that their family “...started with whatever we heard other people used... I might just say ‘okay, I need a new science curriculum, does anybody have any suggestions, we have already used this, this, and this, this is why want to change, any input?’ and people are bound to answer.”

Haymitch noted that with the abundance of curriculum choices confronting him, curriculum recommendations were a necessary part of his selection process: “The only thing I found was that there was so many choices that I had to ask other people and get opinions.” He also shared his poll approach to seeking recommendations: “...how many people have done this? And if everybody was like oh, yes, yes, yes we climbed on that.” Haymitch also went on to say,

So there is this whole thing about how do you make a good choice? I’m just going to have to take someone else’s advice; which is what I did at church, and we prayed about it and asked other people because we had similar backgrounds at church and I just went with that and said that is the way it is going to be.

And finally, Annie summed it up for all the participants when she responded, “Basically I have just trusted other people [about curriculum].”

The online survey results also seemed to substantiate the theme of reliance upon recommendations for curriculum selection; with half of the participants answering the question “how important is a recommendation in your curriculum choice?” with ‘very important’ and the other half marking ‘somewhat important.’ Additionally, when answering the multiple-answer question “how do you find out about new curriculum choices?” 70% of the participants answered with ‘word of mouth’ and almost all of the participants (90%) selected ‘personal research’, a component that several home educators noted involved seeking out online reviews and recommendations. For example, Katniss shared, “I would research at home for reviews and see what other parents had to say and the results that they used.”

### **Religious and moral beliefs.**

In addition to recommendations heavily influencing their curriculum choices, participants also noted that religious and moral beliefs influenced their curriculum decisions. For example, Mags shared, “I always try to use a Christian based curriculum, if at all possible. That is one of the things I really found is probably the most important. I’ve narrowed out if it’s not Christian I kind of stay away from it.”

Annie also indicated that her faith was a large part of her curricular decisions, stating “It [curriculum] has to be biblically based and the way I believe – creation and all of that.” She also noted that if a curriculum was contrary to her beliefs it was something she took seriously – “So definitely that it [curriculum] goes along with the Bible and if I see something that strays away from the Bible it is a big red flag.”

Rue also shared Annie's thoughts about curriculum that strayed from her core beliefs, stating, "...we never wanted anything that contradicted our Christian beliefs... [and] we didn't want our Christian principles compromised."

Two of the participants, Haymitch and Johanna, both indicated that their denominational beliefs were an important factor in the curriculum choice process. Haymitch shared, "We are Catholic, so religion is a big part [of choosing a curriculum]. I wanted it to be some type of Christian curriculum." Haymitch also stated that he had no problem choosing from different curricula "As long as it is faith based and has a Christian worldview." Johanna also shared that her denominational beliefs were a natural jumping off point for curriculum choices: "When we initially started homeschooling, we are Catholic so we chose a Catholic curriculum."

Katniss, on the other hand, did not place any particular emphasis on denominational beliefs, instead referring to the importance of curriculum that carried a moral element – "So most important is a moral component and to ensure that it [curriculum] helps them think critically to be able to learn the material."

For Gale, beliefs and morals were a factor in her curriculum choice process, but unlike some of the other participants, she stressed her desire for her curriculum to also address topics not in traditional Christian curriculum. For example, Gale stated,

For us, we like to be able to, for history, [have] something to be able to include our faith and our values, but we don't want them to not have a good exposure to things too. So even the Christian curriculum companies that we have used they will expose them to what other beliefs are and what their science theories are and things like that too because we don't want them to ever hear that somewhere and be totally thrown off, and be like I

didn't know that existed. We don't hide those things from them – some companies completely leave that stuff out, so we didn't go that approach.

Similarly, Rue noted that while she did not want anything that directly contradicted her Christian beliefs, she was not opposed to curriculum that was not Christian based:

Well, we never wanted anything that contradicted our Christian beliefs – we might have a book from the library that might mention billions of years, which we don't believe, or maybe one book that we might have had somewhere along the way that I had to say you know this part we don't agree with because it contradicts the Bible. I never stuck with anything that was just I guess almost so Christian or just strictly Christian. I was after academic with a Christian worldview or just straight one that you know was just totally academic.

Rue also noted, however, that sometimes even curriculum from Christian publishers was not appropriate for her children when she gave the following example:

My oldest son, he was my first one of course, and when he was probably about fourth or maybe fifth grade I gave him a study about the Greek gods – very popular in the homeschooling movement – and I'm thinking this is good it's made by homeschooling Christian parents themselves and he came to me one day and said Mom, I don't think I should be reading this and I said [close book sound] close your book that's good enough for me; if your heart tells you no, we're over it. You know so he just felt like learning about the Greek gods was just affecting his heart too much and we never opened the book again.

In addition to the interviews and focus group discussion, the results of the survey also pointed to the importance of religious and moral beliefs in the selection of a curriculum. For example, when asked to rank criteria that were important in choosing curricula, one of the highest ranked factors was worldview. In fact, 60% of participants ranked worldview as the first or second most important factor in choosing a curriculum.

### **Research Sub-Question 1**

Research sub-question 1 was designed to discover how home educator's beliefs affect their selection of curriculum. Within this context, two themes were identified: first, it was important to participants that curriculum held their child's interest and was something their child wanted to do, and second, participants noted there is no one-size-fits-all approach to homeschooling and homeschool curriculum choices – every child is different. Both of these themes were identified by the same number of participants, thus making each theme of equal rank.

#### **Child's interest.**

In both the interviews and focus group many of the participants reiterated several times their belief that curriculum should cater to a child's interests and abilities. For example, when asked if she had any parting words about curriculum and curriculum choices, Mags responded, "I guess that the curriculum itself is not as important as just necessarily finding out what the kid wants to do or how they best learn."

Similarly, when examining current curriculum changes in the public schools, Cinna contended,

How can we encourage children to learn, by fixing our curriculum? I don't think so...the answer is in the home and in encouraging kids and letting them do what they want. Some

kids can't do algebra, they want to be mechanics – let them go be mechanics. Don't make them learn algebra.

Cinna also shared that when choosing a curriculum for her daughter she factored her daughter's interests into the selection: "So it is just kind of picking and choosing and figuring out what might be of interest to her..."

Throughout her interview Effie and her husband continually referred to the interests of their children as a deciding factor in their curriculum selection. For example, Effie shared, "...a lot of it is just based on is this holding their interest? Yes, they have to do the work, but I would rather not fight, so if it holds their interest and they are doing the work that's where we are going to go."

Gale also noted that it was important to her that her children have time for their interests, both in traditional textbook curricula and in everyday activities and experiences –

...we want them to be able to explore all of their interests growing up too... Then it gives them time to do a lot of dance, drama, and things that they really have a passion for, and I feel like if we were in the typical 8-3, or 8-2, and who knows how many hours of homework, that we would be really be limited in those areas.

Finally, when defending his position on choosing curricula that was of interest to his boys, Haymitch simply stated, "if they don't like it they are not going to learn anything."

**Every child is different.**

In addition to believing that their child's interests should factor into the curriculum choice process, participants also noted that they believed every child is different and a one-size-fits-all approach to curriculum and instruction did not work. For example, Annie stated,

I just think that every kid is different and you have to find what works best for them and sometimes you realize afterwards that it maybe wasn't the best choice, but just go with it and try not to stress so much. It's school, it's important, but it is not the end all of everything.

Effie responded similarly when asked how she chooses curriculum for her four children – “It is different for each of our kids...trying to find the one curriculum that is best for this child as opposed to that child, you kind of have to find a different one for that one.”

Because participants believed every child learns differently, flexibility within the curriculum was also important to participants. For example, when answering the survey question ‘Describe your curriculum approach’, 80% of participants said that they use curriculum as a starting point, but supplement with other materials, pointing to the participants’ desire for flexibility. Additionally, Johanna shared that she looked for curriculum “with the flexibility to do things that work with them [her children] and how they are.”

