

Learning to Read and Write Without School and Teaching: Exploring Emergent Literacy in French Unschooling Families

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Abstract

This research, conducted in France, investigates the informal acquisition of literacy among unschooled children outside formal instruction. Grounded in Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the research examines the interplay between familial, cultural, social, and digital influences on literacy development. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven unschooling families, encompassing 24 children and young adults aged 3 to 22 years. The findings reveal that literacy development occurs as a sociocultural process, shaped by the interactions within the child's ecological environment, including parental attitudes, family dynamics, and community involvement.

The results challenge the traditional notion of critical periods for literacy acquisition, highlighting that children develop literacy at diverse ages and through various pathways. Digital tools, particularly video games and interactive media, emerged as significant facilitators of literacy, providing immersive and context-rich environments that foster reading comprehension, writing skills, and vocabulary. This underscores technology's evolving role in informal learning.

While the study emphasizes the autonomy of children in unschooling contexts, it also highlights the essential role of parents in shaping environments conducive to learning. The findings underline the need for further longitudinal studies to explore the nuanced interactions between digital tools, informal learning and ecological factors across diverse cultural and family structures.

Keywords: Ecological systems theory; Emergent Literacy; Unschooling; Informal Learning; Reading; Writing; Digital tools

Introduction

Informal Development of Literacy

Natural, Cultural, Social, and Informal Learning of Literacy

The term "natural" is used to describe conscious or unconscious, involuntary learning processes characterized by socialization and integrative learning (Getzels, 1974). Teale (1984) introduces the term "Natural Literacy Development" to describe the development of literacy that occurs naturally in children but is not the result of innate abilities. Weaver and Resnick (1979) argue that the acquisition of literacy is an extension of natural language learning, while Jewell and Zintz (1989) view reading and writing as natural extensions of oral language.

However, researchers caution against the idea that literacy could develop without socio-cultural mediation and external intervention (Morrow, 1989). Morrow (1989) explains that "natural" reading learning does not happen suddenly and requires an environment rich in supportive and interactive behaviors that promote reading learning.

The concept of "Emergent Literacy" is used to describe the process by which children gradually acquire reading and writing skills in informal situations without formal teaching (Kamil et al., 2000). This approach recognizes that literacy development begins from birth and continues throughout life, with children reaching different levels of maturity at different rates (Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

In summary, the development of literacy is considered a natural process occurring within a specific socio-cultural framework, where children informally learn to read and write through interactions with their environment (Anbar, 2004). However, it is important to emphasize that this informal learning does not occur without socio-cultural mediation, and the environment plays an essential role in children's literacy development (Feldman, 1980).

Social and Ecological Conception of Literacy

The term "literacy" is used to describe a set of cognitive skills, independent of the context and the individual acquiring them (UNESCO, 2005). It also encompasses social practices and active and general learning processes (UNESCO, 2005). Barton (1994) adopts an ecological approach to describe literacy, emphasizing its grounding in the social environment and its influence on it. He considers literacy as a social practice, influenced by social institutions and power relations (Barton & Hamilton, 2010). Literacy practices are diverse and can be observed during events where text plays a central role, structured by formal or informal expectations (Barton & Hamilton, 2010). These practices may vary across different domains of cultural life (Barton & Hamilton, 2010). Informal and vernacular learning plays a crucial role in literacy development, as writing practices change and evolve (Barton & Hamilton, 2010). In conclusion, literacy is the result of a development that occurs over time, anchored in the social environment, and not automatically resulting from formal teaching (UNESCO, 2005; Barton & Hamilton, 2010).

Theories of Informal Literacy Development

Several researchers have developed theories on the informal literacy development in young children. Holdaway (1979) identifies markers of emergent literacy in children, related to motivational, linguistic, and operational factors. Goodman (1980) proposes the "five roots of literacy" to describe how reading and writing develop in young children. Lock (1980) presents literacy learning as a social construction guided by adults. Teale (1984) asserts that becoming literate before schooling primarily occurs in daily interactions at home and in the community, involving informal teaching from parents and other literate individuals. Teale and Sulzby (1986) argue that literacy development occurs concurrently and interdependently for reading, writing, listening, and oral expression. Morrow (1989a) explains that children acquire reading skills through experiences in everyday life, social

interactions, and by observing adults' reading behaviors. Regarding the stages of informal literacy development, Mason (1980, 1984) identifies three reading attitudes that develop separately but simultaneously in children. Anbar (1986) studied the development of reading in six children who learned to read at home without systematic instruction and identified a common developmental sequence, including stages such as awareness of books and writings, learning the names and sounds of letters, word association, and independent reading of unfamiliar books. The work of these researchers shows that informal literacy development in children is influenced by social interactions, experiences in everyday life, and the observation of literate models in their environment.

