"Reading Is Everywhere:” A Case Study Situating Children's Book Distribution Within the Literacy Practices of Somali New Mainers

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“READING IS EVERYWHERE:” A CASE STUDY SITUATING CHILDREN’S BOOK DISTRIBUTION WITHIN THE LITERACY PRACTICES OF SOMALI NEW MAINERS

By

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A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Literacy Education

The Graduate School
University of Maine
December 2022

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Somalia has a long and rich oral literacy tradition of poetry, proverbs, and songs, while Somalia’s print literacy history has been significantly disrupted by colonization and then the Somali Civil War. Many Somalis have fled the country since the start of the civil war in 1991, and an estimated 10,000 Somalis have made a new home in Maine. When Somali citizens relocated to Maine, they were exposed to Maine’s Raising Readers children’s book distribution program. Raising Readers distributes high-quality, age-appropriate, English-language children’s books during pediatric well-child visits to foster family literacy interactions and children’s emergent literacy skills.

This study explores how the experience of Raising Readers book distribution fits within Somali New Mainer families’ literacy practices by utilizing in-depth dialogic interviewing techniques with four parents. Through semi-structured interviews, their families’ literacy practices and experiences receiving children’s books are discussed. Exploratory findings emerging from this study include appreciation for the Raising Readers program, and extensive print-based family literacy practices within the homes of participating parents even though the participating parents had not engaged with children’s books or shared reading activities in their homes when they were children. In addition to print-based activities of shared book reading, homework help, and Qur’anic learning, parents relayed many oral literacy practices. First and
foremost, storytelling is a beloved practice amongst all generations of participating parents’ family members; in addition, some poetry and song practices emerged. Of note is that Somali language loss is occurring for some of the participating families’ children.

Implications stemming from these findings include insights for medical practitioners, Raising Readers administrators, teachers, and parents. Ultimately, while participating parents shared constructive feedback to make book distribution even more impactful for newcomer families, their overarching perception of Raising Readers is one of gratitude for the program that reinforces participating parents’ literacy goals for their children and illustrates that “Reading is everywhere.”
I learned from my father, astute as a serpent

And from Magan, his forefather,

How to deal with my fellow-men.

I learned how to show them due respect

And I learned the duties that clansmen owe each other

For no matter what special talent I might possess

Are we not equals, all of us?

-Saahid Qamaan

(Somali pastoralist and political spokesman, died c. 1930)

From An Anthology of Somali Poetry (Andrzejewski, B. & Andrzejewski, S., 1993)
RESEARCHER VIGNETTE

August, 2011: Kennedy Park, Lewiston, Maine

The sun shines brightly on the basketball courts and nearby play structures on the lower side of Lewiston’s Kennedy Park. I hold my six-month old daughter on one hip, her head pivoting as her big brown eyes take in the bouncing balls on the basketball court and the children running after them. With my other arm, I push a swing with my two-year-old daughter on it, who repeatedly demands to go higher than the swing can actually go. Her demands—and my responses—are all in Dutch, as are my remarks to my youngest that describe each scene she moves her eyes to. Unlike virtually every other spot we have frequented in our first two weeks in Maine, in Kennedy Park nobody seems to notice that our words are not English words.

My older daughter jumps off the swing, and approaches a small slide, where two slightly older girls wearing long, bright dresses and hijabs are playing. They take in my daughter’s clothing and skin color and offer her a turn—in English—to which she nonchalantly responds—in Dutch—that she can’t understand them. She does understand their gesture of where she can fall into the rotation, and happily joins them for a few moments, the three girls smiling at each other as they take turns climbing up the ladder and sliding down the other side. For her, just arrived from Amsterdam, where she lived in a Dutch-speaking home in a neighborhood with many Turkish and Moroccan families, English is foreign, but that children speak in languages she doesn’t understand, and wear clothes different from hers, is exactly as expected. In Kennedy Park, a few blocks from the hospital where I was born, but thousands of miles from where she was born, my daughter is not lost; she is right at home.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the world’s youngest children
for their instinct to connect with everyone they encounter,
regardless of potential differences in language or cultural practice.

May we all have the courage and love to follow their superb example.

For Willow, Hazel, and Fred,
Who love me as I am today &
inspire me to continue becoming my best self.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION TO CHILDREN’S BOOK DISTRIBUTION AND
SOMALI LITERACY HISTORY

This research and resulting dissertation brings together my personal and academic trajectories in a study of literacy and second language development in a place and with a population that is foreign, and yet, in some ways, deeply familiar to me. This chapter serves as a broad introduction to my study. I will introduce children’s book distribution programs, recount the story of Somali newcomers to Maine, outline the dissertation study, and situate myself as the researcher.

In 2012, one year after my return to Maine, accompanied by my foreign-born children and their father, I was introduced to Maine’s children’s book distribution program: Raising Readers. This program has been working with medical offices throughout the state to distribute high quality, age-appropriate books to Maine’s children since the year 2000. Funded by the Libra Foundation, program administrators coordinate dedicated printings of selected books, and then distribute these books to medical providers, who give them to children at well-child visits at the following times: birth, 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 9 months, 12 months, 15 months, 18 months, and the 2-, 3-, 4-, and 5-year annual visits. My initial interest was an academic one as part of my PhD program, but, as the mother of young children, it quickly became a personal interest.

While books have long been circulated through libraries and schools for the purposes of academic and civic education, it is fairly recent that a new model for book circulation began: pediatricians started distributing children’s books during medical visits in 1989 in Boston, Massachusetts under the program name Reach Out and Read. The idea was that parents and
children should be spending time with books as much, and as early in a child’s life, as possible. The goal was to increase the rate at which parents would act on doctors’ advice to read often and early to their children during a stage in children’s lives where teachers and librarians may not be part of every family’s community.

While shared reading can benefit all children in terms of emergent literacy (Teale & Sulzby, 1986) as well as developmentally, it is not the case that all families engage in shared reading, nor that all families know the positive benefits of shared reading or have the books available to engage in the activity (Yarosz & Barnett, 2001). The children’s book distribution program was conceptualized to work by putting children’s books into the hands of all parents and children, and encouraging families to spend time looking at, and talking about, those books. To date, only a few studies have explored the reception of children’s book distribution in communities where children’s book reading has not been, historically, a family literacy practice. While children’s book distribution programs aim to support families in their literacy practices, what if their family literacy practices have not, previously, involved books? As Brian Street reminded us in his introduction to Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy: “The rich cultural variation in these practices and conceptions leads us to rethink what we mean by them and to be wary of assuming a single literacy where we may simply be imposing assumptions derived from our own cultural practice onto other people’s literacies” (1993, p.1).

It is notable in this regard that the dialogue that parents and children engage in during shared reading is a crucial component in shared reading’s impact on emergent literacy skill development (Whitehurst, Arnold, Epstein, Angell, Smith, & Fischel, 1994). Many language-rich activities—such as oral storytelling, rhyming games, and singing—foster emergent literacy skills in comparable ways to shared book reading (Shaw, 2021). It should also be noted that Raising
Readers, and other children’s book distribution programs, take considerable care to choose age-appropriate books for each well-child visit children are scheduled for. These books are age-appropriate in form (e.g., board books for babies), in amount of print and linguistic complexity, and also in style, for example using books with rhyme, alliteration, repetition, and song-like qualities to create bridges between print and oral expression.

These dual-routes to emergent literacy skill development, namely through print literacy practices that involve high-quality oral literacy practices, and through oral literacy practices themselves, the intersection of print and oral modalities should be kept in mind. In addition to fostering print and oral literacy activities, shared book reading has been touted as a high-quality bonding activity. In these ways, shared book reading encourages positive relationships and attachment while facilitating emergent literacy skills (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Mol & Bus, 2011; Radesky, Carta, & Bair-Merritt, 2016; Logan, Justice, Yumuş, Chaparro-Moreno, 2019).

In 2012, I began reviewing the literature on children’s book distribution programs, expecting to find inconclusive evidence that such a “low-intervention” intervention could have significant, positive, results. Instead, what I found was consistent—and robust, clinical trial—evidence (detailed in chapter two) that children’s book distribution programs were having effects on both literacy practices of parents and children, and literacy outcomes of children. As a parent, I was pleased to see such positive results of the model across a general population; as an applied linguist and educator specialized in second languages, I was intrigued by a subset of the prior research. Specifically, in one area of prior research, families who spoke a language other than English at home benefitted even more from children’s book distribution programs than monolingual English families did (High, Hopmann, LaGasse & Linn, 1998; Golova, Alario, Vivier, Rodriguez & High, 1999; Mendelsohn, Mogilner, Dreyer, Forman, Weinstein, Broderick,
Intrigued by this result, I first considered it as a parent raising bilingual children, and then began to think about Maine’s largest second language population, families from Somalia who are from a primarily oral literacy tradition. As a linguist and an education researcher, the role of intercultural exchange between doctors from a primarily print-based literacy tradition and patients from a primarily oral literacy tradition soon had me questioning how applicable former research findings on the efficacy of children’s book distribution programs were when crossing not only language lines, but also literacy tradition lines.

In 2015, my supervisor, Dr. Susan Bennett-Armistead, and then-fellow PhD student, Dr. Maryia Labree, and I conducted the first study of Maine’s children’s book distribution program, Raising Readers. Through surveys and interviews with parents, and with the medical providers who distribute books, we were able to replicate the positive findings of prior studies on similar children’s book distribution programs. Specifically, through our surveys and interviews with parents and medical providers, Raising Readers was shown to be perceived as positively affecting parents’ and children’s home literacy practices.

That study provided a first confirmation that the positive effects of children’s book distribution programs cataloged in prior studies of the Reach Out and Read program were also applicable to Maine’s children’s book distribution program, Raising Readers (Groenhout & Bennett-Armistead, 2016). As one of the researcher associates for that general-population study, and as a multilingual mother and applied linguist specialized in second language learning, I had hoped that our (self-selected) respondents in the general population study would include some responses from Somali New Mainer families. Since this was not the case, I continued to wonder
how the Raising Readers program was impacting Somali newcomers in Maine. Ultimately, this line of questioning became a dissertation topic that, despite considerable challenges in execution, I could not resist exploring as my dissertation research. This dissertation study is a follow-up study to complement the first Raising Readers study (Groenhout & Bennett-Armistead, 2016), and explores the experiences of Maine’s Somali newcomer population with the Raising Readers book distribution program.

**Children’s Book Distribution Programs: Philosophy and Results**

The model of distributing children’s books through well-child visits has been shown, over more than 25 years, to positively affect parents’ and children’s enjoyment of reading, as well as how often they read and how many books they keep in their homes (Needlman, Fried, Morley, Taylor, & Zuckerman, 1991; High et al., 1998; Golova et al., 1999). The philosophy behind the book distribution programs, as well as the research chronicling how book distribution affects parents and children’s reading behaviors and attitudes about reading, is rooted in the framework of literacy as cultural practice in support of emergent literacy (Teale & Sulzby, 1986), which frames literacy development as an ongoing progression that starts from birth. In the view of literacy as cultural practice, children are exposed to—and adopt and develop—the literacy practices of their families and their communities (Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1997; Purcell-Gates, 2007).

This view of literacy as cultural practice fits within Bakhtinian and Vygotskian conceptualizations of environmental embeddedness. In these conceptualizations, people are both products of their communities (Vygotsky, 1978), as well as co-producers in the ongoing development of the community due to the bi-directional nature of human interaction because it is social (Bakhtin, 1984). Bakhtin wrote of a polyphonic and dialogic nature of human-linguistic
existence and interaction in which any individual is continuously in dialogue not only with all of the others with whom (s)he interacts, but with all who came before and will follow:

“Intentionally or not, all discourse is in dialogue with prior discourses on the same subject, as well as with discourses yet to come, whose reactions it foresees and anticipates. A single voice can make itself heard only by blending into the complex choir of other voices already in place” (Todorov, 1984, p. x).

This ongoing dialogue of multiple voices (polyphonicity) is always changing in time and space; there is not a one-way transmission from one individual to another, but an ongoing interaction that continues to shape all who engage. In this way, literacy practices are both transmitted from community to the individuals inside that community (Vygotsky, 1978), as well as continuously shaped by the individuals in the community as those community members have ongoing experiences with literacy practices (Bakhtin, 1984). This ongoing shifting becomes even more important in contact zones, where individuals from multiple linguistic and cultural backgrounds come together.

Mary Louise Pratt introduced the idea of the contact zone in a 1990 keynote address of the Responsibilities for Literacy conference where she shared her experiences of teaching a course where instructor and students were constantly examining and re-examining their understandings of the course’s content—and title: —*Cultures, Ideas, Values*. In sharing her experience of teaching that class and observing the students in it, Pratt described both the contact zone’s beauties and its perils:

The students in the class had the experience, for example, of hearing their culture discussed and objectified in ways that horrified them; all the students saw their roots traced back to legacies of both glory and shame; all the students experienced face-to-face
the ignorance and incomprehension, and occasionally the hostility, of others…

Virtually every student was having the experience of seeing the world described with him or her in it. Along with rage, incomprehension, and pain, there were exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom—the joys of the contact zone. The sufferings and revelations were, at different moments to be sure, experienced by every student. No one was excluded, and no one was safe (Pratt, 1991).

Pratt described teaching the above course as a radical shift in teaching, where teacher monologue was irrelevant, and the course’s success was due to the dialogism, the many voices (Bakhtin, 1984) that the diverse group of students taking the class brought to their course meetings. She described it as the “most exciting” and the “hardest” teaching she had ever done, stating: “The lecturer’s traditional (imagined) task—unifying the world in the class’s eyes by means of a monologue that rings equally coherent, revealing, and true for all, forging an ad hoc community, homogeneous with respect to one’s own words—this task became not only impossible but anomalous and unimaginable” (Pratt, 1991).

Within the aforementioned framework of literacy as cultural practice in support of emergent literacy, and with the understanding that literacy practices are shifting in time and space—especially in contact zones—exploring children’s literacy development as a function of their experiences with literacy practices requires us to broadly explore those literacy practices. Indeed, in studies where static variables such as ethnicity or parental language are included alongside measures of literacy practices being utilized within the home, findings indicate that family differences (i.e., home literacy environment/practices) within categorical groups (e.g., ethnicity) not only vary, but they can have a protective effect in regard to literacy achievement and skill (Yarosz & Barnett, 2001; van Steensel, 2006; Nag, Vagh, Dulay & Snowling, 2019). In
essence, who we are—i.e., ethnically or socioeconomically—does not determine outcomes in a vacuum; what we do—i.e., practices—matter immensely, and our practices shift as functions of time, and the contexts we find ourselves in over that time.

As such, the model of distributing books and encouraging parents to read with their children daily is designed with the intention of directly affecting literacy practices by providing a tool, and a nudge, for parents to engage in shared reading, and offering both encouragement and reasons to engage in shared reading. Children’s book distribution programs start with the basic premise that high quality children’s books must be readily available in the home; certainly, this is not a sufficient condition, but it is a first, necessary, condition to enable shared reading between children and caregivers. In addition to the book, itself, additional layers that influence whether the books get read, and in what ways they are read, depend on the sociocultural practices of the home. While lack of access to books can be a barrier to shared reading, so too can literacy beliefs or practices, such as shared reading not being a common literacy practice (Nasi, Bawaneh, Alaraj, Kussad, Nasir, Lyden, Badran, 2021).

While book distribution programs have the goal of directly influencing parents’ and children’s literacy practices, the underlying expectation is that by directly affecting practices, literacy outcomes will be indirectly affected by virtue of parents and children having spent more quality time with books. Indeed, book distribution programs hope to augment the frequency and the quality of print-based literacy practices in which families engage during the earliest years of children’s development.

A 2015 study of 250 parents who, together with their children, were participating in a Reach Out and Read program diagrammed the factors affecting children’s literacy development to show the interaction of the caregiver(s)’ literacy factors together with the healthcare
professional literacy factors as the starting point for influencing children’s literacy development. The caregiver and healthcare professional literacy factors then influence the environmental factors, while the caregiver and the environment influence the child’s literacy factors. All of these elements flow together and interact with one another to foster early childhood literacy development (Rikin, Glatt, Simpson, Cao, Anene-Maidoh & Willis, 2015). In essence, the presence of the healthcare professional as a part of this model is what Raising Readers and other children’s book distribution programs are adding to the equation, with the intention of positively impacting children’s environments and literacy practices, thereby supporting and enhancing literacy development.

As described in Rikin et al.’s model, children’s book distribution programs where medical practitioners give out books to children during the preschool years are influencing both the caregivers’ literacy factors, as well as the environmental factors within the families’ homes. These influences go on to affect children’s literacy factors, and their literacy development as a result. In the medical children’s book distribution model, whereby books are given to children by a knowledgeable and caring individual, the book distribution model capitalizes on both the trust that parents have in their pediatricians, as well as the prime age for primary-care based intervention (Shah, Kennedy, Clark, Bauer, & Schwartz, 2016). As research has been carried out, it has become clearer that the availability of children’s books is only the starting point. Children’s book distribution programs such as Reach Out and Read and Raising Readers not only make children’s books more readily available, but they provide a “nudge” for parents, reminding them of the importance of utilizing the children’s books within their families (de Bondt, Willenberg & Bus, 2020).
In terms of the age factor, it is important to note that reading with young children from birth is not necessarily universally understood to be a recommended practice (Rusu, Wallace, Coman, Costea, Sidor, Pop & Navsaria, 2019). Several layers of education are necessary in terms of ensuring best practices in children’s emergent literacy through the giving of children’s books by pediatricians; in some cases, it is first the physicians who need to better understand emergent literacy and the guidance to share book time with babies from birth before we can expect programs of book distribution to have their greatest, cumulative, effect for children.

Reach Out and Read (1989), the first pediatrician-distributed book distribution program, was conceived of by doctors and educators who were well aware of the benefits of shared reading from birth. The program creators were also seeking to capitalize on the trust parents have in their pediatricians’ recommendations in order to communicate the importance of early, frequent, and high-quality experiences with stories and print. The first research studies on the Reach Out and Read book distribution program documented effects in increased frequency of reading, increased mention of reading as a favorite activity, and increased numbers of children’s books in the home; these documented effects were hoped to then result in effects on literacy skill outcomes (Needlman et al., 1991; High et al., 1998; Golova et al., 1999). Subsequent to these earliest studies, researchers began extending their inquiries into the realm of book distribution programs’ effects on literacy skills, comparing children who had received books throughout the first five years of life to children who had not.

Similar to the early studies’ confirmation that book distribution results in more reading, and increased enjoyment of reading on the part of both parents and children, literacy skills-oriented studies documented positive effects of book distribution on vocabulary development as reported by parents (High, LaGasse, Becker, Ahlgren, & Gardner, 2000), as well as literacy skill
development (and numeracy as well) as established on standardized tests (Wade & Moore, 1998; Wade & Moore, 2000; Mendelsohn et al., 2001; Sharif, Rieber & Ozuah, 2002). These studies, which demonstrate that children who have participated in a book distribution program exhibit more advanced literacy skills than children who were not participating in a book distribution program, affirm that the program’s mechanisms were working. The assumption that affecting family literacy practices will affect children’s literacy skills does, in the case of children’s book distribution by medical practitioners in the first years of life, hold true.

While book distribution programs have been rigorously researched in the U.S., as well as in several other countries, Maine’s book distribution program, Raising Readers, founded in 2000, is just beginning to be researched. University of Maine researchers, including myself, reported positive perceived effects—as shared by both parents and medical practitioners—of the Raising Readers book distribution program (Groenhout & Bennett-Armistead, 2016).

**Raising Readers Parent Survey**

In the 2016 research study we distributed a survey to parents of children receiving books at well-child visits, followed by interviews with parents and medical providers participating in Raising Readers. This study revealed that, like prior studies on other book distribution programs, Raising Readers was having a positive impact both on how much parents and children read, and on how much they enjoyed shared reading. These effects varied with child age for effects on children, but effects on parents did not vary with child age; in other words, parental enjoyment and frequency of shared reading was affected by the program as soon as their children started receiving books, whereas children were affected over time as they were continuously exposed to the program from birth to age five.
There has not been research of the Raising Readers program to explore whether the increase in shared reading, or parents’ and children’s reported increase in enjoyment of shared reading, are ultimately affecting children’s literacy skills as has been shown in prior studies of other children’s book distribution programs. However, the significant amount of prior research (see chapter 2 for an extensive overview) on book distribution programs similar to Raising Readers that tests, and affirms, the validity of the causal chain from literacy practices to literacy skills should allow Raising Readers program administrators to support the claim that affecting literacy practices, as Raising Readers is reportedly doing, will, in turn, affect literacy outcomes as a result of the enhancement in frequency and quality of print literacy experiences during the earliest years of child development.

While this, first, Maine study confirmed that the Raising Readers program is having a positive effect on families, there was a marked absence of responses in the 2016 study from Somali newcomer families in Maine. With over 800 total responses, the study included a nominal number of responses from families who spoke French (n=22) and Spanish (n=12) at home, but zero responses from Somali families; it should be noted in this regard that, in Maine schools in the year the study was conducted, the number of French (n=601) and Spanish (n=706) speaking students, added together, were still fewer than the Somali population of students in Maine schools (n=2,052) (Maine Multilingual Learner Dashboard—Student Counts: 2015).

Indeed, an estimated 30% of Maine students who speak another language than English at home are from Somali-speaking homes (Mitchell, 2020). As such, the complete absence of responses from Somali families was an eye-catching outlier. Were the reasons for this absence in returned surveys that Somali New Mainer families didn’t have strong enough opinions about Raising Readers to want to complete the survey? Or were Somali New Mainer families not likely
to read the (English only) survey questionnaire and respond to it? Or were these families simply reticent to share their opinions, positive or negative, in regard to a lived experience in Maine? Any number of reasons could have led to the absence of Somali New Mainer responses, but what is important is that we did not have any indication whatsoever as to the perceived effectiveness of Raising Readers for this, very sizable, newcomer population in Maine.

Several studies in various regions of the U.S. have investigated the effects of book distribution programs for families who speak a language at home other than English; findings from these studies indicate that the book distribution programs are every bit as effective for bilingual children, and, in fact, these children often benefit even more than their monolingual peers (High et al., 1998; Golova et al., 1999; Mendelsohn et al., 2001; Needlman et al., 2005). However, the book distribution programs featured in these studies incorporate various modifications to the core program, including bilingual books, bilingual medical practitioners, and, in some cases, enhancing the book distribution to include instruction in shared reading (as opposed to simply providing an English book to children, as Raising Readers does).

In a 2007 community-based study of Lewiston’s resources for Somali New Mainer families, one of the findings was that there were lots of fantastic resources available to residents, but that Somali New Mainers did not feel connected or particularly well-served by these resources.

While the Somalis were unanimous in their praise and thanks for the hard work Lewiston residents were doing, they stated that these organizations were providing generalized services designed for non-specific and loosely defined needs rather than targeted and specific priorities (Ford, 2007, p.66, emphasis added).
While Raising Readers was not named as an example of a generalized service in Ford’s study, it could be that the Raising Readers model of benefitting all children with a universal book distribution model might be missing the mark for Somali New Mainers’ families’ needs.

In Maine, Raising Readers is proud to benefit all Maine families with an age-appropriate children’s book at each well-child visit (Raising Readers, n.d.). Especially given Maine’s increasing numbers of newcomer families, the fact that the Raising Readers model does not, as of 2022, include any modifications for newcomer families may be an element to further explore. In the case of Maine’s largest newcomer population (originating from Somalia), there are additional population characteristics to consider alongside the language spoken at home. Specifically, Somali newcomers come from a historically primarily oral tradition rather than a primarily print one, as well as often coming from rural, agricultural backgrounds. As such, many newcomer adults are not print-literate in their first languages (Besteman, 2016). Somali literacy rates are not well documented, and vary by factors such as gender (male literacy rates are reportedly double that of females) urban or rural location, age, language and dialect spoken, and have varied significantly over time. The most recent estimate for Somali adults was 38% (down from a 1970s high of over 50%) (Bigelow, 2010).

Given the threads of second language acquisition and multiculturalism that are woven through my personal and academic journeys, one of my first questions, when looking at the 2016 Raising Readers survey data, was how the demographic variable of language spoken at home affected survey responses. I was eager to find out what responses had come in from folks for whom not only English, but also, for many, print literacy, is relatively new, and was disappointed to find that there were no responses from Somali newcomers among our 800+ survey responses. As both a pseudo-newcomer to Maine by nature of my time abroad and foreign-born family, and
as an applied second language learning linguist and researcher, my desire to understand book distribution’s impacts on new Mainers comes from several angles, and has fueled the conceptualization of my dissertation research as an opportunity to specifically study family literacy practices of new Mainers from Somalia.

**Somali Language, Literacy and Literary Traditions**

Somalia has a considerable degree of mutually understandable language dialects and Somali has been extensively studied—thought to be the most studied Cushitic language. Somali is broadly utilized across what is current-day Somalia, despite a history of colonization by the French, Italian, and British (Bulakh, Simeone-Senelle, Smidt, Voigt, Meyer & Jakobi, 2019). While Somali is broadly utilized, there are additional language groups in the country, for example the Somali Bantu.

Somalia has a long and extensive oral literary history featuring singing, poetry, stories, and proverbs in the Somali language. Somalia is referred to as a “Nation of Poets” due to the pervasiveness of poetry in everyday Somali life and culture (Andrzejewski & Andrzejewski, 1993). Poetry, songs, proverbs, and oral storytelling have a long history of not only entertaining, but also transmitting information and making political statements (Andrzejewski, 2011). In addition to these rich oral Somali language traditions, there has also been pervasive faith literacy, which was—and still is—practiced in Arabic. Somalis have been studying and learning Arabic passages of the Qur’an by heart for generations, a critical component of the Somali culture due to widespread Islamic faith (Bigelow, 2010).

In a 2019 ethnographic study of Somali families’ literacy practices, Qur’anic learning was explored in depth, and shown in some ways to be similar to formal, Western, school-based literacy practices (a skill to learn), and in some ways different (passive rather than constructive).
As explained by one of the children in Christensen’s study in regard to why the children are studying Arabic, he shared: “It is not to learn a language so you can talk to people. We cannot use it to talk in the streets. We just need to be able to read the quran. It is very important for us” (Christensen, 2019, p. 36).

Beyond religious practices in Arabic, the Somali print literacy culture is more divergent. Somali language print literacy practices were rare in practical applications before the 1970s; as noted, religious practices utilized the Arabic language, and colonization led to administration and education utilizing Italian or English. Although several scripts had been created for writing Somali—such as the Osmanya (Cismaaniya) or arguments had been put forth for using existing scripts (e.g., Arabic)—in practice, Somali remained a primarily oral language until the current, nationally selected, Latin-based, Somali script was chosen in 1972 and Somali was declared the country’s official language in 1973 (Andrzejewski, 1974; Osman, 2012; Bulakh et al., 2019).

Written literature in its pure form, that is, in which composition by the author and reception by the public both depend entirely on writing, is a recent innovation in Somalia. The private systems of writing which were in use between 1950 and 1972 were applied mainly to the transcription of oral literature; it was only when a national orthography in Latin script was established and Somali became the official language of the state that potential authors could be assured of a wide reading public (Andrzejewski, 2011, p. 15).

Indeed, the official language and Latin orthography not only helped in developing a Somali-language readership for literature, but also propelled the Somali language and print literacy practices into new arenas, including education and administration: “[Before 1972] several unofficial systems of transcription were used by a small number of private citizens, but all government correspondence and records were in Italian, Arabic
or English. The whole educational system was dependent on these three languages, not only as subjects of study but also as media of instruction. This was a paradoxical situation, since Somalia is one of the few African countries where, with the exception of minute minority groups, everyone speaks the same language” (Andrzejewski, 1974, p. 199).

When launching an official Somali script, the Latin script was selected after many years of debate based on arguments for it being “modern, international, and ‘scientific’” (Johnson, 2006, p. 123), and the pragmatic and economic grounds of already having machinery for typing and printing in Latin scripts (Johnson, 2006). The selection of a single script and the birth of policy allowing Somali to be used in education and administration met a long-developing desire to unify Somali identity through print literacy and through the establishment of not just any single, national language, but the Somali language—the mother tongue rather than the foreign languages imposed by colonizers (Osman, 2012). Indeed:

The key...is to give everybody the opportunity to learn reading and writing...It is imperative that we give our people modern, revolutionary education...to restructure their social existence...This will be the weapon to eradicate social balkanization and fragmentation into tribes and sects. It will bring about an absolute unity and there will be no room for any negative foreign cultural influences (Somali President Siad Barre, as quoted in Lewis, 1993, p. 150).

Within this history, print literacy practices were present for some individuals in some regions and in some languages prior to the 1970s (Andrzejewski, 2011), but the majority of Somali citizens did not engage with Somali language print literacy until the extensive literacy
campaign of 1973 to 1975 following the adoption of the current Somali script (Osman, 2012). This national literacy campaign was an incredible education and literacy undertaking in an attempt to spread knowledge of the newly-established, Latin-based, Somali script to as many citizens as possible (Johnson, 2006, p. 127). As described by Lewis, the national literacy campaign set out to not only educate, but to unify: “The goals of modernization, nationalism and independence are all fused here: a modern, integrated nation, consisting of those who not only ‘speak the same language,’ but who also read and write it” (Lewis, 1993, p.150).

The government’s two-year literacy campaign reportedly took the Somali print literacy rate in individuals over 15 years old from 5% to over 50% (Bigelow, 2010; Osman, 2012), with some estimates even higher. For example, a reported 60% of Somalis in rural regions passed the first literacy exam (Kahin, 1997, as cited in Osman, 2012). It should be noted that this rapid increase in literacy rates has not persisted after the literacy campaign of 1973-1975; pervasive school closures and displacement due to the Ogaden War and the Somali Civil War contributed to declines in print literacy rates. In 2010, the adult Somali print literacy rate was reported to be approximately 38% total, with men 12 points higher at 50%, and women 12 points lower at 26% (Bigelow, 2010).

Long before Somali’s current written form, a rich oral literary tradition, especially of poetry, was pervasive in Somalia. As described by a scholar of Somali poetry: “Somalis make a sharp distinction between poetry and prose. Differentiated from prose by its alliteration, among other distinctions, poetry is by far the more important form of literature to the Somali” (Johnson, 1996, p. 12). As described by Andrzejewski, another Somali poetry scholar, “Poetry certainly is one of their principal cultural achievements. Poetry occupies a large and important place in
Somali culture (…) The Somali poetic heritage is a living force intimately connected with the vicissitudes of everyday life” (Andrzejewski & Lewis, 1964, p. 3).

Within the Somali oral literacy tradition, oral poetry became a medium not only of recounting animal fables for children to enjoy or collective work songs to motivate adults through their work of the day, but also a medium of spreading information and influencing opinions (Andrzejewski & Lewis, 1964; Johnson, 1996). Contrary to the oral epic tradition, wherein performers could approximate—and potentially were even expected to, given the length of epic oratory texts—Somali poetry is mostly concise in nature, which allowed it to spread rapidly, and far, as it was composed and performed (Lewis, 1993).

In addition to being of a length that is typically manageable to memorize, the most defining features of Somali poetry are the presence of musicality (indeed, Somali poetry and song are sometimes used interchangeably) (Johnson, 2006), and the use of alliteration, which also greatly helps in the literal memorization of poems exactly as they were composed (Andrzejewski & Lewis, 1964). Somali custom requires that when a poem is recited by someone other than the original author, that it must not only be properly attributed to the author, but also that the author’s clan be named, that the context for the poem be given, and that it be recited verbatim (Mansur, 1998; Andrzejewski, 2011).

Over time, Somali poetry became more complicated in its themes as it became common practice to hide messages within poetry. As explained by Somali poetry scholar John William Johnson: “When independence was attained and poems against the government were composed, the device of the hidden messages had to be employed more imaginatively to fool the Somali censor but still be understood by the general public” (Johnson, 1996, p.191). As a vehicle of sharing information and influencing opinion, it is not only the ideas, explicit or implicit, but also
the form, that contribute to its quality. Indeed, “Memorable verse spreads rapidly and is not easily forgotten” (Andrzejewski & Lewis, 1964, p. 4).

During World War II, radios were introduced, and increased in number rapidly following the conclusion of the war. Radios, and later, tape recorders, became additional means of transmission and of capture of Somali poetry. The rich oral tradition made these devices highly desirable, and they spread quickly through the country through the 1940s, 50s, and 60s (Andrzejewski, 2011). These devices allowed the Somali literary tradition to go farther and faster; through these devices, poetry’s messages could spread more rapidly, be enjoyed, and influence even more people. These devices were utilized heavily in Somalia long before the Somali script and literacy campaign, and remained pervasive thereafter as poetry and song continued to spread orally (Lewis, 1993; Andrzejewski, 2011). Somalia also embraced the mobile phone as a critically important tool, using Internet-connected smartphones to keep community members connected, spread information, and blend modalities of linguistic expression (Chonka, 2019).

While poetry is attributed as Somalia’s greatest literary gift, storytelling, proverbs, singing, and focusing on a face-to-face interactive, collective experience are all a part of the Somali culture (Bigelow, 2010). One anecdote shared in an exploration of Somali oral practices describes storytelling in much the same way that shared storybook reading is often extolled as an excellent opportunity for quality time between parents and children. Two teenage participants in the study were reported to have shared: “They lived in the refugee camp for 7 years, and although they recall the camp as a very dangerous place, they have fond memories of their mother telling folktales at night. The sisters said that they missed those days in the camp when they were together and felt so close” (Bigelow, 2010, p. 38). Not only are these individuals
sharing a positive childhood memory, but they are sharing a literacy practice that brought their families together and was a positive experience in a time of many negative experiences.

Within the context of Somali as a spoken, but not read or written, language for most Somali citizens prior to the 1970s, Somali poetry is one of the world’s truly 100% oral literary traditions “in the sense that its composition, memorization, transmission and dissemination all took place without recourse at any stage to writing or any other technology of communication and memory storage” (Andrzejewski, 2011, p. 9). Neither written down during composition or once completed, nor able to recite the poem and capture with audio recording technology, the Somali oral literary tradition is an impressive linguistic, cognitive, and social feat (Andrzejewski, 2006) that refutes the Oral-Formulaic (or Parry/Lord) thesis that asserts that oral poetry cannot be composed orally (Johnson, 2006).

The differences between oral literacy and print literacy have been explored and theorized, perhaps most extensively by Walter Ong (2012). Ong’s exploration of orality and literacy was oriented towards the cognitive characteristics of orality (e.g., memory and mnemonics) as opposed to literacy (e.g., abstraction and complexity). Ong claimed that there is a fundamental difference between orality and literacy rather than being two different modalities of language usage. This difference was theorized by Ong not only as two vastly different sets of practices and cultures, but is theorized as print literacy being a “technology” that “restructures consciousness” (Ong, 2012). The specific characteristics Ong attributed to orality were that it is: additive rather than subordinate; aggregative rather than analytic; redundant or copious; conservative or

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1 What Ong called ‘orality’ and ‘literacy’ are what I have defined in this dissertation as ‘oral literacy’ and ‘print literacy’, respectively.
traditionalist; close to the human lifeworld; agonistically toned; empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced; homeostatic; and situational rather than abstract (2012).

Together, these observations are utilized by Ong to argue for a fundamental difference between orality (oral literacy)—as described by the above characteristics—and literacy (print literacy). Since Ong’s writing, the fundamental difference that he proposed as transforming human consciousness has not been borne out (Johnson, 2006, Hartley 2012). A balanced approach is taken by Hartley, who advocates that while Ong may have taken the observations of oral language too far into theoretical implications for human cognition and consciousness, we should still carefully consider Ong’s observations of oral literacy (Hartley, 2012).

For the purposes of the current study, I ascribe to Hartley’s view on Ong’s observations and theories. I have set out to learn about both oral and print practices in Somali families without an expectation of any differences in cognition or consciousness, but curious as to what oral and print literacy practices look like. In a way, this point is irrelevant because I am neither analyzing Somali oral samples nor testing consciousness or cognition; however, I find a note about Ong’s theories crucial from a standpoint of researcher reflexivity. Namely, I did not undertake this study believing that print literacy practices are more advanced than oral literacy practices. While I recognize that my culture is biased towards the prevalence of print, I do not see print as fundamentally different or better than oral language.

**Somali New Mainers**

Somali immigrants have made their way in large numbers to various spots in the U.S. and in Europe as a result of the Somali Civil War, which has been going on for more than 30 years (Connor & Krogstad, 2016). In the early 2000s, immigrants from Somalia began settling in Lewiston and Portland Maine as a result of the Somali Civil War and as a result of their
experiences in primary resettlement locations within the U.S. (e.g., densely populated cities such as Atlanta, Georgia) (Huisman, 2011, Voyer, 2013). The Somali Civil War is officially cataloged as starting in 1991, but interclan warfare began in the 1980s, when Somalia was recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as conditions in the country declined (Voyer, 2013). It was the fall of Siad Barre’s regime in 1991 that accelerated the violence and chaos in the country and marks the official start of the civil war. Fighting was rampant, more than 90% of Somalia’s schools shut down completely, and Somali citizens fled their homes in all directions to escape the threats of death, robbery, and rape that had become pervasive at home (Voyer, 2013; Besteman, 2016).

Spreading west to Ethiopia and south to Kenya, as well as many other destinations, Somali citizens settled in refugee camps and in various locations as they could. Many Somalis stayed for long periods of time in refugee camps or living transitory lives, hoping one day to return to their homes in Somalia. While attempts were made to quell the fighting and to establish new governments, the region remained under intense strain, as a “fragile state” more than 30 years after the civil war began (Pinto, 2020). As the violence went on, continued displacement of millions of Somali citizens occurred, with an estimated more than two million Somalis living outside of Somalia, and Somalia’s population estimated at just 16 million (World Bank, 2020).

In Kenya, many Somalis lived for years—sometimes decades—in refugee camps (Voyer, 2013; Besteman, 2016). While they were safer from violence in the camps than they would have been at home, they could not farm for themselves, they could not leave the camp to engage in paid work, disease was rampant, food and water supplies were insufficient and of poor quality, education opportunities for children were severely limited, and violence, including rape, was frequent. Many who lived in the refugee camps could not find words to describe the horrors of
having lived in the camps for so long. One interviewee of anthropologist Catherine Besteman did find words, but stated: “It was so horrible that it is undiscussable. No one should have to be in such a place” (2016, p. 67).

Within this context, there are many impacts to families and children. While escaping the immediate physical danger of the violence in Somalia, displaced individuals have faced harsh living and economic conditions, and children have not had as much access to education and sometimes adequate nourishment (van Heelsum, 2011; Besteman, 2016). Add to all of this the psychological ramifications of not only having fled, but of not necessarily being able to make a new home/call a new country home, and you have a confluence of traumatic events followed by ongoing hardships. It is from this context of long-term displacement due to the Somali Civil War that many Somalis are eventually landing in Maine. For example, the participants in this study all grew up in Somali families that were in countries other than Somalia for more than a decade before coming to the United States.

On the world stage, displacement of Somali citizens has grown considerably since the start of the Somali Civil War, and continues to this day. Between 1990 and 2015, the number of displaced Somali citizens more than doubled, from an estimated 850,000 to an estimated two million, and is no doubt yet higher today (Connor & Krogstad, 2016). Of this estimated two million worldwide (World Bank, 2020), an estimated 150,000 are in the United States, and an estimated 10,000 are in Maine (Jakimides, 2014).

The Somali diaspora in the United States and abroad is made up of families and individuals who have faced significant struggles for extended periods of time. Somalis had already lived through a lot when they arrived in the U.S., and as evidenced by the secondary migrations of Somalis, arriving in the U.S. is not the end of the difficulties and the journey for
many. Somali individuals and families are seeking a long-term home in a country where they can establish their families culturally, linguistically, religiously, and indeed in all ways (Huisman, 2011; van Liempt, 2011; van Heelsum, 2011). For the purposes of this study, literacy practices and books are at the forefront, but Somali refugees suffered in many ways during the extensive period of displacement that have little to do with literacy practices of any kind.