In the same fashion, Gale related that flexibility in the curriculum was important to her – “I wanted some more flexibility when I started to see, especially my older one, learning styles – what fit for her.” Additionally, when recalling her days as a public school teacher, Gale also

reiterated her belief that every child is different – “it definitely got me open to the fact that one-size does not fit all.” Gale also shared her thoughts on standards-based curriculum, stating,

I feel like kids are so different that I know we have to have standards, but I kind of feel like the long term is more important. Instead of first, second, third, or fourth grade for benchmarks and stuff some of them will hit them earlier; some of them will get them later, but within that window, like the primary window or the intermediate window [they will get it].

Agreeing with Gale’s perspective that curriculum and instruction is not a one-size-fits-all approach, Haymitch stated, “The whole purpose of homeschooling is to take each child and give them what they need to be successful and not just give everyone a cookie-cutter approach.”

And finally, Primrose noted that not only did she believe in individualized curriculum and instruction for her children, she also believed that parent educators were all very different and that those differences manifested themselves in the choice of a curriculum. For example,

Basically they [my children] are all going to be different, I am not bent on college bound, or one way, I’m just kind of seeing what happens with each of them. I just want them to be prepared for whatever seems to be their path. [And] I think it [the choice of curricula] is all very individualized –everyone is very different and everyone’s personality really reflects what they choose for their families and for their house.

## **Research Sub-Question 2**

Research Sub-Question 2 was used to help determine how home educator’s teaching styles and methodologies affect their curricular decisions. From this question three themes surfaced:

first, participants felt that keeping a positive relationship with their children was important. Second, participants related that they would use outside help if a particular subject area caused a strain on their relationship with their children or if they felt inadequate, and third, participants shared that as experience is gained and learning styles emerge, the selection of curriculum also changes. In these themes, the first two themes were represented equally among the participants, and had only slightly more representation in the participant statements than the third theme of changes in the curriculum.

### **Relationships.**

Participants shared that maintaining a positive relationship with their children through the homeschool process was an important factor to them. For example, Annie related, “I think the main thing is our relationship, more than the education part. And that is one of the reasons I employed [Mrs. Doe] to do the math part because it was destroying our relationship trying to do it together. So my expectation is maybe to step back and not to get so involved that it causes problems.”

In the same vein, Katniss shared about a recent lecture she heard at a local homeschool convention:

You have to keep your child’s heart. And I think that is so important, everything coming back on you, you have to keep your child’s heart because he [the speaker] said he wanted his son to take algebra and he just wouldn’t and did he want to fight over algebra and ruin their relationship or keep his child’s heart? And Spanish has been a nightmare for my son and I and he finally finished Spanish II the other day and because of that, knowing he

needed that for Bright Futures, I kept remembering that, so when I am looking at making a recommendation I will still say keep your child's heart.

Effie, addressing both the theme of student interest in curriculum and the theme of maintaining a positive relationship, stated,

I am the bad guy when it comes to bed time and I am the bad guy when it comes to your homework is not done and you are not doing your school. I can't say, well, Mrs. Jones is sure going to have a problem when you go to school tomorrow – it is me! So they are accountable to me or my husband for absolutely everything, so I think that is why the interest is so important because the most important thing when they finish this, aside from being a well-rounded individual that is successful and found something that they love, is that they still love me and still want to be a cohesive family unit and come home at Christmas or whenever and not hate me because I had to be this bad guy all the time.

And finally, Cinna related, “I thought you know you are missing some things here that I am not able to teach you because we butt heads, so I made her take a math class.”

### **Outside help.**

Participants noted that if their relationship with their children began to deteriorate because of homeschooling or if they felt inadequate in a particular area, the method they used to combat this was seeking outside help, whether it was a person, or an online program. Annie, for example, employed outside help because she did not want to “get so involved that it causes problems”, while Cinna employed outside help because “I am not able to teach you because we butt heads.”

When it came to expectations, Katniss shared that her expectation for herself was “to be able to recognize my deficiencies and find what they need where I am deficient so that they get what they need.”

Gale also related that seeking outside help when necessary was an expectation that she had for herself and was an invaluable teaching method:

for the most part my expectation for myself is that when I know I can't do something or I am not doing well with something, that I will use the resources in the community because we have some, not even just certified teachers, but we had some moms with a lot of experience and even now teach science and different things to the homeschool community – their kids are done, but they just have a passion about, and I'm like, you know, I don't know if I'm ever going to have a passion to teach Chemistry or things like that, but I know of people who are, and have great programs and experience from the area. So where I lack I kind of plan to use some of those.

Finally, Johanna, when asked what her expectations for herself as an educator would be, succinctly replied, “That I can be the best I can be and when I don't know or I can't help them seek outside help.”

### **Changes in the curriculum.**

With half of the participants homeschooling for 10 years or more, and the other half homeschooling between four and nine years, a wealth of experience was present among the participants. As experience was gained, the participants related that their curriculum approach

also changed. For example, Effie shared, “So it [choosing a curriculum] has kind of graduated, the same [way] the kids are learning, I’m learning better how to pick.” Effie also noted,

We evaluate what we are using at the end of almost every year, even halfway through the year. You know, sometimes it’s just time for an overhaul and we just add it to the bookshelf in case we ever need to go back to it or for a younger kid maybe that will work well for her even though it did not work for her [other daughter].

Similarly, Primrose related, “You kind of grow with them and learn with them...and sometimes things work better in different seasons just with different ages for the kids, so I’ve had to ebb and flow a little bit...”

Haymitch shared that while the methods he initially used with his boys were very routine, as they grew older he adapted both the curriculum and his methodology: “So in high school we went there and kind of branched out to a whole different way of doing things and a whole new way of looking at things because we had been so rote with getting the basics down.”

Mags and Johanna both stated that their experience with choosing curriculum “was trial and error.” Mags also related, however, that while she has tried many different curricula, she likes to stick with curricula that have been tried and true. For example, “there is a lot of different curriculum that can work, I mean I have tried different things, certain things I found I really liked and I am sticking with because I thought this is just so easy.”

### **Composite Textural Description**

After examining all of the previous descriptions, I integrated each of the individual textural descriptions into a group, or composite, description. The composite description is as

follows: overwhelmingly, participants spoke of their reliance upon recommendations in the curriculum choice process. For many participants, their homeschooling curriculum journey was predicated upon advice from others. For example, Johanna shared, “When we first started we did what other families recommended.” Haymitch agreed, stating, “I found was that there was so many choices that I had to ask other people and get opinions.” However, even those participants with extensive homeschooling experience spoke of seeking out recommendations. Mags, who has 12 years of homeschooling experience, said she still seeks out other homeschoolers with experience to help her choose curriculum – “Asking other homeschoolers. Getting their opinion on what works, what doesn’t, you really want to go with experience.”

In addition to relying on recommendations, participants also noted that religious and moral beliefs were an important factor in choosing a curriculum. For example, participants shared things like “most important is their character” and “It has to be biblically based and the way I believe.” Several participants, however, noted that while they sought out curriculum that matched their beliefs, they would use secular curriculum in some instances. For example, Rue shared, “I was after academic with a Christian worldview or just straight one that you know was just totally academic.” Gale also shared that while she preferred a Christian curriculum, she wanted a Christian curriculum that still addressed issues contrary to her beliefs so her children would at least be exposed to the ideas.

When examining how beliefs affected curriculum selection, two ideas were reoccurring – every child is different, and catering to the interests of the child was important. For example, when looking at the belief of every child as different, statements like “I have used a lot of techniques for their different personalities...” and “I just think that every kid is different and you have to find what works best for them” were evident in both the interviews and focus group.