The Physical and Social Environment

The physical and social environment plays a crucial role in the informal development of literacy in children. Vygotsky (1978) highlights the interaction between the environment and the child, while Teale (1984) asserts that children are actively involved in creating their literacy environment. Ferreiro and Teberosky (1985) emphasize the influence of the social environment on literacy acquisition, while Papert (1980) introduces the concept of constructionism, favoring active learning.

The physical environment should be rich in reading and writing materials, including books, magazines, papers, pens, computers, and a presence of written texts in everyday life (Anbar, 2004; Durkin, 1966; Jewell & Zintz, 1986; Morrow, 1989). Interpersonal interactions also play a key role, with parents and adults reading and interacting with children, responding to their questions and interests, and making reading enjoyable (Anbar, 2004; Durkin, 1966; Jewell & Zintz, 1986; Morrow, 1989). The emotional climate should be positive to encourage interest and literacy development (Morrow, 1980).

In these supportive environments, children actively engage in literacy activities, observe, ask questions, experiment, and informally develop their reading and writing skills

(Goelman et al., 1984; Taylor, 1983; Teale, 1984). The role of siblings is also mentioned, where interaction between older and younger children can foster interest in literacy (Baghban, 1984; Taylor, 1983).

In conclusion, the physical and social environment in which children grow up plays an essential role in their informal literacy development, providing opportunities for exploration, interaction, and active learning.

Behaviors and Cultural Frameworks of Children

Several elements are observed in children who acquire literacy informally. They spend time with writing materials, sometimes invent a personal writing system (Bissex, 1980; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Lancy, 1994; Stahl & Hayes, 1997; Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Temple, 1982; Yaden et al., 2000), and engage in symbolic play, promoting vocabulary development, narrative skills, and metalinguistic verbs (Lancy, 1994). Children who read easily and learn early hear stories at home, enjoy books, know the conventions of writing, and are familiar with the metalanguage of literacy (Galda & Cullinan, 1990) and can learn through the lap method by asking questions while listening to the story (Baghban, 1984). Language development, auditory skills, visual memory, as well as cerebral and psychomotor maturation also play a role in informal literacy learning (Anbar, 2004; Fily, 1997).

Existing research on informal literacy learning is mainly based on English-speaking contexts and focuses on literacy without direct instruction before entering preschool or elementary school. Therefore, it is essential to question whether these findings can be extended to French language learning, considering cultural and linguistic differences. Some researchers question the universality of Chomsky's theory of universal grammar, suggesting that literacy development may be influenced by sociocultural factors specific to each language and social environment (Christiansen & Chater, 2008; Hinzen, 2012;

Leivada et al., 2017). Thus, components of emergent literacy may vary across cultures and languages with distinct characteristics.

Homeschooling, Unschooling, and Informal Learning in France

More and more French families are choosing to educate their child(ren) at home: the number increased from 6,000 in 1998 to 10,000 in 2004, and 18,818 children were not attending school during the period of 2011/2012, which rose to 24,878 for the period of 2014/2015, between 30,000 and 35,000 for the start of the 2017 school year, 41,000 in 2019, and over 50,000 in 2020 (Legifrance, 2020; Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, 2016; Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires, 2011; Sénat, 2012). However, the legal framework surrounding homeschooling in France has undergone significant changes with the adoption of Law No. 2021-1109 of 24 August 2021, which strengthened the principles of the French Republic. This legislation replaced the previous declarative system with a restrictive authorization-based regime, considerably limiting the possibilities for homeschooling and unschooling. These new regulations have raised concerns both domestically and internationally. On 30 October 2023, the United Nations Human Rights Committee expressed deep concern about the limitations imposed by this law, particularly regarding its potential to infringe upon the rights of children to access education that aligns with their specific needs and best interests.