First resettled in large metropolitan areas, often in residential areas with high crime, low incomes/high unemployment, and areas where there were many Black residents—but not Black residents who practiced Islam—the Somalis soon started looking for places to move on to. They were looking for places that would be safer, places they could afford, and places where they hoped they could raise and educate their children in communities that would allow their children to acquire a high-quality education and achieve the American Dream, as generations of immigrants who came before them had done.

Of the settings chosen for secondary migration of Somalis within the U.S., Lewiston, Maine is a popular one. Both in terms of the estimated 10,000 Somalis in Maine (Jakimides, 2014), as well as in Somali languages becoming the most frequently spoken home language, and 21% of English Learners in Maine’s public K-12 schools speaking Somali (Maine Department of Education Data Warehouse, Student Enrollment Data, 2022), the Somali population in Maine represents a significant community of students and families.

The reasons for choosing Maine, especially Lewiston, center around the need for safety and opportunities that resemble the life they either experienced in pre-Civil-War Somalia or heard about from older members of their families. As Somali refugees were displaced, they began looking for the Somali way of life before the Civil War—characterized by safety and peace—whether they had experienced it first-hand or heard about it extensively through the
stories of their family and community members. The safety and peace they were looking for was not found in urban areas such as Atlanta, Georgia. A Somali refugee who moved to Maine after first living in Atlanta, Georgia described his initial impression of Atlanta: “Refugees are settled in very deprived communities. So, by the time you come and realize where you are, it’s like, ‘Oh my God. Where am I living in the U.S.? Is this the country I was coming to?...’ It’s these very tough neighborhoods where even the front doors have gates, and the whole night what you hear are police sirens and gunshots and murders” (Huisman, 2011, p. 17).

Somalis came to America planning to learn English and get jobs, and to send their children to American schools in hopes of their children having not only safety and security, but also a high-quality education (Huisman, 2011; Clements, 2021). It was quickly observed in places like Atlanta that the land of opportunity might not hold as many opportunities as they had hoped. The only affordable housing in the urban areas where they were first settled was in high crime/low-income neighborhoods where they often had the same skin color as their neighbors, but did not want their children getting involved in the street culture, drugs, and violence they witnessed. Education and jobs proved equally challenging. Within this context, Somali refugees arrived in the U.S., but were still looking for something more before settling down for the longer term.

As has been the case with the Somali diaspora in Europe, Somali refugees who came to the U.S. have been mobile within the U.S., looking for better conditions for their families. Somalis initially resettled in California scouted out Minnesota and moved there in large numbers (Roble & Rutledge, 2008) in much the same way that Maine’s Somali newcomers were first settled farther south, and found Maine for themselves (Huisman, 2011). In Europe, refugees got to whichever country they could travel to, and, upon achieving legal status, often moved on to
another place where opportunities for work and education were good, and life was safer and affordable (van Liempt, 2011, van Heelsum, 2011).

In Lewiston, Somalis found an environment with little crime, relatively low rents and good schools (Huisman, 2011), which aligned with Somali newcomers’ goals of raising their children in a place where they can be safe, maintain their community, and have access to educational opportunities (Avery, 2021). Somalis were also, in the early 2000s, amongst a small number of Black residents, and were the only Black residents practicing Islam. These factors helped establish the Somali community by creating a distinct community from other Black ethnicities in the U.S.

Although Lewiston offered more affordable, and safer living than places like Atlanta, many challenges still existed, and persist today. Jobs can be hard to find, especially for those without a vehicle; education for adults is limited, home-school connections are sometimes strained, and everyone works hard to make ends meet and be able to send some money back to family and friends in Africa. One Somali refugee resettled in the U.S. recounted the cognitive dissonance of having hoped for a better life in the U.S.: “His job, which required him to work fifty-five hours a week, Monday to Saturday, paid him $420 per week, which was not enough to support his family. He soon realized that coming to America did not really mean getting an education, it meant manual labor and poverty” (Eggers, 2007, as cited in Besteman, 2016, p.106).

These struggles to make ends meet not only result in the difficulties of limited ability to meet a family’s everyday living needs, but also have had psychological effects on male Somalis. Culturally accustomed—and expected—to be able to provide for their families, male Somali newcomers to the U.S. can suffer from depression; while Somali women are mostly able to carry
out their traditional roles in the U.S., men are often unable to secure employment that meets the financial needs of their families (Roble & Rutledge, 2008).

In addition to subsistence struggles, community life can be tense. While many Lewistonians support the influx of New Mainers in Lewiston, tensions have risen and fallen many times; it cannot be said that Lewiston is a model American town where immigrants have been welcomed with open arms, all their needs have been met, and everybody has become fast friends across lines of faith, skin color, and language (Ford, 2007). This holds true not only for adults looking for suitable housing and job prospects to support themselves and their families, but also for students of all ages at school. A 2017 report from the ACLU of Maine detailed the experiences of immigrant students and students of color in Maine’s schools, including, but not limited to, Somali students in Lewiston; these negative experiences ranged from overt bullying and harassment to pervasive biases and structural inequities (Leblanc, 2017).

New Mainers from Somalia have been confronted with resentment, racism, and general inhospitality in Lewiston, which is, unfortunately, a common occurrence in contact zones where people from multiple cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds come together (Hamzeh, 2003; Huisman, 2011; Voyer, 2013; Leblanc, 2017). For Lewiston, the influx of Somali refugees was quite similar in some ways to prior waves of immigration that brought large numbers of newcomers to downtown Lewiston. However, unlike in previous waves of immigration, the Somalis represented not only cultural and linguistic diversity, but also racial and religious diversity. Similar to prior groups of newcomers, Somalis of both genders and all ages were discriminated against, and there have been significant numbers of Lewistonians who have stepped forward to express that the Somalis are not welcome—perhaps most notably former mayor Laurier Raymond. In contrast, even larger numbers have stepped forward to assert that
everyone is welcome in Maine, regardless of race, language, religion, country of origin, etc. (Besteman, 2016; Voyer, 2013; Hamzeh, 2003).

From a numbers perspective, Maine is the third ‘Whitest’ state in the nation at 90% White (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2021); however, the history of multiculturalism in some Maine cities is quite strong. Lewiston is one of the communities where immigrants have arrived in large numbers looking for work at various points in history. In Lewiston, immigrants found work primarily in the many mills, as well as a rich cultural and linguistic tapestry. In the documentary film The Letter: An American Town and the ‘Somali Invasion’, a Lewiston native recalls the Lewiston of his youth as a place where more than 20 ethnic groups converged. He recalls, with fondness, the multitude and the variety of stories that he heard while growing up—stories from folks born in various other countries (Hamzeh, 2003). Like him, many Lewiston residents maintain that linguistic and cultural diversity is a gift to the community. While this opinion is not unanimous, it aligns with modern educational and civic movements to advance diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice in all arenas of society.

Despite this idealized view from individual Lewistonians whose lives were enriched by the diverse tapestry of the neighborhoods in which they grew up, there is another side to the reality of linguistic and cultural contact zones such as Lewiston. Specifically, there is a dominant culture beyond the microcosm in which they live much of their daily lives; this division into a dominant group and a minority group—which may or may not, numerically, be in the minority—produces many tensions (Leblanc, 2017; Clements, 2021). Lewiston, with its significant Franco-American population, has seen this majority-minority tension played out repeatedly over the decades (Voyer, 2013).
Much like the Franco-American immigration wave of the first half of the 20th century, the Somali secondary migration wave at the start of the 21st century includes one version of the story, which tells the cultural and linguistic richness evolving from the influx of newcomers. However, another version of the story highlights the bleaker side of diverse communities: conflict between groups, the requisite ranking of various groups, which results in differential power and status, and, subsequently, outcomes (Voyer, 2013). This cycle of privilege for one group, and second-class status for another, is familiar to me as a descendent of French speakers who came to Lewiston less than a century ago. Although my mother grew up speaking French at home and English at school, I grew up hearing English only because my mother did not want her children to be discriminated against in the ways that she, and her parents, had been discriminated against. As such, I grew up Franco-American by birth, religion, and culture, but not by language.

The consequences of low proficiency in the majority language for older generations, as well as eventual loss of the home language for younger generations are numerous, and range far beyond the linguistic realm (see for example Wong Fillmore 1991; 2000). Much like my great-grandmother, who never became fully fluent in English despite living in Maine for fifty years, some of the Somali elders feel marginalized not only linguistically, but in terms of respect and in terms of holding their ‘rightful’ place in the community. One Somali elder pointed out: “I am an elder, but I have to take this young man with me everywhere I go. I cannot speak for myself” (Besteman, 2016, p. 232).

While these struggles of communities grappling with multiple languages and cultures in close contact are ongoing, communities where new Mainers have settled have taken steps toward ensuring success for new Mainers. Both individuals and community organizations have mobilized in an effort to not only welcome new Mainers, but also to ensure that newcomers have
the tools and opportunities to create personal and professional success for themselves. New Mainers have, through various channels, been supported in setting up organizations to help their own community. These organizations help to bridge the cultural divide between newcomers and the society in which they landed (Besteman, 2016; Voyer, 2013; Ford, 2007).

One example of how this is done is in encouraging traditional ways of resolving conflicts, which was done in Somalia by the disputing parties asking community elders to ‘hear the case’ and make recommendations on resolution. In this process, the elders’ recommendations are virtually always followed. In contrast, disputes in the U.S. are often taken to the police. The effects of this are dual: not only do the police have an incomplete understanding of the cultural context, but the elders who are, in this system, not consulted, are suddenly “jobless.” This change has resulted in elders feeling less engaged in the community as this role has shifted out of their purview and over to officials (Roble & Rutledge, 2008). As such, community organizations designed and run by Somalis were the result of an initial backlash against the conceptualization of new Mainers as “objects of policy rather than architects” (Besteman, 2016, p. 212). New Mainers having organized their own structures for community amelioration has helped to ensure that services are more culturally aligned than would be the case if these services were designed and run by individuals who are unaware of the cultural currents of specific newcomer populations.

**Children’s Book Distribution and New Mainers**

Many community organizations exist to help new Mainers with housing, with job searches, and many other aspects of life. As a linguist and a researcher, my interest in how these various organizations are serving new Mainers is concentrated on the spheres of education and language development. The Raising Readers program has been established as positively affecting
families in general. However, the effects of family literacy programs are highly contextual; although a study using program evaluation methodology may conclude that a given family literacy program is effective, there is variation across populations, and this interacts with the specific manner of implementation and execution across any initiative’s program sites (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2016; Knauer, Jakiela, Ozier, Aboud & Fernald, 2020; Anderson, Anderson & Sadiq, 2017). In the case of Raising Readers, no studies have yet been done with specific populations who reside in Maine.

In the case of Reach Out and Read, the program has been shown to be most beneficial for families who speak a language other than English at home (High et al., 1998; Golova et al., 1999; Mendelsohn et al., 2001; Needlman et al., 2005), or who have other risk factors, such as lower incomes (High et al., 1998; Golova et al., 1999; Rikin et al., 2015; de Bondt et al., 2020; Jimenez, Crabtree, Hudson, Mendelsohn, Lima, Shelton, Veras, Lin, Pellerano, Morrow & Strom, 2021), higher reactivity (van den Bergh & Bus, 2015), or the parents having low print literacy skills (Knauer et al., 2020; Mendelsohn, Piccolo, Oliveira, Mazzuchelli, Lopez, Cates, & Weisleder, 2020). This dissertation study is one of the first, exploratory steps toward understanding the effects of Raising Readers for a population that came to Maine with funds of knowledge (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005) and family literacy practices that have historically been predominantly oral literacy practices. This study seeks to explore the experiences of Raising Readers in this population and potential development of program modifications to better serve the needs of Somali New Mainers.

While some book distribution programs target specific populations or specific neighborhoods, the goal of Raising Readers is to distribute books to all Maine children. In this way, Raising Readers hopes to positively affect all Maine families, regardless of family income,
education level, or language spoken at home. As Maine’s newcomer population expands, the question of whether or not Raising Readers is having the desired effect for newcomer families becomes increasingly important. Although English learners have been shown to benefit more from children’s book distribution programs in other regions of the U.S., given the considerable differences between the Somali population in rural Maine, and the primarily Hispanic and urban populations of the prior book distribution studies, it cannot be assumed that Maine’s newcomer families will benefit more than non-newcomer Maine families in the same way that, in prior studies, lower-income urban Hispanic families benefit more from book distribution than middle-income White suburban families do (High et al., 1998; Golova et al., 1999; Mendelsohn et al., 2001; Needlman et al., 2005).

In addition to the differences between the urban, Hispanic population, and a new rural, Black, Muslim, previously primarily oral literacy practices population, the book distribution programs serving urban Hispanic communities often provide bilingual, or monolingual Spanish, books rather than English ones, and the medical offices engaging in book distribution often have bilingual practitioners interacting with their bilingual families. In contrast, in Maine, Raising Readers does not include any bilingual or Somali children’s books, nor does it attempt to establish connections across print and oral literacy practices, for example through emphasizing telling stories rather than reading books, by providing image-only books designed to promote storytelling, or by providing additional information in regards to emergent literacy or dialogic reading for parents. Indeed, dialogic reading provides a framework for caregiver and child to interact with each other, using the book as a conversation topic (Whitehurst et al., 1994).

The dialogic reading approach flips the shared reading act to make the child highly participatory in the event rather than a passive listener. The three principles of the dialogic
reading approach are that 1) the parent/caregiver encourages the child to participate in the reading/experiencing of the book, 2) the parent/caregiver interacts with the child’s participation/contributions to provide feedback to the child, and 3) the parent/caregiver adapts their reading and interaction with the text as the child’s skills evolve. In these ways, dialogic reading is both interactive between child and adult, as well as evolving over time as children’s literacy skills emerge, which is reminiscent of our exploration of Bakhtin’s literary theory (1984). Dialogic reading can look entirely different for each child and parent dyad, which is part of its power. Dialogic reading does not depend on the parent having a particular literacy level in a particular language, making it an option for parents with less print literacy experience (Knauer et al., 2020); dialogic reading is about spending quality time interacting together—with a book (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000).

In these ways, the significant differences in both population and in book distribution programming make it such that, in Maine, one cannot assume that the book distribution program is having enhanced effects for all families who speak another language at home. Indeed, it is possible that the positive effects of book distribution that monolingual families in Maine are enjoying are not even similar for Maine’s newcomers, and that program modifications would be necessary in order for Raising Readers to achieve its goal of effecting positive change for all Maine families. It is also possible that, by encouraging print-based literacy practices within communities where oral literacy is the dominant cultural practice, that we are actually doing a disservice to the families that the program is hoping to serve.

In the twentieth century, immigrants were encouraged to speak English to their children at home, even if they, themselves, were not highly proficient in English (Wong Fillmore, 2000). Over time, this recommendation, while well intentioned on the part of those working with
immigrant families, and embraced by immigrant families because they fully recognized the need for their children to learn the language of their adopted country, proved to contribute to strained intergenerational relationships in immigrant families (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Kouritzin, 2000). In addition to creating intergenerational strife, it also had the opposite of its intended effect: it detracted from the linguistic development of children. The benefits of additive bilingualism (i.e., first language maintenance alongside second language development) and the negative effects of first language attrition, have been well documented (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Hakuta & D’Andrea, 1992; Portes & Schauffler, 1994; Portes & Hao, 1998; Kouritzin, 2000; Wong Fillmore, 2000; Bialystok, 2009; Kharchenko, 2014).

There is potentially a parallel to be drawn here between language spoken in the home and family literacy practices. In a 2017 review article on family literacy programs with a focus on culturally and linguistically diverse families, Anderson, Anderson, and Sadiq draw attention to Sénéchal & Young’s 2008 caution: “Shared book reading is heavily promoted within family literacy programmes and indeed, is often seen as the quintessential family literacy activity, even though it is not a universal cultural practice” (Anderson et al., 2017, emphasis not in the original). Indeed, while shared reading has been named the “literacy event par excellence” (Pellegrini, 1991, as cited in Evans & Shaw, 2008), we must keep in mind the literacy culture where shared reading has emerged as this exemplar literacy event. Although shared reading has been shown extensively to contribute to children’s emergent literacy skills in phonological awareness, letter recognition, concepts of print, and word recognition (Evans & Shaw, 2008), emergent literacy skills are not an all-or-nothing endeavor. Shared book reading is highly effective in print literacy-oriented cultures. What else might be effective, and how do literacy practice traditions, oral and print, affect this effectiveness?
While Anderson et al.’s review article focuses on language spoken at home—as they engage in the creation of bilingual family literacy programs—rather than on cultural practice, their caution on cultural practice is essential. In addition, though Sénéchal & Young’s observation is more than a decade old, it is still a common practice to emphasize the family literacy activities of the community rather than the family literacy activities of the family. In a region like Maine, where many newcomers not only speak a language other than English at home, but also come from a community with a predominantly oral literacy tradition, literacy as cultural practice should not be overlooked. For these reasons, this dissertation study explores literacy practices with parents participating in this study alongside exploration of perceptions of the Raising Readers program.

I explored this angle from a desire to conduct applied research that can potentially be acted upon in the form of program modifications and/or new, niche programs that could be created. However, I am aware that attention to cultural practice and languages spoken at home can more feasibly be addressed in some areas than in others. Maine, with its relatively heterogeneous home language population (in comparison to states like Texas or California, where one home language, Spanish, is predominant), is a place that poses significant challenges in this regard.

Research has shown that book reading results in higher quality linguistic interactions than ‘day-to-day’ activities (e.g., clothing, feeding), and, therefore, encourages parents and caregivers to share books with children (Canfield, Seery, Weisleder, Workman, Cates, Roby, Payne, Levine, Mogilner, Dreyer & Mendelsohn, 2020). However, shared reading is not the only high-quality verbal interaction that can foster emergent literacy. High-quality linguistic
interactions may be spurred by story-telling or by singing, rhyming games, etc. in a similar way to how dialogic, interactive storybook reading can foster growth in literacy skills (Shaw, 2021).

Exploring how cultural practices may influence the utilization of children’s books, regardless of the language of the print on the page, is an important step since shared book reading is most impactful for young children when it is interactive.

“The rewards of book sharing do not depend on parents reading the words on the page but rather are maximized when parents venture beyond the text; elicit touching, pointing, and naming; and ask children questions. It is the free-response verbal interaction that engages young children and stimulates their brains” (Zuckerman, Elansary & Needlman, 2019).

Another crucial aspect of shared book reading is in the ways that parents naturally adapt their interactions to complement the current level of literacy skills of the child(ren) they are reading with. As children’s skills develop, parents who are engaging with children in shared reading activities naturally modify their behaviors as the children age and as their literacy skills evolve (Evans & Shaw, 2008). In these ways, children’s books are a means of facilitating high-quality language-based interactions between children and caregivers, interactions that evolve over time. As children begin to recognize letters and words, attention is called to them; as children develop a sense of what will come next, either through rhyme completion or through semantic logic, adults elicit differential participatory actions from children with whom they read. This too is an example of the dialogic principle of Bakhtin applied to culturally embedded literacy practice traditions: there is no single, “best” way to engage in shared reading; skilled readers adjust their shared reading practices to the child’s skill level just like speakers adjust their utterances to their interlocutor’s language and knowledge (Grice, 1975).
When we consider the role of children’s book distribution in the model of positively affecting children’s emergent literacy skills, much research has shown that distributing books at well-child visits can have myriad positive effects on children and families. However, it is not the only route to stimulating high quality linguistic exchanges and compelling experiences with language, such as rhyming games and singing. Shaw, in a pediatric practice brief, reminds clinicians to encourage high quality linguistic interactions—whether facilitated by print or not—for optimal family and child outcomes in terms of language development and positive family attachment and experiences (2021). Although expanding Raising Readers’ book selections to ensure every book is available in the home language of each participating family—while keeping the age-appropriateness and quality intact—is most likely not feasible, cultural modifications to book distribution that draw on the *funds of knowledge* of families with rich oral literacy traditions by encouraging parents to look at the books with their children and engage in verbal interactions that are a good fit for their families might create a bridge for newcomer families who may or may not speak English, and may or may not have a history of engaging in shared book reading.

**The Study**

This study is an in-depth qualitative case study with four Somali New Mainer parents to explore these parents’ experiences of Maine’s Raising Readers book distribution program within the broader context of their families’ home literacy practices, both oral and print. The study uses a series of two structured interviews to explore parents’ perceptions of the effects of book distribution on their children’s literacy practices and beliefs, as well as parents’ perceptions of the effects of book distribution on their own literacy practices and beliefs. In addition to targeted information regarding experiences and effects of Raising Readers book distribution, the
interviews were structured to gather a broad cultural and linguistic profile of each family and their literacy practices.

The purpose is to establish the ways in which the program goals of Raising Readers are being met among a targeted population that has, up until now, not been researched, and that represents a sizeable proportion in two of Maine’s urban school districts: Portland and Lewiston. My goal with this study was to begin exploring the ways that Raising Readers is being experienced, and potentially positively impacting our Somali New Mainer newcomer families in much the same way that Raising Readers is having a positive impact on non-newcomer Maine families (Groenhout & Bennett-Armistead, 2016), and in the same way that Reach Out and Read is having a positive impact on families in other regions of the U.S. (High et al., 1998; Golova et al., 1999; Mendelsohn et al., 2001; Needlman et al., 2005).

The research questions I posed in order to explore the experiences of Raising Readers programming among Somali New Mainer families were:

1. What literacy practices do Somali New Mainer families engage in, and what are the cultural associations with those practices; specifically:
   a. What are common oral literacy practices of the participating family?
   b. What are common print literacy practices of the participating family?
   c. What are the cultural associations and intergenerational transmission of oral and print literacy practices?

2. What are the experiences of Somali New Mainers, and their children, of Maine’s Raising Readers book distribution, and in what ways do Somali New Mainer parents perceive the program to be affecting children’s and parents’ home literacy practices and literacy
orientation? Specifically, in what ways is Raising Readers influencing parents’ and children’s:

   a. reading frequency,

   b. enjoyment of reading, and

   c. children’s desire to become ‘good readers’/parents’ literacy goals for their children?

The study is exploratory in nature; as a qualitative case study, it is not designed to prove unequivocally that certain effects exist or not, but rather to explore and to illuminate literacy and cultural practices, as well as the ways in which family practices align with literacy goals, and ways that the Raising Readers program contributes to the literacy practices and literacy goals. The findings emerging from participant interviews provide insights into potential program modifications that could make Raising Readers even more beneficial for Somali New Mainer families than it already is.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

This study complements the 2016 Raising Readers study, in which we hear positive effects of Raising Readers, but only from a self-selected, non-newcomer population (Groenhout & Bennett-Armistead, 2016). Prior research with Reach Out and Read sets one expectation for children’s book distribution having a positive effect on families who speak a language other than English in the home; however, because of differences in home languages and literacy profiles, it is important to research populations independently (Temple & Moran, 2006) rather than making an assumption that, like Hispanic urban populations, Somali newcomers in Maine will also be positively affected by children’s book distribution. This study takes a different approach in order to reach a specific population in a personal way; essentially, the 2016 Raising Readers study
surveyed a broad population, but none of the responses came from Somali families. This study explores the topics of literacy practices and experiences of Raising Readers with a small number of individuals from the Somali New Mainer population.

The study explores some of the similarities and differences between Somali home literacy practices and the home literacy practices championed by Raising Readers. By establishing a better understanding of both Somali home literacy practices and funds of knowledge (Moll, 2013; González et al., 2005), and how these align with the home literacy practices that American early childhood educators and literacy specialists recommend, implications from this study include recommendations to Raising Readers for ways in which to make the program even better according to the Somali New Mainer parents participating in this study.

Ultimately, my goal in undertaking this research was that it would be applied research to contribute to improved programming in addition to providing exploratory findings to shed light on Somali New Mainers’ family literacy practices and experiences of Raising Readers. This desire to conduct applied research has always been my tendency, but it is, in this case, also driven by the urgency of new Mainers’ literacy experiences. A Somali refugee interviewed in the Dadaab camp by a Somali documentary photographer and an American cultural anthropologist stated: “When a man’s house is on fire, you don’t ask how the fire started, you put it out. The international community has to understand that our house is on fire now” (Roble & Rutledge, 2008, p32).

This is a compelling argument in regard to a burning fire; however, prevention of new fires, without knowing what is causing them, is unlikely to be successful. My research, perhaps ambitiously, attempts to both understand sources and causes, and to contribute towards eventually quelling the fire(s). This work is an effort to take a different approach than “creating a
policy” (or program) without gathering insight from those who could benefit from the program. While such an approach of bringing in policies and programs without consulting with the intended beneficiaries might be misguided, it is a frequent experience among Somali newcomers (Besteman, 2016). In a statement every bit as compelling as that of putting out a fire, Besteman emphasizes the culturally imperialistic tendency for humanitarian groups to “show up and announce that they are bringing a well, when what the village really wants is a school” (Besteman, 2016, p. 217). Fostering print-literacy skills in a community with a rich tradition of oral literacy, while also recognizing the funds of knowledge, and encouraging the continuation of the oral tradition, is a complex intergenerational undertaking. Such complex endeavors require mutual respect and understanding, and joint construction on the parts of those from the primarily oral literacy tradition as well as those from the primarily print-based tradition. I conducted this study to provide exploratory findings of the Somali New Mainer literacy experience.

It is my hope that this study contributes to an increased general understanding of Somali literacy practices and language realities in Maine. These findings may guide future research on literacy within a newcomer population that has not yet been extensively studied from a literacy practice perspective. This study’s exploratory findings contribute to a better understanding of how the Raising Readers program is being experienced in some Somali New Mainer families. It also provides a step towards additional, broader, research on literacy practices among Somali newcomers in Maine in the future.

**Situating the Researcher**

In the researcher vignette preceding this chapter, I painted a scene of my young children and me that illustrates some of the realities of modern migration and immigration in the early days of arrival in a new place. In this context, someone like myself can be simultaneously in a
completely foreign spot, and yet completely at home. In the summer of 2011, although I was returning “home” to Maine, home was not home any longer. Born in Lewiston, but having lived abroad for eight years, and returning to Maine with foreign-born children, I saw and experienced Maine differently than I would have seen it had I married a Mainer and given birth to our children here. As a young mother returning to Maine, I had come full circle, both geographically and socially; although I grew up in a rural Maine town as a native English speaker in an English-speaking neighborhood, as a young mother, I was back to where my mother and her mother grew up as Franco-American minorities in a rural American state. By virtue of my time abroad, as well as my foreign-born children and their immigrant father, my family was more at home among immigrants than we were among monolingual English-speaking Mainers.

Prior to this return to Maine, and inspired by my first stint abroad between high school and heading to college, I studied second language acquisition, foreign language teaching, and bilingualism for many years. Over time, my academic passions for second language acquisition and learning were profoundly influenced by the many contexts in which I lived in multicultural and multilingual environments. Following my undergraduate experience in Maine, and intertwined with my graduate education and training in Europe, I taught second languages in both the U.S. and abroad, and conducted research on bilingualism and second language acquisition. As such, my conceptualization of diverse communities, of second language acquisition, and bilingualism are not only personal, but also academic and professional.

Although I have an academic understanding of diversity and second language acquisition, and many personal experiences from having lived in various communities and learned many languages, I am not a member of the community being researched in this study; neither am I Somali, a newcomer to Maine or the U.S., nor do I live in one of the two urban Maine
communities where large numbers of African refugees have settled over the past 15 years. In these ways, I recognize that, while my own experiences spark an interest in the community I am studying, I do not have an implicit understanding of the community. Similarly, I do not have a natural inroad with this community: I do not speak their language or work in one of the schools or businesses in the community. In addition to not having a natural connection, as an educated, White woman, there was a risk in conducting this study that I would not be trusted or have participants willing to share their true thoughts with me. In these ways, I acknowledged when proposing this study to my dissertation committee that it would be difficult to gain sufficient access to the community, and that, even granted access, I would need cultural as well as linguistic guides in order to conduct this research in an ethical and productive manner. Although I am not a member of the community in any way, I believe that my academic and personal trajectories have made me both sensitive to the intricacies of what I encountered in this work, as well as deeply motivated to conduct this research.

Although I recognize the stark differences between new Mainers’ experiences and my own, and do not claim to understand anyone’s struggles beyond my own, in the end, I believe there is value in drawing parallels despite being keenly aware of the differences. Successfully navigating multilingual and multicultural environments must be done by recognizing our differences so that we can seek mutual understanding and appreciation for those differences, while underlining how we are all similar to one another, and how our stories, regardless of how radically they differ, often follow similar arcs and contain the same themes.

I am conducting this particular study to focus on the experiences of families in one community with a children’s book distribution program. I embark on this research as an educator, a researcher, a linguist, and a mother who is deeply committed to equity, pluralism, and
integration. For me, the interwoven themes are as deeply personal as they are academic due to my experiences living and working abroad as well as my ancestors’ and children’s experiences of coming to Maine from another cultural and linguistic background.
Glossary of Terms

I will use the following definitions for concepts important to this study. Although there are many ways to define these terms, for the purposes of this dissertation, the following definitions are utilized:

**L1:** The first acquired and functional language of a given individual; this language may or may not be the individual’s strongest language in any literacy modality, but it is the original ‘home’ language of the person, the ‘mother tongue’ regardless of proficiency.

**L2:** A language acquired after the L1. L2 need not refer to the second learned language, but may also refer to the third, fourth, etc. language. L2 denotes that the language was not the most prominent language in the context of the child in early childhood. This language may be an individual’s strongest language in some or all linguistic modalities, regardless of the time of acquisition, as well as the home and community/school contexts of the individual.

**Bilingual/Multilingual:** A person who uses multiple languages on a regular basis. Language use may cross language modalities, for example writing in one language for academic purposes, and reading in another language for recreation, and the person needn’t be equally proficient in all languages used to be considered bilingual/multilingual. Children who grow up with multiple languages from birth may identify more as bilinguals than as individuals who have an L1 and an L2.

**Language loss:** the experience of having less fluency, ability to find words, and/or even the ability to understand speakers of a language that was once utilized by the individual. In the context of children in multilingual environments, language loss can also refer to the incomplete acquisition of the L1 such that receptive language may be intact, but productive language is never fully developed, or even to the extent that receptive language skills are insufficient for
daily usage of the language. Incomplete L1 acquisition in children can be observed as L1 capabilities that are sufficient for concrete, daily conversation, but are inadequate for abstract, academic, or unfamiliar stories and contexts. Language loss is especially important in intergenerational immigration contexts, where tension and distance can develop amongst generations of a family due to language barriers and to the perceived value of the languages that each generation does speak.

**Family literacy program:** Refers to interventions or programs designed to approach literacy from a multigenerational perspective. Programs can take many forms, have many purposes, and vary in scope and size. Children’s book distribution programs are one type of family literacy program.

**Children’s book distribution program:** An initiative to give away children’s books to parents and children, regardless of means of distribution (e.g., mail, gift pack, or medical practitioner distribution), age of children, book selection methodology, and additional program elements in addition to book distribution, such as language instruction or shared reading tips. This dissertation focuses on one distribution model and one age group, but “children’s book distribution program” as a term refers to additional programs throughout this dissertation.

**Funds of knowledge:** A conceptualization of individual knowledge that stems primarily from cultural experiences in families and communities. *Funds of knowledge* approaches to education seek out the expertise that individuals already have from their prior experiences and utilize those *funds of knowledge* to create culturally and linguistically responsive learning opportunities and to empower experts with particular *funds of knowledge* to teach others who are unfamiliar in the arena.
**Print literacy culture & practice:** The practices of literacy that surround printed language; either the processing of written text or the creation of written text, which may include examples such as writing shopping lists, reading notes or cards, reading signs and visual communications, documenting laws in writing, etc. The practices refer to the acts of negotiating meaning through printed text; the culture refers to a context in which print practices are common means of communication, and are highly valued by the community. That a community has a culture of valuing print literacy need not signify that oral literacy is *not* valued.

**Oral literacy culture & practice:** The practices of literacy that surround spoken language; either the processing of spoken language, or the utterance of oral language, which may include examples such as singing songs, reciting poetry, listening to stories, and having conversations. The practices refer to the acts of negotiating meaning through oral communication; the culture refers to a context in which oral language is a common means of communication, and is highly valued by the community. That a community has a culture of valuing oral literacy need not signify that print literacy is *not* valued.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEWING THE LITERATURE ON
CHILDREN’S BOOK DISTRIBUTION PROGRAMS

As shared in the prior chapter, children’s book distribution programs were created to help foster family literacy practices and ensure that high-quality children’s books are readily available in all children’s homes. Children’s book distribution programs have taken on a few different forms in terms of how books are distributed, and are spreading rapidly around the world. In this chapter, I review prior research on children’s book distribution programs and how they have been shown to support family literacy practices and children’s emergent literacy.

In contrast to academic literacy skills, which are, for many children, largely developed through explicit instruction and practice, literacy practices are largely culturally transmitted, being passed on from one generation to the next within both families and communities (Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1997; Purcell-Gates, 2007). While K-12 schools and teachers address the development of academic literacy skills and practices, caregivers and the home environment lay a foundation for children’s emergent literacy long before the preschool or kindergarten years. Many factors affect the experiences that children have during these formative years, such as parents’ habits, education level, and socioeconomic position in society (Heath, 1983; Hart & Risley, 1995). In addition to family-level factors, there are also cultural factors related to the literacy practices and general funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) found in various cultures and communities. As is the case with many life outcomes, literacy skills and literacy practices are greatly influenced by these contextual factors.
Children’s Book Distribution Programs to Support Family Literacy Practices

Programs that distribute books to babies, toddlers, and preschoolers aim to ensure that all families have high-quality reading materials in the home, and that parents know the importance of shared reading. In terms of access to high-quality print materials, book distribution programs feature age-appropriate, durable books chosen by literacy experts, and these books are put into the hands of families for free. Perhaps more importantly than providing the print materials for shared reading, book distribution programs send an implicit message to caregivers that reading is important. In addition to this message stemming from an organization’s willingness to invest in books for other people’s children, most book distribution programs also offer an explicit message about the importance of shared reading between adults, babies, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Some programs model effective shared reading strategies for parents, while others “prescribe” ten to twenty minutes of reading a day. Regardless of the exact content of the explicit message to caregivers, book distribution programs combine an implicit and explicit message about the importance of books and reading. This direct messaging complements parenting books and magazines, public service announcements, and teachers all reminding parents about the importance of reading, not to mention that the public library system in the U.S. culture suggests that texts are important enough to be the most-commonly invested in material for wide circulation.

Children’s book distribution programs aim, in the long term, to help children develop stronger literacy skills and a more positive attitude towards literacy by promoting reading and by placing books in children’s hands, essentially from birth. The short-term goals are less lofty, but more easily attained: ensuring that every child has easy access to age-appropriate books in their homes.
The theoretical and logical cause and effect described in the prior paragraphs, while well-intentioned, assumes that print-based literacy practices are the ones that children need in order to develop. This assumption is so deeply rooted in Western views of learning and literacy that we don’t necessarily even see the inherent bias in the act of distributing books to families from cultures where knowledge is attained and stored in oral traditions rather than print traditions. This chapter outlines prior research on children’s book distribution programs in several countries around the world. In most instances, these studies are carried out in cultural contexts where print-based literacy practices are not only more valued, but have become the basis for much spoken interaction. The lens through which a Western, print-based society views children’s book distribution is a critical consideration as we review the literature. Studies from areas of the world where literacy practices are primarily oral are few and far between; these will be discussed towards the end of this chapter as we frame the current study, one in which a community from a historically primarily oral literacy tradition has migrated to a region of the world dominated by print literacy traditions.

Origin and Spread of Book Distribution Programs

In the U.S., as well as in Canada, Great Britain, Europe, and Australia, and most recently Asia and Africa, book distribution programs have emerged as a low-cost, low-interventionist, means of getting the message out to parents that shared reading and book access from a very early age—birth in most models—are critical to children’s development, broadly speaking, as well as crucial for emergent literacy development. Book distribution programs were originally conceived of as a way to ameliorate both the quantity and the quality of linguistic interactions between parents and preschool-aged children.
Children who have fewer linguistic interactions, and interactions of lower quality, are likely to perform at lower levels than their peers who have had extensive, high-quality linguistic interactions (Hart & Risley, 1995). As children go through life, the Matthew Effect—whereby those who have much gain more and those who have little gain less—is in full effect: as children with the fewest and lowest quality linguistic interactions fall farther behind, those who entered school ahead of their peers make increasingly larger steps, widening the divide (Stanovich, as referenced in Adams, 1990). Although this academic achievement gap has received extensive attention, many of the attempts to level the playing field have focused on practices in K-12 classrooms. Although widespread access to high-quality, free, preschool is improving, it is not the case that all preschool-aged children are in high-quality care situations. Children’s book distribution programs came into existence as an intervention that could partially mitigate such a wide gap at kindergarten entry by bolstering children’s emergent literacy through early childhood experiences of shared reading at home, regardless of preschool attendance.

Book distribution programs are designed to have a positive effect on family literacy practices and/or attitudes towards literacy and literacy practices, such as parents’ and children’s enthusiasm for reading. The mechanisms through which book distribution programs operate may have an effect; namely, books and advice that are offered by medical practitioners may have more impact on parents than books received in the mail as a function of the trust that parents have in the expertise of medical personnel. The trust that parents have in doctors’ knowledge of what is best for children may increase the likelihood that parents will listen to the message of the importance of shared reading, and act on it because of their trust in the person bringing the message. In addition to the message of the importance of shared book reading being accepted and acted upon by parents as a result of the trust in pediatrician’s knowledge and advice
(Jimenez, Crabtree, Veras, Shelton, Mendelsohn, Mackie, Guevara, Pellerano, Lima, & Hudson, 2020), doctors report better interactions with families when book distribution is part of their practice (Rusu et al. 2019) and increased attendance at well-child visits after implementation of a children’s book distribution program (Needlman, Dreyer, Klass, Mendelsohn, 2019).

**Methods of Book Distribution: Direct Mail, Invitation and Medical Visits**

There are three widespread modes of preschool-age book distribution that have emerged over the past three decades in multiple regions of the world. One method of distributing books to children and their families is via direct mail. The most prevalent example of this model of book distribution is the Dolly Parton Imagination Library program. How this program works is through direct delivery of children’s books through the mail, to all children living in a chosen zip code. In most cases, zip codes are chosen based on the socioeconomic demographics of zip codes, with the aim of providing books to families who are unlikely to have disposable income to spend on children’s books, and may also lack the literacy skills, confidence, or desire to read with their children.

The program model includes sending a new, age-appropriate, book to every child within a certain age range in the zip code, once a month. The book comes addressed in the child’s name, further adding to the child’s excitement of receiving a new book. This program is widely appreciated for being both low cost and for not requiring the dedicated timing of medical practitioners in the Reach Out and Read model. Effects of this program are positive, but small when compared to programs that provide active encouragement from a medical practitioner alongside distributing children’s books (Skibbe & Foster, 2019; de Bondt et al., 2020).

Another model of book distribution requires more action on the part of the caregiver: the parent or child receives a coupon for a book or a bag/box of books, and then the parent or
caregiver has to take the coupon or invitation to the distribution point (e.g., a library, or a wellness clinic) to pick up the book(s). In this model, not all children receive books, and one can imagine that the variation in who picks up books and who does not is not random variation. Indeed, in a 2015 study in the Netherlands, a U-shaped distribution was found: families with the lowest and highest verbal interactivity between caregivers and children were three times more likely to pick up the book packet than families with an average level of verbal interactivity (van den Berg and Bus, 2015). In this book distribution model, there are likely many families not receiving books for whom the book distribution program could have a positive effect.