Participants also shared that holding the interest of the child was important to them with statements like “if they don’t like it they are not going to learn anything” and “I guess that the curriculum itself is not as important as just necessarily finding out what the kid wants to do or how they best learn.”

Finally, when examining how teaching styles and methodologies influence curriculum selection, participants shared that maintaining a positive relationship with their child through the homeschooling process was important, that seeking outside help was sometimes necessary, and that the selection and approach for curriculum changes from year to year. For example, Annie shared, “I think the main thing is our relationship, more than the education part... so my expectation is maybe to step back and not to get so involved that it causes problems” while Gale shared, “We have changed a little bit year-to-year [with curriculum].”

### **Composite Structural Description**

Much like the composite textural description, after identifying various structural qualities and themes I grouped the individual descriptions into a composite structural description. This section details the description, beginning with the underlying dynamic of trust. Trust in others was evident in the process of choosing a curriculum for the participants in this study. Some participants immediately began their curriculum choice process by simply trusting someone else’s opinion – “Basically I have just trusted other people” – while others gradually came to trust others’ opinions – “I learned a few sources to go to that I trusted.”

Participants also felt that choosing curriculum was an overwhelming process, especially when they first began homeschooling. For example, Johanna shared, “It was overwhelming at first” while Gale related, “I was scared about having too many choices.” For these participants,

the feeling of being overwhelmed was relieved by two main aspects: experience and trusting select educators.

Additionally, participants felt that as time passed and they were able to observe how the curriculum worked with their children, they would be better able to choose curriculum. For example, participants shared comments like “So it has kind of graduated, the same [way] the kids are learning, I’m learning better how to pick”, and “You kind of grow with them and learn with them.”

### **Synthesis of the Composite Textural and Composite Structural Descriptions**

Once the composite textural and structural descriptions were obtained I then synthesized the findings into a composite whole. This synthesis revealed that the experience of choosing a homeschool curriculum, according to participants, was something that could be overwhelming, but with experience and recommendations from trusted friends, was also something that could be done well. For example, one participant shared, “You could get so much homeschool curriculum to choose from that I just chose to whittle it down to a few catalog choices [that I trusted].” Another participant related, “The only thing I found was that there was so many choices that I had to ask other people and get opinions.”

Participants also felt that having curriculum that aligned with their moral and/or religious beliefs was important, but that the curriculum itself was really secondary to their child and the relationship they held with them. To illustrate, one participant commented,

That is all we can do for our children anyway is impart what we believe and hope that we inspire that in them, so the curriculum itself almost becomes secondary to the whole package of education, which is so much more than curriculum.

While another participant shared, “I think the main thing is our relationship, more than the education part.”

Similarly, participants also felt that choosing a curriculum that was of interest to their child and catered to their individual learning styles was of great importance. For instance, one participant stated, “Basically they are all going to be different – I am not bent on college bound, or one [particular] way, I’m just kind of seeing what happens with each of them. I just want them to be prepared for whatever seems to be their path.” Another participant also noted, “The whole purpose of homeschooling is to take each child and give them what they need to be successful and not just give everyone a cookie-cutter approach.”

### **Survey**

The survey was composed of 10 multiple-choice or ranking questions. The questions were designed for two reasons: one, to gather demographic information, and two, to help address the main research question of describing factors that influence homeschool curriculum choices. The results of the survey helped to reinforce the themes identified in the interviews and focus group and also served as the third leg of triangulation. The original survey questions are found in Table 2, Appendix A, and the answers to the questions are outlined in Table 6, Appendix F.

### **Research Questions Answered**

#### **Research question one.**

When examining how select home educators describe the factors that influence their curriculum choices participants overwhelmingly described recommendations from other homeschoolers as influential in their selection of curriculum. For example, one participant

shared, “I have relied heavily on other people’s reviews” while another participant noted, “Basically I have just trusted other people.” Participants also noted that while they gained more confidence in their curriculum selection as they added experience, they still reached out to other people for recommendations.

In addition to citing recommendations as a factor that influenced their curricular choices, participants also related the influence their religious and moral beliefs played in their curriculum selection. For instance, one participant shared, “I always try to use a Christian based curriculum, if at all possible. I’ve narrowed out if it’s not Christian I kind of stay away from it.” Several participants noted, however, that while they preferred curriculum that was in line with their beliefs they were not opposed to curriculum that gave an academic overview of topics not in line with their beliefs.

#### **Sub-question one.**

In response to how home educators’ beliefs affect their selection of curriculum, participants related that they believed every child was different – they did not believe that one particular type of curriculum worked for every child. Participants also shared that homeschooling, for them, was a way to customize education and not give all of their children a cookie-cutter approach. Participants also noted that homeschooling, and in particular homeschool curriculum choices, was a very individualistic process and that everyone approached it differently.

Another belief that participants shared was the belief that curricula should interest the child and should be something they “want to do.” Participants also related that while their

children were held accountable for doing their work, they would rather the work was of interest to their child.

### **Sub-question two.**

In addressing the question “how do select home educators’ teaching styles and methodologies affect their selection of curriculum?” one method that participants used in their homeschooling was that of seeking outside help, especially when the parent-child relationship began to be strained as a result of the schooling. For example, Annie shared,

I think the main thing is our relationship, more than the education part. And that is one of the reasons I employed [Mrs. Doe] to do the math part because it was destroying our relationship trying to do it together. So my expectation is maybe to step back and not to get so involved that it causes problems.

Similarly, another participant noted, “I thought you know you are missing some things here that I am not able teach you because we butt heads, so I made her take a math class [online].”

Another method participants described was that of changing their curriculum every so often, particularly as they gained more experience and learned what worked best for their children. For instance, one participant shared, “So it has kind of graduated, the same [way] the kids are learning, I’m learning better how to pick” and another participant noted, “We have changed a little bit year-to-year.”

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the results obtained from the participants’ interviews, focus group, and surveys. The participants, 10 homeschool educators, each participated in individual

interviews and online surveys, and 4 of the 10 participants also contributed to a focus group discussion. This data was then used to answer three research questions: How do select home educators describe the factors that influence their curricular choices? How do select home educators' beliefs affect their selection of curriculum? How do select home educators' teaching styles and methodologies affect their curricular decisions?

When examining the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices, two themes emerged: one, recommendations play a large part in curriculum selection, and two, religious and moral beliefs are an important factor when choosing a curriculum. Participants noted that they tended to trust the experiences of other homeschool educators when it came to choosing a curriculum and stay away from curriculum that strayed from their beliefs or morals.

When examining the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices, two themes surfaced: one, recommendations play a large part in curriculum selection, and two, religious and moral beliefs are an important factor when choosing a curriculum. The participants related that there is no one-size-fits-all curriculum for students and that if a child was not interested in the material little learning would take place.

Regarding how teaching styles and methodologies influence curriculum selection, three themes arose: one, maintaining a positive relationship with their children was important to the participants, two, seeking outside help was sometimes necessary, and three, curriculum selection was not a one-time, stagnant event – it changed from year to year. Indeed, participants shared that keeping their child's heart was paramount in the education process and that their choices of curriculum changed as their children progressed.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Understanding what factors influence curriculum choices is important to educators (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Siraj & Abdullah, 2011), but in the homeschool realm there has been very little research into what factors influence homeschool curriculum choices. As a result, homeschool educators and educational researchers alike may both be losing valuable insight into what homeschool educators value in a curriculum and how different factors influence curriculum choices. Because of this gap, the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices among 10 homeschool families.

Specifically, three questions helped to direct this study:

How do select home educators describe the factors that influence their curricular choices?

Sub-Question 1: How do select home educators' beliefs affect their selection of curriculum?

Sub-Question 2: How do select home educators' teaching styles and methodologies affect their curricular decisions?

Data was collected from the 10 home educator participants by way of surveys, interviews, and a focus group. The survey, consisting of 10 multiple choice questions, was delivered electronically (see Appendix A), while the interview, found in Table 3, consisted of nine standardized open-ended questions. Those participants participating in the focus group were also asked an additional four questions (Table 4).