Similar to traditional school education, homeschooling in families aims to enable children to acquire specific knowledge and skills, and their progress is monitored. However, some families choose not to provide any formal instruction. Unschooling, although still a very marginal practice in France, raises numerous questions: how will children socialize effectively? Will they acquire the necessary knowledge and skills? Will they successfully integrate into society? Consequently, certain questions, such as the socialization and the learning of reading and writing for children not attending school and

not following a formal curriculum, lie at the heart of these debates, as they are central to the objectives of the French public education system. Among these various questions, I have chosen to focus on the topic of the development of literacy skills in unschooled children. This subject remains challenging to comprehend because how can we assess a child's progress and learning when they receive no formal lessons and are not subject to evaluation?

Thomas (1999) suggests that both formal and informal learning can take place at home and in school but emphasizes the importance of defining them correctly to avoid using one term for two different concepts. In common language, informal learning is sometimes described as "unschooling" in North America, "autonomous" or "child-led" in the United Kingdom, and "natural learning" in Australia and New Zealand (Thomas & Pattison, 2007, p. 2).

Although unschooling is briefly introduced here, a full review of its history, principles, and philosophical underpinnings is beyond the scope of this paper. Readers interested in exploring the topic in depth are encouraged to consult the works of key figures in the field, including John Caldwell Holt, John Taylor Gatto, Grace Llewellyn, Naomi Fisher, Ben Hewitt, Carlo Ricci, Sandra Dodd, and Jan Hunt for example. These authors offer exhaustive insights into the practices, values, and challenges of unschooling across various contexts. For this study, the focus remains on the specific case of literacy development in unschooled children and the implications of these findings.

Method

Motivation and approach for this research

The motivation for this research stems from a combination of academic training, professional experiences, and research interests that challenged traditional assumptions about literacy acquisition. During the author's training as a primary school teacher in the

French public education system, the dominant pedagogical narrative emphasized that formal instruction by trained educators was essential for teaching children to read and write. However, field experiences revealed contradictions to this premise, such as the observation of hyperlexia in neuroatypical children, who developed advanced reading skills independently of structured teaching. These contradictions raised the question of whether literacy acquisition could occur as part of a natural, informal process in the absence of direct instruction.

This curiosity deepened during the author's work in a private school in France, which combined informal learning with active pedagogies such as Reggio Emilia, Montessori, and Outdoor Education. In this environment, children aged 2 to 12 were encouraged to follow self-directed learning pathways, and many neuroatypical learners demonstrated alternative yet effective modes of acquiring literacy skills. These experiences reinforced the desire to investigate how literacy might develop in contexts entirely free from formal instruction, such as unschooling. This research aligns with the author's broader interdisciplinary academic interests in alternative education, active pedagogies, creativity, video games and neurodiversity, particularly the intersections between these fields.

Evolution of hypotheses

After an in-depth review of the literature and exchanges with various sources, I formulated an initial assumption that considers informal literacy acquisition as a sociocultural learning process. This process can be analyzed through different learning and developmental psychology theories, recognizing that children actively construct their knowledge and skills in interaction with their physical, social, and cultural environment.

An initial hypothesis focused on the concepts of desire and agency in children. Based on the idea that unschooling allows children to follow their interests and learn what

interests them, this hypothesis assumed that children learn to read and write when it becomes a conscious necessity and when they develop a conscious desire to acquire these skills. To explore this hypothesis, I intended to interview parents and their children aged 6 to 16 years who do not attend school and do not receive formal instruction but have informally acquired reading and writing skills. The research questions aimed to understand if the child desires to learn what they are learning and if they are conscious of their learning. This hypothesis draws inspiration from Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986; 2007), which emphasizes a triadic reciprocal causation model, highlighting the interactions and interdependencies between personal, environmental, and behavioral factors in individual development. In his theory, Bandura defines the concept of agency as the individual's belief in their capacity to organize and execute actions necessary to achieve desired outcomes. In a preliminary phase of the study, exploratory interviews were conducted with children and adolescents of different ages (6, 10, 13, 18, and 22 years). However, the results of the interviews did not support the initial hypothesis on agency and perception of learning. Instead, the results seemed to lean towards the notion of implicit learning.