The final model of book distribution program is the one that has seen the most rapid expansion worldwide, and the program that has been most thoroughly researched. In this model, books are given to children each time they go to a well-child visit at their pediatrician’s office or other medical clinic. For two fundamental reasons, book distribution programs that operate through the medical system are a rapidly expanding phenomenon. Those reasons include, 1) books can be distributed universally and distribution is not interrupted with family moves, and 2) advice from pediatricians and other medical/child-development experts is generally thought to be more trustworthy. The latter of these two reasons is a strategic one on the part of book distribution program implementers; it is thought that parents might be more likely to accept a pediatrician’s advice to engage in shared book time with children because of the pediatrician’s role as trusted advisor on all aspects of what is best for children. It may be that when parents see book reading as intricately linked to their child’s health and wellness, the message’s strength increases.
Early Book Distribution Research: Family Literacy Practices and Perceptions

Reach Out and Read was piloted in Boston, Massachusetts in 1989. To launch this initiative, two pediatricians and three early childhood educators came together to design and implement a program through which children visiting the pediatricians’ clinic would receive a free book at each well-child visit, and parents would receive advice to read to their children, even the youngest children, each and every day. The 1989 pilot of this program produced results favorable enough to inspire subsequent instantiations of the program, as well as additional research. Notably, the 1989 pilot yielded the startlingly large effect that families receiving books through the Reach Out and Read program were four times more likely to engage in regular book sharing with their children than families who were not receiving books (Needlman et al., 1991). While this first study was not as rigorous as many medical trials because the outcome variable was self-reported by caregivers, and could very well have been influenced by a social desirability effect given that the pediatrician had been recommending that parents read with their children, the research on the Reach Out and Read pilot did include the most essential element of high-quality quantitative research: a control group and an experimental group, with assignment of groups randomized.

Following this initial success, additional instantiations of the book distribution program were implemented. The second study that looked into the effects of book distribution also found that families receiving books through Reach Out and Read were four times more likely to engage in regular book sharing (High et al., 1998). In addition to the frequency of reading, this study asked parents to report their children’s favorite activities prior to, and post, intervention; parents were also asked to report their own favorite activities for time spent with their children at the same two points in time. Notably, after having received books through the Reach Out and Read...
program, parents were both four times more likely to report reading as one of their child’s three favorite activities, and four times more likely to report shared reading as one of their own three favorite activities to engage in with their child (High et al., 1998).

The same limitations apply to this study as to Needlman’s pilot study: families receiving books and advice to read with their children may have responded in the affirmative to questions regarding frequency and enjoyment of shared reading because they believed that that was the desired answer rather than because there had been an actual increase in either the amount of shared reading, or in children’s or parents’ enjoyment of this shared reading. Although the results of the first two published studies were highly positive, they were far from conclusive given the possibility of the results being driven by social desirability.

Similar to High et al.’s 1998 study, a 1999 publication also found that families enrolled in Reach Out and Read clinics were more likely to read often, and more likely to report reading as a top three favorite shared activity between parents and children (Golova et al., 1999). In addition, Golova et al. found that families in the intervention group reported having more children’s books in their homes than did families who were in the control group. While Golova et al. had replicated High et al.’s results, the Golova results were also striking because the effect reported was much larger (intervention group ten times higher than control group) (Golova et al., 1999). At this early stage of researching the Reach Out and Read intervention, an important difference between the two studies was cited as a possible cause of the differential effects: language of distributed books and advice about shared reading.

The High and Golova studies both reported on Reach Out and Read interventions in the city of Providence, Rhode Island, and both studies investigated populations that were primarily low-income. High et al.’s population had three racial/ethnicity groups: Hispanic, Black, and
White, and the study reported results of an English-only intervention; books distributed were popular English-language, American children’s books, and pediatric staff both delivering the intervention and conducting the research study were operating solely in English. In contrast, the Golova study reported on a bilingual intervention with a population that was low-income and primarily Hispanic, where the books distributed were bilingual editions, and both the pediatric staff delivering the books and the message about the importance of reading, as well as the research staff conducting the interviews, were bilingual. In the clinic where Golova et al.’s research was conducted, parents chose their preferred language for interacting with both the medical and the research staff.

Originally, this difference in program delivery and evaluation was cited as a possible reason for the remarkable, ten-time increase, results of the Golova et al. study. Although subsequent studies have also reported positive results for populations of families with similar demographics, and bilingual interventions have had similarly positive effects, Golova et al.’s effect sizes have never been replicated.

In the first Reach Out and Read reported study outside of New England, a 2000 paper reporting results from Louisville, Kentucky divided the control and intervention groups differently than had been done in all prior studies. In this study, where the groups were also assigned randomly, the control group received advice from the child’s pediatrician about the importance of shared reading, while the intervention group received the same advice, alongside a free book for the child to keep (Jones, Franco, Metcalf, Popp, Staggs, & Thomas, 2000). Like prior studies, Jones et al. investigated the extent to which caregivers reported shared reading among their three favorite joint activities; on this particular outcome variable, the intervention group was twice as likely as the control group to report shared reading as a favorite activity in
response to an open-ended question. This effect, smaller than those found in prior studies, seems plausible, given that the control group did not engage in ‘business as usual,’ but received part of, but not all, of the intervention in question.

In addition to investigating favorite, shared activities, Jones et al. surveyed parents regarding their experiences with their child’s pediatrician, and surveyed pediatricians about families’ behavior in pediatric visits. Interestingly, Jones et al. found that book distribution had a positive impact both on parents’ views of the pediatrician, as well as on pediatricians’ views of the families. Specifically, parents whose children were receiving books while they were receiving advice regarding the importance of shared reading rated their pediatrician more helpful than parents who received the same advice, but whose children did not receive free books. In a similar fashion, pediatricians rated parents whose children were receiving books as more receptive to the pediatrician’s advice than parents who were receiving advice about reading, but whose children were not receiving books.

This study provides two novel perspectives in reference to the studies that preceded it. Firstly, it is the first study to start to unpack aspects of why this intervention might work by positing that the program improves relationships between pediatricians and families, thereby increasing uptake of pediatricians’ message. Secondly, this study, in its alternative conceptualization of what the control group should receive (i.e., advice but no book), essentially isolates the effect of the book itself, making it a critical reference for programs where less pediatrician advice is given than is the case in the Reach Out and Read model. While Maine’s Raising Readers program encourages pediatricians to encourage parents to read together with their children, it is not a structured, focal, universally scripted aspect of the program’s delivery.
While books are distributed in a uniform manner across Maine, accompanying pediatrician advice about shared reading is not standardized throughout the program and varies by provider.

In a study that was virtually opposite to the Raising Readers model in terms of intensity of intervention, Sanders, Gershon, Huffman, & Mendoza reported on an intervention where, in addition to advice being given on the importance of reading, a one-and-a-half-hour workshop was provided to parents (2000). This workshop was an interactive session in which parents could learn how to engage in effective and enjoyable dialogic reading sessions with their children. In addition to providing extensive instructional support for parents, this intervention was also extensive in its sensitivity to cultural and linguistic factors. Sanders et al. were investigating a primarily-minority population, and were distributing Spanish language, English language, or bilingual books to participants. Although this intervention differed from many prior interventions, both in cultural/linguistic reach, and in instructional intensiveness, the effect of the intervention was the same: families in the book distribution program read together more frequently than the control group (Sanders et al., 2000).

**Beyond Practices and Perceptions: Testing Developmental Outcomes**

The first U.S. study to report on children’s vocabulary development was vocabulary as reported by parents (High et al., 2000), showing positive effects of book distribution after controlling for family demographics, but not reporting on the vocabulary development as measured by standardized tests. High et al.’s study came shortly after Wade and Moore published in 1998, investigating both literacy and numeracy skills in two populations of first-grade children in Great Britain: one group had participated in a book distribution program during early childhood, and the other group—carefully selected to match the demographic characteristics of the intervention group—had not. This study was groundbreaking because it
reported significant effects for children receiving books in both literacy *and* numeracy, and it reported on outcomes through standardized measures rather than parent reports. That books could also positively affect numeracy skills in addition to literacy skills was a highly positive, somewhat unexpected, result, and that the effects were measurable in standardized test scores added weight to the prior parent-reported findings (Wade & Moore, 1998).

In 2000, Wade and Moore published a follow-up study investigating the children’s skills at age 7.5 years. Also in this study, the children who had received books in infancy far outscored the children who had not received books. Like the 1998 study, children were tested not only in literacy, but also in mathematics; similar to the 1998 results, children who had received books outscored their counterparts on all skills tested. In this research report, the authors put considerable emphasis on their efforts to match the two samples (control and intervention) on core demographic variables in an effort to maximally isolate the effect of the intervention program (Wade & Moore, 2000).

Back in the United States, in 2001, Mendelsohn and colleagues published a study reporting on an intervention with children who identified as Hispanic or Black, testing the children’s receptive and expressive vocabulary, as well as aspects of the home reading environment and shared reading practices. Like preceding studies, intervention families read more together than did families in the control group, and there was a relationship found between the number of times that families had had contact with the book distribution program and the frequency with which families read together (Mendelsohn et al., 2001). This ‘dosage’ effect lends additional credence to the significant difference between the intervention group and the control group; in essence, a dosage effect allows us to observe the intermediate steps between being in the control group and being in the intervention group.
In addition to finding a dosage effect that relates amount of program exposure to shared reading frequency, some robust language development effects were reported by Mendelsohn et al. While the differences in vocabulary scores between the control and intervention groups were both significant, the difference between control and intervention was larger for receptive vocabulary than expressive (2001). In a similar fashion to the dosage effect found for reading frequency, vocabulary scores were also reported to be a function of program involvement: more exposure to the program meant larger differences between the two groups. One final result from this multi-faceted study was that the Latino children showed a greater effect on expressive vocabulary than the native English-speaking children (Mendelsohn et al., 2001). Although many studies had already reported on results from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) children, this was the first study to suggest that the book distribution intervention type might just be most effective for children who are in the most need culturally and linguistically.

A similar study published one year later found similar results, although this intervention did not include bilingual books (Sharif et al., 2002). One other difference in outcomes emerged: while Mendelsohn found both expressive and receptive vocabulary to significantly differ from control to intervention group, Sharif et al.’s study found a significant effect for receptive vocabulary only. Although the children in this study scored higher on expressive vocabulary tests in the intervention group than in the control group, the difference between the two groups was not significant. Although it is slightly different from the Mendelsohn results, it corroborates the Mendelsohn results and interpretation perfectly: Sharif et al. did not parcel out L1 and L2 children as Mendelsohn et al. had done. In Mendelsohn’s study, the effect on expressive vocabulary was found only for L2 children; Sharif did not disaggregate results by L1 and L2, and also did not find a significant effect for expressive vocabulary. Like all preceding studies, in
addition to the language development outcomes, Sharif reported behavioral differences between the intervention and the control group: the intervention group was more likely to report reading as one of their favorite activities, engaged in shared reading more frequently, and had more books in their homes than the control group did (Sharif et al., 2002).

In another 2002 study that looked at multicultural populations, Silverstein and colleagues found significant effects on home literacy practices for both the native English-speaking families as well as the L2 families (Silverstein, Iverson, & Lozano, 2002). In contrast to Silverstein’s significant effects with native English-speaking families, Fortman reported on a book distribution program with a few different variants, and found that only one variation produced significant results for middle-class, English-speaking families: a VHS tape providing guidance to parents about shared reading was also distributed alongside a book and oral advice (Fortman, Fisch, Phinney, & DeFor, 2003). In this version of the intervention, significant effects were found for the families receiving the video advice in addition to a book and the pediatrician’s advice, but not for the group receiving only a book and pediatrician advice (Fortman et al., 2003).

Fortman’s study provides an important contrast to the studies that revealed increased effects for children living in non-English speaking homes. In a similar fashion to the book distribution intervention having increased effects for children least likely to have an abundance of books at home and parents who may not (yet) be aware of the benefits of shared reading, book distribution programs may have the least effect for children and parents who are most likely to score highly on home literacy practices and resources. In essence, families who already have lots of children’s books and already read together extensively may not have as much room for change.
The first study to use direct observation within the home in order to measure the home literacy environment was published in 2004 (Weitzman, Roy, Walls, & Tomlin). The researchers used both parent interviews and home observations to measure the home literacy environment, reading behavior, and overall familial interaction. The researchers found that three of the measured constructs contributed to the scores on the home literacy index: amount of interaction with the book distribution program, a nurturing home environment, and the mother’s education level. Weitzman et al. parcelled out the effects of these three independent variables affecting the outcome variable: home literacy index; participation in the book distribution program had its own unique effect above and beyond the other significant variables. The order of entry of predictor variables, with the number of Reach Out and Read visits a child had had being the last variable to be entered into the model makes the significantly predictive value of the Reach Out and Read exposure variable a highly meaningful result (c.f., Ridzi, Sylvia, & Singh’s, 2014 logistic regression methods, which privileged the main predictor variable by entering it as the first variable into their model).

A large-scale study published in 2005 took a unique approach: instead of assigning a control group, the researchers investigated practices in families immediately prior to starting the book distribution program. As such, the families are their own baseline. What this study found was similar to many preceding studies, namely, that after the book distribution intervention, parents were more likely to identify shared reading as a favorite activity, and families were reading together more than they had been doing before the intervention. In addition, parents more often reported seeing reading as a critical precursor to subsequent success in school. Finally, like many previous studies where both English-speaking families, and families speaking
Spanish at home participated, the researchers found that the intervention was most successful for Hispanic families (Needlman et al., 2005).

In 2008, Byington and colleagues reported on qualitative results that were not part of a designed study; rather, the study emerged out of the book distribution program’s implementation because so many families sent thank you notes to the clinic about the book distribution program. In an analysis of 133 thank you notes, the researchers observed appreciation from the families for the following program elements/outcomes: free books, especially the bilingual books distributed; the book lending library that was set up within the clinic; learning about the importance of early reading and promoting the ‘buen habito’ (good habit) of reading; enhancing patient-provider relationships; and especially fostering a feeling among patients that the medical practitioners had respect for the families (Byington, Hobson, Olson, Torres-Nielsen, Winter, Ortiz, & Buchi, 2008). This study provides a valuable complement to the long list of quantitative studies set up in the manner of clinical medical trials, with standardized assessments and randomly-assigned control groups.

Although this study would not constitute sufficient evidence that book distribution programs have the effects that the researchers culled from parent thank you notes, this study fleshes out some of the quantitative effects found in the more clinical studies. For example, it is conceivable that parents might not be 100% honest when answering a question about how much they “liked” a book distribution experience, or about how significant of an effect it had on their family’s practices. In contrast, the very fact that the parents in Byington’s study were appreciative enough to write unsolicited thank you notes lends credence to survey or interview results reporting that parents like and appreciate a book distribution program. In essence, parents
are so convinced of the merit of the program that they want to tell how wonderful it is without having been asked.

Peifer and colleagues reported on the effects of several initiatives designed to promote shared reading at home (Peifer & Perez, 2011). This study used a telephone survey to randomly sample two different groups of parents at two different times. The first survey was conducted immediately prior to the start of the intervention, with the second telephone survey conducted after the intervention had been fully rolled out. Results of the two survey administrations were significantly different from each other; namely, the second survey, following implementation, reported more frequent book sharing, more frequent shared play, and more frequent library visits. Although these results may be attributable to the book distribution program, and especially to the peripheral efforts in this particular program model to encourage parents to engage in literacy activities, there is also a possible confounding factor. Although the two surveys were administered to a random sample of community members, the sample for the second survey reportedly significantly higher education and income levels than the sample selected for the first survey. Because we have seen in other studies that socioeconomic status and education have particularly strong effects on literacy practices and outcomes, this study’s results remain inconclusive to a certain degree.

In a Salt Lake City study, the effects of Reach Out and Read were investigated by looking at participating children’s skills at the end of kindergarten (Diener, Hobson-Rohrer, & Byington, 2012). Because of the demographic characteristics of the sample population: low income and Hispanic, literacy skills at the end of kindergarten were expected to be below anticipated age norms. Despite the risk factors for literacy development that these children were expected to have, the children all had solid literacy skills at the end of kindergarten. They had all
been exposed to a book distribution program throughout their early childhood years (Diener et al., 2012). While there is no control group in this study, it is plausible that this program is having a positive, protective, effect.

Two recent Canadian studies found positive effects of book distribution programs; with one study finding that participants engaged in more literacy activities than a control group, and the second study finding that book distribution participants enjoyed shared reading more than a control group. The first study compared families going to clinics in one province, where book distribution (in a packet, with an educational DVD, a CD of children’s music, information for parents, and coupons for a local bookstore) was occurring in the hospitals after mothers gave birth, and another province where this practice was not occurring. Using random samples from each community, parents were asked via telephone questionnaires about their frequency of shared reading, singing, television watching, and talk. While the study found no difference in the amount of talk between the two groups, the researchers did find that the group that did not receive the book packet at birth watched more television than the group that did. In contrast, the group that received the book packet at birth engaged in more shared reading and more singing than the group that did not (Veldhuijzen van Zanten, Coates, Hervas-Malo, & McGrath, 2012).

Although the study’s design does not allow for causal lines to be drawn between book distribution, and shared reading, singing, watching television, and talking, this study does suggest that book distribution can have an effect on parents’ activity choices.

In the second study, researchers compared families that were participating in a book distribution program to families who were not, but who were from the same, rural communities as the families participating in book distribution. This study compared prenatal expectations regarding amount of reading and enjoyment of reading as a bonding activity, to actual
experiences after birth. Although the study revealed negative effects in the sense that parents read less to their child than they had expected to before their child was born, and viewed shared reading less centrally than they had expected to, the results comparing parents who engaged in book distribution programming enjoyed shared reading more than parents who were not involved in book distribution (Letourneau, Whitty, Watson, Phillips, Joschko, & Gillis, 2015).

In a study of the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, in Syracuse, New York, positive effects of the book distribution program were also found (Ridzi et al., 2014). Although this study did not have a control group, months of participation in the book distribution program (one book received per month) was used as a predictor for frequency of shared reading. Even when all other predictive variables were entered into the regression model, the effect of the book distribution program was still significant (Ridzi et al., 2014). A few caveats with this study are that there was no control group, and that the type of regression analysis employed, as argued by the authors, to “control for covariance,” but, instead, would have privileged the independent variable entered into the equation first: participation in book distribution.

Despite these caveats, this study has a significant design advantage: there is no pre-survey, and no advice about reading offered by individuals affiliated with the research, minimizing the possibility that socially-desirable answers would be given. Indeed, social desirability is the same for all participants in this questionnaire, making the positive responses of those with more book distribution exposure likely attributable to the book distribution program.

A 2014 Australian study commissioned by the United Way also reported positive effects for the Dolly Parton Imagination Library (Riley, 2014). Although this study did not have a control group, participants (N=913) responding to a telephone questionnaire reported increases in daily reading, increases in talking about reading with other parents, and increased time children
spent quietly reading. This finding was consistent with U.S. studies of the Imagination Library program (Ridzi et al., 2014; Samiei, Bush, Sell & Imig, 2016).

A 2016 study, also of the Imagination Library, compared kindergarten readiness scores of two groups of children in Tennessee. Of the entering kindergartners who completed both kindergarten screening, as well as an English-language questionnaire about home reading habits and participation in Imagination Library, (N=263), 54% of the study sample had participated in the Imagination Library book distribution program. This study found that the group of children who had participated in the book distribution program during the preschool years had significantly higher scores on the tests (kindergarten Readiness Indicator) used by the Memphis City Schools to assess kindergarten readiness (Samiei et al., 2016). Although this study is correlational in nature, there were no significant demographic differences between the group of children who had participated in the book distribution program, and those who had not. The two groups did differ on childcare during the preschool years—some with family members, others in organized public or private childcare/preschool; as such, this is a potentially confounding variable for further study.

Another Imagination Library study in Michigan compared much larger groups of kindergarten students’ scores than the preceding Samiei et al. study. Skibbe and Foster compared 2.4K participants of Imagination Library with 3.3K non-participants and also found that kindergarteners who had participated in the program had higher scores on phonological awareness measures and letter knowledge. Like the Samiei et al. study, Skibbe and Foster’s sample was determined to be representative of the area in which the study was conducted, with no differences emerging in regard to the participating and non-participating groups in terms of ethnic group. There was an identified participant difference in terms of free lunch participation,
which was used as a proxy for socioeconomic status, wherein 36% of the children participating in Imagination Library qualified for free lunch, whereas 43% of those not participating qualified. This study is another in an ever-increasing body of evidence for positive effects of book distribution programs, although the potential confounding variable of SES should be considered in more detail.

A recent study introduced additional elements beyond the traditional Reach Out and Read model of distributing a book and offering anticipatory guidance to parents about shared reading. In this study, half of the participants received a standard Reach Out and Read approach, and the other half of the participants received an ‘enhanced’ approach that included access to an instructional video and text message reminders. The authors found that increasing the elements of the program intervention resulted in enhanced effects of the program; not only did the “enhanced” version of the program influence parents’ views of reading and their responsivity more than the standard intervention did, but the parents in the enhanced program also reported feeling more connected to their providers and more supported (Jimenez et al., 2021).

A study conducted in the Midwest included propensity score matched (PSM) participants, where each child included in the analysis had a ‘match’ in the other treatment group. The authors found very little effect of the Imagination Library book distribution program (Thompson, Klemp, & Stinson, 2017). The authors argue that communities should take care to ensure that what little resources are available for programming such as book distribution be resources that go to programs with proven outcomes. Thompson et al. argue that the Imagination Library model, because it simply sends books out in the mail, may not be as effective as the Reach Out and Read or Raising Readers model, in which medical practitioners distribute books (2017). Indeed, the meta-analysis of children’s book distribution programming by de Bondt et al. found differential
effects for different types of children’s book distribution programs, with the Reach Out and Read model of a doctor giving a book, alongside anticipatory guidance on shared reading, to be the most effective children’s book distribution model (2020). That being said, the meta-analysis showed all children’s book distribution program variants to have a significant, positive effect. Within a single study, some program’s effect sizes may not be large enough to be detected, but when considered together in meta-analysis, the effect is indeed present.

Thompson et al.’s methodology with matching program participants with non-program participants was done in a general population, and concluded that book distribution, alone, may not be enough. Similarly, the authors of a very small-scale 2016 study that looked specifically at a refugee population came to a similar conclusion: while literacy interventions with refugee families can have positive effects, ongoing and early intervention may be necessary in order to facilitate the desired effects (Kupzyk, Banks, & Chadwell, 2016). In this study, packets of materials were distributed to all families at the beginning of the intervention, and the authors argue that distributing the materials would not have been enough for this population; the refugee families participating in this intervention required the family literacy programming in order for the distributed materials to be useful to the families at home (Kupzyk et al., 2016).

While children’s book distribution programs have a proven track record for their capacity to be effective, we can look more closely at individual populations and individual program models in order to ensure that the general mechanism of children’s book distribution is effective in particular circumstances for particular families. The next section digs more deeply into outcomes of children’s book distribution in various culturally and linguistically diverse contexts around the globe.
**Children’s Book Distribution Across Literacy Cultural Traditions**

Due to the widespread success of children’s book distribution programs in the United States, the initiative to get books into young children’s hands from birth has been adopted in many other countries. Multiple models are being used in addition to the medical/well-child visit model. In various children’s book distribution programs around the globe, books are distributed (as gifts) through hospitals, libraries, town halls, and even vending machines. As we consider the effects and perceptions of various children’s book distribution programs, it is important to keep in mind the role of the book, the role of the doctor/trusted advisor, and the role of the community context, where shared book reading may or may not be a common literacy practice.

In one of the very few studies that has found no effect for book distribution programs, Goldfeld and colleagues used a telephone survey in Australia to interview just over 550 low-income families about their children’s expressive vocabulary and communication skills, and the home literacy environment. The authors did not find any significant differences between the control and intervention groups in this study, and argued that book distribution programs are spreading around the world without having evidence behind them showing that they produce the results they are intended to produce (Goldfeld, Napiza, Quach, Reilly, Ukoumunne, & Wake, 2011).

There are at least two alternative explanations for this study’s null effect; firstly, the study’s outcome variables and data collection methods were not sensitive enough. Specifically, this study only looked at expressive, but not receptive vocabulary, while it is a general language development truth that receptive vocabulary develops faster and earlier than expressive vocabulary. In other book distribution studies looking at both receptive and expressive vocabulary, findings were stronger and earlier in the intervention cycle for receptive vocabulary.
than expressive. In this way, including only expressive vocabulary in this study, and measuring a child’s expressive vocabulary through a parental questionnaire over the telephone, might be a likelier cause for the null effect than the explanation the authors offer: book distribution programs are ineffective.

Another possibility lies in the program execution itself; for example, that nurses distributing books and modeling shared reading were not taken as seriously as a doctor. It has been posited that one of the reasons that medical book distribution models are so effective is because of the authority that doctors have on the topic of “what is best for my child” as well as the general respect that most people have for doctors. If parental trust in a child’s doctor is indeed a crucial part of the mechanism through which medical book distributions have often-reported positive effects, it could be that book distribution programs where nurses distribute books are less effective than programs with doctors distributing books; it is also possible that different cultures have different associations with doctors and patients such that the trust element may be an important factor in the U.S., but not an element in some other cultures. It could also be that medical providers treat families from various backgrounds differently; when language and culture differences exist, does the relationship of trust hold in the same way as it does for the majority of families? It should be mentioned that in the first, and only, study of Maine’s Raising Readers program, that it was not always the pediatrician who was giving a book to the child, but sometimes a nurse or an administrator. This did not seem to diminish the degree to which the program was seen as effective by parents.

A 2012 Taiwanese study provided an initial look into the potential effectiveness for children’s book distribution programs in a cultural context where shared reading between children and caregivers is not a common literacy practice. This study included a control and an
intervention group; both groups were exposed to one aspect of the study: volunteer readers were located in clinic waiting rooms. The intervention group also received books and advice once they got to the doctor’s examining room. Despite this overlap in implementation conditions, Wu’s study found that the intervention group, who received books and anticipatory guidance from doctors, shared books more frequently, had children who were more interested in reading, and were more likely to list reading as a favorite activity than were families who were part of the control group (Wu, Lue, & Tseng, 2012). This first look into whether or not a children’s book distribution program can be as effective for families who have not been embedded in a cultural framework of shared reading being a common element in family quality time showed that children’s book distribution programs can be effective across communities with varying cultural and literacy practices.

A few years later, a study in India produced similar results: in a randomized controlled trial lasting 18 months, children who were part of the group exposed to a Reach Out and Read model of book distribution that included waiting room readers had effects in the areas of reading as a favorite activity, the amount of time spent reading per week, and the number of books in the home, as compared to non-participating children (Srivastava, Bhatnagar, Khan, Thakur, Khan, & Prabhakar, 2015). One outcome variable that was not affected was the number of days per week that families read as a bedtime activity with their children. Critically, this is couched as a potentially cultural interaction: in this region, families’ bedtime rituals traditionally involve singing at bedtime rather than reading (Srivastava et al, 2015). This study, too, shows that book distribution can be effective even if the community culture was not one with a high tendency towards shared book reading.
In addition to finding an effect for book distribution and doctor-distributed advice on reading, these two studies, in Taiwan and India, are critical because—as noted above—they cross a particular cultural variation. In Taiwan and India, views on shared reading as a favorite family pastime are quite different than in many Western cultures. Wu et al. argued that their study, critically, provides support for the idea that book distribution programs can be effective even in communities where shared reading is not as culturally valued as in the West (2012). This outcome may well be related to the privileged role of the pediatrician, which was part of both the Taiwanese and the Indian studies.

A recent study in rural Kenya (Knauer et al., 2020) distributed children’s books and provided advice to parents in regard to the importance of shared reading as well as specific dialogic reading techniques. The study compared four variations of a children’s book distribution/family literacy program to ascertain if the more intensive interventions were more effective than the less intensive version, and also assessed if the intervention was more or less effective for parents with low print literacy levels. The four variations of the study were 1) distributing six children’s books to families; 2) distributing six children’s books to families, plus ONE training session; 3) distributing six children’s books to families, plus TWO training sessions; and 4) distributing six children’s books to families, plus TWO training sessions, AND a home visit. For the participating families in this study, there were limited (if any) children’s books present in the family home before the intervention occurred. Findings from this study included that the book distribution element-alone—was not enough to move the needle for families, but there was little additional benefit to providing a second training session or a home visit. In this way, providing the book and a single training session seems to provide the coveted balance of being effective without creating an overly costly intervention. Finally, in terms of
parents who were not, themselves, able to read, the intervention had greater effects for these
families than for families whose caregivers could read. In this result, we have some evidence in
regard to book distribution—paired with guidance—being effective for non-literate parents.

Underlining the importance of family practice above and beyond books themselves, a
2015 study in Coventry interviewed 25 parents to ascertain parental experiences of the book
distribution program Bookstart, and found that parent and child engagement with books was the
key to program effectiveness. The authors found that the program increased family enjoyment of
reading, and enhanced the shared reading activities of the family (Wray & Medwell, 2015). The
authors concluded by emphasizing that based on what they heard from parents, it’s not the books
distributed, themselves, that are producing such positive effects, but that the ways in which
parents and children are engaging with books together is having a transformative effect on their
children’s, and their family’s as a whole, reading enjoyment and experiences. In this way, it
would appear critical that we keep the books themselves in perspective as a tool of a certain type
of experience. What appears to be required is family engagement with language and literacy
more so than a particular tool (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000). As we cross cultural lines of literacy
practice between cultures where print and where oral literacy are most prevalent in family’s
home literacy practices, this point will be an integral one.

Summary of Children’s Book Distribution Efficacy and Extant Questions

As outlined in this chapter, much research has documented positive outcomes of book
distribution programs. A great number of the quantitative studies on book distribution programs
have had substantial rigor, with control groups, large group sizes, random assignment to groups,
and researchers blind to group membership, etc., allowing for a fair conclusion that the book
distribution model is a, generally, effective one. Furthermore, an earlier literature review looked
at the results of unpublished manuscripts on book distribution programs (Needlman & Silverstein, 2004). Impressively, of the 12 unpublished manuscripts found at the time, eight of them contained positive, significant effects of book distribution programs, suggesting that positive, published results are not the result of publication bias.

While it is clear that children’s book distribution programs have many positive effects, in many different familial contexts, only three studies of children’s book distribution programs’ effectiveness (Knauer et al., 2020; Srivastava et al, 2015; Wu et al., 2012) were carried out in a cultural context where print-based literacy practices were not a central element of literacy traditions in the region. While many studies outlined in this chapter have included some families for whom shared reading may not be a frequent practice, further study on specific populations would increase our understanding of children’s book distribution efficacy for specific communities, including those whose literacy traditions have historically been primarily oral.

As I consider Somali New Mainers’ cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge, which historically have utilized oral literacy practices more than print literacy practices to achieve both knowledge transfer and linguistic artistic expression, I pose the question of how home literacy traditions interact with community literacy traditions. While book distribution programs have proven successful in many contexts, how is one newcomer community, in this case Somali New Mainers from a primarily oral tradition who are now living in Maine, where the surrounding, majority culture is primarily a print tradition, affected by a literacy intervention that is deeply rooted in the majority culture’s print-based literacy tradition and practice?

A study carried out with families who had recently immigrated to the Denver, Colorado region examined parent perceptions of a book distribution program through sentiments shared in focus groups. Parents in this sample were expected to be engaging in shared book reading with
their young children less frequently than average, due to demographic, linguistic, and literacy 
practice characteristics of the participants. What the study authors found, however, is that the 
book distribution program was perceived to not only generate excitement about reading, but also 
that parents were engaging in new practices of shared book reading with their children that were 
not practices that had been extensively part of their lives prior (Gillanders & Barak, 2022). This 
study frames this evolution not as a replacement of prior practices, but as an add-on practice. 
Like the Gillanders & Barak study, this dissertation explores how a children’s book distribution 
program could be utilized to “extend rather than substitute, add to rather than subtract from, and 
sustain rather than interrupt families’ language and literacy practices and cultural contexts” 
(Alim et al., 2020, as cited in Gillanders & Barak, 2022, p.19).

This dissertation, alongside the findings from Gillanders & Barak (2022), Knauer et al., 
(2020), Srivastava et al., (2015), and Wu et al., (2021), are just the beginning in terms of 
exploring the many outstanding questions in regard to the effectiveness and the appreciation for 
children’s book distribution programs within populations that come from a primarily oral literacy 
tradition. While it is clear that the children’s book distribution model is effective in many 
situations, including a few recent studies in communities where shared reading is not a focal 
family practice, additional research on specific populations can help us better understand how 
effective children’s book distribution programs are for specific populations. The research I 
conducted in Maine focused on exploring an intervention devised for a community long steeped 
in print literacy in families who have long practiced oral literacy traditions more than print.

In the 21st century, despite a tendency to conceptualize diversity as a benefit and not as a 
deficit for a community, and to “celebrate diversity” in abstract conversation, our actions do not 
always align with our stated beliefs. Although the deficit perspective in reference to English
Language Learners and culturally and linguistically diverse families has long been exposed (Auerbach, 1989; Delpit, 1995; Paratore, Melzi & Krol-Sinclair, 1999), our policies and practices, as institutions, often do not align with our individual, well-intentioned and well-informed, beliefs (Roy & Roxas, 2011; Spotti & Kroon, 2009).

In this study, I make every effort to acknowledge the myriad literacy practices and traditions of both the majority community and the newcomer community. As medical practitioners from print-literacy traditions distribute English children’s books to new Mainers who may or may not speak or read English, and who come from a culture steeped in oral literacy traditions, we must remember to critically examine the cultural context as well as the well-intentioned act of distributing children’s books to all Maine families. In addition to the language of the books and the potential mismatch between family and community home literacy practices, we should consider the role of the medical practitioner in the Raising Readers book distribution program model. While this study does not dig deeply into this arena, it is also important to remember that the Somali New Mainer population is likely to be looking for strong interpersonal communication between themselves and their doctor(s) (Feldmann, Bensing, de Ruijter, Boeije, 2006), and that this connection may also influence the experience of receiving children’s books at well-child visits.

While it could be the case that new Mainers are enjoying the same effects of Maine’s children’s book distribution program as non-newcomers have reported, it is also possible that program modifications are necessary in order for new Mainers to reap the same benefits of children’s book distribution programs. Raising Readers has the goal of benefitting all Maine families, regardless of language spoken in the home or prior family literacy practices. This may be what the program is already doing; this study was devised to begin exploring various
populations within the state. Through this study, I hoped to uncover some of the finer points of the interaction between the inner workings of children’s book distribution programs as they relate to the myriad family literacy practices and cultural *funds of knowledge* that families bring to the critical task of fostering children’s emergent literacy, both oral and print, in the earliest years of life.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This research focuses on Somali families’ literacy practices and their experiences of Maine’s children’s book distribution program, Raising Readers. I conducted this study with four participant-informants who are Somali New Mainers residing in Lewiston with their families; with their help, I am exploring New Mainers’ experiences through the lenses of funds of knowledge and home literacy practices (Purcell-Gates, 1997; Heath, 1983; González et al., 2005).

As reported in the introduction, Somali literacy practices have historically been heavily oral rather than print-based, due to written Somali only becoming a widespread written language since the 1970s, and literacy rates in Somali having declined significantly from their peak in the 1970s due to ongoing violence, disruption of school, and displacement of Somali citizens. This study explores a potential mismatch between the intended outcomes of Raising Readers and the literacy practices of the population for this study. In order to explore Raising Readers within this population, this study investigated both participants’ experiences of book distribution, as well as family literacy practices regardless of book distribution. This exploratory study is intended to broaden the lens through which we look at children’s emergent literacy in one cultural and linguistic New Mainer group.

I recruited participants through my professional network of faculty advisors and graduate student colleagues, as well as through open solicitation with several community organizations and university student groups. As an outside researcher, recruiting and retaining participants was exceedingly difficult; I have detailed the process for interested parties in Appendix E.
My study materials were approved in March of 2020 by the University of Maine’s Institutional Review Board. Due to the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, my research was put on hold alongside all non-critical human subjects research as soon as the study materials were approved. When university research restrictions lifted, I began recruitment in October of 2020, and conducted the final interview in April of 2022.

**Study Context**

While Raising Readers distributes books to all preschool age children from birth to age 5, I focused on parents with children between the ages of 3 and 8 due to prior research results of book distribution programs having a cumulative or “dosage” effect over time (Dowdall, Melendez-Torres, Murray, Gardner, Hartford, Cooper, 2020; Groenhout & Bennett-Armistead, 2016; Rikin et al., 2015, Mendelsohn et al., 2001). I recruited four Somali New Mainer parent participants to learn about four families’ experiences with Raising Readers and their families’ home literacy practices. The participating parents’ children have all received books through Maine’s Raising Readers program since birth, or since arrival in Maine if not born here. Maximum variation across participants’ demographics, literacy practices, and experiences with Raising Readers help to establish both commonalities and differences across participant experiences (Seidman, 2013).

Amongst the four families, there are nine children, ranging in age from 2 years to 10 years. In the structured interviews, I focused my questions regarding book distribution on children between the ages of 3 and 6, but also took in a wealth of information regarding children’s experiences in their younger years and beyond the last Raising Readers book received at age 5. In this way, the study focuses on the later years of Raising Readers experiences (ages 3-
5), but within a context of how Raising Readers was experienced before and after these late pre-school years, and the broadest context of intergenerational family literacy practices.

Community Context

Because I, the researcher, am not a member of the Somali community, or even a member of one of the regional communities where Somali New Mainers are living, access to the community for research purposes was expected to be this study’s most difficult challenge. This expectation turned out to be correct; in addition, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic was an additional, secondary, unforeseeable challenge. In an effort to address the first, foreseen, challenge, I engaged with two community experts to learn more about the Somali community members’ context and experiences in Lewiston before I began my research interviews. In this way, I endeavored to learn as much as possible from engaging with community members from a practical standpoint to supplement the extensive reading I had done while designing my study.

To gain access to the community, I contacted schools, early childhood centers, college student organizations, and community organizations in Lewiston and in Portland. Amongst these contacts, several were cold calls (or emails) in which I reached out to organizations and individuals with whom I had no professional or personal connections in common. In addition, my professional and personal network (graduate program professors and graduate student colleagues) referred me to several contacts in the Somali community. Comprehensive information regarding participant recruitment is included in Appendix E, but it should be noted that all of the participants I successfully completed two interviews with were individuals referred to me through my own professional and personal network.
Semi-Structured Dialogic Interviews

This study used qualitative methods of data collection and analysis; namely, a series of two structured interviews, each with discrete, but interrelated topics (Seidman, 2013). These interviews were carried out in a Bakhtinian Dialogic approach, recognizing that “The meaning of any utterance, whether spoken or written, can only be understood in a particular context” (Brettschneider, 2004, p. 99). This approach is similar to Harvey (2015), and aims to resemble a natural conversation to the greatest extent possible, with the expectation of ongoing negotiation of meaning in order to “record and reconcile complexity, detail and context” (Temple & Moran, 2006, p. 40). The study was designed to gather data to explore the following research questions:

1. What literacy practices do Somali New Mainer families engage in, and what are the cultural associations with those practices; specifically:
   a. What are common oral literacy practices of the participating family?
   b. What are common print literacy practices of the participating family?
   c. What are the cultural associations and intergenerational transmission of oral and print literacy practices?

2. What are the experiences of Somali New Mainers, and their children, of Maine’s Raising Readers book distribution, and in what ways do Somali New Mainer parents perceive the program to be affecting children’s and parents’ home literacy practices and literacy orientation? Specifically, in what ways is Raising Readers influencing parents’ and children’s:
   a. reading frequency,
   b. enjoyment of reading, and children’s desire to become ‘good readers’/parents’ literacy goals for their children?
This study was designed as a narrative qualitative case study (Merriam, 2009) with the goal of gathering participant experiences and stories to provide both a deep and broad database from which to gain an understanding of a small number of Somali New Mainer families’ home literacy practices, and the purposes and values of those practices. These were used as a lens through which to explore participating families’ experiences with the Raising Readers book distribution program.