In this final chapter a summary of the findings is reported, complete with supporting participant statements. Next, the theoretical implication of the findings, as it relates to social

cognitive theory and the ecology of human development is discussed. Following the theoretical implications, practical implications are also discussed, and finally, the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are outlined.

### **Summary of Findings**

In total, seven themes were identified in this study during the transcendental phenomenological reduction process. Specifically, when examining what factors influence curriculum choices, two themes surfaced: first, recommendations are an important part of choosing a curricula and second, religious and moral beliefs factor heavily in the curriculum choice process

Additionally, when investigating how home educators' beliefs affect curriculum choices, two themes also emerged: it was important to participants that curriculum held their child's interest and was something their child wanted to do, and participants noted that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to homeschooling and homeschool curriculum choices – every child is different.

Lastly, when focusing on how home educators' teaching styles and methodologies influenced their curriculum choices, three themes emerged. First, participants related that keeping a positive relationship with their children was important. Second, if necessary, participants employed outside help, and third, as experience was gained and learning styles emerged, the selection of curriculum also changed.

## Implications

### Theoretical Implications

#### **Social cognitive theory.**

A major tenant of social cognitive theory is self-efficacy, described by Bandura as the measure of one's ability to succeed in tasks and reach objectives (Bandura, 1989, 1991, 2001). Self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1977), can arise as a result of performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states. In this study, participants demonstrated self-efficacy particularly as it related to vicarious experiences. For example, Bandura (1977) notes that vicarious experiences influence self-efficacy, which in turn, influences choices; a motif that was evident in participants' statements about how observing success in other homeschool families' curriculum choices influenced their own choices. Additionally, participants also showed self-efficacy in relation to verbal persuasion – curriculum recommendations from fellow homeschoolers greatly influenced not only the home educators' selection of curriculum, but also their belief in their ability to succeed.

Furthermore, within social cognitive theory, Bandura stresses the idea of self-regulation. Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, and Twenge (2005) describe self-regulation as the capacity for altering behavior, while Bandura (1982) described self-regulation as a systemic self-observation and audit of one's performance. This particular principle was evident in this study by participant statements and observation. For example, participants noted that their curriculum choices were ever changing and the result of self-evaluation – one participant even noted that she evaluated the curriculum half-way through the school year to gauge its effectiveness. This constant self-

observation and assessment of performance reinforced the applicability of not only self-regulation, but from a wider perspective, the use of social cognitive theory as a framework for this study.

Lastly, the participants in this study also demonstrated human agency, or the belief that people “can effect change in themselves and their situations through their own efforts” (Bandura, 1989, p.1175). For instance, participants shared that if a particular curriculum or teaching method was not working, they would try different approaches until the desired change was accomplished. In each of these instances, the participants believed that they could effect change and were not simply helpless bystanders. These participant statements echo Bandura and Wood’s (1989) findings that self-efficacy is positively correlated with human agency.

### **Ecology of human development.**

At its core, the ecology of human development stance emphasizes the effect of interdependent systems on the development of a person (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Of the interdependent systems, the smallest system, the microsystem, is of particular importance because it has a vital role in influencing a person’s behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). According to Ungar, Ghazinour, and Richter (2013) the microsystem represents "activities, roles and interpersonal relations where the developing person is directly involved with particular physical and material features like the family, school class, neighborhood or church" (p. 352). Utilizing this ecology of human development lens to view the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices proved to be a reasonable way to view the phenomenon. For example, participants shared that recommendations from church friends and fellow homeschoolers greatly influenced

their curriculum selection, an occurrence that fits nicely with Brofenbrenner's emphasis on the microsystem's role in influencing behavior.

### **Practical and methodological implications**

From a practical standpoint, the findings in this study are helpful to home educators and researchers for several reasons. First, the study allowed home educators to voice what influenced their curricular decisions, which then allows educators to clarify and solidify future curriculum choices. For example, participants related that recommendations from other homeschool families were very influential in their curriculum decision making process. This is in keeping with Craven's (1970) contention that decision makers tend to search for information to inform their decisions from a limited number of inside sources and will not usually seek additional information unless driven to do so. Truly, over and over again, participants in this study voiced the importance of relying on recommendations from people they trusted. As an educator, I too have benefited from recommendations, advice, and counsel from trusted friends and colleagues, and believe the ability to acknowledge and receive wise advice and recommendations is an essential attribute of successful educators. Indeed, Proverbs 19:20 (ESV) states, "Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future" while Proverbs 12:15 (ESV) warns, "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice."

In a similar vein, this study also provided a clearer picture of the priorities of homeschool educators. Understanding the priorities in homeschool curriculum selection is helpful because it helps educators become more aware of their curriculum choices, and the quality of those choices, which in turn, can help improve the overall academic outcomes of homeschooled students. Indeed, Crawford and Snider (2000) found in their research that curriculum is a

"critical factor in student achievement" and that while teacher skill, dedication, and compassion are important educator qualities, educators "can produce better educational outcomes if they also have access to "tools that work"" (p.122). Carnine (1992) also notes, "Just like that of any other professional, teachers' efficacy is dependent on the tools at their disposal" (p. 13). Nathan, Long, and Alibali (2002) also found that curriculum significantly determines not only what students do academically, but it may also significantly influence educators' lesson plans and coverage of content, thus reinforcing the importance of home educators' priorities and ensuing curriculum choices. In the same vein, Tyler (1949) notes that educators should consider their priorities and educational aims and make a point to consider how those priorities can be attained and organized, and how to assess the attainment of those priorities. For example, Conley (2006) notes that if an educator's priority is college or career readiness then a curriculum that is coherent, content rich, and full of opportunities for reading, writing, and discussion should be implemented.

Another implication for this study was the participants' religious and moral beliefs and the influence those beliefs had in their curriculum selection. This idea reinforces previous research which contends that homeschooling is a "lifestyle choice, not just an educational choice" (Hurlbutt, 2010, p. 20). Isenberg (2007) also found in his study that one of the top three reasons people choose to homeschool is to "provide religious or moral instruction" (p. 399). Furthermore, while home educators may have similar knowledge, it is their differences in beliefs that influence how they select and teach content (Ernest, 1989). According to Prideaux (2003) curriculum is the outcome of human agency, and is "underpinned by a set of values and beliefs about what students should know and how they come to know it" (p. 269). Additionally, Green and Hoover-Dempsey (2007) found that home educators believe "they are personally responsible

for their child's education and they are capable of educating their children well in ways consistent with their priorities" (p.278). Similarly, religious and moral beliefs shape educators' curriculum orientations – Van Brummelen (2002) notes that curriculum orientations are essentially basic worldview assumptions and Ladwig (2009) notes that these assumptions can be foundational in choosing and organizing curriculum. Ennis, Ross, and Chen (1992) also note that "Value orientations represent philosophical perspectives that can be operationalized as educational goals for student learning" (p. 39). Lastly, Connelly and Clandinin (1986) note that teachers actively construct the curriculum through their beliefs and orientations. Indeed, from first-hand experience, I could clearly see how the beliefs and orientations of the participants in this study affected not only the selection of curriculum, but the way that curriculum was implemented and taught. For example, participants spoke of wanting their children to do their very best, a concept illustrated in Colossians 3:23, and think for themselves instead of following everyone else's opinion, a thought demonstrated in Exodus 23:2. Additionally, while the participants in this study did factor in religious and moral beliefs into their curriculum selection, they also wanted to provide a solid academic foundation for their children and unlike other portraits of home educators, the participants in this study actually had the educational background to do so. This is in stark contrast to the typical stereotype of home educators as backwoods, ignorant people.