As a result, a second hypothesis was developed, considering literacy acquisition as a process embedded in child development. The theoretical approach chosen for this research stage is based on Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. He proposes a view of human development as a dynamic process of interaction between the growing individual and their ecological environment. According to his theory of ecological systems, human development is influenced by the relationships between different levels of environment: the microsystem (pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships experienced by the individual), the mesosystem (interrelations between two or more contexts actively involving the individual), the exosystem (settings that do not involve the

developing person as an active participant but still affect them), the macrosystem (the consistencies, forms, and contents of lower-order systems existing at the level of subculture or the culture as a whole), and the chronosystem (the influence of changes and continuities in the environments where the individual lives). This perspective emphasizes the importance of interactions between individuals and their environment, including family, school, peer groups, neighborhood, etc. It also highlights the impact of normative and non-normative life transitions on development. In the context of education and alternative pedagogies, this approach emphasizes the importance of considering the relationships between different levels of environment in which children evolve. In the context of unschooling, it is essential to consider how families adopt this educational approach and how it influences child development. Institutional influences, public policies, and family relationships are all factors that interact to shape the learning and developmental experiences of children practicing unschooling. By studying these interconnections, it becomes possible to understand how the ecological environment plays a role in the development of literacy in children educated informally.

To study this new hypothesis, seven unschooling families were selected, meeting criteria such as having children aged 6 to 16 years, providing completely informal instruction, and acquiring literacy skills without direct instruction from adults. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven mothers of families with two to four children, aged 3 to 22 years. The interviews were conducted in the presence of twenty-four children, adolescents, and young adults. To ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, all personal information (background and form) was removed from the interviews.

Results

Unschooling Culture: The Macrosystem

The interviews shed light on common ways of thinking, acting, and feeling that manifest in values, knowledge, beliefs, representations, and ideas that are not formally codified in an authoritative reference text.

Unschooling: A Multifactorial Choice

Continuity of Attachment Parenting. The surveyed parents mention a natural transition from attachment parenting to homeschooling. This concept, stemming from the expression "attachment parenting" (Sears, 1985), draws inspiration from Bowlby's attachment theory (1969). It can be defined as a privileged maternal relationship beneficial to the child's development, reflected in practices such as on-demand breastfeeding, babywearing, and co-sleeping. This approach has led some parents to continue the informal education of their children, respecting their individual rhythms and needs.

Reaction to the School System. Many parents chose unschooling due to unsatisfactory school experiences, citing mismatches between the institutional pace and that of the child, or after experiences abroad. These choices do not appear to be influenced by the parents' backgrounds, religions, or professions but are rather dictated by the child's interest and well-being.

Rejection of Authority and Societal Norms. Some parents view unschooling as an anti-authoritarian approach allowing genuine child autonomy. Notions of freedom, autonomy, and independence are central to this perspective. Others adopt unschooling to address institutional educational and pedagogical shortcomings for neuroatypical children.

In conclusion, the choice of unschooling arises from a philosophy aimed at respecting the child's pace and well-being, whether it be a continuity of compassionate parenting or a reaction to an unsatisfactory institutional experience. This choice challenges certain educational assumptions, asserting, among others, that children cannot learn autonomously without being subjected to a hierarchical structure.

Socio-Cultural Environment

Shared Literary Culture and Terminology. The majority of parents highlighted their familiarity with major works on unschooling, mentioning authors such as John Holt, Alan Thomas, Ivan Illich, Peter Gray, among others. This literary culture provided them with confidence in the face of social and institutional challenges. Regarding terminology, although most prefer the term "unschooling," they acknowledge the need to adjust their language depending on their interlocutors to ensure mutual understanding.

Activities and Social Interactions. The issue of socialization is often raised and sometimes a source of frustration for unschooling practitioners due to its frequency. Nevertheless, all interviewed parents mentioned a variety of activities for their children, ranging from library visits to travels, music, sports, and arts. Moreover, the majority are members of associations, offering the family an extended network through various activities and commitments.