The narrative qualitative approach to data gathering consisted of a series of two semi-structured interviews (Appendices A and B), which, together, provided in-depth information on participants’ family and community contexts, family literacy practices, and experiences of Raising Readers. While every effort was made to collect similar information from all participants, some information was not offered even if directly questioned, and other information was shared without me having asked for the information. In terms of incomplete answers, questions that were not directly answered by the participant were woven into the interview a second time, and if they were not directly answered the second time, I moved on to additional questions. In terms of information offered that I had not asked about, this naturally creates a divergent array of shared experiences on the part of the participants.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English by design as the Raising Readers program only distributes books in English, regardless of a family’s home language. For this reason, I focused this study on participants who already speak (some) English. Although I did not screen for English or Somali reading skills, amongst recruited participants, all four read English, while only one read Somali (Ahmed). Future studies with Somali researchers could explore this topic with Somali community members who cannot speak English yet, but the focal question for this study is best illuminated through families who have resided in English-speaking
communities long enough to engage in such an interview in English as they could also be in a position to utilize the English-language books distributed by Raising Readers and be affected by the book distribution program.

In exploring the literacy practices of these parents, who have already learned English, we can look not only to the experiences of the book distribution program, but also the ways the books are being utilized within their families with their own children, as compared to the absence of shared book reading in the homes of participating parents when they, themselves, were children. This study explored the literacy practices of four Somali New Mainer families that have already acquired (some) English and for whom children’s shared reading was not a literacy practice for prior generations.

Although I purposefully studied individuals who had already learned some English, and my recruitment materials and interview protocols were not made available in Somali, I did invite participants to participate together with a translator if they desired. One participant requested that a Somali translator be present for conversational support. With this participant, clarifying questions and answers were negotiated through the translator when/where needed.

In all interviews, I continuously posed follow-up questions with all participants to ensure a common understanding across what I heard as the researcher and what the participant meant as an informant to ensure a common negotiation of meaning. In addition to this ongoing member checking as a dialogic negotiation of meaning, I engaged each participant in the second interview in a review of what I had taken away from the first interview and what questions I still had. In these ways, member checking was conducted in a dynamic and ongoing manner in a dialogic approach (Harvey, 2015).
The semi-structured interview format was used in order to gather data from a small sample group on both children’s book distribution programs and family literacy practices within the Somali community. Using a cross-section of techniques from Seidman (2013) and Harvey (2015), the two interviews are designed to not only gather information, but to establish rapport and engage in dialogic negotiation of meaning across multiple conversations. The first interview focused on the participant’s family life and composition (membership, daily routines, favorite activities) and history, and the family’s literacy practices (both print and oral). This first conversation was to get to know the participant, understand their family’s context inside and outside the home, and catalog the family’s oral and print literacy practices while continuing to build rapport.

The second interview built upon the content and the rapport established during the first conversation; in the second conversation we focused on receiving books through Raising Readers. This interview is separate from and subsequent to the first interview so as to minimize the chance for a socially-biased response to questions about oral and print literacy in favor of print literacy due to the many questions about books and shared reading during the section of the interviews devoted to participants—and their children’s—experiences of receiving books through the Raising Readers program.

The two interviews conducted with each participant occurred with one to two weeks between the first and second interview, and participant interviews never overlapped in time (e.g., the first interview for the second participant was after both interviews, field notes, and transcription work for the first participant had been completed). The short time between interview 1 and interview 2 allowed for maximal relationship building, but provided time for me to reflect and gather my notes and impressions. All information shared during the first interview
with each participant was revisited before the second interview. As a key element of the Bakhtinian Dialogic approach is to engage in member checking across multiple interviews (Harvey 2015), I conducted analysis in an ongoing fashion. As I engaged in review of field notes and re-listened to the recorded interviews, and reflected on what I had heard, I prepared questions to follow up on during the second interview based on anything outstanding or unclear from the first interview. This allowed me to check my understanding and revisit crucial elements, and allowed participants to elaborate and expand on their prior comments.

The interviews lasted between 35 and 55 minutes, and participants met with me at a location and a time of their choosing both to make logistics as easy as possible for participants as well as to ensure they were in a location that was comfortable for them personally. Locations selected were often public spaces, both indoor and outdoor. Children were present for approximately half of the sessions, and I spoke with the children and interacted with them at intervals on their initiation, but no interview questions were directed to children.

Every effort was made to ensure the interviews were as conversational and dialogic as feasible, without steering participants towards particular ideas or experiences. Each session started out with some small talk about the weather, what special occasions were happening for the participant, and how everyone was doing in general. At the start of the first interview, I gave a printed copy of the Informed Consent document (Appendix C) to the participant and reviewed it orally after greetings and small talk. Following this, I recorded the semi-structured interviews, posing questions, but also frequently referring back to prior comments participants had made, interacting with participants’ children if present, and sharing some of my own experiences of parenting, (Covid-19) remote schooling, and children learning English IF participants described something similar to my own experiences.
In these ways, I endeavored to make the interviews into a parental exchange to build researcher-participant rapport emphasizing some of our shared experiences and demonstrating my interest in participants, their families, and their families’ experiences. I was careful not to initiate the sharing of experiences in an effort not to influence participants’ responses; essentially, I shared an experience only if I had had a similar experience to something the participant mentioned so as not to elicit any particular experience on their part, but to build rapport amongst parents (participant and researcher) and establish some shared experiences. The interviews were generally increasingly comfortable as rapport developed over the interview time. After a few interviews, there was extensive relevant conversation following the last question posed and answered; participants often asked me to tell them more about my research and more about my experiences, to which they responded to my responses with yet more information.

Participants

Participating parents (3 female, 1 male) representing four distinct families in Maine came to the United States as teenagers or young adults, and have been in the U.S. between 5 and 20 years (average of 13 years in the U.S.). Participants are all of Somali origin, but did not all grow up in Somalia as a result of the Civil War: two were born in Somalia and left the country as children, while two were born in other (non-U.S.) countries that their families had fled to. After leaving Somalia or being born abroad, participants spent time in five countries before coming to the United States. The two participants born in Somalia lived in a refugee camp in Kenya for more than 10 years before coming to the United States, and the two participants born abroad each spent more than 10 years in various countries before coming to the United States. Participants have been in Lewiston for the overwhelming majority of their time in the U.S., and unanimously love Maine (except for the snow!).
Participants all grew up in households where the home language was exclusively Somali, although they were exposed to several other languages as a result of their movements and as a result of education. Of these languages encountered in childhood, only English is claimed as a current additional language, and it should be noted that all participants read English, while only one participant reads Somali. All participants have a spouse who also speaks Somali, although home languages are now a mix of Somali and English since English is the more dominant language for many of the children.

Within the participants’ nuclear families, there are nine children, ranging in age from 2 years to 10 years. Three children are female and six are male. Seven children were born in Maine, and two were born in Africa. The school-age children attend public schools in Lewiston, while younger children are home with their mothers or other female family members. All participants have, or have had, additional family members beyond their nuclear family living in Lewiston with, or near, them. At the time of the interviews, no grandparents or extended family members were living in the same home as the participating parents and their children, but in some cases grandparents had previously lived together with participating parents and their children in multigenerational households. Participants’ networks of siblings, nieces/nephews, and parents within the Lewiston community is vast.

A brief profile of each participant is outlined in the following paragraphs. I am purposefully brief in these profiles in order to ensure the anonymity of my participants in this study. While the participants are referred to with pseudonyms (Ahmed, Maryan, Sahra, and Halimo) throughout this dissertation, including a more in-depth personal profile of each participant could potentially divulge the identities of some of my participants. After spending significant time with each participant and developing a relationship with each, it is out of deep
respect for them as individuals that I keep this section of my description intentionally not rich, and not thick.

I have carefully selected for inclusion only details that are non-identifying, and have been intentionally vague, such as saying that an individual works in education rather than what position at what school or for what organization or childcare center. Likewise, above, I presented the sum total of countries that participants had lived in prior to coming to the U.S. rather than divulging which countries were lived in by which participant. In a small Maine community, including all of the information shared with me by participant would divulge their identities to a reader from within their own community—especially if I were to present this information in such a way as for the reader to be able to combine information like what countries were lived in, together with current place of employment and number and gender and age of children. In this way, I use not only pseudonyms to ensure anonymity between reader and participant, but reduced levels of personal description in terms of identifying information. When covering literacy practices and opinions in upcoming sections, description and details are richer and thicker as these details would not be able to be utilized by a reader to personally identify an individual participant from this study.

**Ahmed.** Ahmed is a male parent of two male children, one who attends elementary school and one who is of pre-school age. Ahmed came to Maine as a teenager and completed his high school education in Maine before pursuing post-secondary education. Ahmed works in education and lives with his wife and their two children. In their home, both Somali and English are utilized by the whole family, and the parents are actively trying to maintain the Somali language at home so that the children will retain the language. This participant is proud to live in Maine and raise his family here.
Maryan. Maryan is a female parent of four children (one female), of which three attend elementary school and one is of pre-school age. Maryan came to Maine as a young adult and works in education. She lives with her husband and four children, and enjoys the safety and ease of life in Maine. In Maryan’s home, English is the primary language used amongst the children, and Somali is the primary language utilized when Maryan and her spouse are conversing together.

Sahra. Sahra is a female parent of one elementary school-aged female child. Sahra came to Maine about five years ago with her young daughter, and does have some additional family who live nearby. Sahra works in manufacturing, loves the beauty of living in Maine, and considers herself an English language learner. She lives with her daughter, and the two speak exclusively Somali at home.

Halimo. Halimo is a female parent of two elementary-school aged children (one male and one female). Halimo came to Maine as a teenager and completed her education in Maine before becoming a healthcare professional. She has a lot of family in Maine and loves having her family nearby, as well as the peace and opportunities available in Maine. Halimo lives with her husband and two children, and while they primarily speak English at home, she would like her children to continue learning Somali and not lose their native language.

Data Collection, Processing, and Analysis

The primary data was collected directly from participating parents orally, with interviews recorded on two devices (a handheld recorder and my cellphone or laptop) to prevent any possible loss of data. Field notes were recorded on a single device immediately following each interview. The interviews and field notes were transcribed in a two-step process; I first utilized speech-to-text recognition software to produce a rough draft of the transcription, and then went
through the transcriptions while listening to the audio file in 3-5 second segments to correct errors, add missing elements, and, in the case of the interview transcriptions, attribute speech to the participant or to the researcher. I saved all interviews and field notes both as an audio file and a text file for analysis. The interview transcriptions required listening to the recorded interviews multiple times before even a rudimentary level of accuracy could be achieved. The number of times it took to listen to the recording and ensure the transcription’s accuracy varied by participant. Beyond the creation of accurate transcriptions, I listened to the interviews repeatedly, sometimes by participant in order to be immersed in a single participant’s stories, and other times by interview to compare and contrast participants’ experiences of similar topics covered in each interview.

Coding techniques utilized were deductive, inductive, and in vivo (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Transcribed interviews were first coded for In Vivo coding as it is a recommended practice for novice qualitative researchers to help them capture the essence of it all from the standpoint of the interviewees. I then coded deductively (Content codes) for the key elements of the structured interview protocol concerning family literacy practices and effects of Raising Readers on participating families. Following deductive coding, transcripts were inductively coded (Theme codes) for the emerging themes in participating parents’ shared and divergent experiences and practices. These themes embed this study’s findings in not only the prior research on children’s book distribution, but in intergenerational experiences of cultural and linguistic shift in immigrant contexts in general, and the Somali diaspora in particular.

This approach was taken in order to ensure that each interviewee’s experience was captured. The final analysis presents each participating parent as an individual case, sharing the narrative of each parent to provide an in-depth view into the experiences of the participant. In
addition, a cross-case, thematic analysis reveals the emergent themes uncovered when looking across cases and reviewing analytic memos. The thematic analysis explores oral and print literacy practices as well as experiences of the Raising Readers program; in addition, participants’ suggestions for potential improvements to the Raising Readers book distribution model and methodology were offered, unsolicited, by several participants. These suggestions, too, are shared as part of the cross-case analysis.

**Trustworthiness**

Extensively trained in quantitative research prior to this PhD, including being taught to strip away all angles until 100% objectivity could be argued for, and successfully defended, I have learned a whole new framework in my PhD program. Although I began my PhD program still carefully seeking the objectivity that I’d previously been taught was a critical foundation for any valid research, over time, I grew to understand—and then deeply appreciate—the qualitative framework and methodology as well. Also in this way, Bakhtin’s conceptualization of dialogue has guided my work as I came to recognize that as the researcher, I cannot be outside and objective, as I am internal to the activity of the research. Bakhtin wrote:

> At the basis of the genre [dialogism] lies the Socratic notion of the dialogic nature of truth, and the dialogic nature of human thinking about truth. The dialogic means of seeking truth is counterposed to official monologism, which pretends to possess a ready-made truth, and it is also counterposed to the naïve self-confidence of those people who think that they know something, that is, who think that they possess certain truths. Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 110, emphasis in original).
Guided by this concept of discovery, we can conceptualize research interviews as not only a back-and-forth where a researcher asks an informant to reveal already-formalized ideas, but also an exchange wherein a co-construction of exploring ideas occurs, with a) researcher’s questions inducing reflection at points along the way that lead to discovery on the part of the informant, b) informant’s responses inducing reflection at points along the way that lead to additional questions on the part of the researcher and c) a co-construction of meaning within the research interview space:

Discourse (as all signs generally) is interindividual. All that is said, expressed, is outside of the ‘soul’ of the speaker and does not belong to him only…(…)…The author (the speaker) may have inalienable rights upon the discourse, but so does the listener, as do those whose voices resonate in the words found by the author (Todorov, 1984, p. 52).

Of course, this is not to say that all information gathered in a research interview was unknown before the interview with the participant, but rather to allow for the space for reflection, discovery, and co-creation of meaning that informs the researcher’s inquiry. As such, in this study, I make no claims to objectivity, and continuously examined my position as the researcher, or my reflexivity (Creswell, 2013) as one-half of the dialogic equation in semi-structured interviews.

In terms of the objectivity that I was previously trained to seek out and perfect in quantitative studies, I am now convinced that it cannot exist, especially not in a qualitative study such as this one. The need for situating the researcher and examining reflexivity are commonly referred to in qualitative research methodologies because “All researchers are part of the social world they research and all have views that they bring to the research” (Temple & Moran, 2006). While this element might only—in a best-case scenario—influence the study design and the
interpretation of findings in a quantitative study, it affects every stage of a qualitative study, including interactions with participants, that is, participant-researcher dialogue. Building upon the Bakhtin quote above, we can recognize that what we say is directed towards a certain audience; as such, meaning, as spoken, will vary not only by speaker, but by interlocutor. “Meaning is always somebody’s meaning, and meaning for somebody” (Bostad, Brandist, Evensen, & Faber, 2004, p. 9).

Given this understanding, I carefully reviewed my subjectivity on a regular basis both during interviews and in data processing and analysis in order to be fully aware of my opinions and instincts and redirect them at every step along the way. Perhaps the most illustrative example is when I initially—automatically—coded children’s rules being an oral practice into the “print practice” coding bucket as an absent print practice. I was startled by this coding when I circled back around to it during reflection; essentially, my expectation that children’s rules would be written down had prompted my interpretation of the oral rules not as an oral practice but as an absent print practice. Upon reflection, I noticed this anomaly and corrected it.

This constant review and reflection made significant contributions to this study, and the degree to which I can confidently present it to others. While I don’t believe that one can ever say that complete perfection has been achieved, it has been my intent every step of the way to act with integrity and to continuously review my actions and reactions. I am sure I made mistakes along the way, but I made every effort to act with integrity. “As one qualitative researcher, Fred Hess (personal communication), phrased it, validity in qualitative research is not the result of indifference, but of integrity” (Maxwell, 2013, p.124). Due to the researcher’s involvement in a study such as this one, and my position as a cultural and linguistic outsider, the most significant
element of integrity that I sought out was to continuously question my influence in terms of shaping the emerging themes.

The techniques I used in order to ensure optimal validity of the findings are orienting to the community both through reading and through interviewing and learning from two experts on the study’s community, having a connection of extended trust by using networks to recruit participants (Temple & Moran, 2006), collecting rich data (Maxwell, 2013), and respondent validation in the form of ongoing negotiation of meaning (Harvey, 2015), and negative cases (Maxwell, 2013). I extended the conceptualization of negative cases to include not only the instances where participants did not report a certain element, but also actively looked for socially desirable answers.

Perhaps the most interesting example in this regard is that while every parent told me that they read with their children, several admitted that they struggle to make time to read on their own. They also reported that they would both “like” or “enjoy” (Ahmed and Maryan) reading more, and that they felt it was important for their children to observe their parents reading (Halimo). Together, these provide evidence for the trustworthiness of the participants’ responses from the standpoint that the responses I received are not the socially desirable responses across the board. These methodological means and continuous evaluation of what was being shared with me helped me to ascertain the degree to which my participants entrusted their true thoughts and experiences to me. Finally, my initial assessment of my position as the researcher, and my continued review of my situation and reactions to material, participants, and emergent findings throughout the study, also helped me to ensure the greatest degree of trustworthiness in the exploratory findings of this study.
Prior to beginning participant recruitment, I read many books and articles to learn about Somali culture, language, and experiences through the Civil War, refugee camps, and the Somali diaspora’s locations and experiences of the various areas of settlement around the globe. While this reading provided a broad background, it was essential that I also learn first-hand from members of the community (Trimble & Fisher, 2006). To accomplish this, I was referred to two individuals within the Lewiston community, one a Somali New Mainer who worked as a cultural and linguistic liaison for the Lewiston School department for the Somali community, and a second individual who was a White U.S. citizen running an organization deeply involved in the Somali community.

I learned about the Somali community in Lewiston from these two individuals, shared my intentions for this research study, and gathered feedback on how best to conduct this research in a respectful and ethical manner as an outsider to the community. These guides were invaluable to me in understanding the human experience of the New Mainer Somali community in Lewiston, and they were kind enough to share some prior researchers’ difficulties to help me devise a successful research design, including the option of translators, the need for complete anonymity, conducting interactions at the place of the participant’s choosing, having respect for participants’ time and understanding Somali concepts of time and small talk, and appropriate compensation for participants’ time and efforts. As addressed elsewhere, as an outsider to the Somali Lewiston community, the help of these two guides was crucial to my initial understanding going into the community to conduct interviews.

As detailed in the recruitment appendix (Appendix E), participants were sought out through several mechanisms, and all who successfully completed both interviews were individuals who had been personally referred to me through professional connections of mine. In
this situation, I was going into the interview in a privileged position before the participant even met me; as a trusted, “known” individual to a participant’s known and trusted connections, participants were coming into interviews poised to trust me until they had any reason not to trust me. Had I recruited interviewees in the park or on the streets, I would have been in the position of needing to earn even the most basic level of trust.

During the interviews, I collected rich data using in-depth interview techniques, audio recordings and full transcriptions of each interview (Maxwell, 2013). I supplemented the audio recordings with field notes of facial expressions and degrees of enthusiasm or emphasis (Miles et al., 2014). Rich data was collected from participants through a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions, and a considerable amount of follow-up questions. In this way, I sought to gather not only the topical facts for each question, but the experiential details and the participants’ views on those experiences. Of course, the information shared by participants is limited by the participants’ willingness to divulge details to me in a research interview setting (Mestheneos, 2006; Trimble & Mohatt, 2006).

Throughout the interviews, I engaged in ongoing negotiation for meaning to ensure I had the basic information right, as well as to elaborate on the particulars beyond each basic understanding (Long, 1985). This technique is one I learned extensively through my (foreign) language teaching and years of living abroad. When words don’t match facial expressions or when words are implied instead of spoken, I questioned in a supportive way to help resolve the mismatch or fill in the gaps. In addition to the ongoing negotiation of meaning that was part of my interviewing technique and recording of field notes, I engaged in member checking for the first interview’s information at the start of the second interview. I chose not to engage with participants for an additional member checking session after the second interview because the
results of the first member check were all satisfactory; this is a limitation of the study that I elected for in my attempt to balance taking up people’s time only as proved needed.

Another element that helps to establish trustworthiness of this methodology is in the negative cases that were included. My methodology plan was to screen potential participants and strategically stratify the sample to include participants with different literacy levels and professions, genders, and experiences of Raising Readers. Due to the extreme challenges of participant recruitment—detailed in Appendix E—I was not able to screen all interested parties and then only select as participants those who were maximally different from one another. Essentially, I successfully recruited four interested participants, and included them all in this study. Although I was not able to pre-screen and select maximally diverse participants, I did achieve maximum variation in gender, time in U.S., differential literacy backgrounds, and experiences of Raising Readers.

As I recruited, I conducted interviews with each willing participant as soon as I could schedule a first interview with them. Over the course of the interviews, transcription, and deductive coding analysis, it became apparent that I had examples of negative cases despite not having enough interested participants to screen potential individuals and selectively interview them. Specifically, families indicated that Raising Readers had not increased the amount of time that they spent with books together with the children, but did indicate that Raising Readers books had increased their family’s enjoyment of books. It is not the case that participants were giving only socially desirable answers and telling me what I wanted to hear.

In addition, one participant (Halimo) has experienced Raising Readers first as a teenager watching her younger siblings receive books and now as a parent receiving books with her own children. Halimo shared the reactions of Raising Readers of her own parents (no usage of the
Raising Readers books) contrasted with her own experience (no increase in reading, but increased enjoyment and deep appreciation for the program). In this way, a negative case was shared with me within one of the participant’s personal experiences with the program, and considerable time was spent in our interview conversations on how the Raising Readers books were perceived in her family as a teenager when her family had just arrived in the United States. This contrast sheds considerable light on the potential trajectory over the course of time for newcomers.

Finally, I engaged in deep reflection to position my own motives and explore how my prior experiences would potentially influence my study. I considered reflexivity, ensuring I was “conscious of the bias, values, and experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 216) that guided me towards this study and would affect it along the way. In positioning myself, I designed this study to focus it on my personal, intellectual, goal (Maxwell, 2013) to understand how Somali New Mainers’ literacy practices intersected with the Raising Readers book distribution program. I surveyed the related characteristics and experiences I had had as 1) an outsider to the study’s population, 2) an American who spent many years abroad, 3) a White, educated, language educator and researcher, and 4) a multilingual and multicultural individual, but heavily biased toward/rooted in print-literacy traditions/cultures.

These are my frames in conducting this study, which are in some ways different from the frames that my participants brought to the study, and in other ways similar. As an outsider, I was disadvantaged in terms of implicit knowledge of the community, culture, language and religious practices, but this outsider status also enabled me to gather information from an outsider perspective rather than my participants assuming that I “already knew” (Temple & Moran, 2006). Within the social science research debate on insider or outsider status,
Twine argues that insider status generates its own barriers and that difference may stimulate, rather than block, communication by focusing on understandings taken for granted. Insiders and outsiders, according to Twine, generate different kinds of knowledge rather than either one producing better knowledge (Twine, 2000, as cited in Temple & Moran, 2006).

This conceptualization of both the strengths, but also the weaknesses, that an insider to any research study population can insert into a project is part of what gave me space to consider conducting this research. Careful positioning of my prior experiences and knowledge base—and constant reflection on the same—are essential elements to conducting this study and producing valid findings.

Throughout the study, I revisited The Handbook of Ethical Research with Ethnocultural Populations and Communities repeatedly for tips on specific aspects from recruitment to interviewing, to working through my data. In addition to subject matter advice with refugee and immigrant informants gleaned from that handbook, I continuously re-examined my position as the researcher after each interview to ensure that the lenses through which I considered each element of the study were in focus for me. I engaged in this reflection through recording field notes and journaling about my experiences in the field and my reactions to those experiences, as well as my reactions to participants’ reported experiences. As themes started to emerge, I also wrote analytic memos that included not only the emerging themes but my reactions and thoughts about those potential findings. These reflections and analytic memos inform the overall context of the study and findings, as well as help to ensure the integrity of the findings vis-à-vis the situation of the researcher (Maxwell, 2013).
Limitations

Due to the retrospective nature of this point-in-time case study, it is impossible to know what the experiences of these parents would have been had the Raising Readers program not been a part of their children’s lives. We must keep this in mind when we interpret participants’ responses about how the Raising Readers program affected their families. Participants’ reports are their impressions of the effects of Raising Readers, which should not be conflated with other studies that measure the literacy outcomes of children’s book distribution programs. This study’s focus is on the experience of the program, and on parents’ and families’ perceptions of their own literacy practices and how the Raising Readers program might be influencing those practices.

As a small-scale case study, the goal of this study is to provide in-depth understanding of a small number of participants’ experiences in one specific area: family literacy practices. While additional contextual factors, most notably the Somali Civil War and resulting displacement, influence participants’ lives to a great extent, this study focuses on literacy practices. It is crucial that we interpret these findings with that focus in mind and that these findings not be extended out to other individuals in the population or to other populations. This study has limited generalizability although it provides some fascinating exploratory findings.

The complexities and difficulties of recruiting participants as an outsider, during the Covid-19 pandemic, proved to be a significant challenge for the study. In terms of the participants I successfully recruited, three were referred to me through professional networks. Due to the sampling and recruitment procedures, I can make no claims to the sample being representative. Though representativeness was never a feasible goal for this small-scale case study, I built maximum variation into my recruitment strategy, but was unable to screen potential participants and select a maximally varied sample due to the Covid pandemic and to limited
interest amongst potential participants. Ultimately, although I was not able to select a sample to achieve maximum variation in participants due to the limited number of individuals who were willing to participate, I did achieve quite a varied sample simply by chance. These variations are detailed in the participant overview (i.e., gender, time in the U.S., home language use profile) and in the findings themselves (i.e., literacy practices and experiences of Raising Readers).

In addition to the sample limitations, Covid-19 affected the data collection considerably. Before the Covid pandemic started, I originally hoped to conduct interviews outside over the course of the summer of 2020; however, all research was halted by the university for that time period. When research resumed, the weather was not suitable for outside meetings, so I was limited to parents who were comfortable being interviewed inside with both of us masked and at a distance. These health concerns limited my potential participant pool considerably. Due to the pandemic, I was also not able to engage casually on the streets or in other public spaces to recruit participants who were not being reached through my professional network. While I did post notices, cold call organizations, and email community leaders, all of these efforts were exceedingly time-consuming and without results. It is impossible to say the extent to which the context of Covid contributed to this recruitment difficulty or simply the fact that I am an outsider to the community.

Indeed, as addressed extensively, my position as an outsider to the community may have impacted more than just participant recruitment. Specifically, it could have caused me to misunderstand cultural cues and leave items unexamined because I simply missed them. As a non-Somali speaker and an outsider to the community, my understanding of the community and context is limited to what I learned from books and papers, what I gathered from community guides, and my unrelenting awareness that I needed to question my understanding and my
instincts at every step along the way. This outsider status is a limitation in regard to my natural understanding of the participants and their contexts; however, it may have helped ensure nothing was taken for granted or “already understood.”

Finally, some information that I did not ask for during interviews would have been helpful in interpreting the experiences of participants and in shaping the findings. Information I did not ask for specifically and that is missing from the participating parents’ profiles included highest level of education achieved, total years of formal schooling, and literacy levels attained in each language. While some parents shared stories about their education experiences, not all did, and I did not solicit summative information like diplomas earned or years of schooling. While demographic variables for literacy studies often include not only gender and occupation, but also family income, highest grade completed and/or total years of formal schooling, such items were left out of my protocol by design to emphasize family literacy practices rather than schooling or socioeconomics. In hindsight, these summative facts regarding formal education would have provided helpful context to my analysis.

The next chapter provides a broad array of findings—some in regard to topics I aimed to study and that I crafted my interview protocols to reveal participants’ experiences around—and others that emerged without having been a part of my questions, either research or interview. The findings in regard to Raising Readers are considered through the lens of findings from the 2016 Raising Readers study (Groenhout & Bennett-Armistead, 2016), as well as the extensive research base of other children’s book distribution programs (as reviewed in Chapter 2).

As noted above, this is a case study with limited generalizability. Due to the trustworthiness established, we can be confident that the findings in the next chapter are true and accurate experiences and opinions of the individuals with whom I conducted this research. To
assume that all Somali New Mainer families’ experiences are the same would be a grave mistake. Due to the sampling procedures, it would even be a mistake to assume that these experiences represent the majority of Somali New Mainer experiences. What we can say is that these experiences exist and are a true rendering for the participants included in this case study. Whether these findings represent a small minority or a vast majority cannot be speculated upon, and can and should be addressed in future research.

As shared in the next chapter, participating parents had a great appreciation for the Raising Readers program and indicated that their families had gotten more enjoyment out of reading children’s books together, even though they did not feel the program had changed the amount of time that they spent reading. In addition to specific findings in regard to parents’ experiences of Raising Readers, my study provides a broad view of participating parents’ family literacy contexts. Due to the in-depth nature of the interviews, these literacy practices are not simply a snapshot of current practices, but a broad, intergenerational and international history of literacy practices, past, present, and future in the families of these participants. In the following chapter, a rich tapestry of practices shifting in time and space to reach the current context illuminates the desired future vision some participants shared of their wishes for their children’s futures. Many elements influence these wishes; one is Raising Readers.
CHAPTER 4

STUDY FINDINGS

Over the course of data collection and processing, I was immersed in the data extensively before I began any coding work. Immersion occurred through completing the transcription work, which required listening and relistening to the audio files to ensure accuracy and completeness of each transcription. Each interview was listened to at least three times just in the process of creating the written transcriptions; some interviews were listened to additional times, depending on the accuracy of the initial speech-to-text file, which varied by participant and additional speakers/background noise in the vicinity of the interview.

I analyzed the data in several different phases, utilizing multiple sources of primary and secondary data. The primary data sources are the audio recordings and the written transcriptions of interviews; in addition, secondary data sources included the field notes from each interview, the profile of each participant, and the analytic memos that I composed as themes started to emerge (Miles et al., 2014). All of these sources made up an iteratively expanded database for analysis. The individual segments of my analysis unfolded in several, repeated phases of listening, reading, coding, checking for accuracy, and analyzing. These are detailed in Appendix F.

As a result of the multiple passes through the data to understand fully what was shared by each research participant, I completed my analysis with both a deep and thorough understanding of each participant’s life and perspective on my research topics, as well as an extensive database of coded information. In the following sections, I will first provide a comprehensive analysis of information shared in explicit reference to my research questions, then elaborate on perspectives shared that were beyond my research questions, but are intricately linked to family literacy
experiences and shed light on the trajectories of literacy practices amongst members of the Somali diaspora who have settled in Lewiston, Maine. Finally, I will situate the explicit and implicit findings in the broader literacy practice and intergenerational transfer of literacy practices in cross-cultural settings.

**Codes Utilized**

Throughout the phases of analysis, codes were added as topics repeated themselves across participants, and modified as themes began to emerge (Miles et al., 2014). The final list of codes that shapes my analysis of participants’ experiences as shared with me is included as Table 4.1, and includes two Types of codes: Content (Deductive) and Theme Inductive). Content codes were created to capture and to describe the information shared that directly responds to my research questions. Theme codes were developed inductively throughout the phases of analysis (Appendix F) as themes emerged, either within a participant’s narrative or across participants’ and analytic memos.

The full list of codes is organized into Categories within the Types outlined above (Miles et al., 2014). These categories allowed me to better organize and understand the coded information within each code Type. The Categories that I organized my content and theme codes into emerged as I went through multiple cycles of data analysis, interpretation, and analytic memo writing, and included: Literacy Practices, Reading Experiences, Family Experiences, Somali New Mainer Culture, Intergenerational Immigrant Experience, Print Trends, Oral Trends, Reading Trends, and Suggestions for Raising Readers.
Table 4.1
Final Codes, Categories, Descriptions and Types Utilized in the final analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code Description</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td>Practices (Literacy)</td>
<td>Literacy Cultural Practice</td>
<td>Content (Description)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PO</td>
<td>Practices (Literacy)</td>
<td>Oral Literacy Practices</td>
<td>Content (Description)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>Practices (Literacy)</td>
<td>Print Literacy Practices</td>
<td>Content (Description)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RE</td>
<td>Reading Experiences</td>
<td>Reading Enjoyment</td>
<td>Content (Description)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RF</td>
<td>Reading Experiences</td>
<td>Reading Frequency</td>
<td>Content (Description)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RG</td>
<td>Reading Experiences</td>
<td>Reading Goals</td>
<td>Content (Description)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EKP</td>
<td>Family Experiences</td>
<td>Tech &amp; Social are Kids' Preferences</td>
<td>Theme (Analysis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELM</td>
<td>Family Experiences</td>
<td>Love Maine</td>
<td>Theme (Analysis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAP</td>
<td>Print Trends</td>
<td>Print Practices Primarily Academic</td>
<td>Theme (Analysis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPG</td>
<td>Print Trends</td>
<td>Print Practices Growing</td>
<td>Theme (Analysis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPD</td>
<td>Oral Trends</td>
<td>Oral Practices Declining</td>
<td>Theme (Analysis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSP</td>
<td>Oral Trends</td>
<td>Oral Practices Primarily Stories</td>
<td>Theme (Analysis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RBD</td>
<td>Reading Trends</td>
<td>Reading would have occurred w/out Book Distribution (RR)</td>
<td>Theme (Analysis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCB</td>
<td>Reading Trends</td>
<td>Reading Choice of Books</td>
<td>Theme (Analysis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RIA</td>
<td>Reading Trends</td>
<td>Reading is Important</td>
<td>Theme (Analysis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RRA</td>
<td>Reading Trends</td>
<td>RR is Appreciated</td>
<td>Theme (Analysis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAG</td>
<td>Suggestions: RR</td>
<td>Suggestion: Anticipatory Guidance</td>
<td>Theme (Analysis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBB</td>
<td>Suggestions: RR</td>
<td>Suggestion: Bilingual Books</td>
<td>Theme (Analysis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHQ</td>
<td>Suggestions: RR</td>
<td>Suggestion: Healthy Habits Questionnaire</td>
<td>Theme (Analysis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EEF</td>
<td>Somali New Mainer Culture</td>
<td>Extended Family &amp; Community</td>
<td>Theme (Analysis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>Intergenerational Immigrant Experience</td>
<td>Language Loss</td>
<td>Theme (Analysis)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The full database of coded information based on these Categories included 691 rows of data across the four participants. I utilized this database alongside the coded transcriptions as a means of quickly searching, filtering, aggregating and comparing shared information, both within any given participant’s experience, as well as across the participants. My analysis is treated in three separate sections; first I will present each participant’s narrative as an individual case to reveal a full picture of each participant’s experiences. Secondly, I present the emergent themes arising from a cross-case analysis; finally, I expand on both of the former to examine how my findings here fit within the broader research landscape.

Content Analysis: Description of Literacy Practices and Effects of Raising Readers

Family literacy practices serve as a foundation for emergent literacy and represent crucial bonding experiences for family members to engage in positive activities together (Wasik, 2012). Whether we look at literacy activities from an academic foundation perspective, in which rhyming games and shared reading can help children acquire phoneme recognition and segmentation skills, or from a bonding perspective, in which children and caregivers enjoy a story or a song together, the benefits of family literacy experiences are multiple, and crucial to both academic and socio-emotional development (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Mol & Bus, 2011).

In my participant interviews, I gathered extensive information about the types of literacy activities, both oral and print, that responding family members engaged in with their children. Before going in-depth into the details of each participant’s family’s experiences, I will frame this study’s findings with two important facts that emerged: none of the parents participating in this study were read to as children, and all of the parents participating in this story do read to their own children.
Case Analysis: The Narrative of Each Participating Parent

In the coming sections, I will first present each participant as an individual ‘case’, describing in depth how oral and print literacy practices are part of the family’s life, as well as how oral and print practices have evolved over the course of their lives and in their families, as well as how Raising Readers book distribution is experienced. In addition to these core areas of information, I will frame each participant’s experiences into a broader life context, but without revealing any details that could potentially identify any one of the individuals participating in this study. In my sample of four participants, there are both broad similarities and narrow differences. After these in-depth sections for each participating parent, I will go on to look at these topics across participants.

Ahmed’s Story. As outlined in the participants’ section, Ahmed is a father of two boys, who lives with his wife and children in Lewiston, and is proud to raise his family in Maine. Ahmed works in education and is aware that his professional expertise provides him with important information to help him raise his children in ways that create an excellent foundation for his children’s education and longer-term success in the United States. Some highlights from Ahmed’s story are shared in his own words in the following pages².

Ahmed moved to Maine with his parents and siblings after a short period of time in an urban U.S. area, and his family came to Maine with other family connections already established in Maine, which helped Ahmed’s parents, and Ahmed and his siblings, get situated in Maine. Ahmed reflects that it would be exceedingly difficult to show up in a place so different from

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² While the words in Ahmed’s narrative are his own, I have pulled answers from an array of questions together—sometimes even across interviews—and removed my (interviewer) questions and comments. In this way, I have juxtaposed Ahmed’s shared responses to knit several concepts into narratives on the topics explored in this study.
home without having anyone you know who can help you navigate the community and the language:

-In Maine, I always lived in Lewiston. I like living in Lewiston ‘cause it’s a small town. The community’s not bad. I’ve enjoyed it since I moved here. I can say that I am proud living here and raising kids. I enjoy it. [We came to Lewiston because] a relative lived here and talked to us about Lewiston. It’s small and it’s peace. And then my family decided to move here.

-[As an adult] I’m happy because as long as you have a job and you know the community, you know how to interact with people and you know how to get what you need from the community, then I think life would be a lot easier than if you’re coming here and not knowing anybody, or none of the language. Like the first year or two is going to be a tough transition. You’re supposed to know what you’re buying, what’s in it. There’s certain foods that we don’t eat. Like pork or if it has gelatin. We don’t eat. So you should be able to read all that. But if you don’t know, then it’s gonna be tough. You’re gonna have to find someone to read that for you.

In addition to being happy about his life in Maine, Ahmed enjoys his work in education because it allows him to help parents and children. Ahmed reflects on the differences between Somali life in Somalia and how it differs from Somalis’ lives in Maine:

I like the work that I do ‘cause when I’m making a difference in people’s lives, that’s what motivates me. That’s what keeps me going. I like to go out. I like to meet people. I like to listen to people’s, to what they need help with, and try to help them. It’s not easy raising kids here. It’s totally different than where my parents grew up and where I was born. Totally different. People are busy working, but back home, it’s like the whole community
will be looking after your kids when you’re not there. But now everyone is busy. Back there it’s a collective community, like if you’re away from your house or you’re doing some errands and your kid starts misbehaving, your neighbor will straighten them and say “Hey man, we don’t want to see you doing this.” It’s also like when we see a child doing misbehaving, they don’t want that part of community to look bad, you know, cause you’re part of the community. You’re expected to behave. Here, people are minding their own business, doing their own thing—it doesn’t mean that people back there are not minding their own business, but it’s totally different here. You have a lot of people that speak different languages, and have different religions. But back home, it’s all Muslim. Same religion and language, you know? It’s like one identity. So that’s the biggest difference that you see and when you have a lot of people that have different culture, different religion, they’re going to have different views and a different way of life.

Ahmed’s two children are a focal point of his stories he shares with me. His older son is doing remote schooling because of Covid, and his younger, preschool-aged son is also home with his wife all day. He shares some of their favorite activities:

-My oldest child, he likes to play with his friends. He likes to ride his bike. He likes to watch educational videos and YouTube. He likes to play with his younger brother, who kind of follows his older brother around. [The younger one] likes to ride his bike. He likes to watch YouTube games. He likes to play games on the phone. He kinda copies to what his older brother does. [My youngest] likes to do and explore things that are not familiar to him. Sometimes he likes to copy what other young kids are doing in the neighborhood, like throwing sticks or rocks. Whatever that pleases them, he likes to do it. And he enjoys doing it. [But my older son] sometimes it causes an issue because he
doesn’t like to be copied or mimicked. So at times, he will be okay, like when they’re playing together, but at times when he’s kind of following, or if my youngest says “Oh, I want to do that!” my oldest gets mad at that. He doesn’t like to be copied or sometimes he’ll go “Why are you following me?! Why are you doing everything that I do here?”

-[With Covid going on] there’s less interaction. As a parent, you always set a precaution; you want your kids to be protected, so there’s less interaction. [Before Covid] in my neighborhood, when kids come back from the school in the afternoon or evening, you’ll see a lot of young boys and girls just wandering around and just playing. Sometimes, the boys can get rough and one of the boys can get picked on. But we haven’t seen any bad incidents happening. The kids wander around and play together and they’re peaceful, and I think it’s great.