Furthermore, in addition to bolstering prior research in the areas of recommendations and religious and moral instruction, this study also reinforced the idea of differentiated instruction. Indeed, participants repeatedly stated that they believed that every student was different and deserved individualized instruction. These participant statements echo the research, with Meighan (2005) stating, "Given the fact that we are able to locate over 30 differences in

individual learning styles, any uniform approach to the curriculum or to learning is intellectual death to some, and often most, of the learners and is therefore suspect" (p.285). Dodge (1995) further elaborates, contending that "The curriculum must also be *individually appropriate*, for each child is a unique person with his or her own temperament, interests, learning styles, and cultural background" (p. 1179). Additionally, according to Davis (2011), many home educators "opt for a blended approach and use a number of sources to develop their curriculum" (p. 29). In his comparison to curriculum as a recipe, Stenhouse (1975) also comments that "within limits, a recipe can varied [sic] according to taste. So can a curriculum (p.4)", further reinforcing the idea of curriculum as a malleable, customizable product. Finally, Nygaard, Højlt, and Hermansen (2008) note that curriculum should be flexible, as every student's learning process changes over time. Indeed, in this study participants strove to provide a customized educational package for each of their children – as one participant noted, the purpose of homeschooling is to give each student what they need, instead of providing a cookie-cutter approach. From personal experience, as both a former homeschooled student and current traditional educator, I can attest to the power of individualized instruction. Because of this, I believe that homeschooling is a very powerful form of instruction and can help reach students who may otherwise be lost in the crowd.

Paralleling the idea of individualized instruction, participants felt that the chosen curriculum should be something students want to do. This idea also echoes the research, with Pill (2004) stating that quality curriculum "supports student choice in content, assessments, and reporting of achievements" (p.13). Furthermore, Skilbeck's (1984) situational curriculum model of decision-making also advocates having students participate in the process of choosing a curriculum. Indeed, factoring students' interests and abilities into account is of paramount

importance, as Meighan (2005) notes that “any uniform approach to the curriculum or to learning is intellectual death to some, and often most, of the learners and is therefore suspect”

(p.285). Once again, from personal experience, allowing students to have a voice in curriculum selection and implementation has saved me from many a headache. Furthermore, while I do not believe that a child should be the sole director of his or her own education, I firmly believe that a child’s interests and abilities should be taken into consideration with not only the selection of a particular curriculum, but also with the scope and sequence of that curriculum.

Participant’s use of outside help, particularly the use of Internet programs, was also in keeping with prior research. For example, Davis (2011) notes, "The Internet has become an invaluable opportunity for homeschooling parents to broaden their child's education and expand opportunities for their child to learn through auditory, visual, and kinesthetic methods" (p. 29). Kleist-Tesch (1998) also found that home educators are increasingly incorporating technology into their educational plans. Hanna (2012) also noted in her study of 250 home educators that the Internet is growing in popularity, both as a means of locating curriculum and as an actual curriculum. For instance, in this study, participants spoke of searching the Internet for curriculum recommendations and reviews and with their older children, using the Internet as an actual curriculum, particularly with programs like Florida Virtual School or other similar privately owned companies.

Lastly, from a practical viewpoint, this study identified several additional themes that current research does not address, and will therefore be helpful in supporting researchers’ future studies. For example, while the idea of having a positive relationship between teacher and student is addressed in the research, it is done primarily from the perspective of a traditional educator and student, rather than a home educator and student. In one recent research article, Mazama and

Lunday (2013) do note, however, that in the African American homeschooling community the second most cited motivation to homeschool was the desire to strengthen family bonds. Mazama and Lunday (2013) also went on to say that “Many parents felt that an investment in time, especially at the early stages of a child's life, would avoid subsequent difficulties” (p. 132). Similarly, in this study, it became apparent that the participants valued their educational relationship with their children and took steps to strengthen that relationship. In many ways, while participants did not explicitly reference the Bible as an inspiration for their teacher-student relationship, Proverbs 23:26 (KJV) proved to be evident in their desires: “My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways.”

When examining the methodological implications of this study, a transcendental phenomenological approach was appropriate because the study's purpose was to simply describe the experiences participants shared, rather than explain why participants were influenced by a certain factor. This was in keeping with Moustakas' (1994) view that transcendental phenomenology centers around description rather than explanation. Indeed, Moustakas' (1994) notes that the aim of phenomenological research is to

determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the essences or structures of the experience. (p. 13)

Creswell (2009) also echoes Moustakas' (1994) viewpoint, stating, “Phenomenology is a research strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 13).

Furthermore, from a methodological standpoint, this study was appropriate because in addition to simply describing the experience of factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices, this study also sought to set aside prejudgments about homeschooling and homeschool curriculum choices, particularly as I already had some familiarity with these areas. Moustakas' (1994) notes the importance of setting aside prejudgments in transcendental phenomenology, stating,

Phenomenology, step by step, attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, a readiness to see in an unfettered way, not threatened by customs, beliefs, and prejudices of normal science, by the habits of the natural world or by knowledge based on unreflected everyday experience. (p.41)

### **Limitations**

As a qualitative study, this transcendental phenomenological study has several limitations. First, this study is limited in its ability to generalize its findings to the public. This is due to several factors. For example, while a sample size of 10 participants was appropriate for the approach used (Creswell, 2007), the small number of participants make generalizations to the public undesirable. Additionally, several sample characteristics limited the study's generalizability. For example, all of the participants resided in a two hour radius of Tampa Bay, Florida, thus excluding participants from other areas of the country that may have differing viewpoints. Also, because I chose to employ snowball sampling in my data collection process, even some homeschool members in the Tampa Bay area may have been excluded from my study (Schutt, 2012). Furthermore, while homeschool families have tended to be primarily white

(Masters, 1996), homeschool families today have become increasingly more diverse (Kunzman, 2009; Welner, 2002) and heterogeneous (Collum, 2005; Collum & Mitchell, 2005), thus making my sample of nine white participants and one African-American participant not as diverse and heterogeneous as the general homeschool population may be. Lastly, in addition to limited generalizability, this study is also limited because I used myself as an instrument of data collection (Creswell, 2007). This limitation is especially significant because I gathered a large amount of narrative data, thus increasing the chance of human error.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

While this study yielded valuable insights into factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices, additional research should be done in this area, particularly with a larger, and more diverse demographic set. For example, subsequent studies should seek to include populations not fully addressed in this study, such as urban communities and ethnic minorities. Widening the set to allow for more diversity will help to alleviate some of the limitations this study suffered from and will help paint a more complete picture of factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices. Furthermore, if this research is replicated with a larger set, a comparison of the data will help to show if the participants in both sets shared similar beliefs, or if the factors and beliefs outlined in this study were unique.

Additionally, further research into the theme of home educators desiring to maintain a positive relationship with their children and seeking outside help when necessary is needed, as current research (Buka, 2013; Newberry, 2010; Urooj, 2013) in this area primarily addresses traditional school relationships rather than homeschool relationships. Investigating this theme with a larger set or even with different participant demographics would help shed insight into

whether this theme was unique to this study or if home educators across the board value keeping their child's heart.

Lastly, future studies in this area would benefit from including quantitative data. For example, using Likert scale questions based on the discoveries of this study may help researchers better understand what factors influence homeschool curriculum choices. Furthermore, multiple statistical analyses might shed more light into factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices across multiple variables.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the factors influencing homeschool curriculum choices. This study was necessary because there is very little current research that specifically addresses home educator's curricular decisions. To investigate this gap in research literature, three research questions were asked: How do select home educators describe the factors that influence their curricular choices? How do select home educators' beliefs affect their selection of curriculum? How do select home educators' teaching styles and methodologies affect their curricular decisions? To gather information related to these questions, triangulation in the data collection was used. The three data collection methods were surveys, interviews, and a focus group. The data was gathered from 10 homeschool educators who had homeschooled for at least three years and lived within a two hour radius of the Tampa Bay area. After employing phenomenological reduction, six themes arose from the data. Those themes were: (a) recommendations are an important part of choosing curricula, (b) religious and moral beliefs factor heavily in the curriculum choice process, (c) it was important to participants that curriculum held their child's interest and was something their child wanted to do, (d)

participants noted that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to homeschooling and homeschool curriculum choices – every child is different, (e) participants related that keeping a positive relationship with their children and seeking outside help when necessary was an important method they used, and (f) curriculum changes as you homeschool.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Table 2

*Survey Questions*

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1. How long have you been homeschooling?