This description of the children’s dynamic in Ahmed’s family and neighborhood paints a picture of an active social life for his children, which was—as has been the case for children across the country—disrupted by Covid. During this study, Ahmed’s younger child was at home as a preschooler, and Ahmed’s older child was also at home because his elementary school was engaging in remote learning because of Covid school closures. In terms of schooling and academics, Ahmed’s family has been very focused on providing a foundation for the children before they go to school, as well as helping with remote schooling during Covid. When describing his elementary child’s homework, Ahmed shared:

When he gets stuck with the work, we will just coach him. We’ll try to help him understand and he will do from there. With my son, we started teaching him the basic when he was very little, so he had a good grasp of the basic reading and writing before he even went to school. With the work, once you explain to him, he gets it and then then you
don’t need to stay with him or explain to him again and again. In his first year of school, he did very well.

In addition to the academic preparation that Ahmed and his wife are providing for their sons before school, and the support they are providing for remote school and homework, Ahmed’s older child has started attending religious schooling on the weekends, which his younger brother will participate in when he is older.

[My older son] has a set schedule on the weekend. We also teach him Qur’an on the weekend. I don’t know if you’re familiar with the Qur’an, the Islam teaching of the Holy Book. We teach him that in the weekend. When I look at him, he has a very busy schedule. He’s in school for five days. He comes home, and the weekend he still has to work. That also helps with the language structure, because, English, it’s written from left to right. But Arabic it’s from right to left. So when he’s learning that, he is also learning other skills as well. So he was doing that and that keeps him motivated. But with Covid going on, we try to give him more time off. We shorten his schedule. We understand that he’s doing a lot already, so we want to make sure that he’s rested and ready for the next week.

For Ahmed’s preschool-age child, the days are different. The younger son follows a routine with his mother on weekdays:

He will watch YouTube videos, I would say for an hour, and then he has other activities. Then by the time he finished all that, it’s lunch. And then it’s nap time. So he follows that routine. [With adults, the younger child] likes to hang with them. He likes to ask “Can we
go outside?” He likes to interact. He likes to see if the adults will be willing to take him outside.

In Ahmed’s home, a mix of Somali and English are used for communication, with the children speaking to each other in both English and Somali, and English being the stronger language for the school-aged child, and Somali the stronger language for the preschool-aged child. The family utilizes both languages, and explains things in English if Somali is in use and is not understood for particular vocabulary or concepts:

When my [older] son was very little, we were only speaking to him in Somali, but now since he started school, and he’s speaking English, we use them both. You know, sometimes it’s going to be something called translanguaging is happening, you know? Sometimes, if he doesn’t understand something [in Somali] I have to try that in English.

Ahmed estimated that about 75% of his family’s interactions were in Somali, and about 25% in English, and shared that when his two children are talking to each other, they use both Somali and English.

Ahmed does not report any singing or poetry being a part of his family’s oral practices, but does share that he and his wife tell stories to their children, and these stories are often ones that were heard by the parents (from their own parents) when they were children. Ahmed shared an ongoing telling and retelling of stories across four generations within his own family:

-Normally the story that I will tell [are stories] that my parents told me when I was little. Like back when I was growing up, my parents will tell me, will tell us, you know, different stories that they have heard when they were little. [Stories are often] personification stories, or things that happen back then. Like two animals attacking the
village, or maybe it could be a journey. You know, back then, when my parents were growing up, they didn’t have proper transportation, so they walked very long distances and they will tell us about what they experienced. What they’ve seen on the journey. So those were the stories. I also share stories that I’ve experienced as a child. I share those stories of how life was like. I will talk to them about how back then we didn’t have like cafeteria. We didn’t have—the schools didn’t provide lunch—so we’d have to go home, get lunch, and then come back. I tell [my sons] these kinds of stories so they have some understanding of what my life was like.

-One of the stories that I remember from my dad was one day he was just in the middle of the jungle and all of a sudden he was chased by an elephant! He [my dad] would remember it and say “You know, that story! Do you want me to tell it again?”

-And my oldest son, sometimes when he talks to his grandma, and his grandma will tell stories, then a couple of days later he will ask again, “Can you repeat that story for me again?”

In addition to this intergenerational transfer of stories, Ahmed reports that the adults in his family listen to the radio, and both adults and children watch TV. As a family practicing Islam, they also utilize the Arabic language for prayer and for religious services; Arabic prayers are memorized and recited, and Ahmed attends congregation prayers at the local mosque on Fridays.

In terms of print practices, Ahmed shared that he enjoys reading, but does not have much time or energy to pursue reading independently. As working parents with young children, the day
is full and reading is an activity he would like to get back to if there is more free time as the children get older.

I have this busy schedule. So I always tend to find, when I get home, it’s being with the boys, playing with them and then, by the time it’s bedtime, you know, it’s bedtime and I’m exhausted. I want to be honest with you. I haven’t read, I haven’t finished…it’s been a long while since I finished a whole book.

Ahmed is able to read in Somali, English, and some Arabic and Swahili. His school-age child is learning to read in English, and his pre-school age child is learning the Somali alphabet at home. Books are primarily available in English only, and Ahmed would like to see Raising Readers branch out to distribute bilingual books:

-Reading is predominantly English. When you go to the library, you can find books that are Somali stories, but when they go to the doc’s office, it’s just English. I hope that they can provide books that are multilingual as well. Lewiston is a diverse community, we have like 35 languages in the school system. So I think they should make this kind of books available for the community. I think that it shows that you care about the community, you know, you want to reach out to them. I think it would be a good investment.

-We don’t have a lot of books that are in Somali. We normally borrow them from the library. It’s not a large collection. We borrow that and then that helps.

In terms of writing, Ahmed does most writing in English at work, but also does some Somali writing at work. In their home, there are no written rules for the children; there is a behavior chart where the children can earn special privileges based on good behavior.
When it comes to reading together with the children, both children regularly read and/or are read to, and enjoy books and reading in various combinations (alone, children together, and parent reading to children). Because there are very few books in the Somali language available to the family, virtually all reading is done in English. In terms of whether the children look at/read books independently or read together with one or both parents, Ahmed explains:

It's a combination. I would say all of the above. Sometimes we’ll read together, at night, at bedtime. We have a bedtime routine to read together. Nowadays, we have a Storyline Online video [for listening to stories], so I will look it up, and he will go to that and he listens. He enjoys listening to that and he enjoys reading. Sometimes they pick up the books and my youngest will copy what my oldest does, so he’ll get his books and he’ll just imitate. He can’t read, you know? But, he’s learning. He [picks up the book], go through it, take a look and then get another one.

Ahmed shares a lot about the evolution and practices of shared book reading in his family with his wife and children, specifically stating not only that they started reading to their children when they were very young, but that this early start has been a critical element:

The greatest thing that happened to my sons is that we started reading to them when they were very young. He likes to read the books. [When we get a book] he opened it and started reading right away. As soon as we get books from the library or from the providers, he reads the books. He enjoys reading every night. That’s his, I think it’s like a routine for him.

Reflecting on the origins within his family, Ahmed remembers:
-One of the things that happened was that we, when we shared the book, the first one that I’ve been in before they even learned how to read, we went together. I started my oldest with picture books. We went through that, and then when I realized that he’s liking it, I added some more books. And so my youngest, copies a little what my oldest does. So like if my oldest drops a book, he will try to do the same thing: find another book that he may or may not read or understand.

-I think as a parent, you just need to hold them for the first few months, and show them. You know, every kid is different. Some kids will pick it up quickly. Some kids will need more time. So my son struggled a bit, but now I don’t even have to remind him to read. Every night before bedtime, he knows…

Ahmed maintains that his children always enjoyed the RR books. He shared two reasons as evidence of this, stating that whenever his child receives a book through RR, he opens it immediately and reads it—and never reports that he doesn’t like a book given to him. In addition, if Ahmed’s children go to a well-child visit with their mother, the fact of having received a book is often shared with Ahmed by the child when he comes home at the end of the day. Based on the child’s desire to read the book as soon as it has been received, and that the receipt of a book is an experience worth sharing about one’s day, Ahmed feels that receiving books through Raising Readers is appreciated by his children, and, as such, he appreciates the program too as a parent:

-[When they get a book] the first thing that he does is he will open it, read it, and he will tell me whether he likes the book or not. He will not express his emotions at that moment. He’ll start reading and then we’ll discuss. And I’ll say “What do you like about the book?
What’s your favorite character?” And then he will share those with me. First, he will open it and read it, and then share his thoughts with me.

-At the doctor’s office, he has no choice [in the book selection]. They will give him and then he has never said anything like “I don’t like that book.”

Ahmed’s experience of his children never disliking the books given by Raising Readers is one positive aspect of the book distribution program for the children. In addition, in terms of Raising Readers fitting into the natural progression through phases of different types of shared reading activities that Ahmed and his wife started with when the children were very young, Ahmed expresses appreciation for the age-appropriateness and ‘fit’ of the books Raising Readers distributes:

The books that they give to my oldest son, they were very short, precise. They definitely helped him a lot because when he started, you know, reading those books and then we moved on to bigger books.

Although his children enjoy the Raising Readers books and he appreciates the giving of books, Ahmed does not believe that his family’s frequency of shared book reading would have been different if Raising Readers books were not coming into his family throughout his children’s early childhood years.

Nothing has changed, you know? It’s not like I’m making changes to his routine. I’m not, like if your son is struggling with reading, you always look for support. Like you look for a tutor. I’m not doing that. I don’t have to do that at all. So my behavior is still the same [as it would have been without Raising Readers book distribution].
Building from this family practice of shared reading that started when the children were very little, Ahmed’s current conceptualization of his children’s reading is one of pride, and his future hopes are for his children to enjoy reading and to become skilled readers:

- I like reading. I like to read, and I want my kids to read as well, and to be independent readers. I’m happy when I see him doing independent reading. I’m happy for him, you know? And I feel proud, you know, I see my son reading the books and that’s what all parents want to see.

- I emailed my son’s teacher and asked, “Are there areas where he has struggles? Is there something I can help with?” And she was like, she has no issue with him, so it’s good to hear that, and I want to continue doing that. And I want to make sure that he continues reading and liking reading.

- I let him read books that he wants to read. I don’t force because if you force them, then you get to the point where you see this resistance. And eventually, like I hope he doesn’t have it, but he’ll refuse to read at all. So I let him read. I let him choose.

Ahmed mentioned that books received by his children through the Raising Readers program were always read, firstly to children when they were young or looked at by the children as they got older. Ahmed indicated that their home has always had a large selection of children’s books, so he does not feel that receiving books through Raising Readers had an effect on the availability of books or on the frequency of reading those books. Similarly, he shared that his children have always enjoyed being read to and always enjoyed reading themselves; as such, he does not feel as though things would have been any different for his children if Raising Readers had not been giving his children books.
Ahmed is an educator, and due to not having grown up in Maine, Raising Readers was a completely new concept for him when he had children in Maine. He is very appreciative of the program because it aligns with his parenting/educational philosophy and he did not have access to many books as a child and his parents could not read, nor help him learn to read or help him with his schoolwork. He wishes that there could be programs like Raising Readers in Somalia and in the refugee camps. Reflecting on his experiences prior to living in the U.S.:

-[Back home] there was nothing like this. You just see a doctor and you leave. [Raising Readers] is totally new to me. I have never experienced anything like this. For someone who has a background in education, it’s okay to me.

-[Back home] if your kids need books, you either go to the library or ask the teacher, you know, ask the teacher to give her books, but there’s nothing that exists, nothing that existed in our community, that, you know, there’s no Raising Readers, nothing. So you go to your doctors, go to the doctor’s office, you do what you need to do and you leave, that’s it, it’s so more like just medical. It’s completely different. Yeah. I wish they could have that kind of program [Raising Readers] there as well.

Because Ahmed experienced such different contexts for learning to read before coming to the U.S., namely learning print and reading through school settings only, and seeking out the help of community members when he needed help because his parents couldn’t read/help him, the contrast of Ahmed’s own experiences with his children’s experiences is considerable. Ahmed is very proud of his sons’ reading progress and success, and has always had the goal of ensuring that his children read and enjoy reading. He does not attribute these goals to Raising Readers; as an educator, these were always his goals for his children’s literacy. Though Raising Readers
hasn’t affected his goals for his children, he appreciates the program immensely as it aligns with his goals for his children.

**Maryan’s Story.** Maryan is a mother of four children (three male/one female; three school-aged/one pre-school), who lives in Lewiston with her husband and four children. She works in education and came to Maine, which she loves, as a young adult after a short amount of time in another U.S. city. She also loves being a part of her older children’s school:

-[Maine] I love it! It’s not too far. It’s good for the kids. The library is here. Walmart is here. If you have appointment, the hospital is not too far. I love it. Everything’s close. I used to live [name of large U.S. city]. There, you can’t go to appointment and go shopping. You can’t go at the same day to different, to a lot of places. [There is] a lot of traffic, a lot of! But here, today I went shopping. We went to eat. I’m sitting with you here…I love Maine no matter what…but snow?! But I love Maine.

-As a parent, at the school, I’m so happy I’m working this school my kids go. I’m so happy to meet the teachers and I know when they started that MEAU (?) Yeah, MEA. I know the time. I know the date. So we have to do a lot of homework. We have to practice at home. I know when they have the events, I know when they have field day, outside, all the schedule, I have it. That’s my happiness. I know the teachers. I have their phone numbers. [My daughter’s teacher], I see her every day. I have class that I’m doing every lunch duty over there. And she knows our religion. And on Ramadan day they put on the hallway the designs for Ramadan. The moon, everything. It’s very social, the teacher, she knows all the religions, I’m so happy.

Maryan’s four children are very active and love social activities, both inside and outside of school, and love playing (and fighting) amongst themselves and playing with other children:
-[My kids’ favorite activities] are playing outside like this. Playing soccer, playing the playground, swim, swimming, everything! [In the winter they like to] slide the big mountain. They always play something. Sometimes they design on that {pointing to the pavement} with chalk on the walk, on the walking, where you’re walking, the walking side. Or just talking to each other or they do something like they ALWAYS do something. Or talk, talk about the shows. They always do. They always find something to do.

-Always fighting. Three boys and one girl, I mean, the boys ALWAYS fight. Fight inside the house, fight outside: “Give me the ball!” and “I was the first one!” And always I tell them “Rock, paper, scissors, shoot—you have to do that” Usually they all play together. They paint, or do some dictation, or math. Yeah.

-They never play with the toys they have. They always need the phone. They play with the phone. They play with the pots and pans.

-[What they like most about school is] Recess and math. And friends. Meet your friends every day. To be honest [what they don’t like about school is] the library. Sometimes they say it’s boring, the library, because you can’t talk with your friends {Maryan gesturing “SHHHHHHHH”}

Maryan speaks Somali with her spouse at home, and English is exclusively spoken when conversations occur amongst the children. Because the parent’s stronger language is Somali, and the children’s stronger language is English, multiple languages are used in the family, depending on who is engaging in the conversation, and conversations with her children include both Somali and English: “I speak Somali to them, but they respond with English.” Her youngest, preschool
age child only speaks English. There is no listening to the radio by anyone in Maryan’s home, and TV is utilized by all family members, with children watching only in English and parents watching primarily the news in Somali.

Maryan sings often to her children, which is a tradition she has carried from her mother singing to her when she was a child. Although her children don’t understand much of the Somali songs in terms of content, they enjoy mom and grandma’s singing, and they hum along to the songs because they don’t know the words. Maryan shares that for her youngest child it’s the most favorite time of the day, exclaiming:

-When I sing, they know it’s the best time. They run upstairs [to come] sit in my lap.

Very, very special.

-[When my mom/their grandma lived with us] she was singing the same songs as when I was little and she would sing to me. But the notes, they [the kids] don’t know how to say it. And they don’t know [what] they mean, [the lyrics].

In addition to lots of singing in her family, Maryan shared that her mother used to recite poetry, but that Maryan does not. Maryan shared with me “My mom knows everything. I forget!” Like singing, Maryan has carried on her mother’s traditions with storytelling, sharing that much storytelling occurs, not just through Maryan, but also through the children’s grandmother. A few key elements of this storytelling environment are that the children often don’t understand the stories in Somali, and the children have a growing preference for technology over the oral stories:

-[When mom or grandma tell stories] sometimes they say “We don’t understand what mom, grandma said.” So you tell a story, and then I was translating everything. And they were like “Is this REAL?!” But then they, then I enjoy it. ’Cause you know, technology
{sighing} you know, technology everything. I used to enjoy [stories] with my mom.

[When I was little] we would have a little fire outside, she [Maryan’s mother] was guarded and around and talking this story. This, the wolf, the story in English! {Referring to the Three Little Pigs}. I used to live in Africa, can you believe that the SAME story, the Three Little Pigs, I used to run around in Africa in the Somali version. It’s the same here, but there’s not the same way [now] I enjoyed it. They say {gesturing towards children} “We can Google it!” and they’ll reset it up. We have too much technology. I don’t like it to be honest.

In addition to the Somali stories and songs, all of Maryan’s family members have memorized or are learning Arabic prayers through memorization. When I asked if Maryan could read Arabic, she shook her head “no,” but also explained:

For praying, well, yeah. We read, I say, you’d read the book or you have to learn. So I, I read whatever I learned. Yeah. It’s 30 pages. So you have to understand what is there in that 30 page. You have to read by heart.

Maryan reads in English and writes in English, but never learned to read or write in Somali. Maryan sometimes reads for herself at night, and reads for information online on her cell phone. In Maryan’s home, there is very little written down, with one exception being that she writes a shopping list on her phone. At work, she also rarely writes anything down, and when asked if she reads or writes Somali, she smiled wryly:

Honey, you got the wrong person! I don’t know how to read Somali. I don’t know how to write. I don’t know how read, but I know how to speak. It’s so hard. A lot of people are like me, they know how to speak, but they don’t know how to write.
Three of the children attend elementary school, with the youngest child at home sometimes with the grandmother, sometimes at daycare, and sometimes with Maryan. After school, the older children attend after school programming, and Maryan helps the children who want help with their homework:

-[In our community center] they have program every day. Science program. Gardening. They always do something. [The community center has programming] they have always something 2:30 to 5.

-[Homework is] science, math, reading and writing. Reading was like a lot of work. We do a lot of things like grammar, math, everything. Every single Wednesday. We have the Seesaw on the iPad. [My daughter] I’ll help her. The science and the math and I always help her writing. Reading, science and math she do by herself, but always I help her no matter what. If she asks me something. At first I told her: “Try, and if you’re not, then call me.” [When she does her homework] She stay with me in the kitchen, on the table.

Maryan shared that children’s books in English are readily available at home and in the community, and the children read sometimes, although they prefer playing outside, watching TV, and socializing with their friends. Maryan engages in varying practices of shared reading with her children depending on their age and their preferences, and she does not read to all four children together as a group very often because of their varied ages. She shares that sometimes the kids don’t want to read with her, but if they do, she participates. Maryan describes her observations of the children’s preferences for engaging in shared reading and how they have changed over time:
First, they looked the pictures. And then the pictures, they started looking at the page, like how, how they want to read it. But for the oldest [when they read now] they’re not next to me. They go to their room and read it. But {gesturing toward younger children} she always reads next to me. [We talk about the books] we read a lot. The ones we read the more we know, the more they know and talk about.

-[I don’t always read books to the children because] she always doesn’t like it. I say, “Okay, I’ll listen if you read it” and then I listen. Last week her teacher tell her “What about you read page and mommy reads page? You can share” They always listen to their teachers. We started that [alternating pages] last week.

Maryan shared that children’s books have always been readily available to her children, although the sources have changed over the years. When her oldest children were younger, she took them to the public library often so that they would always have books at home. With the Covid-19 pandemic, her children’s school sent home a significant quantity of books; in fact, Maryan shared, with four children, feeling overwhelmed by the number of books that have flooded into her home over the course of the pandemic:

We got a lot of books at school, especially with Covid. We’re so happy. The school GIVES [us] books. Oh my God, a lot of books. We have a lot of books. I have to do a donation.

In speaking about her preschool age child, Maryan talks extensively about both her own appreciation for the Raising Readers books being high quality board books, as well as her observations of her child’s appreciation of the books, and his actions in regard to enjoying the book for one evening only:
-He loved the book. Interesting. Yeah. They look at it. The doctor give it to them because they have so much colors and the pages are so hard. Not like {picking up my interview notes} it’s not like this, it’s kinda hard…and they have something to touch it. Yeah. And the soft one, what they call it. This is soft. They put inside the book, the feather, like duck feather, bird feather, so when they touch it, the nose sometimes {Maryan mimicking child’s enjoyment of sensory features of books}. The colors, the animals. Whatever the doctors give, they like it!

-I mean, it’s all kind of nice to give us books. Like 1, 2, 1, 2, 3 {Maryan gesturing the books piling up} That’s a lot of books. But [when the books come home] they see their other toy right? {Makes motion of throwing book aside}. So I put them [books] in my bed, and then we go in the bed at night and we read it.

-Next month he has another appointment and he enjoys those books. Only one night and then he’s done.

While most books in her home come from the library or the school, she appreciates the books from Raising Readers immensely not just because of the quality of the RR books, but also because of the age appropriateness. Maryan shared that Raising Readers was filling a crucial gap in age-appropriate books at one point during Covid, when they couldn’t go to the public library, and the flood of books from the elementary school were not age-appropriate for her youngest child.

The doctor’s office books they don’t have at school. They don’t have his age books [at the school]. On Pre-K maybe, or on daycares maybe, I don’t know. But you know, every year, because every year it’s different. Pre-K, Kindergarten, the books [at the doctor’s
office] change. The books the doctor give to you is like for this age {gesturing towards child}, maybe they deliver it for them? I don’t know. It’s not the ones [books] at the school.

Maryan thinks that Raising Readers did not affect the frequency of book reading with her children, but does believe that the RR books were particularly well enjoyed by her children, due to their animal stories, the colors, textures, the pictures, and for babies, the thick board book format, shared above. With the public library, and now the school, she feels that books are readily available:

If they’re [Raising Readers/doctors] not giving me books, I mean, we have the library. We have the car. And we not go [to the library] this year to be honest, this year because at school they gave us a lot of books. If I had not received those books [from Raising Readers], no matter what, we have something to read. I don’t know. We have a lot of books! Like the kind of book example with the big pictures, not the small ones, but big pictures books, with colors. The more they see the colors, the more they attach to the book.

Maryan appreciates the books being given by Raising Readers as it is always nice to receive a new, high-quality book, and every book the doctor gave, her children have always thought they were great books. Although Maryan does not believe that Raising Readers books influenced how often they read or her children’s literacy skills, she appreciates the gesture and her children enjoy the books.

As a child, Maryan did not have books, and was not read to. She also does not remember any lists, newspapers, or other print being present in her home as child. She has fond memories
of her mother telling stories and singing, and is aware of the shift from stories to books experienced across generations of her family:

-My mother, she talked about a lot of stories and books, and she tell me what happened. Like the little girl, what was it, the little girl that had the little, she visit her grandma, and the wolf? {Child interjecting: “Red Riding Hood”} And then I tell them [her children] “The book that you guys read—the books are different but the stories are the same.”

-When I was young, my mother would read to us without books. I don’t understand how my mom KNOW?! …Remember. I would say to my mom “How you KNOW that?!?” To be honest, I don’t know the story without a book to read, but my mom, she always read to us [without a book].

-We didn’t have power [when my mom was telling stories]. I don’t know the word in English. Not the fire…I couldn’t hold it…when you go to camp, you have the little lights with you…[researcher-parent interchange of words and gestures to find the word ‘matches’]. We had that, the matches, and you put…[interchange to find the word ‘lantern’] the lantern. She used to tell us stories and it was so beautiful. We was sitting on the floor and she was reading. I mean not reading. She was reciting the story. [We had] no technology. It was so beautiful.

**Sahra’s Story.** Sahra has one school-aged daughter and has been in Maine for a significantly shorter period of time than the other three parents participating in this study: less than five years, compared to the other three, who have all been here for more than 10 years. Sahra completed one interview with me, and opted to include a Somali translator in our conversation to help ensure Sahra’s understanding of my questions, and my understanding of her
responses. Sahra did not complete the second interview, which went into depth on Raising Readers and experiences with shared reading, so her story and experiences are less well understood than Ahmed’s, Maryan’s, and Halimo’s stories.

Sahra shared that she enjoys life in Maine, except for the snow:

I like to be here because I like to live here because, Maine is greenery. The, you know, especially with the summer. It’s beautiful. What I don’t like is the snow {Sahra laughing}. I love living here in Maine and I work for [name of company]. It’s a fairly new, temporary job. A lot of immigrants work there.

Sahra came to Maine with her only child, and her husband is not with them here in Maine. Sahra and her daughter do have some additional family living nearby in Maine, which helps her to adjust and she is grateful that her daughter has cousins to play with. Sahra shares that her daughter is very social and inquisitive, and likes everything about school:

-There’s nothing that she doesn’t like about school. She likes to go to school. She likes to do it…You know how much she likes school because when she gets sick and I told her to stay home, she will be like “I miss the school. I want to go to school.”

-[My daughter’s favorite things to do are] she likes to ask me a lot of questions. She tells me stories about what happened to her at school. She talks to [other children], and plays with them, interacts with them. So that’s my favorite part of the day, what she does. She tells me about her day, whether she, you know, fall off the swing or someone else did or something shocked her, how the day went. She tells me how the day went, then we eat, she takes a shower, you know, does her homework, if she has any, and then we go to sleep. It’s the end the day already.
Sahra considers herself to be an English learner, sharing within the first minute of our conversation: “I’m an English learner too,” and has a different home language usage profile from the other three parents participating in this study. Specifically, Sahra gets news in Somali on her phone and speaks almost exclusively Somali at home with her daughter, who is learning to read in English at school.

Sahra and her daughter both pray in Arabic at home, and Sahra sings to her daughter in Somali regularly, and sometimes the two of them sing together. Sahra also shares that her daughter sings together with her mother (the child’s grandmother) as well. Sahra enjoys listening to poetry be recited, but does not recite poetry herself. There is no radio in their home, but Sahra watches news in Somali on TV and her daughter watches children’s movies and videos in English. With her daughter, Sahra tells stories in Somali from her childhood:

What I remember from my childhood, I can share with her sometimes. She’s [too young] so she’s not telling anything [stories]…she’s just listening for now. She asks questions about it, what I tell her. She has questions.

Sahra speaks Somali, English, and Swahili while at work in Lewiston, and doesn’t write much down at work, but is using English writing to study for her US citizenship exam. Sahra shared that writing down what she needs to learn helps her remember the facts as she prepares for her test. She reports that the citizenship exam has 100 potential questions, but the exam will only include some subset of the questions:

You will never know. You never know which one it is. So you have to study the whole hundred to be asked, you know, like six of that. So I study those hundred and writing them down. You know, writing helps me remember.
In addition to studying for her own citizenship exam, Sahra helps her daughter with some homework if she needs help, and her daughter attends religious school on the weekend to learn about Islam:

-[Her homework] is something that she can do, small, silly alphabets and numbers. So if I go over once she’s finished, if something is wrong, then I help her understand why it is.

-The weekends, in the morning, both Saturday and Sunday, she goes to school where she learns about her religion.

In terms of family rules, there are none written down in Sahra’s home; she reports that her daughter knows what is expected of her and acts accordingly: “She doesn’t need reminders most of the time. She knows what she’s supposed to do.” Sahra reads news on her phone in Somali, and shares that the only other times she has for reading is to read the Qur’an:

-I can’t read books that are written in Arabic, but the only book I read now is the Holy Book, the religious book, and it’s in Arabic.

Sahra reads English books to her daughter, especially lullabies and other children’s books at bedtime. Sahra reads with her daughter in English since she started going to a school in Lewiston, but emphasized that she (Sahra) is doing her best as an English learner, and that her daughter is learning to read as well:

-Especially since my daughter is in school, she gets different books, but her favorite are the lullabies. So always, when she’s going to sleep, I read to her. She can’t read yet, so what I do is I read to her and she listens. We try our best to read. I’m an English learner too.
She only knows how to put three words together. She cannot read fluently. Sometimes I buy books for her, and sometimes we get from the library. But most of the times, she’s getting it [books] from school.

**Halimo’s Story.** Halimo is a mother of two school-aged children (one male, one female). She works in healthcare, and lives with her two children and her husband in Lewiston. Halimo likes life in Maine, after a childhood that was severely disrupted by the Somali Civil War. She loves Maine, except for the winter:

-I missed all my elementary school with moving around and not having a country where you can call your own or being accepted yet as a citizenship. I’ve missed so much school, and it was basically catch up [when I came to Maine]. I missed most of my elementary schooling, but we did a lot of homeschooling. My mom would find a teacher, and hire them for a couple of months just so we can catch up to where, to anywhere that we can be. The goal was to come to the US, but as we were aging we needed to make sure that we are on track. We would just learn how to read and the basic math, things like that. That’s where her most important thing that my mom would work on.

-[In Maine] it’s honestly, it feels safe here. That’s my number one thing is to feel safe. And that’s one thing I love about it. Being safe and having opportunities and working for opportunities and have a lot of resources. Before, it was different. Now there is a lot of resources and there is a lot of support and things like that. I just, I like the quietness of Maine. I like the safety net of Maine, and that’s why we’re still here. I’ve had a lot of friends who I grew up with that move to bigger cities, bigger dreams and whatever. But to me, I simplify, I just like to be close with my family and make things easier…we like it.
-Living Maine, we do a lot of outdoor activities during the summer. We look forward to getting our scooters and bikes and just being outdoors a lot. In the winter, I’m not gonna lie to you…it’s just something about the winter, even though I’ve been in Maine [so long] and having them {gesturing towards children} here. Once in a while, where we live, there’s a hill. So once in a while, I’m like “Okay, you guys can layer up and we’ll go sledding!” But it’s not my favorite thing in the winter.

-In the winter we look forward to staying home or reading books or a lot of movie nights when we can. And they like that. I’ll let them buy their own snacks or choose something just to get that excitement going and get their blankets and things like that in the living room.

Halimo and her children are generally pleased with their experiences with the school, especially the social aspects of the school. Covid’s impact on her children’s education was severe:

-[My kids like about the school] well, when I personally ask, they say seeing their friends and being with their friends. When I ask, that’s what they say mostly. I’m always trying to figure out which subject they like the most. They’re still, I think, shaping into that. My son is really good at math.

-I like the, well, we live, I like that the school is very close to us where we live. [The teachers] I think they are doing the best that they can, honestly. I really do. I would hate to judge anybody, especially, I’m sure they chose that field for a reason. They’re passionate about it for a reason. I just think they are doing the best they can.
I do like the teachers and the school. I like the fact that there’s a TalkingPoints app that we use with the teachers. It’s very convenient. I don’t have to call or send an email and I can send a message real quick and it’ll directly go to the teacher’s phone and they’ll get a chance to respond to me immediately and we can see ‘received’ and ‘read’ or things like that.

-The pandemic happened [and they had to stay home for an entire year]. When the pandemic happened we didn’t get the devices to do Zoom, so we just, everything was just on pause. [Then they] went through Zoom and it was very rough. It was just regular school hours, but throughout Zoom. I stayed home for that whole year with them. With [my] work schedule, I had to change that up and it was, it was a lot. It was days we could go online and days we couldn’t. We had teachers that would get sick, so we would get substitutes. I thought it was very hard [for them], and [they’re] still catching up.

Halimo’s children are very active with sports, activities, and playing in the neighborhood, and enjoy having extended family in Maine. Covid impacted their family a lot in terms of not being able to have as many social gatherings:

-My daughter’s into a lot of arts and craft. Drawing. She’s into music. She likes dancing. She doesn’t do any of the sports, but we’re hoping to enroll her into some. She’s not very into it, so I don’t wanna push her. I just wanna go off with what she likes and she’s very artsy.

-My son he’s, he plays sports. He’s into a lot of sports. He likes soccer. He ran track in the summer. He’s a boy. He likes to play around a lot. He goes to soccer practices on
Monday and Wednesday after school. And on the weekends, he does a pickup team for soccer for his age.

-They [both] like to hang out with their cousins. They’re, they play tag. They run around. They have bikes and scooters…throughout the summer they do that. If we do in-home, when they get together at a [family member’s] house, they like to play some video games, Roblox and things like that. They’re so lucky, ‘cause I didn’t grow up with my grandparents. I didn’t grow up with my aunts and uncles. They [Halimo’s children] have that here and it’s so nice to see that.

-Whenever we get the chance, we get together. [Covid impacted that] a lot in the beginning. A lot. We were very isolated. ‘Cause we’re just, the first year that Covid hit, we stayed home. So we did virtual learning throughout that year, and it was a lot. They were not getting any social interaction with their friends or cousins. After a while, once [family members] started getting vaccinated, then we started getting a little more comfortable visiting and things like that. [Covid] did affect them, but we are over that now thank God.

In Halimo’s home, language usage is heavily weighted towards English. Halimo shared that she and her spouse, despite both growing up speaking Somali, were speaking English primarily together before they had children, which has influenced their children’s learning of Somali. While her children have many extended family members from Somalia living in Lewiston, their home language being primarily English has limited their Somali language skills:

-We speak a lot of English and I wish…me and my husband will talk about it sometimes. We didn’t realize how we were influencing them. ‘Cause we speak, me and him, speak
English, so then we communicate with them [the children] in English. Their Somali is not that great. I wish I [had] realized how important it is not to lose our own language. For my parents, whenever we’re with my parents, my parents only speak Somali. So then my Somali’s better when I’m with my parents, and then when I’m home, I’m speaking English, but then now we’re more conscious of that. So we’re like “Okay, let’s try not to lose our own language.” Then communication’s gonna be hard with them [the children] with their grandparents. So now we’re like, “We need to make sure that they understand grandma.”

-When you have another language that dominates the most, you’re gonna forget about the language you don’t use anymore. It's so quick for you to learn another language and then to lose what you knew.

Halimo does not sing or recite poetry for her children, but she does regularly tell them stories. These stories are in English, but are the stories her parents told her in Somali when she was a child. Halimo’s children do hear stories in Somali from their grandparents—mostly about life back home in Somalia and how it is similar and how it is different from her children’s lives here in Maine. Halimo stays close by and translates wherever needed so that her children can understand their grandparents’ stories.

-[An example story Halimo tells her children] My son often always asks: “Did you go to first grade?” Or “How was Kindergarten when you were in Kindergarten in the country you lived?” So I would always explain to him, and then he would be so amazed that I didn’t go to school five days a week. I would explain to him that my parents got married and then the Civil War started happening. So they had to move and they had us and they would go to countries where they were trying to figure out a way to get accepted, to get
citizenship. I guess I didn’t see the importance of going to school when I was younger because it wasn’t the norm where we were living. And I tell him, even though we lived in other countries, we would still have Ramadan ‘cause, and then we would have Eid, and my mom would buy us clothes and we’ll try to find our own people that have our background and then try to connect throughout those moments. I would tell him stories about that. They find it fascinating.

-I think when telling stories, I can kind of somehow relive the moment or think about the moment and it’s a good feeling to always remember my childhood, and I’m honestly always appreciative of everything that my parents did.

-[The story] my mom talks about a lot is, um, before the Civil War happened, how they live at, in Somalia it was more stable of a life. ‘Cause sometimes we ask her questions like “Did you guys have TV back then?” Or things like that. So it’s so funny, and then my mom says, before the Civil War happened, Somalia had an established government. People were...there was law and order. People were just working and doing things. So she always talks about her home and how they had a cinema in her home, in the backyard. Like a drive [in]. So she said, she always talks about stories where on the weekends, they would play movies and people would come and pay to watch the movies and when it’s time for her and her siblings to go to bed, her and her sisters, and her cousins, would sneak in the balcony and watch. And I’ve never been to an outside cinema, but she said she would always tell us “I’ve been to an outside cinema, ‘cause we owned an outside cinema!” So she would always tell my kids like, just how back then they were fortunate before the war started happening. She says “I grew up with a lot of things like that.” Like the things that we value now, but she valued back then…so she tells my kids that all the
time. I’m really glad that my mom experienced that and I get to experience those stories and now my kids get to experience those stories with them.

-They [grandparents] tell stories in Somali and they [the kids] try to listen, but then they’ll say “What, what is grandma saying?” …so I’ll take the time to explain to them and making sure that they’re understanding as much as they can. They do a lot of comparison of like being born and raised here and how they were born and raised in Somalia. The difference. So they’ll say “When I was THERE…”

In addition to sharing stories about the past, in Halimo’s household, the parents listen to the news, and the children watch television in English only. Daily prayers are conducted in Arabic in the home, and the children are attending religious schooling on the weekends. At home, the children, together with Halimo, are learning the Arabic alphabet so that they can all learn to read Arabic:

- I’m learning [to read Arabic] now since they’re {gesturing to children} learning so I wanna make sure, so I started taking a class, so just to make sure if I’m asking them to learn something, I should know it too.

-We go to our mosque, which is, um, they do Islamic learning. It’s called Dugsi. So they do that every Saturday and Sunday. There’s a couple of their friends there and our local Imam who’s there. So they learn the value of Islam, and what we practice. It’s for them to understand the basics of learning the Qur’an, and our religion.

-We do our daily, we try our best. There’s a night prayer that they learned, which is in Arabic. They’ll say it in Arabic, but I’ve learned the meaning too, which is like “We’re
going to bed, like God protect us” and things like that. They [the children] just started learning Arabic, but most times it’s good to know what you are reciting.

-We do our daily five prayers [at home], and then on Fridays, when, if he’s [Halimo’s son] ever home on Fridays, when there’s no school, he’ll go to Friday prayer with his dad, which is very important. There’s a lot of Somali men that go to the mosque, but I haven’t been in a long time. I’m sure they do Somali and then they’ll speak in English too. They’ll have another Imam who will speak in English for the youth, ‘cause there’s a lot that will go and understand English more than Somali.

Halimo reads and writes in English only, but is also learning the Arabic alphabet together with her children who are learning it at weekend religious school. She hopes to do the same with Somali one day so that she—and her children—can learn to read and write Somali. Halimo enjoys reading, although she reports that she can’t read much now as she doesn’t have time. Her aspiration is to read more to learn new things and to set an example for her children.

-(Reading) is one of my goals for this year that I started to do (…) like to get a, either motivational book or something, uh, something that I have no clue about and just educate myself on different things, so….to just show them that reading is not just for kids, it’s for everybody.

-That’s one thing me and my husband always talk about is to, to show them than [not] just tell them. So we try to challenge ourself to read 25 minutes a day. Just to show that we read too. I know that what we do is an influence to them, so I, me and my husband always remind each other to put our phones away and read with them.
When Halimo was growing up, she didn’t have much exposure to print. Her home had the Qur’an in it, and sometimes some newspapers. As shared earlier, she sometimes had an intermittent tutor who would teach her the basics of reading, but there were no storybooks in her home as a child.

Halimo’s children are learning to read and write in English; the older child has a school requirement to read 25 minutes daily and record progress in a reading log, and the parents put together academic activities in English for the younger child after school and help the older child complete homework:

-[Homework is] surprisingly not a lot. My son recently started getting spelling words. That was, that was good. And he gets a reading log every day. So Monday through Friday, he has a reading log for, and he’s supposed to read 25 minutes a day….put the book, title, and parent signature. And then he does spelling words. So every week he’ll have a new set of 25 spelling words, which I like the consistency of things. For my daughter, she doesn’t get a lot of homework. They do, I’m assuming, they finish everything in class. With me and [their] dad, we just try to get things off the Internet and get books or just like any learning activities that we can, for her to at least be busy at home.

-We try to, when they come home, at least give them like 25 minutes to 30 minutes of at least education materials, then they can earn their TV break or whatever.