Three years

Four years or less

Five years or less

10years or less

More than 10years

2. What criteria are most important when choosing curricula?

N/A  Ease of use

N/A  Worldview

N/A  Flexibility for different ages

N/A  Price

N/A  Quality of Content

N/A  Aligns with state standards

N/A  Aesthetically pleasing

N/A  Hands-on

N/A  Built in evaluation

3. Who is involved in the choosing of curriculum?

Entire family (parents and students)

Both parents

One parent

One parent and student(s)

4. How important is a recommendation in your curriculum choice?

Very important

Somewhat Important

Not that important

5. Do you have a favorite curriculum publisher?

Yes

No

6. Describe your curriculum approach

Follow curriculum guide to the tee

Use curriculum as a starting point, but supplement with other materials

Use curriculum as a reference

Other

7. How do you learn about new curriculum choices?

Word of mouth

Homeschool curriculum fairs

Personal research

Other

8. Do you use online curricula?

Yes

No

9. How many children do you homeschool?

One

Two

Three

Four or more

10. Approximately how much time each day do you devote to homeschooling?

Three hours or less

Four to five hours

Six to seven hours or less

Eight hours or more

**APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL DOCUMENTATION**

February 24, 2014

IRB Approval 1802.022414: Homeschool Curriculum Choices: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Sarah,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email. Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

## **APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

### **CONSENT FORM**

Homeschool Curriculum Choices: A Phenomenological Study  
Sarah Pannone  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of the elements influencing homeschool curriculum choices. You were selected as a possible participant because of your homeschooling background. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Sarah Pannone, School of Education at Liberty University.

#### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to better understand the elements influencing homeschool educators' curriculum choices.

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Electronically complete a short, multiple-choice survey about elements influencing homeschool curriculum choice.
2. Participate in a one-time, 10-20 minute interview regarding the elements influencing homeschool curriculum choices. This interview will also be audio recorded and transcribed.
3. Possibly participate in a one-time, 30-45 minute focus group discussion panel on the elements influencing homeschool curriculum choices. This focus group discussion panel will be audio recorded and transcribed.

#### **Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**

The risks in this study are no more than you would encounter in everyday life.

There are no direct benefits to participation in this study, however, the societal benefit of participation in this study is a better understanding of what influences homeschool curriculum choices.

#### **Compensation**

There will be no compensation for this study.

#### **Confidentiality:**

The records of this study, including audio recordings, will be kept private, with the data being safely, and electronically stored in my (Sarah Pannone) personal computer. This data will not be accessed by any third party, other than a trusted transcriber. Because there is no anticipated use of the data in the future, the data will be deleted at the end of three years. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely

and only the researcher will have access to the records. However, if you are selected to be a participant in a focus group, I cannot assure confidentiality and privacy, as other participants will be involved.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

### **How to Withdraw from the Study:**

Should you at any time wish to withdraw from the study you may contact me (Sarah Pannone) and request to be withdrawn from the study. Upon withdrawal from the study any data that may have been gathered (audio recordings and/or survey information) will be destroyed.

### **Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Sarah Pannone. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at 727-288-6368 or [sjpannone@liberty.edu](mailto:sjpannone@liberty.edu). Dr. James Swezey, the advisor for this study, may also be contacted at (434) 592-4903 or [jaswezey@liberty.edu](mailto:jaswezey@liberty.edu). If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu). *You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

### **Statement of Consent:**

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers.

Yes     No

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_

**IRB Code Numbers:** 1802.022414

**IRB Expiration Date:** 2/24/15

## **APPENDIX D: EMAILS**

### **Email to Participants (member checking)**

Thank you again for your help with my study. When you have time, could you take a look through the attached transcript of our conversation to verify its accuracy and completeness? Also, while I will be using pseudonyms in my final paper, I would like to include a brief description of each participant. For example, "Beth, a homeschooling mother of three, has been homeschooling for five years. She has a degree in Psychology and is a member of XYZ homeschool group". To ensure that I get these participant profiles correct, would you be willing to write your own? Two or three sentences should suffice, as well as a mention of number of children and years of experience (anything else is up to you). Thank you so much!

### **Email to Peers (peer review)**

Thank you for agreeing to help review my study. Attached you will find chapters one through five of my study, as well as Appendix G which lists all of the significant statements used in the phenomenological reduction process. Please pay special attention to the research questions, themes identified, and subsequent discussion as I am asking you to check the accuracy of the themes I have identified. This process of peer examination will help to reinforce the trustworthiness of my study and is a necessary part of my study.

Thanks again!

## APPENDIX E: PHENOMENOLOGICAL REDUCTION

### Research Question One Significant Statements and Themes

How do select home educators describe the factors that influence their curricular choices?

- So just digging, asking questions, and talking to other people who are homeschooling.
- How many people have done this? And if everybody was like oh, yes, yes, yes we climbed on that.
- For us, we like to be able to, for history like I said, something to be able to include our faith and our values, but we don't want them to not have a good exposure to things too.
- So definitely that it goes along with the Bible and if I see something that strays away from the Bible it is a big red flag.
- Recommendations from other homeschool families. What they like and what they were using
- When we first started we did what other families recommended
- Is I want them to enjoy learning and I want to enjoy my time with them so I don't want to feel like we are checking off lists,
- I just find it all and decide on something and then maybe I might change it up, I might change up the math book because you know it's getting boring and it's just getting old, so let's just use a different one.
- The things I like the most. I like the literature based curriculum because I love reading and I love stories and I think you learn a lot better through things you can identify with, so that would be my biggest thing because it's hard for me to teach things that I don't understand
- Yes one thing that I have done in the past and I have done for years is I have relied heavily on other people's reviews
- But looking at it means a lot to me, those reviews. If it was something I did not know you know I would take those people's reviews pretty seriously
- I learned a few sources to go to that I trusted. You know, several of them are Christian homeschoolers that are companies that put out these big catalogs and all and I learned over the years and kind of like trusted their opinion and all.
- I've used other people telling me things
- Somebody might say "hey we are doing such and such, have you ever heard of that?" and then I would look at it and go yeah, that is great. So it usually kind of happens like that.
- Basically I have just trusted other people
- Usually recommendations and that sort of thing – I like to know what has worked for other people
- I might just say "okay, I need a new science curriculum, does anybody have any suggestions, we have already used this, this, and this, this is why want to change, any input?" And people are bound to answer
- We started with whatever we heard other people used

- Talking to other moms – there is a large community of homeschoolers around here, so even just at the park a lot of times you hear someone talking about something that they have been using
- So most important is a moral component and to ensure that it helps them think critically to be able to learn the material.
- I always try to use a Christian based curriculum, if at all possible. I've narrowed out if it's not Christian I kind of stay away from it
- I looked for programs that were more hands-on because my son has visual problems
- I had to start giving everything a chance and not judge it by its cover
- It is such a big investment so the one that are willing to let you look at stuff and not say that's it you bought it, you are stuck with it kind of deal that helps too.
- I was after academic with a Christian worldview or just straight one that you know was just totally academic.
- didn't want our Christian principles compromised
- It has to be biblically based and the way I believe – creation and all of that.
- When we initially started homeschooling, we are Catholic so we chose a Catholic curriculum
- We never wanted anything that contradicted our Christian beliefs
- Most important is their character
- I couldn't have something that was consuming that much of my time for my fourth grader.
- So I do not want to have to do planning, I used to do that with my daughter all the time, I did a lot of planning and it took too much time.
- User-friendly for mom activities
- The only thing I found was that there was so many choices that I had to ask other people and get opinions
- I would research at home for reviews and see what other parents had to say and the results that they used.
- Asking other homeschoolers. Getting their opinion on what works, what doesn't, you really want to go with experience.
- Price is some
- I just want them to get the best education they can get in a safe environment that works for them
- Easy to navigate
- Enjoy learning- learning is not always fun, but I don't want it to be something that she hates.
- It can be the best textbook in the world and if the kid doesn't use it, or doesn't want to do it, or hates it then it doesn't matter.
- So I guess mostly, shorter answer, their interests, their ability, and whether they're bored or not.
- I was looking for stuff I would enjoy and that would have a lot of hands-on idea for them
- Mostly what works for me is what I have in the house, what we had accumulated over the years
- I just [gathered] anything that I thought might work and added it to our collection.
- I like sticking with something that I know is dependable and trustworthy.

- I guess I'm kind of more in the middle of hard-core textbook and letting everything be your guide.
  - I want to make sure that everything we are getting is beneficial to them
  - Probably that they really understand it.
  - We are Catholic, so religion is a big part. I wanted it to be some type of Christian curriculum
  - As long as it is faith based and Christian worldview
  - Probably that it is already preplanned. That would be the biggest thing.
  - I still wanted a little bit of that (lesson plans) done for me because of the time element,
- 
- Well, that they are getting a good education is the first thing.
  - And second thing would be cost.

*Themes identified from these statements:*

### **Theme**

Recommendations are an important part of choosing curricula

### **Evidence**

- Recommendations from other homeschool families. What they like and what they were using
- Somebody might say "hey we are doing such and such, have you ever heard of that?" and then I would look at it and go yeah, that is great. So it usually kind of happens like that.

### **Theme**

Religious and moral beliefs factor heavily in the curriculum choice process

### **Evidence**

- We are Catholic, so religion is a big part. I wanted it to be some type of Christian curriculum
- I always try to use a Christian based curriculum, if at all possible. I've narrowed out if it's not Christian I kind of stay away from it

## **Sub-Question One Significant Statements and Themes**

How do select home educators' beliefs affect their selection of curriculum?

- Basically they are all going to be different, I am not bent on college bound, or one [particular] way, I'm just kind of seeing what happens with each of them. I just want them to be prepared for whatever seems to be their path.
- That is the most important thing - what is best for their child.
- I hope that she is a well-rounded person
- We think education is very important, but at the same time we want them to be well-rounded
- And that they can be independent thinkers - that is a big thing that they can think for themselves, that they can analyze things for themselves, they don't just have to be spoon fed whatever the professors or teachers teach them.
- I wanted some more flexibility when I started to see, especially my older one, learning styles- what fit for her.
- Definitely got me open to the fact that one size does not fit all.
- And two, I feel like kids are so much different that I know we have to have standards, but I kind of feel like the long term is more important. Instead of first, second, third, or fourth grade for benchmarks and stuff some of them will hit them earlier some of them will get them later, but within that window, like the primary window or the intermediate window.
- The whole purpose of homeschooling is to take each child and give them what they need to be successful and not just give everyone a cookie-cutter approach.
- I want them to still want to learn even when they are done. And to be productive members of society, that's really the bottom line.
- And because they love to learn they can do whatever they want
- I used a lot of techniques for their different personalities...
- It is different for each of our kids.
- Trying to find the one curriculum that is best for this child as opposed to that child, you kind of have to find a different one for that one
- I guess that the curriculum itself is not as important as just necessarily finding out what the kid wants to do or how they best learn.
- Then I look at the child, you know, what they like, or some of them are very independent, they like to do their own thing.
- They need to do something to self-actualize. They have to find something that is what they want to do
- The answer is in the home and in encouraging kids and letting them do what they want. Some kids can't do algebra, they want to be mechanics - let them go be mechanics. Don't make them learn algebra.
- So it is just kind of picking and choosing and figuring out what might be of interest to her or something where I am like "why not, let's see what they are doing out there".
- I just want them to be prepared for whatever they feel like they want to do in life
- And we want them to be able to explore all of their interests growing up too.

- Whatever dreams they have I support that, but I am a firm believer that education is a key component because without knowledge my people perish.
- And find a passion, I think it is important to me.
- Their interests.
- I just think that every kid is different and you have to find what works best for them and sometimes you realize afterwards that it maybe wasn't the best choice, but just go with it and try not to stress so much. Its school, it's important, but it is not the end all of everything.
- I think it is all very individualized - everyone is very different and everyone's personality really reflects what they choose for their families and for their house.
- The goal was college prep. So I used the SAT starting in eighth grade as a guideline
- Yes, they know from day one that that is the goal- we are getting ready for college. That is what this is all about.
- Then it gives them time to do a lot of dance, drama, and things that they really have a passion for, and I feel like if we were in the typical 8-3, or 8-2, or who knows how many hours of homework that we would be really be limited in those areas.
- If they don't like it they are not going to learn anything
- That is all we can do for our children anyway is impart what we believe and hope that we inspire that in them, so the curriculum itself almost becomes secondary to the whole package of education, which is so much more than curriculum.
- You just always have trust that God is going to show you what you need in your family, and it sometimes changes, but it is always good.
- I want to see them just do excellently what they put their hand to do.
- So just basically teach him the basics that he needs to learn and how to live life in a godly way, how to take care of themselves, and I guess just be ready for whatever the next step in his life may be.
- And my goal for me is to be able to impart that to them and that there are not any limitations - if we want to do this, we can do this.
- How can we encourage children to learn, by fixing our curriculum? I don't think so. We have to fix the parents getting involved and the idea that someone else has to educate our children.
- I don't believe there is enough curriculum that sometimes allows inner-city kids take advantage of homeschooling
- And then a lot of it is just based on is this holding their interest? Yes, they have to do the work, but I would rather not fight, so if it holds their interest and they are doing the work that's where we are going to go.
- But [also something] that will hold their interest
- We just kind of moved to what works for their personalities, what they like

- So my expectations are to definitely keep them up where they are supposed to be. We are not trying to push them way ahead or anything, but at the same time not hold them back.
- So when you find something nice that works, that is great, but you can switch around, it's more just like the commitment of I'm going to homeschool, this is the best thing for my kid and even if we don't do everything that the school system thinks we should do the kids have such a stronger educational background because they are not forced into here is what we are learning today by the school, you know that mindset
- It is just very personal; whatever your bend is and whatever you think is important is what people choose.
- You have got to choose something that is true to you, even if it is far right, real biblically based, or even if it is liberal and un-schooling,
- If it is true to your family then that is what you have to do and that is how you have to send your kids out to the world.
- If you are a good or a nonbeliever, find something that works for you because there is certainly material out there and make it work for you and your family.
- Then I look at how the kids learn
- With the flexibility to do things that work with them and how they are.
- What we thought would work for us
- A strong, well-rounded education is a big thing. Not to be force-fed the worldview that the public schools are giving, so they are getting the Christian based, God centered worldview.
- I want them to be well-rounded and not just learn how to associate with 30 kids their own age
- We want them to be able to think for themselves and not the necessarily the way of everybody else's opinion. And be able to just stand when other people are falling.
- I wanted my kids to think
- That it gives them a real world experience to think critically when learning the material- I think that is most important,
- So I looked at those two and found that Seton had critical thinking skills and reading comprehension focuses rather than the general read a book approach, so I chose it because it was more structured that way. Critical thinking skills and reading comprehension were the differentiating factor between ABeka and Seton. That is pretty much it I would say, the critical thinking
- But what really mattered for a homeschooler was that SAT score so you can get your scholarship money.