-[With his homework] I have to do a lot of cuing with him to remind him. “Time to do your reading.” He kind of knows ‘cause it’s been a routine. I think the routine is what gets them going.
Halimo brought her children to the library when they were very young, got them their own library cards, and created spaces at home for the children to keep and read their books. Halimo has always had a goal for her children to enjoy reading and to develop strong reading skills because she believes reading is crucial to academic achievement. Now, her children do not want to be read to, but if they want their mother to listen to them read out loud, Halimo makes time to sit and listen to them read. She also asks her children regularly to tell her about the stories they read (e.g., the story, setting, and characters).

- Before they could read, I, we would take time—me and (their) dad—would try to take turns to read for them. [Now, my daughter] is into, she’s still into a lot of books. She’ll read. If I ask her to come sit with me and she’ll read to me. She likes to read out loud. So one of us can listen to her. So that’s what she does. [When she first started school] she got like 25 sight words and it’s words that she’ll constantly practice. So anytime she’ll open a book that she knew, she can find the sight words, she’ll point it out. She’ll say it.

- My son, when he learned how to, when he started reading on his own, he would read to her as often, as often that she would sit and listen. And that was very nice. But then when she started school, she started a little bit of her own sight words and putting words together. She would sit and do her own reading, or I would sit with her and listen to her.

- [Now] my daughter enjoys reading out loud, not to herself yet. I’m still, I wonder when will be a point where she sits in a corner and grab her own blanket and just read to herself? But she loves to read out loud to me and like do the animation of what she’s reading. So maybe she’ll sooner or later get to that too.
-When we read the books, I’ll ask my son: “Can you take five things about the book and tell me the story or the setting or the characters?” When we read, [I’m] watching how my son kind of puts things in his own words or like how he memorizes his own story.

-[Now] I’m working really hard on trying to get them to enjoy reading. But my son is into a lot of those, that animated reading books? At first I just thought it was like a waste of time or un-educational because he will watch the animated shows. So, now he’s into reading them. So I’ve learned to just take what I get. As long as he's opening up a book and reading, it’s okay. I make a deal with him for his reading log. It has to be like something where he can write about the setting or the character or the problem.

-I’m waiting for him to get to that point where he’s like really passionate about reading and being, like really loving the story that he’s reading or kind of understanding the story. So I don’t know if he’s still too young [to love reading]. I’m still as a parent trying to figure that out, but I would love to raise kids that do love to read and value time reading instead of like screen time…which we work so hard to try to disconnect them from the screen, unplug the TV… disconnect the wifi…hide the remote…I ran out of hiding spots in the house and I’m like “Maybe I’ll go to the car and throw it under the rug!” But I would love to raise kids that just enjoy reading and like kind of envision the story and mentally just understand. I’m working with my son ‘cause I want him to be an example for his sister.

In these ways, Halimo has been fostering her children’s print literacy development for many years. She is also fighting the battle of encroaching technology. When asked about rules in her home, she shared that all of the expectations and rules for her children were orally
transmitted. However, she recently printed one rule for the first time, laminated it, and posted it on the television: *No TV until homework is done!*

Halimo is deeply appreciative of the Raising Readers program, for many reasons. Her daughter still gets excited about receiving books, the books have always been of very high quality and age appropriate, and Halimo feels that the program helps to encourage reading being seen as something that is pervasive rather than isolated to school or other single contexts:

-When they start giving the books, it’s setting them up to be independent readers or just that reading is important. For me, in our household, I always appreciate it ‘cause I know what we are building and what the reasoning is.

-It’s amazing to go to a checkup and talk to your doctor and then have your kid go home with a nice big book. And they have big books or small books or just, they follow their age category with the books. So it’s, I thought it’s really nice. And it’s brand-new books. You can tell they are brand new. So it’s, I thought it was really nice.

-[My daughter] she gets excited. She still gets those age-appropriate books. As soon as she gets it, she’ll hold onto it. She’ll cherish it. She’ll go home, put it in her book bucket, and she’ll read it…back and forth, take it upstairs to her bedroom.

In terms of the frequency of reading, Halimo did not report that Raising Readers influenced her or her husband to read any more frequently with their children, but did have a positive effect on their enjoyment of reading. Halimo immensely appreciates Raising Readers’ role in making books/reading something that is pervasive, fun, and critically important:

-[Raising Readers books] I think it got them started on really, on opening a book and like dissecting a book before, before they even know how to read. ‘Cause they would get
books when they were really little. So I do think it’s important. I do think it gave them the exposure of books that you, that you get books from even your doctor’s office, not just books that mom and dad buy or the library. Or eventually when they start going to school, that reading is important and it’s everywhere.

-For me, we were, I was, already, I was already aware of how important reading was, ‘cause I didn’t grow up with that. So I think we were already taking those steps to making sure that we have books in the house and we are reading with them. But then I think just having them get books from the doctor kind of made it feel more special.

Halimo has observed differential reactions of her children to Raising Readers books, stating that they both enjoyed the books when they were very young, but that as they grew older, her daughter seemed to continue to enjoy the books more than her son did as he got older. Halimo mentions that her children liked many of the Raising Readers books, but not all, and that being able to choose books might be a nice improvement to the program to help more children enjoy more of the books:

-[They enjoyed some of the stories] I would say some, I think, it’s like ‘cause most of the books were, like I said, they don’t get like a general topic or try to go off what the kid likes. So most of the books are about animals or exploring. I’ve noticed they did like some, but not all. I wouldn’t say all.

-At the beginning, I think when he was a lot younger, he was more excited, but as he’s gotten a little older…he has his own category of books that he likes now. And usually books [from RR] are not based on what they like. I think they just give books that are age-appropriate for them.
She still gets excited. She immediately opens it and looks through it. My daughter would look each, she’ll open it, go through the pages herself. Most times when she was a lot younger, most times when she didn’t know how to read, but she’ll put the pictures together and try to figure out the story. So she’ll go through that. And then when she’s ready, she’ll ask me to read with her or read to her. But most times she’s excited to sit down and do her own examination of the book and go through ‘cause she’s super excited.

They get more options [book choice] at school. ‘cause they’ll have like, each classroom have like a bookshelf, so they’ll choose and they have a library to go to. But at the doctor’s office, the books have already been chosen. I think it would be good [to have options/choice], but everything’s so time restricted with any appointments. I did envision that too before: “I wonder if they can bring like three sets and maybe like she can choose one or we can choose one, but it wasn’t, it not normally like that. And I just think maybe it’s with the time, but I think it would be great to see that [book choice].

In addition to recommending some degree of children’s choosing a book at Well Child visits, Halimo also mentions that books that are specifically—linguistically and culturally—geared towards patients could be helpful, as well as much more anticipatory guidance on the part of medical providers:

-I think that [Somali language books] would be helpful. Having books to cater to your patients because of their background, like books that kind of relate to them, I think that would be nice. To get one bilingual book or like a book in Somali, so at least a mom who’s not that fluent in English can at least open that book, and if she knows how to read, would read to her kids in Somali because I think just hearing the words, or just seeing
their mom opening a book and reading to them will eventually make them want to read too.

- Getting bilingual books and maybe just having five minutes, just to explain to the parent “You’re getting this book because of so and so” I mean, because of this reasoning or how important reading is. Or why they’re getting the books or like making sure that reading is as important as exercising.

- Even if they’ll do that and just let the parent know: “Take this book, sit with your kid five minutes and have your kid open the story and just tell you what—in their own words—what the character’s doing, or you tell them in your own words what the character’s doing…then you can have a dialogue going throughout the day that builds their vocabulary or their sentences.” Maybe doctors can educate their patients on that. That would be nice.

Halimo also shared additional experiences she had had with Raising Readers beyond her experience of her own children receiving books through the program. When Halimo came to Maine as a teenager, she had younger siblings who were born in Maine and, therefore, significantly younger than her. These siblings also received books through Raising Readers while she was a teenager, and sometimes she was present—together with her mother—when her siblings received books at the doctor’s office. Halimo remembers that books were given, but no information was shared as to why books were being given or what the parents or children should do with the books they were receiving. As a teenager, Halimo felt that there was “missing information” when her younger siblings received books from their doctor at Well Child visits:
-I think the fact that sometimes the doctors maybe don’t have a background on the parents. So if the parent doesn’t know how to read, it’s hard for them to value. My mom primarily read and spoke in Somali. She was educated back home. It was so hard for her, she started learning English, but it was, she didn’t, it was, it took her a long, long time. So I don’t think she valued the books that are all in English versus she would always try to find books that were in her own native language.

-I always wondered if they had a little background on the parent just to know how they feel about the books….but now that my kids are born here and we go to pediatrics, they’ve always got books too. They were excited, ‘cause I was excited to look at the books. It was a different generation. I know the value of reading versus a parent that came from a war-torn country and they just want the value of safety and raising your kids in a country.

-That’s something that I didn’t grow up with, or my younger brother, ‘cause he was born here, so I remember him receiving books, but I think ‘cause my parents were not so educated on how important reading is, because we didn’t grow up with that exposure of elementary school. I think at that point, my parents just didn’t really realize how important those books might have been in his life or what was the reason for him getting the books. I think for me as a parent, now I know the importance of reading and what it builds and how it helps kids. So I always value when they get the books. So we always plan on, reading at night, looking at it and things like that.

-Being a parent, and then having my kids be fortunate enough to be born in a country where education is important and they started from like Pre-K all the necessary steps that I missed out. I think as an adult, like you learn from, I mean, you learn from the things
that you, the things I wasn’t exposed to. I remember when I was pregnant with my son, I would do a lot of reading. Anything I could read about, having them being exposed to reading or things like that was very important to me. Definitely I think I do a lot of things that I missed out on with them. That’s where reading comes from…having a bookshelf at home, coming to the library, getting them their own little cards, putting it in in a key chain and having them understand that reading isn’t boring. ‘Cause I didn’t grow up with that!

In these ways, Halimo has a unique vantage point in regard to the different experiences of receiving books through Raising Readers across two generations of her family in Maine. While her children have enjoyed and cherished the books, and she has appreciated the gesture and the positive effect on her family’s enjoyment of reading, these experiences were not the experiences of her younger siblings or her parents when they first arrived in Maine. During our conversations, Halimo recollected that the Raising Readers books were not utilized much by her younger siblings or by her parents when they received them. She attributes this difference to three factors: 1) in Halimo’s experience, the doctors did not (and still do not) provide enough information about why they are giving books to children at Well Child visits, 2) the Raising Readers books were always in English, and while her parents could read Somali when they arrived in Maine, they could not read English, so the English children’s books were not read when they were received by the participant’s younger siblings, and 3) Halimo has developed an understanding of the importance of early reading through her experience of not having had books available to her as a child and through her reading/education while she was pregnant with her first child in Maine. In many ways, Halimo’s family’s experiences—her parents, her own and
siblings, and her children’s experiences—chronicle the shifting of expectations and actions across generations within a single family.

**Cross-Case Analysis: Synthesizing Parents’ Experiences**

In the preceding sections, I conveyed in detail a complete picture—as shared with me by participating parents—of the oral and print literacy practices of each parent, and their children, as well as their experiences and perceptions of the Raising Readers book distribution program. Through the process of creating a rich narrative of each participant and composing analytic memos, similarities and differences in participating parents’ experiences emerged. I include my observations in the next sections before moving on to the analysis of emergent themes that resulted from my inductive coding processes.

My research questions were designed to elicit information regarding parental experiences and observations in regard to reading frequency, enjoyment of reading, and family literacy goals that the participants felt were influenced by their children receiving books at Well Child visits through the Raising Readers (RR) program, specifically:

1. What literacy practices do Somali New Mainers engage in, and what are the cultural associations with those practices; specifically:
   a. What are common *oral* literacy practices of the participating family?
   b. What are common *print* literacy practices of the participating family?
   c. What are the cultural associations and intergenerational transmission of oral and print literacy practices?

2. What are the experiences of Somali New Mainers, and their children, of Maine’s Raising Readers book distribution, and in what ways do Somali New Mainers perceive the program to be affecting children’s and parents’ home literacy practices and literacy
orientation? Specifically, in what ways is Raising Readers influencing parents’ and children’s:

a. reading frequency,

b. enjoyment of reading, and children’s desire to become ‘good readers’/parents’ literacy goals for their children?

Synthesis of Oral and Print Literacy Practices

Parents shared a wealth of literacy practices with me, both oral and print, that are part of their current daily lives. In addition, these practices and experiences are compared and contrasted with oral and print literacy practices from prior periods in these parents’ lives, as well as projected into the future to share the literacy goals that these parents have for their children in time. In the following sections, I will explore the similarities and differences that emerged when looking across the wealth of experiences and information that were shared with me. In a coded analysis of the print and oral literacy practices across participants, there are 57 instances of coded information in regard to Oral Literacy Practices, and 58 instances of Print Literacy Practices.

A few elements emerge as vastly similar across the participants in this study. In terms of print practices with their children, all parents in this study are making English books available to their children and reading to their young children on a regular basis. This observed similarity is especially important within the context of none of these parents having had access to books in their homes as children or having been read to as children, which I’ll share more about in upcoming sections. There is also some similarity in terms of the dominance of the English language, especially if we consider the usage of Somali and English within the context of how many years each parent/participant has been in Maine/the U.S. While Sahra uses Somali as the home language, she has been in Maine less than five years. In contrast, Maryan, Halimo, and
Ahmed have all been in Maine for more than 10 years, and all three homes are either predominantly English or a mix of English and Somali. In this way, there are differences in the dominant home language profile, and while these differences may be related to time in the U.S., this exploratory case study is not designed to establish any such patterns.

All participants report their children enjoying television and watching exclusively in English. Sometimes reading is reported as an enjoyable activity for the children, while other mentions of children being read to or reading are mentioned more as academic pursuits rather than reading being an enjoyable pastime. Regardless of enjoyment, the children are all learning to read and write in English; one family is working on teaching Somali reading and writing at home (Ahmed) and a second family (Halimo) would like to pursue Somali reading and writing as a home learning project after the children have learned Arabic.

The participating parents do not report many instances of reciting or reading poetry, limited singing, and very few instances of print rules or organizing documents (e.g., shopping lists, calendars) visible to children inside the home. The near absence of poetry and singing was surprising to me based on my exploration of Somali oral literacy practices as I was preparing for this study and orienting to Somali literacy practices. This may be an interesting aspect for additional research with Somali New Mainers of older generations than the young parents participating in this study. Namely, I found myself wondering if poetry and singing were nearly absent as a result of these participants not having spent much time in Somalia, or is poetry and singing not as pervasive a literacy practice as I had understood it to be through my literature review, or was poetry and singing a prior practice that has dwindled for these individuals?

Amongst the families of Sahra, Halimo, Ahmed, and Maryan, there is some presence of poetry and singing, but the presence of telling stories that are passed from one generation to the next
was much more prominent, both in frequency of being mentioned, as well as level of detailed recollections shared with me during interviews.

Other similarities across the experiences shared by Maryan, Halimo, Sahra, and Ahmed, are that children’s books—in English, but not in Somali—are abundant. In addition, most text that parents are reading is on electronic devices, and rules, shopping lists, calendars, chore lists are absent as environmental print found inside the home with a very few exceptions of one rule in one home and one behavior chart in another home.

As mentioned, these parents unanimously report telling stories to their children, and that these stories are most often the stories that they heard from their own parents when they were children. These stories are frequently told in English, but not always. Halimo, who has not only her children, but also her parents and many others in Maine, reported that her children hear stories from their parents, grandparents and extended family members; Mom and Dad’s stories are told in English and grandparents’ stories are told in Somali with Mom or Dad present to translate any parts that are not understood by Halimo’s children. Maryan shared similar experiences of her children not necessarily understanding stories and songs in Somali. To a lesser extent, Ahmed shared that sometimes he has to translate to English, but it did not appear to be as common of an occurrence as in Halimo and Maryan’s families. For Sahra’s family, Somali is the home language, and no issues were reported with Somali comprehension or production.

**Synthesis of Experiences of Raising Readers**

In comprehensive coding of all of the information shared by the participating parents across the interviews, my full database of coded information includes 20 references to RR’s effects on enjoyment of reading, 29 references to RR’s effects on reading frequency, and 26 references to RR’s influences on literacy goals (parent’s or child’s).
As with the preceding synthesis of oral and print literacy practices, the following synthesis looks across participants’ shared experiences. It should again be noted that these questions were all in the second structured interview and one participant (Sahra) did not return for the second interview; as such, only three informants’ experiences were shared in regard to the effects of Raising Readers in the in-depth cases above, and are included in the cross-case synthesis of the next section.

Across Ahmed, Maryan and Halimo, the shared experiences of the Raising Readers program indicate that the book distribution program is greatly appreciated by both parents and their children. In addition, while the program is not perceived to have increased the frequency of reading within these families, Raising Readers is reported to have had additional positive effects for participating families. Specifically, parents indicated that, in their estimation, Raising Readers increased the enjoyment of reading, facilitated literacy skill development, and highlighted the critical importance of books and reading.

All three parents indicated that they had multiple sources for children’s books in their homes, including the public library, books sent home by the school for families to keep at home, and books purchased for their children and kept at home. No parents indicated that having enough books to read to their children was an issue for their family, although the lack of Somali and bilingual books was mentioned by both Ahmed and Halimo, and is consistent with several children’s book distribution program studies where bilingual or home language books are provided (Golova et al., 1999; Sanders et al., 2000; Byington et al., 2008; Knauer et al., 2020). In addition, this finding is consistent with recommendations advocating for culturally and linguistically responsive family literacy programming (Anderson et al., 2017; Gillanders & Barak, 2022).
In addition to a lack of Somali and bilingual books overall, the Covid-19 pandemic’s closure of the public library was indicated as a difficulty in having access to enough age-appropriate books at certain times. Overall, Ahmed, Maryan, and Halimo indicated on many occasions that English children’s books are readily available to their families, which is in contrast to the environments where these participants grew up. As noted earlier, none of the parents in this study had access to books in any language in their homes as children. Ahmed attended school in Africa and had access to books at the school, and Halimo had access to books at a few distinct points in her childhood when a tutor was available to catch her and her siblings up a bit on missed schooling.

All three parents reported reading to, reading with, and listening to their children read on a regular basis, and believed that this would have been the case even if they had not been receiving books through Raising Readers. Structures and habits for this differed across families, children, and age groups, and parents are responding to children’s wishes in many cases, for example by listening to a child read who wants to read out loud rather than be read to. In some ways, parents are also leading the charge, for example by initiating night-time bedtime stories, and encouraging talking about books after reading if a child prefers to read alone.

While all parents reported that children open and look at books received through Raising Readers immediately, what happens with the reading of those books differed widely across families. Ahmed shared that his children like to read the Raising Readers books by themselves and then tell their parents about the book. Maryan indicated children opened books immediately at the doctor’s office and flipped through them, but then discarded the books as soon as they arrived home; Maryan then collects the discarded books and brings them to the bedtime reading spot to ensure that the new books get read. Halimo indicated that Raising Readers books are not
only opened immediately, but become treasured objects for a few days after receiving them from the doctor’s office. In these ways, the books are enjoyed by each family in a manner that works best for the children and the parents in that home.

While parents maintained that they would have read to their children the same amount without Raising Readers as they did while receiving books through the book distribution program over the course of their children’s early childhood years, parents did indicate that the Raising Readers books increased their families’ enjoyment of reading. The reasons for this included that the books RR gives out are of very high quality (both in terms of the content and the physical book), are always age-appropriate, and because it is nice to receive a gift. Although I did not ask parents if receiving books had influenced children’s literacy skills, parents did report that the program has positively affected children’s literacy development because of the age-appropriateness of the selected books; the careful selection helps children grow into the books best suited for their emerging literacy skills.

In terms of Raising Readers potentially having an effect on parents’ and children’s goals around literacy, parents all reported that the book distribution program aligned with their goals; as such the parents greatly appreciate this program. Raising Readers underlines the importance that these parents, themselves, place on books and reading: “I was already aware of how important reading was, ‘cause I didn’t grow up with that” (Halimo), and “I like to read, and I want my kids to read as well, and to be independent readers” (Ahmed). Parents are grateful for this additional place where the importance of books and reading are emphasized. In the experiences of these families, children’s book distribution through Raising Readers emphasizes that books are not just something that parents and schools are pushing: “I do think it gave them the exposure of books that you, that you get books from even your doctors’ office, not just books
that mom and dad buy or the library. Or eventually when they start going to school, that reading is important and it’s everywhere” (Halimo). Reading is critical, in an additional context beyond home and school, namely the medical context. In this way, Raising Readers has not transformed the thinking of these participants; books and reading have always been considered crucial by these parents even though they did not grow up with books and reading themselves. Raising Readers is a greatly appreciated resource that provides enjoyment and highlights the crucial role of literacy and books in children’s early years.

**Thematic Analysis: Emergent Themes Across Participants**

Following the deductive coding of information specific to my research questions that helped me to create narratives of each parent—that is, each case as illuminated in the prior sections dedicated to each participating parent—I utilized inductive coding to reveal the themes that emerged across parents’ narratives in regard to trends in the social context of the study, families’ literacy practices, and families’ reflections and suggestions in regards to Raising Readers book distribution. While the content analysis explored the individual experiences of each of the participating parents, the following, thematic analysis, brings together experiences and opinions across parents. These themes are treated holistically, with explicit reference to the participant(s) who expressed ideas related to these themes.

Overall, 414 instances of 15 emergent thematic codes were included in the final database of participants’ shared experiences. Because these codes were inductive in nature, they evolved over time during multiple readings of the transcriptions and multiple times listening to the audio recordings. The list grew over time as new themes emerged, but it also became tighter over time as related concepts were incorporated into single themes. The themes observed, by participant,
are shared in Table 4.2 (next page), and illustrate both the convergence and divergence across themes and participating parents.
Table 4.2  
Emergent Themes by Participating Parent and Across Cases  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
<th>Ahmed</th>
<th>Maryan</th>
<th>Sahra</th>
<th>Halimo</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extended Family &amp; Community</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>63</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tech &amp; Social are Kids’ Preferences</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somali Language Loss</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love Maine</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Practices Declining</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Practices Primarily Stories</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print Practices Primarily Academic</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print Practices Growing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading would have occurred w/out RR</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Choice of Books</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Is Important</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising Readers Is Appreciated</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestion: Anticipatory Guidance</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestion: Bilingual Books</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestion: Healthy Habits Questionnaire</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>414</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the following sections, the thematic codes are explained, with illustrative examples provided along the way. I will start with themes related to participating parents’ views on reading and on Raising Readers, will then zoom out to the full community context and experience within which these views of reading and Raising Readers have developed for these participants, then will share observations about the changes in literacy practices occurring over time within these families before concluding with concrete suggestions and advice provided by participants that could make Raising Readers an even more impactful program in the experience/opinion of Ahmed, Halimo, Sahra, and Maryan.

**Reading and Raising Readers**

Two thematic codes that emerged during data analysis were: Reading Is Important and Raising Readers Is Appreciated. These themes are notable for multiple reasons, perhaps most notably because they were not solicited/explicitly asked about, and because there were so many instances of participants expressing these sentiments (55 comments about the importance of reading, and 31 comments about appreciation for Raising Readers), and they align with many prior studies of parents’ perceptions (Needlman et al., 2005; Byington et al., 2008; Muhumed, 2018; Jimenez et al., 2021).

In terms of the importance of reading, parents shared their beliefs that learning to read in English is a crucial element to success for their children in the United States. For example, Halimo shared: “I think for me as a parent, now I know the importance of reading and what it builds and how it helps kids.” This explicit expression of importance also came through implicitly with actions that parents shared that they were taking, such as reading to their children frequently (all parents), ensuring books were available in the home (all parents), and sometimes teaching them skills, such as teaching preschool age children the alphabet (Ahmed and Maryan),
and routinely asking young elementary school age children to tell parents about a book’s characters, setting, and plot (Halimo).

The importance of reading was also expressed through explanatory values (e.g., Ahmed stated liking Raising Readers “from the start” because he believes reading is important). The parents in this study also contrasted their own childhoods, where books and reading were either unavailable (Maryan) or only available as academic tools through schools (Ahmed) and occasional tutors (Halimo), to their own children’s experiences with books being everywhere. Parents shared that their children were lucky to grow up in this context of widespread book availability; for example, Maryan exclaimed “We’re so happy!!” while explaining that her children’s school has been flooding families’ homes with books since the Covid-19 pandemic closed the schools and libraries. With similar appreciation, Halimo shared that her children are lucky to grow up learning that “Reading is fun, not boring…‘cause I didn’t grow up with that!” and an expression that her children are “So fortunate to be born in a country where education is important.”

Parents shared their views of the importance of reading in the United States and for academic purposes at various points in multiple interviews, and these sentiments were shared in the absence of commentary regarding the importance of oral storytelling. Many examples of family oral stories were shared, and parents—without solicitation—expressed affection for their children’s ongoing interest in family stories; however, parents did not express a desire for their children to become good storytellers. In contrast, parents did share many desires in terms of reading development and outcomes for their children, with goals such as wanting children to “keep developing as readers and like reading,” (Ahmed) be “passionate about reading” and be “able to envision the story and REALLY understand it” (Halimo).
While these stated goals for desired print literacy outcomes, most notably reading, are a sign that these parents are well aware of the central role that print literacy practices and skills will play in their children’s lives, Somali New Mainers may not be fully leveraging or even fully aware of the vast oral literacy \textit{funds of knowledge} that has been a strong foundation for their families for generations. This strikes me as potentially notable because I see a parallel to language loss that occurs within immigrant families, and which often is only regretted once the tide has shifted too far to reverse it (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Kouritzin, 2000). Parents may not (yet) be aware of the oral literacy \textit{funds of knowledge} they possess, and may only realize its value once it has been lost.

While parents did express regret at their children’s emerging Somali language loss, they did not express regret for the potential loss of the oral tradition. Again, these themes are emergent; I did not ask parents if they believed reading to be important, if they felt that their children were at risk for losing the Somali language or if they felt their children were at risk of losing some oral literacy traditions. What is shared in this section are emergent themes; unpacking the broader landscape with many more parents reporting out on these emergent themes would be necessary to better understand and find further evidence (or lack thereof) of these observed themes.

Deeply related to the dozens of observed instances of the importance of reading expressed by participants, a large number of comments about parents’ appreciation for the Raising Readers program resulted in the theme of Raising Readers being appreciated. As shared in the individual case analyses, Raising Readers book distribution was not experienced as having increased the frequency of reading for any of these parents and their children, but it was reported to have increased the enjoyment of reading for all families. Within this context, the comments
about appreciating Raising Readers could be interpreted in many ways. One of the desired outcomes of children’s book distribution programs is to get families to spend more time with books with their children; however, families that already intended to spend time daily with their children in shared reading do not necessarily have the opportunity to increase the amount of time. While this outcome of increasing shared book time wasn’t experienced by these parents, the increase in enjoyment in reading is another goal of children’s book distribution programs—the more we enjoy shared reading, the more we are likely to engage in it. Of course, it is also important to note that this is an exploratory case study, with no pre- and post-intervention measurements and no control group. Participating parents do not believe that Raising Readers affected their frequency of book reading, but knowing whether or not it did is unanswerable in this study’s design.

Parents shared that their children like the books given by the doctors through Raising Readers either always (Ahmed; and Maryan stated “Whatever book the doctor gives, the children like it!!) or sometimes (Halimo). Parents also indicated that children enjoy going to the doctor because they know they will receive a book (Halimo), tell the parent who didn’t take the child to the doctor about having received a book when that non-accompanying parent comes home for the day (Ahmed), open the book to look at it right away in the doctor’s office as soon as the child is given a book (all parents), and “cherish the book” for several days after receiving it (Halimo). In these ways, participating parents have observed their children’s appreciation for receiving books through Raising Readers.

In addition to children’s positive reactions to receiving books, parents expressed their own appreciation for the program because of its alignment with the aforementioned expressed value that Reading Is Important. Participants see Raising Readers as a complementary influence
that aligns with their goals for their children as readers, for example Halimo expressed appreciation for Raising Readers because she sees “how it aligns with what she is building as a parent.” Parents also stated that they wished programs like Raising Readers existed in the refugee camps and in Somalia (Ahmed), that Raising Readers books are of very high quality and it’s so “nice to give us books” (Maryan), and that it’s “amazing to go to a checkup and have your kid go home with a nice, big, age-appropriate, brand-new book” (Halimo).

While parents did not believe, in this sample, that they read more with their children as a result of Raising Readers, the increased enjoyment, and the vast appreciation for the program were evident. In this way, Raising Readers is not, for these families, fulfilling a critical gap in the form of getting books into homes that do not have any; for example, Maryan responded to my query about Raising Readers potentially having increased the frequency of reading with an authoritative “No matter what, we have something to read.” Instead, Raising Readers is fostering a love and enjoyment of reading amongst all participating parents and their children, and it was reported to advance children’s skills by two parents (Ahmed and Maryan). These results are very similar to the findings from the Raising Readers parent surveys and interviews in terms of increasing enjoyment of reading and supporting skill development (Groenhout & Bennett-Armistead, 2016), establishing a tentative alignment with native English speaker Maine families and the Somali New Mainer sample included in this study.

**Experiences and Community Context**

Several themes emerged as considerable commonalities in terms of parents’, and their children’s, experiences in Maine and in the Somali New Mainer community. These were that parents unanimously love life in Maine for several reasons, despite the snow and frigid winters, that their children overwhelmingly prefer social activities and technology as their named
‘favorite activities’ in response to an open-ended question, and that parents have a broad network of community and family members who are crucially important to them (Clements, 2021).

In terms of life in Maine, parents expressed appreciation for the safety, peacefulness, and nature of Maine. These parents also reported that there are opportunities for jobs and that everything is close by within the community and easily reachable because there is not much traffic. One participant noted being “proud” to raise his family in Maine (Ahmed), and another participant talked about many of her friends from high school moving on from Maine, looking for “bigger cities and bigger dreams,” (Halimo), but she, herself, wants the security and opportunities that Maine offers. These statements all provide some insight into the reasons why so many from the Somali diaspora have chosen Lewiston as the place to make a life for themselves and their families. These statements of appreciation for the city of Lewiston align with prior findings in terms of what Somali migrants are looking for when they select a long-term home (van Liempt, 2011; Huisman, 2011; van Heelsum, 2011; Clements, 2021).

In addition to the broader context of Lewiston and Maine’s opportunities, space, and safety, participants talked at length about the value of community and family, both in their culture and in their current familial and community contexts. Halimo talked about extended families living together in intergenerational households, as well as the role of neighbors and community in taking care of each other (Ahmed), helping to raise each other’s children (Maryan and Ahmed), and providing a rich social environment for all individuals in the community (Ahmed and Halimo). Participants shared that the Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacted their families in multiple ways, including disrupting employment and schooling (all parents), and vastly reducing social connections and events (Ahmed and Halimo).
Everyone spoke about their experiences in the Somali culture that they grew up in despite spending very little time, if any, in Somalia. Halimo, Sahra, Ahmed, and Maryan have a robust experience of the Somali culture as communal, with neighbors and family all working together. Ahmed utilized the terminology “collective community” to express how everyone works together, organizing feasts for an entire neighborhood, keeping an eye on each other’s children, and working together to achieve outcomes. Halimo talked about how her children are “so lucky” to grow up with a huge collection of aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents because when the participant was a child, she had only her parents and her brother. Halimo shared with me that she remembered that in times when her family was the only Somali family in a neighborhood, her mother would actively go out looking to “find our own people that have our background and try to connect.” Similarly, Ahmed stated “When you move to a new place and you feel isolated, you have no choice but to move and find a place where people speak the same language as you do.”

This deep gratitude for family and community’s presence, and expressed need to seek it out when it is not present, underlines the social and networked Somali culture (Bigelow, 2010; Clements, 2021). The experiences of the participating parents in this study indicate how vitally important this cultural context is to these parents, and illuminates the migration of Somali refugees to hubs of Somali citizens seeking not only opportunity and safety, but desiring to be in a place where individuals can come together in the social, linguistic, religious, and cultural contexts that they share as Somali citizens.

One final theme in this grouping of parents’ shared experiences is that the parents I interviewed unanimously reported social encounters and usage of technology to be their children’s favorite activities. This information was shared in the context of response to an open-ended question about their children’s favorite activities—a question often included in book
distribution questionnaires to ascertain if reading is a “favorite” activity of a child. No participant cited reading as a favorite activity of one of their children, which I interpret as a token of honesty and an indication of social desirability not leading participants to certain responses (Denzin, 1970). While it is always nice to hear that a child loves to read, it is critically important that we have confidence in the trustworthiness of parents’ reports. Not only are the social and technological responses a token of honesty because nobody indicated reading as a favorite activity, but these responses are related to the prior theme of the importance of family and community. In this day and age, we should expect children’s favorite activities to include technology (no matter how much we might lament this fact); that social activities were mentioned just as often as technology should provide a glimmer of hope for all of us parents!

Trends in Oral and Print Practices

Overall, my analysis of participants’ narratives shows more print practices among participants’ families than oral practices. Within this broad trend, oral practices are primarily reported to be for telling stories and for religious purposes, while print is primarily for academic and other learning contexts in purpose. Although all participants reported telling stories to their children—stories of their own childhood experiences, and stories of their parents’ and grandparents’ experiences that were told to them—there are a few shifts in terms of storytelling practices and language used to tell stories that are occurring in these families.

Parents reported that their children love hearing stories, sharing details like the fact that children will ask parents and other family members to tell the same stories again and again. Ahmed shared: “My child sometimes when he talks to my—to his—grandma, you know, and his grandma will tell stories, ad then, and a couple of days later he will ask again: ‘can you repeat that story for me again?’” Children also like to talk about the stories, find the stories
“fascinating,” (Halimo) and frequently ask if the stories that are least like the children’s current daily lives are actually true (Maryan and Halimo). Maryan shared that when her children’s grandmother tells stories to the children in Somali, they don’t understand the story; she goes on to explain: “So I was translating everything and they were like ‘is this REAL?!’”

Participants shared with me that the stories are a beloved element in their families because it allows their children to know what their parents’ and other family members’ lives were like before they were in Maine, which, according to the children’s reactions, is a positive experience for them. In addition, parents enjoy sharing their stories with their children; as noted by Halimo, telling stories is a good way to “relive the moment” and remember loved ones who have passed away, and telling stories, overall, gives a “good feeling” (Halimo).

Although children were reported to not only enjoy storytelling, but to talk about it and ask for repeat performances, it is important to note that children often do not understand the stories if they are told in Somali (Maryan, Halimo, and to a lesser extent, Ahmed). This report was also made of children listening to parents and other family members sing in Somali (Maryan), but, as already noted, there were far fewer singing family members reported than family members who tell stories. Likewise, poetry was another oral tradition that participants were asked about, and all participants denied reciting poetry themselves, and only Sahra and Maryan indicated having heard poetry recited on a regular basis at any point. In this way, oral storytelling is by far the dominant oral practice reported to have been a past or a current practice for these individuals.

While oral storytelling is the most common oral practice, and reportedly enjoyed by all participants and all their children, there are some potentially concerning threads in terms of the practice shifting over time. In regard to the language of storytelling, itself, the majority of the
children in this study cannot understand stories told to them in Somali (Maryan, Halimo, and to a lesser extent, Ahmed). Since receptive language (listening/understanding) is a more passive skillset than productive language (speaking), this is of particular concern in terms of degree of language loss that has already occurred in these families. The dominant pattern for language acquisition and loss in the United States had historically been for the “first generation to learn enough English to survive economically; the second generation continued to speak the parental tongue at home, but English in school, at work and in public life; by the third generation, the home language shifted to English, which effectively became the mother tongue for subsequent generations” (Portes & Schauffler, 1994). As indicated by Portes & Schauffler, the above three-generation pattern was observed to be shifting towards a more rapid change between the first and the second generation, which is what appears to be happening in some participating parents’ families.

In their 1994 study of nearly 3,000 second generation immigrants, Portes and Schauffler found that the second generation was nearly universally proficient in English (L2), and that L1 proficiency was not robust. Similar patterns have emerged throughout the nineties and 2000s: language acquisition of the majority language (English) is happening quickly, but reduction in usage of the minority/L1 languages these individual’s families came to the U.S. speaking is also happening more and more quickly (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Portes & Hao, 1998, Kouritzin, 2006). In this way, we are witnessing an acceleration from the historical three-generation language shift to a process that may already be complete by the second generation. In the case of this study’s participants’ families, language loss may be on a course to be lost from one generation to the next, with the study’s participants being fluent speakers of Somali, and many of their children
not speaking the language, and also having difficulties to understand it. This topic will be addressed again in depth later.

In addition to the declining usage and understanding of the Somali language, as reported by multiple parents in expressing that they tell stories to their children, but usually in English because the children do not understand if they tell them in Somali, the ability to memorize and retell a story was explicitly noted to have been lost by one of the participants (Maryan). In sharing examples of how her mother told stories to her when she was a child, and recounting how much she loved those stories and the experience of listening to her mother, Maryan went on to explain her awe of her mother’s ability to retell a story. Maryan expressed her awe at her mother’s ability to retell an entire story, full of details and at great length. When describing these experiences to me, she shook her head incredulously, recounting her reaction when her mother would tell a story: “I don’t understand how my mom KNOW?!!?” In addition to being in awe of her mother’s ability to recite a long story, Maryan shared the beauty of hearing those stories outside by a campfire. She describes the special moments with her mother in the evening: “[We had] no technology. It was so beautiful.”

Similar to extensive oral storytelling, Maryan also reported that her mother recited poetry to her when she was a child, but Maryan isn’t able to remember all of a poem, so she does not recite poetry for her children. This skill, for this parent, was experienced in listening to her mother recite poetry, but is not a skill she practices herself. In addition to the skill’s displacement over generations, Maryan reports that although she loved her mother’s storytelling and poetry as a child, her own kids prefer technology. She reads to her children because she knows it is important, and states that she “needs a book to read to her kids” even though her mother never
needed a book to be able to tell a story; Maryan’s mother told stories all the time, remembering them by heart.

In contrast to some of the shifting in oral practices and in the Somali language itself, print practices are growing quickly in the families of parents in this study. As previously noted, and of crucial importance, none of these parents grew up with books at home or were read to by their parents; indeed, only Halimo reported that her parents could read (in any language). Of participating parents, all read English, but only one reads in Somali (Ahmed). Across all participants and languages read, the languages they read were learned through instruction, rather than through social transmission of literacy practices. In this way, these parents are creating a vastly different context of family literacy practice than the contexts within which they grew up. As shared with me, their family literacy practices while they were growing up did not include children’s books or shared reading at home, while some participants reported access to books through school and tutors. While some participants had access to books and learned how to read, they did so without first having the context of print literacy developing in an emergent manner (Teale & Sulzby, 1986) through home/family based shared reading practices.

This context illuminates the seismic shift in the experiences of these families, with vastly different experiences of the parents as children when compared to the context and experiences these parents are creating for their own children. The parents are offering ample opportunities for exposure to print within their homes, which are potentially expanded due to the Covid-19 pandemic’s school closures. For example, Ahmed and his wife are actively teaching their children at home, starting with the Somali alphabet in preschool years to the Arabic alphabet to learn Arabic for religious purposes later on. Maryan is frequently asking her children to read out loud to her, Sahra is frequently reading to her daughter, and Halimo is coaching her children on
being able to summarize a book’s plot, setting, and characters after having read the book. These parents are all actively steering their children away from non-educational technology as much as feasible, and in the case of one parent, actively steering their children’s technology time towards educational content (Ahmed). In short, these parents see themselves as active participants and teachers in their children’s learning of print literacy skills, and this model for home-based print literacy learning is a significant shift from the home literacy practices with which these parents grew up.

**Suggestions on Books and Raising Readers**

One of the emerging themes related to frequency of shared reading was that English children’s books were plentiful in these families’ homes and community settings, and these parents started reading to children when they were very young (and believe they would have done so even if they had not received books through Raising Readers). Participating parents shared these as explanations for their impression that receiving books through Raising Readers had not increased the amount of time/frequency that they spent reading with their children. Ahmed shared “We have plenty of books, and he reads those books. It doesn’t feel like he’s in need of books,” while Maryan explained “We have a lot of books,” and went on to exclaim that they have so many children’s books in the home that “We need to do a donation!”

In addition to a plentiful number of English children’s books being available within these families’ homes, participants reported being in tune to the importance of reading—as noted above, this was explained through the lenses of the parents not having had those opportunities at home, and the overarching U.S. context, where reading skills are important. Halimo explained that she “would have done the same even without Raising Readers” because she became aware of the importance of reading as a young adult in Maine.
As outlined in earlier sections, parents are greatly appreciative of the Raising Readers program even though they do not report that it has transformed their literacy practices within their households in terms of frequency of reading. That the program has been an enjoyable one and has reinforced the ideas they already had in regard to the critical importance of books and reading is enough to make these parents fans of the program.

Parents did provide some suggestions in regards to ways in which the program could be modified to have an even bigger impact for children, and for Somali New Mainers in particular. These suggestions included some mechanism for choice, distribution of bilingual books instead of English only, increasing anticipatory guidance provided to parents, and adding reading to the Healthy Habits Questionnaire (a copy of the current questionnaire is provided in Appendix D) that parents fill out at well-child visits.

Halimo brought up the idea that reading should be one of the questions posed on the Healthy Habits Questionnaire (Appendix D) that all parents fill out at each Well Child visit. She noted that the doctor’s office already asks about drinking enough water, getting enough sleep, eating enough fruits and vegetables, spending enough time exercising, and spending less than the recommended amount of time on electronics. Why not ask about reading/time with books in this context? I bring her suggestion forward with particular reverence: as both a parent and a literacy advocate, I think it’s a brilliant suggestion that could serve as a reminder for parents who already “know” they should share books frequently, and a conversation opener for the doctor with any parents who don’t know, or who report that it’s not a current practice in their household.

All parents indicated that the doctors from whom their children receive(d) books did not provide much (if any) information about why the book was being given to the child. While parents appreciate the gesture of receiving a book, and like that it makes books more prevalent
than just school, home, and library, Halimo expanded on this to state that doctors should be giving much more advice to parents when they give out the books, especially for families who may not have already heard at length how important books are to providing an academic foundation while positively influencing a child’s overall early childhood experiences and developmental trajectory.

As shared in Halimo’s narrative, she has experienced Raising Readers in two contexts: firstly, as the older sibling of children receiving books and then as a mother. At the time of this study, she had one child receiving books and another child recently having aged out of the Raising Readers program. She recalls that when her younger siblings received books, Halimo’s mother never did anything with them because nobody explained to her what she should do with them, and she couldn’t read English anyway. Halimo reflected on the experience her mother had, coming to the U.S. in search of safety, and not having the background of knowing about the importance of reading to young children. She added: “She started learning English, but it was, it took her a long, long time. So I don’t think she valued the books (Raising Readers included) that are all in English versus she would always try to find books that were in her own native language (…) I remember going through pediatrics, um, with my younger sibling too, and he would get books and my mom was never like amazed or impressed with them.”

In addition to the books being exclusively in English, Halimo shared with me that she felt more anticipatory guidance from the doctor when giving out the children’s books during well-child visits could have a positive impact for families. She related: “It was never explained how important it is for parents to take this moment or where these books are coming from or what is Raising Readers. (…) I think they’re maybe not taking the time maybe to explain it the right way to the parent.” In this way, she is not only sharing her belief that additional anticipatory guidance
would be helpful to at least some parents whose children are receiving books through Raising Readers, but she is also sharing the trajectory of change within her own family in regard to the experience of receiving books through Raising Readers. Especially for our newest New Mainers, guidance on the importance of reading could be the critical difference that results in books being tossed aside or books being cherished objects in the child’s home.

When mentioning the possibility of children being able to choose their own books from amongst a selection of age-appropriate books, parents indicated that they recognized that this would be more complicated for Raising Readers and for the doctors’ offices, but parents felt it was a sometimes-crucial element to ensuring books are enjoyed by their children. Although Maryan stated that her children liked “all” of the books they received through Raising Readers, other parents reported that their children liked “some” of the books (Halimo and Ahmed). This comment was made specifically in regard to interest, or lack thereof, in a book’s topics and characters; although the Raising Readers books were unanimously experienced as being of high quality in both content and physical form, sometimes the characters or topics were just not interesting to some of the children.

In a similar vein, parents reported that their children love going to the public library or the school library and being able to select their own books. This contrast was mentioned specifically in regard to the perceived enjoyment of Raising Readers books, and offered as an alternative through which there could be even greater enjoyment amongst children of the Raising Readers books if choices were available, at least for somewhat older children at well-child visits. Maryan and Halimo both acknowledged that having more books and letting children select one would be logistically difficult, but stated this opinion as a result of watching their children choose books at the library versus receive a book chosen in advance.
Parents were very keen on the idea of Raising Readers distributing bilingual books instead of English only, and it should be noted that this was not a question in the structured interview protocol, but rather a suggestion that came up repeatedly and enthusiastically amongst the participating parents in this study (Halimo, Ahmed, and to a lesser extent, Maryan). The reasons for this were many, and ranged from a desire to make distributed books accessible to parents who can read one language but not the other (Halimo), as well as an opportunity for a parent who has learned to read in English already to see the Somali translation (which for many Somali parents in Maine is a language they have not yet learned to read). In this way, bilingual books would be a mechanism for making books more accessible to a wider audience, as well as serving as an opportunity for children to learn or maintain a language that they are at risk of losing, and for parents who speak Somali and read English it could be an avenue to learning to read their native language (Ahmed).

In an even broader sense, bilingual books were discussed from a standpoint of enhancing multicultural awareness amongst all recipients of Raising Readers books. A child growing up in a home where only English is spoken could be exposed to other languages, and indeed, even to the fact that there are other languages spoken by Mainers all around them even if not in their own neighborhood. In this way, bilingual books could serve all children and families as a mechanism of awareness of the many languages spoken in Maine, as well as a potential mechanism for dabbling in learning some of these languages that are spoken by neighbors but the family has not yet been directly exposed to.

Across all of my thematic findings, the idea of bilingual books generated significant excitement amongst participating parents, and the realization of possible or ongoing Somali language loss generated significant regret. The topic of Somali language loss being experienced
amongst participating parents will be covered extensively in the next section. That the absence of Somali printed materials could be a key factor in preventing more/ongoing Somali language loss, and as such these two themes and their shared experiences across participants are directly related, should not be overlooked.

**Extended Family and Community, and Somali Language Loss**

The final two emergent themes from this study reveal an all-encompassing broader family and community network that is relied upon and enjoyed by participating families, and—as noted in the suggestion for bilingual books—an indication of rapid first language loss amongst the children of these participants. I will treat each of these separately, but will also draw attention to the interconnectedness of language with community/family practices, and belonging. Again, please recall that these are emergent themes: I did not ask participants about the role of extended family/community in their lives or if Somali language loss was potentially occurring. Through this lens of emergent themes across participants, the combined breadth and depth of these experiences can potentially be interpreted with significant weight.

In terms of family, extended family, and community involvement, participants all shared appreciation for the people around them and their roles in their lives. Common examples were extended family members and their children’s teachers. Also mentioned were non-family neighbors, although the Covid-19 pandemic was reported to have disrupted contact with neighbors and community significantly.

The parents participating in this study contrasted their deep appreciation for Maine with the places they had settled—for brief periods of time—before coming to Lewiston. Ahmed, who lived briefly in a large U.S. city before moving to Lewiston stated: “[U.S. city name] there was not the sense of community that there is in Lewiston,” and further explained, “If you come to a
new place and you don’t know anybody, it would be a tough transition.” Maryan, who had also lived briefly in another large U.S. city, shared that life there was very isolating because everything was far apart and there was a lot of traffic. In contrast, in Lewiston, participants feel connected to their community, their children’s teachers, and enjoy the closeness of everything they need. It should be noted that these participants who have been in the U.S. for many years first spent a few months in another place and now have been in Lewiston for many years. In this way, Somali New Mainers have sought out a place where they consider life to be good, and then stayed.

When explaining the Somali culture, Ahmed referred to the Somali culture as a “collective community,” and explained that in Somali culture, all adults nearby will contribute to watching your kids if you have to be away. American culture was reported to be different, and the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the degree of separation and individuality that Ahmed has observed in the Maine Somali community as compared to Somali culture back home. In addition to adults keeping each other’s children in line, he also shared that there was no homework help or tutoring available in Somali schools, or in the refugee camps; if you needed help with homework, you had to ask your friends or your siblings to help you. For Ahmed, given that his parents couldn’t read, help from parents was not one of the available options for family or community-based help. In these ways, the support network for Ahmed extended beyond the formal (school) and the nuclear family, which is the dominant model in many American children’s lives. He shared his experience as a child before coming to the US: “There’s no like after school program. There’s no homework help. There’s no tutoring…there are some private schools that you have to pay, but, you know, you don’t have that much money to pay that fee. So, you either ask for a friend to help you or a brother or sister, if you have one,” and went on to
explain when I asked if his parents also helped him when he needed it academically: “My parents had never been to school.” In this environment, siblings, friends, and neighbors were crucial to having the materials (books) and the support system that he desired in order to get the best education he could.

Three of the participants in this study had parents who lived in Lewiston either together with the participant’s family or very close by. Parents shared that when their mothers lived with them or close by, their mothers took care of the children and would take them to the park. Participants’ children also have an array of cousins, aunts and uncles nearby, and Halimo stated that she can’t imagine moving somewhere else, saying that their own kids are “so lucky” to live in a place with so much extended family nearby. For Halimo, who grew up with only her parents and siblings nearby, she considers her children’s experience to be far preferable: “Me and my siblings had a really close bond ‘cause we didn’t grow up with a lot of Somali kids.” She went on to explain her close relationship with her siblings being the result of her mother’s encouragement: “‘Cause we’re in a foreign land. So, my mom…it was so hard for her to trust people when she doesn’t speak the language, so she would always make sure that we stick together and be each other’s friends.” In this way, the broader Somali community in Lewiston has some similarity to the community lifestyle in Somalia or the refugee camps: parents and their children have extended family and other Somali community members to rely on, to socialize with, and to practice religion with.

Participants and their children were reported to be practicing Islam in multiple ways. Prayers are recited at home multiple times a day, male community members attend Friday services, and several children had just started going to Dugi religious schooling on the weekends since this too had been shut down for a period during the Covid-19 pandemic. The
parents participating in this study are all raising their children within the Islamic faith and community, teaching their children prayers in Arabic orally from a very young age, and in the case of two families, teaching their children the Arabic alphabet to deepen their study of the Qur’an and their understanding of their religion (Halimo and Ahmed). The practice of Islam, and recitation of prayers in Arabic, was uniform across all participants, with parents sharing different approaches to what they are teaching their children at home and their aspirations for their religious practices and mastery of Arabic.

Ahmed mentioned that in teaching Arabic to the children, it also increases metalinguistic awareness for the children because Arabic is written right to left instead of left to right, and has a different script than the Latin script of English and Somali. In these ways, exposing children to Arabic, and helping them learn the alphabet and memorize prayers is not only the acquisition of yet another language for yet another purpose in life, but it also increases the foundational knowledge that the children have about the possible structures and forms of various languages. In addition to language learning, Halimo shared that as a parent, she places great value for the Islamic teachings her children are studying at Dugsi on the weekends, expressing: “They learn the value of Islam, and what we practice.” In addition to learning about the Islamic faith and practices, her children are learning the Arabic alphabet, and she is just starting out to learn the Arabic alphabet together with her children.

It should be noted that the language of religion was reported to be shifting in some ways in Maine, but not others. All participants reported that they pray, and have their children pray, in Arabic. However, it was also shared that the language of religious services at the mosque has changed over the years. Originally offering services in Somali and Arabic, they have more recently added English to the religious services to ensure that new Mainers who may not be
proficient in Arabic or Somali still have the opportunity to fully participate in their traditional religious practices even if it needs to be in a new language (English).

The final emergent theme uncovered in this study was related to the prior theme of suggesting that Raising Readers expand to provide bilingual books; namely, the final theme emerged around a broad spectrum of first language (potential) loss amongst the children of participating families. Sahra made no mention of potential Somali language loss, but it should be noted that she and her daughter had been in the U.S. for less than five years. For the three participants in the U.S. more than a decade, Somali language loss was mentioned either explicitly or implicitly through the sharing of language use inside the home and the statements made by Ahmed, Maryan, and Halimo in regard to their children’s lack of understanding of Somali language stories and/or songs.

For two participants’ children, Somali language loss has already largely occurred (Maryan and Halimo). It should be noted that in these cases, it is more likely a case of incomplete first language acquisition than a case of an acquired first language being lost (Levine, 2000; Montrul, 2008). For these children, born and raised in Lewiston with parents who speak English as well as their first language of Somali, and surrounded by English in the community, the amount of exposure to Somali and to English may have favored the acquisition of English. What was noted by both Halimo and Maryan was largely social motivation on the part of the children; namely, the children encounter other children and speak English together. Maryan shared that her oldest child spoke Somali when he was little, but once he went to school, he quickly transitioned to English, and all his younger siblings quickly followed suit, with the youngest having the least exposure to Somali in this fashion. Halimo shared that because she and her husband both spoke English and Somali, they spoke too much English to each other to expect
the children to pick up Somali in the home. For both Maryan and Halimo, although extended family members speak to the children in Somali, the children often do not understand, necessitating translation on the part of the parents.

Halimo expressed deep regret for the potential that her children might grow up to not speak Somali, noting that she didn’t realize how important it was to not lose a language—until she witnessed that it was happening. Halimo is now working hard to shift the momentum in the direction of strengthening the children’s Somali skills orally, and one day hopes that the children will also learn to read and write in Somali. Halimo also shared an observation that language loss happens so quickly that it snuck up on her, and stated that the reason why it is happening is because of English’s dominant role day to day: “When you have another language that dominates the most, you’re gonna forget about the language you don’t use anymore.”

In addition to Halimo’s and Maryan’s opinions that their children were not as proficient in Somali as they would like/expect them to be, Ahmed shared ways that he is actively trying to promote and ensure that Somali language loss does not occur. While Ahmed and his wife have not created any language use rules in the home, they are cognizant of the amounts of Somali and English in the home and actively redirect toward Somali when they feel that English is becoming dominant. Ahmed does not want to introduce rules around reading or around Somali and English language usage because “You want your kids to express in a language that fits….in a language that they can fluently express themselves.” Ahmed is actively encouraging a balance across Somali and English language usage inside the home: “I want to make sure that it’s balanced. I’ve seen that [other] kids, that, when they’re growing up, they never spoke Somali. So now it’s just English and I think it’s sad.” In this way, Ahmed has already observed Somali language loss in
families in the community, and has developed strategies to prevent this from occurring in his own home.

The language loss theme and the importance of community and family are interrelated, as will be discussed in the coming chapter, much like the development of print literacy practices appears to be inversely related to the maintenance of oral literacy practices. I will be reframing these findings as they fit into the concepts of literacy as cultural practice, which stems from each family and each community’s funds of knowledge and evolves within families and communities over time. As shared by the participating parents in this study, literacy practices are shifting rapidly amongst these individuals and their children. How these practices continue to evolve, and what stands to be gained—and lost—along the way, are worthy of continued study and programming to best support our communities and families across the State of Maine in the development of new practices and the maintenance of existing ones.
CHAPTER 5
IMPLICATIONS

This case study was developed to explore participating parents’ experiences of children’s book distribution and how the print-oriented literacy practice of parents engaging in shared reading time fits into the broader tapestry of family literacy practices within a specific population. The Somali New Mainer population is one whose literacy history is heavily weighted towards oral literacy practices based on several historical factors: Somali having a widespread script only since 1972, low print literacy levels in the country of origin, and the civil war disrupting education opportunities in Somalia as well as displacing many Somali citizens, including those who participated in this research.

This study was designed to explore in what ways a print-literacy oriented program—Maine’s Raising Readers children’s book distribution program—might be achieving its intended effects of fostering shared book reading time and enjoyment amongst children and their parents. With little prior research investigating the impact of children’s book distribution programs in populations that have historically been more heavily oriented towards oral family literacy practices than print literacy practices, I was curious to undertake this study to explore how the program might be experienced by one such population: Somali New Mainers. What participating parents shared with me is not only a robust history of oral literacy traditions, but also a, more recent, print one. For participating parents, shared book reading was not part of their families’ literacy practices when they were children, but it is part of every participating parent’s literacy practices that they engage in with their own children.

I designed this study anticipating that I would catalog many responses during the interview phase that would be beyond the realm of potential program improvements to pass on to
Raising Readers, and this turned out to be the case. While it may not be feasible to make all suggested modifications to the Raising Readers program—or indeed even make any of them—despite this potential, this study does provide some insights into potential modifications to Raising Readers. At the same time, it provides insights that can be utilized by others; namely, teachers, doctors, and parents. I conducted this study to see if children’s book distribution programs might be missing the mark completely within populations where parents have limited print literacy in their own language(s), where shared book reading may not have previously been a cultural practice, and where additional factors of economic stability and general well-being are also not to be simply taken for granted. While I hope that the findings here can be utilized in an applied manner, the reality may be that the creation of a new program would be a helpful addition to the literacy and language landscape of Somali New Mainers. This is a model suggested in the pediatric literature for situations where general population interventions may not serve special population needs (Cates, Weisleder, & Mendelsohn, 2016).

This case study is small in scale and exploratory in nature, but yields intriguing findings in the realm of family literacy practices and the utilization and experiences of children’s book distribution programs within a specific newcomer population. I cannot overstate the importance of treating these exploratory findings as a bridge towards more in-depth study instead of assuming that because the four families I interviewed have had these experiences, that all Somali New Mainer families have had similar experiences. That being said, there was considerable variation in my sample of participants (gender, age and number of children, length of time in the U.S., and educational experiences shared); as such, we need not expect that this is a completely non-representative sample.
In addition to variation in participants, the responses that I received varied considerably, which has helped me interpret the findings with some degree of confidence that the answers given were not simply engineered to be socially desirable. Finally, since Halimo shared views of Raising Readers from both the perspective of being a current parent, as well as witnessing her younger siblings receive books when she was a teenager, we can see the evolution in practices and opinions over time within one family. The reception of Raising Readers books with her younger siblings was markedly different from her own reception of books now that she has her own children. This reported evolution within a single family reminds us that there is not only variation across families, but variations within families over time as contexts, needs, and desires change.

Families I did not interview for this study may be somewhat similar to Halimo’s parents, who could not read English, and did not make an attempt to utilize the English Raising Readers books with Halimo’s younger siblings. Families I did not interview may also be like Halimo herself, who greatly appreciates the Raising Readers books and is thrilled to live in a place where books are everywhere/not just the purview of teachers. Families I did not interview may resemble something in between no utilization of Raising Readers books and high appreciation for Raising Readers books. What I consider important to remember is that this study reveals examples all across the spectrum if we consider the full array of experiences shared with me by Halimo, Sahra, Ahmed, and Maryan. As an exploratory case study, there is a broad collection of experiences revealed through the individual narratives and the comparison of experiences across participating parents.

As emphasized in previous chapters, none of the participating parents were read to as children, and all participating parents read to their own children. As such, it is not the case that
the primarily oral literacy tradition from which our Somali New Mainers came from has made children’s books undesirable or superfluous for the parents included in this study. The oral traditions are evident in participants’ practices and, even more so, in their myriad histories. In this way, Somali families are embracing print literacy practices, potentially even to the detriment of the maintenance of the oral traditions. As such, the transformation of dominant literacy practices from oral to—at some point potentially for each family—the dominance of print practices may very much align with the prevailing pattern of language acquisition and language loss amongst immigrant populations in the United States (Portes & Schauffler, 1994; Portes & Hao, 1998; Wong Fillmore, 1991; Wong Fillmore 2000). Somali New Mainers are learning English and adopting print practices, but will they maintain their Somali language and their oral literacy practices alongside? With this pressing question in mind, I will share implications relevant to several interested parties: doctors, book distribution program administrators, teachers, and parents.

**Implications for Doctors**

Participating parents in this study, as with many prior published qualitative and quantitative studies, greatly appreciate receiving a children’s book when visiting their child’s pediatrician’s office. Not only do they appreciate the book, but they appreciate that books are an element of the medical landscape, which helps to show how important books are. In addition to this appreciation across parents in various studies (Byington et al., 2008; Wray & Medwell, 2015; Groenhout & Bennett-Armistead, 2016; Gillanders & Barak, 2022), children’s book distribution programs have been shown to produce multiple positive effects for families’ frequency and enjoyment of reading (Needlman et al., 1991; High et al, 1998; Golova et al., 1999; Needlman et al., 2005), as well as targeted improvements in children’s emergent literacy
skills (Wade & Moore, 1998; Wade & Moore, 2000; Mendelsohn et al., 2001; Sharif et al., 2002).

Parents participating in this study mentioned that more guidance in regards to children’s book distribution from medical professions is desired. Participating parents mentioned that some guidance was given when Raising Readers books were distributed, but not much guidance, and they felt that more information would be helpful. They also expressed that doctors should know more about whether or not families were already engaging in shared reading and whether or not they were already aware of the importance of shared reading. In these ways, parents participating in this study indicated that more interaction and advice around shared reading would be an improvement to the experience of receiving books at Well Child visits. It should be noted that this suggestion on the part of participating parents is an emergent finding of this study; I did not ask parents if doctors should give more direction in terms of educating parents on the benefits or the mechanics of shared reading.

Decades of research have shown that children’s book distribution programs can have positive effects in many arenas for children’s emergent literacy skills. Not only does shared book reading create a powerful opportunity for quality time in the same ways as storytelling and singing together promote language development, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary development (Shaw, 2021), but shared book reading also fosters the specific emergent print literacy skill of concepts of print (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Mol & Bus, 2011). Amongst this growing body of children’s book distribution studies, a few key findings should be re-emphasized in light of the shared experiences of the participants in this study. One key aspect to remember is that the effects of children’s book distribution programs are often the greatest for families who need support the most, such as families who speak a different language at home.
than the majority language of the community, or have certain familial characteristics such as lower income, disrupted schooling, or lower parental literacy levels (Golova et al., 1999; Sanders et al., 2000; Mendelsohn et al., 2001; Needlman et al., 2005; Knauer et al., 2020; Mendelsohn et al., 2020). In this way, our Somali New Mainers may be one of our most important populations to support through programming such as Raising Readers.

Another key finding to remember is that several studies have found that the greatest benefit from children’s book distribution programs comes when the children’s book is accompanied by anticipatory guidance from the clinician (Jones et al., 2000; Sanders et al., 2000; Knauer et al., 2020; Skibbe & Foster, 2019; de Bondt et al., 2020). When considering this finding, it is also important to consider the type of shared reading literacy intervention that is most impactful for young children: dialogic reading (see Barone, Chambouleyron, Vonnak, & Assirelli, 2019 for a meta-analytic review). Anticipatory guidance is crucial not only in terms of promoting the fact that shared reading is an important activity to add into a family routine on a daily basis, but also anticipatory guidance should ideally include demonstrations of how to engage in dialogic reading or at least explain that it is the shared experience and interaction that are highly valuable (Zuckerman & Needlman, 2020).

Several models of circulating this information have been experimented with, such as explanations during the well-child visit, distributing pamphlets, and even developing videos of effective dialogic reading instruction and directing parents towards those videos with a series of text-message reminders (Jimenez et al., 2021). Anticipatory guidance from the medical professional appears to be a crucial factor in children’s book distribution efficacy (de Bondt et al., 2020), and, depending on the uptake of this information regarding why a book is being given and how best to use it, programs that include anticipatory guidance directly from the doctor/
medical personnel do better than programs that “just” distribute books or refer parents to generic education materials that can be consulted after the medical visit.

In addition to the global finding that anticipatory guidance has a positive, enhancing effect on children’s book distribution effectiveness, it is also the case that this ‘personal touch’ from the doctor may be particularly valued by Somali New Mainers. In an in-depth study of Somali refugees’ experiences with their general practitioners in the Netherlands, an overarching finding was that interpersonal communication was one of the top two factors—alongside the doctor’s attitude—to influence the patient’s experience of the care they received from the doctor. Indeed, personal attention is “what participants expect from doctors, based on their experiences in Africa, where personal attention is the most valuable asset a doctor has to offer, in an environment with limited technical possibilities” (Feldmann et al., 2006, p. 37).

Together, these findings from prior research support the need to ensure that doctors and other clinicians who distribute books through Raising Readers are well aware of when the intervention has the most impact: when anticipatory guidance accompanies the book, and with whom: families with less prior English shared reading experience. Furthermore, Somali New Mainers may appreciate more than average any personal connection that you can make with them, and with their children (Feldmann et al., 2006). Doctors, if you can, take a moment to find out if the parents of your patients already know about emergent literacy; if they don’t, your choice to spend a few moments on this topic at each visit, explaining and encouraging, could have exponential effects over time. This information is crucial for parents to hear and to understand, and has an excellent potential for being taken to heart if the guidance comes from a trusted medical professional.
Implications for Raising Readers Administrators

As highlighted in the implications for doctors, the inclusion of anticipatory guidance has been shown to be instrumental in randomized controlled trials of children’s book distribution programs (Jones et al., 2000; Sanders et al., 2000; Knauer et al., 2020; Skibbe & Foster, 2019; de Bondt et al., 2020). In my interviews with parents, little guidance from doctors was reported, and one participant (Halimo) remarked on how acutely the absence of that guidance impacted her experience of the program. Any efforts that can be made in underlining the importance and effectiveness of taking time to talk about books and reading could have additional positive impacts beyond the positive impacts already reported by many in regard to the distribution of books through Raising Readers (Groenhout & Bennett-Armistead, 2016).

In addition to potentially highlighting the positive effects of anticipatory guidance with your distributing book clinicians, the suggestion from parents to include bilingual books, and especially the excitement that these parents exhibited when thinking about the possibilities, makes this a topic well worth revisiting. The inclusion of books in multiple languages has been a part of several prior studies of the effectiveness of book distribution programs, and those programs have been shown to be highly effective (Golova et al., 1999; Sanders et al., 1999; Byington et al., 2008; Knauer et al., 2020). It should be noted that none of these studies utilized bilingual vs. monolingual books as the independent variable, so we have no indication that these programs were successful only because of the bilingual or L1 books being utilized.

Investigations into family literacy programming for populations where different languages are used in the family than in the community do underline the benefits of L1 books and programming. For example, Anderson et al. (2017) and Gillanders & Barak (2022) advocate for careful construction of family literacy interventions for culturally and linguistically diverse
populations, and Knauer et al., carefully designed their book distribution program in a low print literacy community to include not only books in multiple languages, but explicit instruction in how to engage in shared reading with a child even if the caregiver could not read the language of the book being utilized (2020).

In addition to examples of successful family literacy programming, the literature on L1 maintenance versus loss reveals compelling reasons to champion the maintenance of children’s mother tongues (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Hakuta & D’Andrea, 1992; Portes & Schauffler, 1994; Portes & Hao, 1998; Kouritzin, 2000; Wong Fillmore, 2000; Bialystok, 2009; Kharchenko, 2014). Specific to the Somali diaspora, Ganuza & Hedman reveal the beneficial effects of maintaining and developing L1 Somali language skills on not only children’s Somali skills, but also their L2 (Swedish) skills (2019). For these reasons, the requests of participating parents to provide bilingual books through Raising Readers is deeply embedded in prior language and literacy research findings.

Though we are all aware that additional languages would greatly complicate the logistics of Raising Readers, there may be ways to achieve bilingual book distribution through a targeted arm of the program, or potentially a new program. While it would be a logistical nightmare to provide an age-appropriate book to each child in his or her own native language at every well-child visit AND rotate these books each year, compromises in one area might reveal opportunities in another. Specifically, not shifting to a completely different book for every age every year could allow for variation in the language if there were less variation in the titles. In addition, accepting that children who are not bilingual would receive bilingual books, and that children who speak Spanish at home would sometimes receive a Somali-English book, and
children who speak Somali at home would sometimes receive a Spanish-English book could create space for bilingual books to be a possibility.

At first glance, this might seem like an absurd proposal, but think what it could do for Maine’s children and families in terms of awareness of the fact that various languages are lived across this state, and what those languages are and look like would be an education in and of itself. Although most monolingual English families might not try to learn to read Somali if they received a bilingual Somali-English book, these books could promote multilingual awareness and intercultural acceptance by exposing all families and children to an array of languages other than English.

Another suggestion offered by participants in this study is that sometimes children really prefer to choose their own book rather than being given one. In the same vein as above in terms of potentially not having a completely brand-new book for each age group for each year, if there were multiple age-appropriate books available and children had a choice amongst a few different books, it would respond to this potential improvement feedback from parents in this study, as well as provide a very different model from the single book that is automatically the one book for each age group. If there were not new books for every age group for each and every year, and a child were given the choice amongst a few different age-appropriate books, it would reduce the risk of a child receiving the same book that their older sibling already received and is already a part of the home library.

Although participants had substantive feedback for how Raising Readers could be an even more powerful experience for them and for their children, there was sincere appreciation for the books distributed through the program. Both directly in regard to the books received being perfectly age appropriate and visibly and tangibly of high quality, as well as the indirect
appreciation for the presence of books being ‘everywhere’ and not just from the school, the library or from mom and dad, there is no doubt that there is appreciation for this program already in its current form. This appreciation is an echo of prior studies of children’s book distribution programs (Byington et al., 2008; Groenhout & Bennett-Armistead, 2016; Gillanders & Barak, 2022). Although participants maintained that they would have read to their children “either way”—with or without Raising Readers’ books—they appreciate the program and wish they had had it in Somalia and/or the refugee camps.

**Implications for Teachers**

A note of appreciation to our teachers should be distributed as a result of this research! Participants reported excellent communication and availability from their children’s teachers that promoted a sense of connectedness and joint effort between parents and teachers to educate the children of the parents I interviewed; especially within the context of remote schooling and the Covid-19 pandemic, this is a well-deserved compliment. In addition, parents’ appreciation for the cultural and religious knowledge of their children’s teachers creates a sense of trust and understanding amongst the parents that extends far beyond a basic trust in the academic ability of a teacher to educate participants’ children. These findings indicate that teachers of these children have embraced the calls for Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2002) and a *funds of knowledge* perspective (González et al., 2005).

In addition to this universal appreciation for children’s teachers, educators should take note of a few important elements from the findings of this study. Again, while the findings are small scale and exploratory, what teachers can benefit from knowing is not dependent on these findings being universal experiences beyond the reported experiences of the participants in this study. Namely, these children are learning English and learning print literacy practices at a
stunning rate when compared to 20th century immigration experiences (Portes & Schauffler, 1998). While English Language Learner students are potentially not at the level of their native English-speaking peers, Somali English Language Learners are gravitating to English and print practices within the second generation of immigration. In recent years, much work has been done to promote and expand the notion of funds of knowledge amongst practicing teachers and aspiring teacher candidates (Scott, Brown, Jean-Baptiste, Barbarin, 2012), and to advocate for the ongoing shift from the deficit perspective to one that harnesses funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005). As the tides continue to turn towards teaching and educating young people always coming from a funds of knowledge perspective and not a deficit perspective (Auerbach, 1989; Delpit, 1995; Paratore, Melzi & Krol-Sinclair, 1999), this study puts this imperative in sharp relief from an education perspective.

From a linguistic perspective, Somali New Mainers’ potential language loss should also be considered. Somali New Mainers came to the U.S. from a robust oral literacy tradition, and are adding print literacy practices to their families’ literacy practices, and especially to their children’s educations. Based on the rapidity of first language loss observed in prior populations, and the shared findings across this study’s participants, we would do well to be keenly aware of the potential loss of oral literacy traditions and the Somali language. Based on the extensive body of research on language loss in prior waves of immigration (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Portes & Schauffler, 1994; Portes & Hao, 1998; Wong Fillmore, 2000; Kouritzin, 2000; Kouritzin, 2006; Kharchenko, 2014), the best thing we can do in classrooms and in schools is to draw from the first language and the oral literacy funds of knowledge and encourage their continued utilization in families and communities, while providing English Language Learner supports to children and families who can benefit from those supports. The extant research on the transferability across
languages and literacy skills reminds us that the skills we help students develop or maintain in their home language not only positively affect their home language abilities (L1), but positively impact the community language (L2) as well (Cummins, 2001; Ganuza & Hedman, 2019).

**Implications for Parents**

Parents were the participants for this study, so in many ways, having implications for parents is a means of spreading knowledge and insights, and enabling other parents to benefit from it. What was shared with me by parents should be shared with all parents, Somali New Mainers or any cultural group. One of the many valuable lessons I learned from these parents is that their stories are valued by their children even when the children can’t understand them in the language in which they are told. These children are hungry for the stories of their parents and their ancestors and hungry to learn “how it was” not only “back then” but also “back there.” In the context of migration, these children have an added element of change beyond what many children encounter through their parents’ stories and experiences: these participants’ children have never seen Somalia, the refugee camps, or the other countries where their parents grew up. This appreciation for stories of where they came from has been observed in the Somali diaspora in Minnesota as well (Bigelow, 2010). For all parents, regardless of where you grew up or what your stories are about: share your stories because your children love hearing them!

In terms of shared book reading and parental support of children’s emergent literacy skills, many valuable practices were shared with me by the parents participating in this study. Parents indicated that reading was important and that they had been making time to share books with their children since their children’s youngest days. This is precisely what early childhood literacy educators would recommend parents do. In addition to engaging in shared reading, parents shared with me varying ways that they responded to their children’s wishes in regards to
shared reading over time, for example by sometimes reading aloud, sometimes having children make up the story based on the pictures, sometimes observing while children searched for sight words, sometimes listening while young readers read aloud, and sometimes letting children read on their own and then engaging orally to find out about the story’s characters and plot. In these ways, parents are responding to the evolving needs and desires of their young children, which helps children develop their literacy skills (Evans & Shaw, 2008).

A final implication in regard to shared reading itself is a reminder that dialogic reading has been shown in previous research to be the gold standard in terms of fostering emergent literacy skills in children. The responsiveness and variation I mentioned in the prior paragraph is illustrative of some of the best practices of dialogic reading (Whitehurst et al., 1994; Dowdall et al., 2020; Zuckerman & Needlman, 2020). In this regard, it is important that we remember that the books are a tool caregivers utilize to engage in high-quality linguistic interactions with their children. As noted in chapter 1, dialogic reading has the advantage of being entirely free form, and not dependent on the parent or the child being able to read the language the book is written in. Looking at a book together with a child and interacting about what you see—even if you cannot read the words on the page—is a critical encounter that enhances children’s emergent literacy skills. The more interactive a shared reading session is, the more impactful the shared book time is for the children (Whitehurst et al., 1994). Similarly, rhyming games, singing, and highly interactive oral dialogues make significant contributions to children’s emergent literacy; dialogic reading fosters emergent literacy, but so do several other high-quality linguistic exchanges that don’t depend on a book or on a parent having the print literacy skills to read it (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000; Shaw, 2021).
Another implication for parents is to become aware of the ease with which we can lose a language when it is underutilized, and the difficulties it can present for families and children (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Hakuta & D’Andrea, 1992; Portes & Schauffler, 1994; Portes & Hao, 1998; Kouritzin, 2000; Wong Fillmore, 2000; Bialystok, 2009; Kharchenko, 2014). Parents in this study who had been here more than 10 years were aware of Somali language loss—or stalled development—happening in their own children or in their community members’ children. While it is often difficult for adults to learn a new language, it is very easy for children to lose/not fully acquire one. What parents choose to do with this knowledge is of course up to them, but it is important that we spread this knowledge to parents so that they may make informed choices about their children’s linguistic (and therefore cultural) futures.

Finally, as stated by Halimo in reference to her own children’s Somali language loss being, at least partially, attributable to the fact that she and her Somali husband both spoke a lot of English to each other in the home, children watch their parents and follow their example (to a degree). Even if a child is not going to follow your example at a certain stage in their life, it can never hurt to set the example or be the change you wish to see in your children. The parents I interviewed for this study were encouraging their children to read, attempting to limit the ever-encroaching flood of technology into their children’s lives, and setting the stage for successful and happy lives for their children. Parents are doing so much! Keep reading, keep encouraging, keep singing and telling stories—your children love them and you are creating a rich tapestry of literacy practices in your homes by doing so.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this exploratory study provides a first glimpse as to what literacy practices are like for a very small sample of four Somali New Mainer families, there is much still to be done.
When we consider the findings from this small sample, we inevitably have to ask: “How representative are the experiences of these parents of all Somali New Mainer parents’ experiences?” Ultimately, we don’t know how representative this sample is, but what we DO know is that at least some Somali New Mainer families are adopting print literacy practices in English with their children at a fast pace.

We can look to the experiences shared in this study to be assured that print literacy practices are certainly making their way into at least some Somali New Mainer families’ homes, and can even see a trajectory within individual families for how this can change over the span of a few years as families remain in Maine and additional generations are exposed to family-based print literacy practices and receive books through Raising Readers. While this study portrays an in-depth view into a four families’ lives, it cannot tell us what the ‘mainstream’ Somali New Mainer experience is. Perhaps the participants in this study are very similar to the average Somali New Mainer family experience, but it is also possible that these families may be at the margins of the Somali New Mainer experience. These parents may have the most English language acquisition, the most uptake of children’s book reading, and any number of other factors. What we don’t know is if the experiences shared by these parents are typical, and for whom are these experiences typical.

What we can say is that it is not the case that Somali New Mainers, due to their country’s history of rich oral literacy practices and traditions, are not adapting to the print literacy practices that are dominant in the U.S. In other words, it is not the case that the primarily oral literacy culture from which these individuals have come to the U.S. influences them in such a way as to make print practices—in this case children’s book reading—an undesirable or an ignored experience. While it may take some time, this shift to including shared book reading in family
literacy practices can occur within a fairly short period of time, as evidenced by Halimo’s stories of the contrast between her usage of Raising Readers books in contrast to her parents’ (non) usage of Raising Readers books with Halimo’s younger siblings.

As Bakhtin maintains, we are all in a continual state of change, and this applies to language and literacy practices most eloquently. Perhaps we are even too good at continuous change in this regard; so good that we can lose a first language and cease to practice literacy traditions that our families have enjoyed for generations. Future study to explore this rapid change and to help us devise strategies for fostering adoption of new languages and literacy practices without allowing the old ones to be supplanted is research that would have great benefit to immigrant populations around the globe.

In terms of truly pinpointing, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the exact degree to which Raising Readers is increasing reading time, reading enjoyment, and/or emergent literacy skills for Somali New Mainer children, a randomized controlled trial would need to be completed with only Somali New Mainers as participants, and would also strictly control not only intervention group (participating in Raising Readers or not participating), but the number of years in the U. S. before participating or not participating in Raising Readers once children are born. Reach Out and Read has conducted many such studies, sometimes with populations who speak languages other than English at home, and we know from these studies being repeated across settings that RoR does positively impact families whose home language is not English. The extant question for the Somali New Mainer population remains the history of oral literacy traditions, which has not been extensively studied. While a few studies have emerged in the last decade (Wu et al., 2012; Srivastava et al., 2015; Gillanders & Barak, 2022), more research in this arena would be an
excellent addition to the research landscape on not only children’s book distribution but also the interplay across oral and print literacy traditions.

For multiple reasons, this type of RCT research in Maine is unlikely to come to fruition in the manner described above, most notably because Raising Readers aspires to deliver books to all families (Raising Readers, n.d.). While we are unlikely to see RCTs controlling for time in the U. S. with only Somali New Mainer participants, we potentially can do much more to investigate the lived experiences of the Raising Readers program amongst Somali New Mainer families. If there is enough interest within the Somali New Mainer population, an extensive interview-based study to gather discrete facts from a large number of people instead of the in-depth experiences of a small number of people, as I have done here, could be conducted with Somali speakers as researchers and data collectors. Seeking a comparative data set that looks not in depth at the literacy practices, but gathers pointed information about how often families read, tell stories, in which languages, etc. could provide a rich dataset that could be evaluated, quantitatively, against several factors, perhaps most importantly the languages read and spoken by the parents, and the amount of time that the family has resided in the U. S. This approach would allow for a broader perspective in terms of what these practices look like across the population.