## Theme

It was important to participants that curriculum held their child's interest and was something their child wanted to do.

## Evidence

- And then a lot of it is just based on is this holding their interest? Yes, they have to do the work, but I would rather not fight, so if it holds their interest and they are doing the work that's where we are going to go.
- But [also something] that will hold their interest

## Theme

Participants noted that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to homeschooling and homeschool curriculum choices – every child is different.

## Evidence

- I just think that every kid is different and you have to find what works best for them and sometimes you realize afterwards that it maybe wasn't the best choice, but just go with it and try not to stress so much. Its school, it's important, but it is not the end all of everything.
- Basically they are all going to be different, I am not bent on college bound, or one [particular] way, I'm just kind of seeing what happens with each of them. I just want them to be prepared for whatever seems to be their path.

## Sub-Question Two Significant Statements and Themes

How do select home educators' teaching styles and methodologies affect their curricular decisions?

- So in high school we went there and kind of branched out to a whole different way of doing things and a whole new way of looking at things because we had been so rote with getting the basics down.
- I am a project manager by training, so inspect what you expect
- If we get off on a tangent, that's okay too

- I think the main thing is our relationship, more than the education part. And that is one of the reasons I employed your mom to do the math part because it was destroying our relationship trying to do it together. So my expectation is maybe to step back and not to get so involved that it causes problems.
- Is that they still love me and still want to be a cohesive family unit and come home at Christmas or whenever and not hate me because I had to be this bad guy all the time.
- But for the most part my expectation for myself is that when I know I can't do something or I am not doing well with something, that I will use the resources in the community
- Also, to be able to recognize my deficiencies and find what they need where I am deficient so that they get what they need.
- You have to keep your child's heart.
- To be apprised of the latest changes so that the knowledge I am imparting it up-to-date for my children, and that is not always easy.
- And we found that it wasn't comparable to what the kids were getting in school and it was difficult, like the language arts and English lessons would be Bible verses and that was hard for them to work with and break down and stuff.
- We have changed a little bit year-to-year
- We evaluate what we are using at the end of almost every year, even halfway through the year. You know, sometimes it's just time for an overhaul and we just add it to the bookshelf in case we ever need to go back to it or for a younger kid maybe that will work well for her even though it did not work for her.
- So it has kind of graduated, the same [way] the kids are learning, I'm learning better how to pick,
- A lot of it, especially math, is progression
- You kind of grow with them and learn with them
- And sometimes things work better in different seasons just with different ages for the kids, so I've had to ebb and flow a little bit,
- And we have so many textbooks, and if this one isn't working that we are [trying another].
- A lot of times it is trial and error
- I thought you know you are missing some things here that I am not able teach you because we butt heads, so I made her take a math class
- That I can be the best that I can be and when I don't know or I can't help them seek outside help.
- Because there is a lot of different curriculum that can work, I mean I have tried different things, certain things I found I really liked and I am sticking with because I thought this is just so easy.
- It was trial and error
- And I would say that is one of the reasons why I really entertained the idea of homeschooling because I could look back at my childhood say the things that I really learned, subject-verb agreements, and where commas go, and spelling, and how to construct a paper - that really came from my mom.
- I will say "you know we need to read this book" that I read or that he read in school and "why are we not reading that anymore in school, why are we reading the feel-good love

stuff about how awesome everyone is”. I don’t know, that might influence us a little bit. Because I am not a fan of all of the reading material that is out there right now.

- I’m at the point I guess in my life where some of the things are just the grace and mercy of the Lord. That’s what I have to depend on to make up for the mistakes that I made
- With what you’re going through with sometimes it’s just survival mode
- Some of the things that I remember, because you know that is how it was done with me makes sense, so I might pull from that, but sometimes it doesn’t. So I guess it does influence it. Like I might think if I see something that has worked well with me then I might do that with them.
- They usually have a set series of lessons that I have picked out
- I make out the daily routine so we can see what gets done today
- I have spreadsheets for them and when they complete an assignment then we mark it off on the spreadsheet.
- I think I’ve expected my kids when they were older to be more independent and independent learners. Because I thought that was important
- I was looking for something that could lead her along and give her some more independence so I could be doing more of the basic hands-on stuff with my younger one with math.
- And sometimes there is so much out there it makes you crazy, and you go to the convention and then you are overwhelmed and you have to kind of have tunnel vision, you know, only be a little bit open, otherwise you will get thrown off track,
- In the early years for about probably five years I would go to homeschool curriculum fairs and as one of my friends said just take an aspirin and go on. You know because it can kind of be overwhelming. I got what I needed out of that in the beginning and then I decided that you know the immense expense of all that and I didn’t feel like I needed all that emotional stuff.
- You could get so much homeschool curriculum to choose from that I just chose to whittle it down to a few catalog choices
- The only thing I found was that there was so many choices that I had to ask other people and get opinions
- It was overwhelming at first.
- I was scared about having too many choices and you know, in the public school they told me this is what you use, so then having too many choices was overwhelming at first, but now it would be hard to go back and have someone else say you have to do it this way.
- We get started pretty early with the basic because they are the freshest, so we start with math and reading
- Usually we do math first, or sometimes we will do reading first, or sometimes we will do Bible study first, but we always do the most important things, the things that need to be done the most, [first]
- I pretty much trained them that they would get up and start independent reading.

**Theme**

Participants related that keeping a positive relationship with their children was an important method they used

**Evidence**

- I think the main thing is our relationship, more than the education part.
- You have to keep your child's heart.

**Theme**

Participants related that they would use outside help if a particular subject area caused a strain on their relationship with their children or if they felt inadequate

**Evidence**

- That I can be the best that I can be and when I don't know or I can't help them seek outside help.
- But for the most part my expectation for myself is that when I know I can't do something or I am not doing well with something, that I will use the resources in the community

**Theme**

As experience is gained and learning styles emerge, the selection of curriculum also changes.

**Evidence**

- You kind of grow with them and learn with them
- And sometimes things work better in different seasons just with different ages for the kids, so I've had to ebb and flow a little bit

## APPENDIX F: SURVEY ANSWERS

Table 6

*Results from the Survey*

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### Question 1: How long have you been homeschooling?

Answer Choices	Responses
At least three years	0
Five years or less	1
Ten years or less	4
More than ten years	5

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### Question 2: What criteria are most important when choosing curricula?

Answer Choices	Average Ranking
Ease of use	7.20
Flexibility for different ages	7.00
Worldview	4.20
Price	3.90
Quality of content	8.50
Aligns with state standards	2.20

Aesthetically pleasing	3.40
Hands-on	4.70
Built in evaluation	3.90

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**Question 3: Who is involved in the choosing of curriculum?**

Answer Choices	Responses
Entire family (parents and students)	3
Both parents	1
One parent	4
One parent and student(s)	2

**Question 4: How important is a recommendation in your curriculum choice?**

Answer Choices	Responses
Very important	5
Somewhat Important	5
Not that important	0

**Question 5: Do you have a favorite curriculum publisher?**

Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	4

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No	6
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**Question 6: Describe your curriculum approach**

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Answer Choices	Responses
Follow curriculum guide to the tee	1
Use curriculum as a starting point, but supplement with other materials	8
Use curriculum as a reference	0
Other	1

**Question 7: How do you learn about new curriculum choices?**

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Answer Choices	Responses
Word of mouth	7
Homeschool curriculum fairs	3
Personal research	9
Other	0

**Question 8: Do you use online curricula?**

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Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	7
No	3

**Question 9: How many children do you homeschool?**

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Answer Choices	Responses
One	4
Two	3
Three	0
Four or more	3

**Question 10: Approximately how much time do you devote to homeschooling each day?**

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Answer Choices	Responses
Three hours or less	1
Four to five hours	9
Six to seven hours or less	0
Eight hours or more	0

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