By gathering a vast data set and then evaluating the factors shared, comparing literacy practices of those in the U. S. for relatively short periods of time to practices of those in the U.S. for relatively long periods of time, an understanding of any trends over time in shifting literacy practices could emerge. In a similar vein, not all medical practices distribute Raising Readers books, so while an RCT that gives out books to half of a group and compares them to another half that did not receive books would not be an acceptable methodology, an extensive data set as described above would naturally include some families who had not been exposed to Raising
Readers. While differences in that group as compared to individuals who had been participating in Raising Readers could not necessarily be attributed to the participation or non-participation in Raising Readers book distribution, it might be a study angle to look at if such an extensive data set of key data points could be collected from a sizeable sample of Somali New Mainer families.

In addition to future research to better understand the impacts of children’s book distribution programs on Somali New Mainer families, and more extensive research to explore the trajectories of shifting oral and print literacy practices when individuals move to areas with different dominant practices than those where they came from, I would personally like to further explore the trends of first language loss occurring in the Somali New Mainer population. While this study did not set out to inquire in this regard, the trends not only of emerging language loss, but already the anticipation of its negative impact if it continues to occur, is a finding that echoes prior immigration experiences of other communities (e.g., Wong Fillmore, 1991; Kouritzin, 2006; Kharchenko, 2014). What we could learn from all of these potential future studies could help us become more informed as parents, teachers, and community members and neighbors. While “Much prior research on language, literacy, and learning has examined the nature of the divides that separate us and the clashes that occur when disparate people come together” (Freedman & Ball, 2004), the tides are shifting to focus our research and our pedagogy on culturally responsive practices, and the commitment to a funds of knowledge orientation rather than a deficit perspective.

**Concluding Thoughts**

As I reflect on these exploratory findings, where we see examples of growth in print literacy practices, reduction in oral literacy traditions, and already-occurring first language loss reported by this study’s participating parents, I see an ongoing shifting wave of ideological
becoming (Bakhtin, 1984). While test results and outcomes for an array of pervasive measures (e.g., high school graduation or ultimate educational attainment) may show persistent variation by factors such as SES, gender, or race, what we also see in the research is that these variables are not determinants that pre-ordain outcomes for anyone. For example, within the realm of emergent literacy, Yarosz & Barnett gathered data from more than 7.5K parents, and found differential rates of shared reading by informants’ ethnicities and languages spoken at home, but when they added in the maternal education level, higher education levels revealed variation within the ethnic and linguistic minority groups (2001).

Similarly, van Steensel measured children’s literacy development and observed differences in this development by ethnicity and family income; however, when he added in an estimation of the richness of the Home Literacy Environment (HLE), again, distinctions were uncovered within ethnic and economic groups across Home Literacy Environments (2006). In these ways, the role of family practices and education, whether years of education, or targeted information that helps parents understand the benefits and mechanisms of shared reading’s positive effects on children’s emergent literacy skills (Knauer et al., 2020; de Bondt et al., 2020; Jimenez et al., 2021)—thereby affecting families’ practices—should be emphasized rather than any categorical variation across populations.

In these ways, every individual is continuously affected by education and by community practices of the individuals within the family and the community. This is especially true for individuals who are in intercultural and multilingual contexts, which are contact zones for even more rapid change. All humans are in a constantly shifting state of change, and who we were, are—and will be—can never be fully encapsulated and ultimately known. As we look to the initial exploratory findings from this study and the potential next research studies that could shed
more thorough and additional light on these topics within this community, I look at these findings, and the potential future research through a few lenses. These lenses are Moll’s *funds of knowledge*, which invites us to build from current strengths, Pratt’s contact zones, which assures us of the beauty and the difficulties when individuals from different cultural histories are in dialogue together, and through Bakhtin’s conceptualizations of dialogism and openendedness, which confirms that we continue to evolve as our contexts and our communities evolve around us. In essence, our myriad *funds of knowledge* meet—and dialogue—in the contact zone.

Bakhtin wrote in *The Dialogic Imagination*:

A dialogue of languages is a dialogue of social forces perceived not only in their static coexistence, but also as a dialogue of different times, epochs and days, a dialogue that is forever dying, living, being born: co-existence and becoming are here fused into an indissoluble concrete unity that is contradictory, multi-speached and heterogeneous. It is freighted down with novelistic images; from this dialogue of languages these images take their openendedness, their inability to say anything once and for all or to think anything through to its end (Bakhtin, 1981, as cited in Morris, 1994, translation: Holquist & Emerson).

As Bakhtin writes of our languages in contact, so, too, are the individuals utilizing and living these languages and literacy practices. Each person’s experiences are continually evolving and it is unable to be known what the full sum of each person’s total life experiences will be over the course of their lifetime. Each person, each family, and each community is in a continual state of dialogue with all around us, with varying practices and experiences that change as the immediate context changes, as the community changes with the arrival, departure and adaptation of individuals within the community, and as the broader world context around the community
changes. To truly recognize that we don’t know what the end looks like is to realize that there is, in fact, no end. We ourselves, our languages, and our literacy practices stem from traditions that preceded us and will be carried forward—not intact, but in some form to some degree—by the generations who succeed us.

As we continue our dialogic existence, the activities we engage in, the literacy practices we enjoy, and our ways of being in the world, we will continue to evolve and to create yet new practices and ways of being. One such, recent, development is the Somali Book Fair, where print determines the name of the event, but the fair is actually a multimedia cultural event: “The Book Fairs are extensively and intensively mediated through digital technologies, reflecting and amplifying their social, political and cultural significance to dispersed audiences” (Chonka, 2019). Book Fairs in Somalia are an exemplar of literacy practices and their cultural expressions finding new forms and outlets as our sociolinguistic contexts and technologies evolve around us.

This study is not the first one to witness the ever-changing tapestry of family literacy practices; as concluded by Gillanders & Barak: “Families’ cultural interpretations and practices are not fixed or unchanging” (2022, p. 4). These evolutions contribute to our funds of knowledge and should be leveraged as we continuously encounter new practices and new arenas where we have to devise practices to navigate those arenas.

The findings of this study in regard to print and oral literacy practices of participating parents and their children reveal a shift that has occurred over a single generation: none of the participating parents engaged in shared reading as children, but they all engage in shared reading with their own children. It is not the case that English children’s books are irrelevant for Somali New Mainer families because they did not engage in shared book reading as children. The parents participating in this study have made books available to their children, made time to
engage with their children around books, and expressed their appreciation for the Raising Readers book distribution program for an array of reasons. As such, the initial question guiding this study around the relevance of English children’s books for a population from a historically primarily oral family literacy tradition reveals that, for these parents, books are relevant, important, and appreciated.

As a parent who arrived in Maine with children who did not (yet) speak English, I have experienced the rapid progression from prior language (Dutch) to current language (English), and empathize with the parents participating in this study in terms of rapid change and experienced loss. As individuals move into new spaces, with new literacy practices, and/or new languages, creating opportunities for all of us to cross borders and navigate together, we would do well to encourage ourselves to add languages and literacy practices to our existing, rich, repertoires to the fullest extent possible. It is in echoing Bakhtin that I argue that adding languages and practices to our *funds of knowledge* as shared by the parents in this study, and the parents participating in Gillanders & Barak’s 2022 study, enhances our family experiences and our communities in a richer, multi-speeched or polyphonic, dialogue than is the result when new practices and new languages replace the prior languages and practices altogether.

As educators are pushed to get all students to age-appropriate print literacy levels, and to get all English language learners to proficiency in English faster and faster, we should remember these findings, and those of a growing awareness of first language loss. As shown in many immigrant experiences, it is easier to lose a first language than it is to acquire a second (Portes & Schauffler, 1994; Portes & Hao, 1998; Kharchenko, 2014), and it takes approximately five to seven years to acquire a language for academic purposes (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000; Demie, 2013). While we steadfastly work towards the new language, we would do our societies and our
children a great service by providing the information and the tools to maintain the first language, and ensure that all are aware of the sociological currents that lead immigrants, especially youth, to rapid majority language acquisition and can, at the same time, accelerate minority language loss (Dicker, 1996; Cornips, 2008; Baran, 2017). This study shares preliminary and exploratory findings that there may be a parallel in literacy practices shifting in similar ways to first language loss in the Somali New Mainer population. As always, more research will provide a better understanding; this study provides a first glimpse of what may be to come as the length of time in the U.S. for our Somali New Mainers increases.
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

STRUCTURED INTERVIEW #1: CHILD AND FAMILY COMPOSITION, ACTIVITIES, LITERACY PRACTICES

Introduction for participant:

I am very grateful for your willingness to converse with me today, and as I had noted in prior conversations about participating in my research project, I have two separate conversations planned. Today is about your children and your family in general, and about the language usage in your family. The second session is about your children’s experiences with receiving books from their medical provider(s).

Today I would like to hear a lot about your children and about your family. For example, how old are your children? What are their genders? What do they enjoy doing? Has your family always lived in the same neighborhood in Maine? What do you enjoy about life here and what might you like to change to make it better?

- What are your children’s favorite activities (for all children):
  - For children between 3-8, ask for more information
- Follow up to find out more:
  - What are their favorite things to do with other kids? What are their favorite things to do with adults?
  - What do their interactions with their siblings and extended family look like?
  - What do their interactions with friends look like?
- For school-age children:
  - How do they go to school in the morning? How do they come home? When?
  - What do they typically do after school? Where are they and what are their activities?
  - What do they like about school? What do they dislike?
o What do you, as a parent, like about children’s school?

o What do you, as a parent, like about children’s teacher?

o Do children have homework? What does completing that homework look like within the family?

o What do weekends look like? What are the activities?
  - Do these change with the seasons?

• For non-school age children:
  
  o Where do children spend weekday/daytime? With whom?
  
  o What might a typical day look like for the child?
  
  o What is the child’s favorite thing to do while older siblings are at school?
  
  o In what ways do weekdays look different from weekends?
  
  o Does daily routine change with the seasons?

• Family information:
  
  o Where were each of your children born?
  
  o Where were you born? Have you lived anywhere else besides there and Maine?
  
  o How long have you been in Maine? Have you always been in the same town in Maine?
  
  o Do you work? If so where, and what do you enjoy about it?
  
  o Do other adults in your household work? If so, where and what do they enjoy about it?
  
  o What is your overall impression of life in Maine?

Languages:

• What languages are used in your family?

• Who uses which languages? What is each language used for?
  
  - For example, do you speak English with your older children and Somali with your younger children?
  
  - Do you speak Somali at home and English at work?
  
  - Do your children speak English among themselves and Somali with you?

• Which languages can you and all of your family members speak and understand?

• Which languages can you and all of your family members read and write?
Oral Practices:

- Do you tell stories in your family? Who often tells stories, and in what kinds of settings are stories told? Can you tell me about it?
- Do you ever sing in your family? In what settings would you or a family member sing, and can you tell me about it?
- Do you ever recite poetry? In what settings and can you tell me about it?
- Do you listen to news or other types of radio? Who typically listens and what kinds of things do you listen to?
- Do you watch news or other types of television? Who typically watches and what kinds of things do you watch?
- How is language used in your religious practices? In what settings, and who, would recite prayers and religious passages in your family?
- Does your family set expectations and consequences using language?
  - Can you tell me some examples of how agreements are made in your family, how they are communicated, etc.?

Print Practices:

- Do your children read books or look at books on their own? If so, what does this often look like and which children engage with books?
- Does anyone in your family ever read books, the news, or other items out loud to the family as a group? Is this done for informational purposes? Is this done as a form of entertainment similar to oral storytelling?
- Do you read or look at books with your children one-on-one or with a few children? If so, at what ages, and can you share some examples of what this looks like?
- Do you read individually?
  - What kinds of materials do you read on your own (e.g., news, religious texts, stories, updates from family away, etc.)
  - If you read in multiple languages, what do you read in each language?
- Is written language used in your religious practices? If so, in what ways?
- Is written language used for setting expectations and consequences?
• What kinds of writing do you engage in?
  o What kinds of writing do you do at home or at work, and for which purposes?
• If you write in multiple languages, which languages are used in which writing activities?
APPENDIX B
STRUCTURED INTERVIEW #2: REVIEWING FAMILY AND LITERACY PRACTICES PROFILE, AND RAISING READERS

Introduction for participant:

The first part of this session will be entirely devoted to going over what I heard and synthesized from the prior session. I have created a profile of your family based on everything I heard, and I would like to go through this profile together with you. I would like to hear any places that are incorrect or incomplete. I will state my understanding, interspersed with questions that came up for me while listening to the first session recording and creating the profile. I will also be asking for confirmation regularly along the way, and will pose follow-up questions wherever there are inaccuracies or where we can elaborate more.

The second part of this session is all about Raising Readers experiences. I would like to learn about your children’s experiences receiving books through Raising Readers at well-child visits with their medical provider. I am interested in both your child’s reactions to the books, your reactions, and any way these books being given by your medical provider have influenced your family’s interactions with books.

Receiving Books:
- When was the most recent time that one of your children received a book through RR?
- How old was this child the first time they received a book through RR?
- How many books would you estimate this child received from their medical provider since they were born?
- Have all of your children received books through your medical provider(s)?
  - If not, were the differences because of different medical offices or living outside of Maine, or something else?

Reactions to Books:
- How have your children felt about receiving books? Were they excited to receive it?
• Did your children open the books when they received them in the medical office?
• Did they open the books when they were at home the same day?
• Did they read the books with an older sibling or with an adult?
• Did you notice any changes in how your children interacted with the books as they got older?
• If your children had the books read to them, did they enjoy the stories?
• Did your children ever look forward to going to see the medical provider because they would also receive a book?

Reactions to Medical Provider:
• What was your reaction to a medical provider giving your child a book?
• Did your medical provider explain why he or she was giving your child a book?
• Did your medical provider talk with you about sharing books with children?
• How did the experience of receiving a book, and potentially talking about the reasons for sharing books with children fit in with your prior experiences with books?
  • Did your parents read to you when you were a child?
  • Did you have books in your home when you were a child?
  • What role did written language (books, newspapers, etc. fit into your home life and into your parents’ work life)?
• If you do both oral storytelling and book reading with your children, what do you enjoy about each? What do your children enjoy about each?

Effects of Raising Readers:
• Do you think receiving books from your child’s medical provider has had any effects on your children? If so, can you share your thoughts?
• Can you compare the effects of receiving books through your child’s medical provider with the effects of going to school?
  • For example, did your children enjoy the books they received at well-child visits and then also enjoy books at school too?
  • Did your children not enjoy the books received at medical visits, but then they did enjoy books at school?
• Did your children enjoy the books they received from their medical provider, but then not enjoy books at school?
• Can you tell me about your children’s ideas around books and reading? How have these evolved over time? And what do you think has influenced those changes?
• Do you think receiving books from your child’s medical provider has had any effects on your activities with your children?
  o (For example, did you read with your children because your medical provider suggested you should?)
• Do you think that the books that your child received have had any effect on your enjoyment of sharing books?
  o Did you always enjoy books? Did the books your child received open up a new activity for you with your children?
Informed Consent to participate in the research study:
Children’s Book Distribution Programs Within an Oral Literacy Community

Dear Parent,

You are invited to take part in a research project being conducted by Rachel Groenhout, a graduate student in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Maine. The research project is in the form of interviews with parents of young children. The research will be conducted under the guidance of Dr. Susan Bennett-Armistead, Associate Professor of Literacy Education in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Maine.

The purpose of this research is to explore family traditions of storytelling and reading, and how receiving books from healthcare providers fits into these family traditions. We hope the results of this study will help to develop a deeper understanding of what happens (for parents and children) when children receive books from their healthcare providers.

To participate in this interview study, you must be 18 years old or older, and you must be the parent (or legal guardian) of a child (or multiple children) between the ages of three and eight. Interviews can be held in a location of your choosing.

What will you be asked to do?

We are asking for your permission to interview you (and record the conversation) regarding your family experiences of storytelling, singing, reading, and writing as well as your experiences receiving books at well-child healthcare visits. Questions in the interviews will focus on your own thoughts and experiences, as well as your perceptions of how your children experience these same activities. Sample questions include: What are your child’s favorite activities? When was the most recent time your child received a book from his or her medical provider?
Risks:

Other than time and inconvenience, risks to you are minimal. The study consists of a series of two interviews; each interview is estimated to take about 45 minutes.

Benefits:

This study will have no direct benefit to you except perhaps the potential for an increased understanding of your family’s storytelling and reading traditions.

We do hope that the reported results of the research may add to what we know about family traditions with stories, both oral and written, as well as how these traditions interact with children’s book distribution programs.

Compensation:

In appreciation of your time, you will receive a popular children’s book at the conclusion of the first interview. You will still receive this token of appreciation even if you end the interview early.

Also in appreciation of your time, you will receive a $25 Hannaford gift card at the conclusion of the second interview. If you stop the third interview early, but continue it on another day, you will receive the $25 gift card when the interview is completed.

Confidentiality:

Your name will not be on any of the documents resulting from the interview. We will replace parents’ names (and any other names mentioned during the interview) with pseudonyms in interview transcriptions. Your real name or any other identifying information will not be used in any reports, publications, or conference presentations that result from this study.

With your permission, the interviews will be audio recorded. These recordings will then be transcribed; both the interview transcripts and audio recordings will be stored in a password-protected Google folder. Audio recordings will be kept until March 2025, and then destroyed. Transcriptions of the audio, with all identifying information removed, will be kept indefinitely. They will be accessible only to the researchers (Rachel Groenhout & Susan Bennett-Armistead).
Voluntary

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question at any time, or to end any interview at any time.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me (Rachel Groenhout) at (207) 581-5435 (voicemail), (207) 514-3797 (text message), or rachel.groenhout@maine.edu. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Susan Bennett-Armistead at susan.bennett-armistead@maine.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, University of Maine, (207) 581-2657 or at umric@maine.edu.
**APPENDIX D**

HEALTHY HABITS QUESTIONNAIRE (PEDIATRIC WELL-CHILD VISITS)

5-2-1-0 Healthy Habits

**A G E S 2 – 9**

**LET’S GO!**

We want to know how your child is doing! Please take a moment to answer these questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child’s Name: ___________________</th>
<th>Age: ________</th>
<th>Today’s Date: __________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. How many servings of fruits and vegetables does your child have a day? _______________________
   (One serving is: 1/2 cup of fresh or frozen fruit, 1 cup of leafy greens, or a piece of fruit the size of a tennis ball.)

2. How many times a week does your child eat dinner at the table with the family? ________________

3. How many times a week does your child eat breakfast? ________________

4. How many times a week does your child eat takeout or fast food? _______________________

5. How much screen time does your child have each day? Don’t include school work. ________________

6. Does your child have a TV or keep a tablet or smartphone in their bedroom? ________________

7. How many hours does your child sleep each night? ________________

8. How much time each day does your child spend being active? ________________
   (This means they are breathing harder and their heart is beating faster.)

9. How many 8-ounce servings of these does your child drink a day?
   - ___ 100% juice
   - ___ Water
   - ___ Fruit or sports drinks
   - ___ Whole milk
   - ___ Soda or punch
   - ___ Nonfat (skim), low-fat (1%), or reduced-fat (2%) milk

10. Based on your answers, is there ONE thing you would like to help your child change now?
    - [ ] Eat more fruits and vegetables
    - [ ] Eat with your family more often
    - [ ] Eat less fast food/takeout
    - [ ] Drink less soda, juice, or punch
    - [ ] Drink more water
    - [ ] Be more active – get more exercise
    - [ ] Spend less time watching TV or using a tablet/smartphone
    - [ ] Get more sleep

Please share this form with your provider, then take it home with you. Thank you!

**Help your child live 5-2-1-0 every day!**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>_____ 5 or more fruits and vegetables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Give foods fun names, like “x-ray vision carrots” and “mighty broccoli trees.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add veggies to foods you already make like pasta, soups, casseroles, pizzas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep washed and chopped veggies and fruits in the fridge so they are ready to grab and eat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add fruit to cereal, pancakes, or other breakfast foods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try fruits and veggies with dip such as salad dressing, yogurt, nut butter, or hummus.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>_____ 2 hours or less of recreational screen time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Put away phones and turn off the TV during meals. Make it a time to sit and talk about the day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have craft items ready to go. You can even find supplies in your recycling bin!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stock up on books, coloring sheets, and board games. Print free activity sheets from the internet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create an obstacle course with chairs, blankets, and other household items.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play hide and seek!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>_____ 1 hour or more of physical activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Try jump ropes and hula hoops to keep the whole family active.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a balloon to keep your child moving. Try to keep it from touching the floor!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turn on music and have a family dance party.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go for a hike on trails or in the park. Look for animal tracks or collect leaves and stones.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get outside and ride bikes or play tag. Look up different tag games online.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>_____ 0 sugary drinks, more water</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freeze fruit, like berries, in ice cubes. Watch your water change color as they melt!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use cool cups, bottles, or straws to make water extra fun!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add fresh fruit or herbs to water for natural flavor. Try mixing flavors, like watermelon and mint.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try mixing seltzer with a splash of juice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggest a glass of water or milk instead of juice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

As reported in the participant methodology section, recruitment for this study was exceedingly difficult. In this appendix, I share the context of recruitment, the avenues utilized, and my experiences with the process in hopes of helping others to conduct similar types of research within communities that may be harder to reach if one is not an established member of the community.

In addition to personal networks, I reached out to several organizations and individuals with whom I had no prior affiliation and no current connection, leaving messages, talking with staff members, and posting flyers. I utilized these methods of reaching out, being sure to include phone calls and not just emails and texts based on the cultural connection strategies of phone or face-to-face communication (Bigelow, 2010). I cold-called organizations and individuals—unable due to Covid-19 to approach individuals in the parks or on the streets—in an attempt similar to some researchers before me to “overcome some of the disadvantages of a sampling strategy that was skewed towards people chosen through gatekeepers” (Temple & Moran, 2006, p. 83). While I attempted such recruitment, it was not successful; like the aforementioned example, my study’s participants were successfully recruited through personal networks. My inquiries to colleagues resulted in chains of connections being made; in contrast, the contact I initiated with organizations (student and community), schools, and community leaders resulted in several failed attempts.

Indeed, this experience is common when conducting research across cultural and linguistic contexts, and especially in contexts with individuals from certain immigration and refugee statuses. As noted in a study examining reasons asylum seekers moved to the UK, “A major issue for the researchers was the difficulty of accessing interviewees, which was overcome
Difficulties in recruitment were expected before I began this study. Cultural, linguistic, religious, and confidentiality/anonymity concerns were all factors in expecting recruitment to be a complicated undertaking. As shared with me by one of my community guides, some prior researchers have entered the Lewiston Somali community and not been entirely respectful. Within this context, it is understandable that a new research endeavor could be viewed as an activity/individual to avoid. As outlined in Doing Research with Refugees, “Some national groups were less willing to be interviewed…[…]…some interviewers also had difficulties in reaching women and particularly uneducated women in the home” (Temple & Moran, 2006). In this regard, I was fortunate to be a female researcher, as I did not encounter gender-based difficulties in participant recruitment that I might have if I were male.

Although recruitment was expected to be difficult, the actual difficulty far exceeded my expectations. In addition to the expected factors above (cultural, linguistic, religious, confidential/anonymity), my study was cleared to commence during the same month as the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to this broader context, my research was on hold through the spring and summer months when I had planned to spend time outside in downtown Lewiston to get acclimated and hopefully make some contacts for the purposes of guiding my research and potentially even meeting participants. This approach was made impossible by the Covid-19 pandemic. When I was cleared to begin research in October 2020, it was only with specific precautions and in approved spaces that I could interview participants. These restrictions made it even harder to connect with participants and schedule interviews that they were comfortable with.
both in terms of psychological safety and, given Covid-19, physical safety. The recruitment methods I utilized are explained, including their results, in the following sections.

Two members of my dissertation committee each recommended a few contacts to me. Two of these individuals responded affirmatively to my request to come interview them during the planning stages for my dissertation (2019). These individuals work in the Somali community, one in a community organization, and one in the school system. These two individuals were instrumental in furthering my understanding of the context of the Somali community. In addition to a broad, people/experience-based introduction from these two individuals that complemented the extensive reading I had already done, these two individuals gave me concrete tips in regards to making contacts in a respectful manner. These included specifics like utilizing small talk to make connections, establishing a target time but being flexible, reaching out in advance of a scheduled meeting to confirm, and ensuring participants were in a location that is comfortable for them. I also received advice on the type and amount of compensation that could be seen as most appropriate within the community. Finally, these individuals gave me some names of potential participants, although none of those potential participants went on to become participants. From an orientation standpoint, these two individuals were invaluable. Additional recruitment strategies are outlined in the next paragraphs.

Community organizations that are specifically working to support Somali newcomers in a single or most often in multiple aspects of their lives were contacted in Lewiston. I reached out by phone, by online contact forms, and email to five different community organizations. A few never responded to my emails or called me back. Two organizations did respond: at one organization, an individual picked up the phone on several occasions, took messages, and promised to call me back with names and contact information. Because of the affirmative
response and the promise to call back, I pursued this group for several months, calling back every 3-4 weeks to ask again. Ultimately, I never received any names or contact information. The other organization that responded to an online inquiry from me did, after several emails and phone calls, connect me to one participant. That participant completed the first interview, scheduled the second, but did not appear for the second interview and then did not respond to one request (and two reminders) to reschedule the second interview.

Student organizations that serve international students globally and two organizations that support students from Africa and from the Muslim community were also contacted. I sent open-ended messages to these student organizations’ leaders, asking them to forward to their membership. These queries were forwarded, because I did receive a small number of follow-up emails from student members. In each instance, students communicated with me briefly to recommend additional individuals I could contact. While this response was encouraging, none of the first level or second level contacts generated through this approach led to a participant being found. Flyers (that I created and shared with the student) were also posted by one of the individuals who responded to me through this route, but the posted flyers did not result in any leads.

Personal/professional contacts were the avenue that generated the three participants who completed both interviews with me. Through my PhD program and my university work, I have made connections with several individuals who work in schools and in Early Childhood Centers. These individuals are ultimately the avenues through which the participants in this study were successfully recruited. One individual in my network posted flyers for me, which did not generate any leads. Ultimately, it was the personal connection to another personal connection (up to four degrees of separation) that successfully recruited participants.
While this approach may not be an appropriate one for a randomized, controlled, trial, it proved essential to establishing the amount of trust that was needed for this sort of in-depth personal sharing that I was asking participants to engage with. The fact that each participant knew somebody (who knew somebody, who knew somebody....) who knew—and trusted—me was critical in gaining access to this community for this level of personal interaction. While this approach has some shortcomings in terms of sample to population generalizability, it is also the case that, for this sort of investigation, trust could be considered a more crucial element than representativeness. Indeed, this study makes no claims of representativeness; it is an exploratory study with a very small number of informants that can shed lots of light on how things are in a few families, but cannot be extrapolated out to argue that this is what it looks like in all Somali New Mainer families or even the majority of Somali New Mainer families.

As such, the validity, and the depth of the findings here are more important than the attempts I made to have as representative a sample as possible. While those attempts failed, I employed many mechanisms to increase the accuracy and the depth of my exploration; these were largely successful, as evidenced by the extensive breadth of information shared (when yes/no answers could have been utilized to hasten the interview’s end and share as little as possible) and the range of responses that were in no way limited to the “socially desirable” response. Respondents laughed with me and told me “I’m not gonna lie to you, I don’t have time to read,” and their shared experiences of Raising Readers were nuanced, as evidenced by these examples: appreciation for the program, absence of RR resulting in their families reading together more, mixed responses as to whether or not their children enjoyed the books, and, perhaps most importantly, nuanced suggestions in regards to potential modifications to the RR program that could benefit families.
Ultimately, issues of recruitment were a focal point for me throughout the study. Recruitment went on in parallel with data collection, transcription, analysis, reflection, and coding, and, at times, I spent months making phone calls and searching for individuals and organizations to contact without any parallel data collection or processing activity going on. In these ways, recruitment for this study was both an education and a very significant portion of the total time required to complete the full study. I am exceedingly grateful not only to the participants who did share their lives with me, but also to the very long list of individuals who referred me to friends, who referred me to more friends, and so on until I ultimately found the individuals whose lives and experiences I have explored in depth here.

If I were to do it all again, the following points would be crucial guideposts. I offer this so that others looking to undertake such a study may benefit from my experience/what I learned:

1. Personal connections matter; utilize them responsibly
2. Face-to-face interactions foster negotiation of meaning and establishing rapport
3. Patience is a virtue. Extensive time will be needed.
4. Give only key points in introduction (email, phone call, text). Elaborate in person.
5. Check in between meetings, and start meetings with small talk.
6. Geographic presence is paramount. Even if you are a racial, linguistic, cultural, and religious outsider, being present is paramount.
Share Your Stories

Seeking Somali parents for research interviews

Receive $25 Hannaford gift card & children’s books

Sample Interview questions:

• Your children’s favorite activities
• Your family’s favorite activities
• Your time in Maine/U.S.
• Your child’s experience receiving books at Well Child visits
## APPENDIX F
### PHASES OF ANALYSIS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis Activity</th>
<th>Timing</th>
<th>Analysis/Preparation Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Inductive Coding of printed transcription (In Vivo coding by underlining)</td>
<td>Case Analysis After Each Interview</td>
<td>Familiarity/Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Relisting to check in vivo coding</td>
<td>Case Analysis After Each Interview</td>
<td>Accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Reviewing Field Notes</td>
<td>Case Analysis After Each Interview</td>
<td>Familiarity/Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Inductive Coding of printed transcription (Descriptive coding on right margin)</td>
<td>Individual Case Analysis</td>
<td>Familiarity/Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Relisting to check descriptive coding</td>
<td>Individual Case Analysis</td>
<td>Accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Intonation Checking <em>while listening</em> to audio: check intent and extensiveness</td>
<td>Individual Case Analysis</td>
<td>Familiarity/Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Relisting to all audio interviews, by interview</td>
<td>Cross-Case Analysis Orientation</td>
<td>Familiarity/Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Re-Reading all transcriptions with layered coding</td>
<td>Cross-Case Analysis Orientation</td>
<td>Familiarity/Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Descriptive coding of content by Research Question</td>
<td>Individual Case Analysis</td>
<td>Content Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Creation of participant profiles</td>
<td>Individual Case Analysis</td>
<td>Familiarity/Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Analytic Memos</td>
<td>Cross-Case Analysis</td>
<td>Thematic Exploration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Creation of Themes from Analytic Memos</td>
<td>Cross-Case Analysis</td>
<td>Thematic Exploration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Deductive Coding Emergent Themes (Abbreviated Codes in left margin)</td>
<td>Cross-Case Analysis</td>
<td>Content &amp; Theme Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Content Analysis of Deductive Coding</td>
<td>Cross-Case Analysis</td>
<td>Explicit RQ Findings (What did participants report?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Thematic Analysis of Deductive Coding</td>
<td>Cross-Case Analysis</td>
<td>Implicit Findings (What themes emerged from participant reports?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX G
RESEARCHER REFLECTION

I almost didn’t conduct this study. As a PhD student, I read over and over again in research reports and in qualitative methodology guides that in order to gather valid information from reliable participants, the researcher should be a member of a community—at least for a period of time—before attempting to research it. I found it sage advice and I wanted to “do it right.” In the end, due to the interaction of geography, my life/responsibilities, and Covid-19, full immersion within the community for an extended period of time was impossible, and I had to decide whether to forge ahead despite that shortcoming or to abandon the idea that had been growing in urgency as I learned more about our Somali New Mainers and wondered in what ways their experiences would be similar to Maine’s prior waves of immigrants, and in what ways different—this of course within my area of expertise and passion: language and literacy.

This question was a personal one for me, as my family came to Maine from French-speaking Canada a short enough time ago that I heard first-hand my grandparents’ stories of why they came, and their struggles to learn English and adjust to their new community, as well as my own experience of not growing up speaking the same language at home as my mother grew up speaking in her home. Always having been curious about my family’s experiences in this regard, when I returned to Maine from the Netherlands in 2011 with my foreign-born children and their father, and learned of the Somali migration, it was a community whose experiences came to mind again and again as I worked towards my literacy PhD. I told myself to come up with other, easier (logistically), dissertation topics, but this one called to me too strongly to abandon it.
Ultimately, reading *The Handbook of Ethical Research with Ethnocultural Populations and Communities* is what convinced me that I could, and indeed, I *should* conduct this study despite not being an insider to the community.

As stated by Birman in the above-mentioned handbook:

-This chapter has outlined a large set of complexities in carrying out ethical research with immigrants and refugees. Reviewing the long list of issues and problems, one might conclude that it is much simpler not to do research with these groups! (Birman, p. 174)

- (...)Researchers may feel that the only option to act ethically for them is to decide not to do the study. This, however, creates ethical dilemmas in their own right and can lead to exclusion of vulnerable populations from research (Birman, p. 164).

While I struggled to feel like a valid researcher to undertake this study, Birman’s warning that the alternative can mean a population remains invisible gave me the conviction to prepare the best that I could, and to engage with guides to help me conduct this research in the most ethical and sensitive way that I could. I may not have been the best person to have done this research in some regards (language, race, culture, religion), but I have done the research, and it sheds important light on critical topics that may have remained unexplored had I not done so. At this juncture, I offer my exploratory findings and my deepest gratitude to my participants for the opportunity to gather this information and share it.

Reflecting on whether I had the cultural insider knowledge to conduct this study seamlessly, there was always the nagging voice that I am not Muslim, not a migrant or a refugee, and not a part of the Somali community. In contrast, I am a parent who speaks multiple languages and has lived in several international settings for extended periods of time, navigating new cultures, learning new languages, and developing intercultural competence. Taking deep
care to learn about the qualities I do not have, and gaining confidence from those that I DO have, I set out, very carefully, to explore this study and eventually bring it to fruition.

I have no doubt that my research would have been better informed at the outset, and much easier to recruit participants had I been able to follow the sage advice of immersing myself in the community. In contrast, my outsider status ensured that nothing was assumed or taken for granted; my outsider status and lack of implicit understanding of the experiences of my participants allowed me to approach them explicitly, in depth, and with great care. It was not easy, and the findings are exploratory in nature. However, I have gathered some preliminary findings that certainly warrant further exploration. I acknowledge that, despite my best efforts, I may have misinterpreted some aspects of participating parents’ experiences even with my constant reflexivity and careful analysis. I have carefully cataloged four families’ experiences and interpreted them as I believe the questions are too important to remain un-explored.

I almost didn’t conduct this study. I am grateful and humbled that I did.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to share my eternal gratitude for the parents who participated in this study, and the guides who helped me design the study and recruit participants. This work would not have happened without your time and trust—thank you for sharing your experiences and expertise with me.

As a working mom, this PhD and concluding dissertation took several years to accomplish and would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of many individuals. My family and friends have provided exactly the right balance of asking about my PhD progress often enough for me to know that they cared, but gently enough for me to not feel pressured as to why the heck I hadn’t finished the darn thing yet. 10 years is a long road to a degree, and though I often felt like Annie on the streets of New York, woefully sighing that I was “NEVER gonna get there,” I never regretted the journey for a second. All along this very long and difficult road, my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Susan Bennett-Armistead, has been both my rock and my cheerleader—she believed in me and in my study even when I didn’t, and I wouldn’t have made it through without her boundless enthusiasm and sage advice.

I would like to thank my dissertation committee members, Dr. Rich Kent, Dr. Alec Lapidus, Dr. Flynn Ross, and Dr. Tammy Mills for their expertise as well as their close reading and thoughtful feedback on my dissertation draft—your excellent comments and redirections improved my work in several ways. In addition to those who guided my PhD journey, there are countless individuals who contributed to my academic and personal passions over the many years before I dreamed up this particular study. I have had the distinct privilege to have been inspired, challenged, and educated by so many amazing individuals both inside and outside of academic settings. I can’t list you all, but your faces and voices are in my mind as I write this.
As noted in the narrative, this study is deeply personal for me both from a historical and a future perspective. My ancestors came to Maine as immigrants and I was privileged to have my grandparents share all of their experiences, positive and negative with me. My foreign-born children are immigrants in some contexts and 100% native in others. What will their full array of experiences be? I envision their futures include many adventures.

My family has supported me in my many educational endeavors over the years, financially, but also by being there every single step of the way for whatever I needed. In my younger days, my father was my math tutor, and my mother was my taskmaster in everything; they both remain my most frequent editors to this day. My older sister was a stellar student and set every bar sky high before I even realized there was an achievement to reach; I looked up to her example and strove to match her high bar every step of the way. When I was learning French abroad, my grandmother wrote me letters in French and even learned how to use AOL Instant Messenger, chatting to me in French late into the night as I worked on my homework. In my final year of undergraduate study, my mother drove several hours a day to sit with me and transcribe the data for my Honors bachelor thesis when 250 completed—paper!—surveys (of the 500 I had sent out in hopes of a 10% response rate) rolled in and I, utterly overwhelmed, almost abandoned the (optional) thesis. In my family, I was always encouraged to pursue and to persevere. No task was too difficult and no undertaking too large. I never would have completed this dissertation without that foundation.

Unfortunately, in the ten years it took to complete this PhD, my grandparents have all passed away, but I know that they know just how grateful I am for the sacrifices they made to establish our family and to give us every opportunity to grow and to build ourselves in pursuit of the things that matter most to each of us. I am who I am due the opportunities they created for
my parents and the values they instilled in them. It is all passing down from one generation to the next, and I have completed this dissertation in large thanks to their work ethic and their deep conviction that we can do anything we set our minds and our hearts to.

My children, in turn, have been an endless source of inspiration to me. Watching and helping them navigate new worlds and languages when we moved from Amsterdam to rural Maine was an inspiration to me and to many others. The speed with which my older daughter went from not understanding a word of English to confidently conducting her day in it, and the complete lack of consternation in making that transition, were a wonder. Just this year, my younger daughter started middle school in a new town after six years at a single, tiny, elementary school, and had made new friends, learned the school and her schedule, and really kind of become a teenager, all within a week! She, too, made it look easy; I watch them in awe as they grow and adapt into each new arena.

I would also like to acknowledge the sacrifices my children made in order for me to pursue my career and my degrees. I wrote one masters thesis with my older daughter asleep beside me because she was a squirmy baby who preferred to sleep alone in her car-seat or crib, and wrote my second masters thesis with my younger daughter asleep on a body pillow in my lap because she slept better that way. Over the years, I have been present for fewer bedtime stories and fewer Saturday soccer games than I think most moms strive to be present for; I try to reframe this as an opportunity for them to also get lots of quality time with their father and with their grandparents. Still, mom guilt is real, and I feel it deeply both for the time I missed with my children, as well as for those who stepped in for me on so many occasions. You are my children’s heroes—thank you.
BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Rachel Groenhout was born in Lewiston and spent her youth in the coastal Maine towns of Woolwich and Bath, graduating from Morse High School in 1999. She took a gap year working as a nanny in Amsterdam and backpacking in Europe before attending the University of Maine in Orono. A student of the University of Maine Honors College, she studied abroad for a year in Québec City, wrote an Honors thesis, and earned her French B.A. in 2004. She commenced graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh, where she taught in the French department as well as for the Institute of Reading Development. She then taught English in France for a year at Université François Rabelais in Tours before transferring to the Universiteit van Amsterdam in the Netherlands to continue her graduate studies. In Amsterdam, she started a family while completing an M.A. in French and an M.S. in Brain and Cognitive Sciences as well as continuing her language teaching and linguistics research endeavors at Universiteit Utrecht. Returning to Maine in 2011 with her family, she began her PhD in Literacy Education at the University of Maine in 2012 while working in Education Assessment at the University of Maine at Farmington. After 11 years with University of Maine System institutions in data and education roles for assessment, Institutional Research, data management, and data governance, she moved to Colby College in 2022 to lead institutional data and data governance efforts. In addition to her professional employment, she teaches Education courses at nearby institutions and is an active member of several professional associations. Rachel is a candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Literacy Education in December 2022.