A Homogeneous Community?

At first glance, the French unschooling community might appear uniform, but upon closer examination, distinctions emerge, particularly concerning socio-professional profiles, approaches of different associations, and even the definitions of the term "unschooling."

Socio-Professional Profiles of Parents. The majority of parents come from five of the eight largest French socio-professional categories, demonstrating notable social and economic diversity.

Unschooling: A Trend or a Philosophy? My interactions revealed that some perceive the enthusiasm for homeschooling, and specifically unschooling, as a passing trend. Some families claim to practice unschooling but make exceptions, particularly for subjects like French and mathematics. These variations suggest that the term "unschooling"

is used elastically, encompassing a range of practices.

Diversity of Groups and Their Philosophies. There are several French associations around homeschooling, each with its own philosophy (e.g., *Choisir d'Instruire Son Enfant* prioritizes the role of the adult; *Libre d'Apprendre et d'Instruire Autrement* emphasizes the freedom of the child and parent; *Les Enfants d'Abord* focuses on the individual needs and interests of the child; *CollectIEF*, primarily focused on legal aspects, collaborates with other groups).

In conclusion, while homeschooling encompasses a wide range of approaches, from traditional to pure unschooling, unschooling itself is not monolithic. Some families view it as an extension of compassionate parenting, while others adopt it in response to an ill-fitting school system. What emerges is that each family's perception and practice of unschooling can vary considerably.

Institutional Pressures on Families: The Exosystem

Families practicing unschooling face pressures that extend beyond their immediate family context. These pressures, notably stemming from French National Education inspectors who monitor homeschooling, may not always have direct connections with the family. French law mandates that families undergo inspections to ensure they respect the child's right to education, and some parents feel immense pressure during these inspections, fearing the consequences and sometimes influencing how they educate their children. The inspector's behavior, the parents' professions (e.g., teachers who are more familiar with the system), and other factors can affect the inspection experience. Some parents are even falsely accused of being part of a sect. As a result, institutional pressure is often intense, leading some families to move abroad or adopt other strategies to cope with it.

Social and Family Pressures: The Mesosystem

The mesosystem encompasses relationships between different microsystems, such

as family, friends, and the broader community. Several parents mentioned tensions with their relatives due to their choice of homeschooling. These tensions often result from preconceived ideas and prejudices propagated by the media and society. Despite the pressure, some parents have managed to navigate this environment with the support and experience of their loved ones. Ironically, most of these parents respect the choices of others to send their children to school, despite facing judgment for their own choice of homeschooling and unschooling. The socio-cultural and educational perceptions of non-practicing families play a key role in this pressure.

Individual Appropriation of the Non-Schooling Culture: The Microsystem

Unschooling, as a cultural practice, exhibits a diversity of practices and adaptations influenced by individual values, social, family, and institutional pressures, as well as family organization. At times, these adaptations may appear, on the surface, to contradict the core principles of unschooling.

Dissonance Between Beliefs and Individual Practices

While unschooling advocates for non-schooling, several families adapt their choices according to their children's needs and desires. Some children opt for traditional school, others for distance learning, while others pursue university studies. Some parents make different choices for different children. Parents recognize the benefits of literacy as a tool for intellectual empowerment while respecting the child's choice. This compromise between the philosophy of unschooling and the reality of each child showcases the complexity of balancing child autonomy with adult responsibility.

The Influence of Technology on Learning

The digital realm presents another complex dimension. While the philosophy of unschooling advocates for autonomy in front of screens, the reality is that each family sets its own rules based on their observations and values. Families present a broad spectrum of

opinions on this matter, ranging from the idea that screens are indispensable today and are part of our culture, imposing no limits, to those who believe screens are entirely harmful to children and may deny access to them completely. However, technology has proven to be both a tool for socialization (e.g., when teenagers meet to play together on Minecraft) and learning (e.g., when a teenager improves their spelling through texting). Screens, ubiquitous in today's society, have been used for learning reading and writing, and some children have even learned to read and write through computer games they were exposed to from a young age. Parents also reported that technology played, at the very least, a significant role in learning. Recent studies show that screen use is not necessarily detrimental to the well-being of teenagers (Orben & Przybylski, 2019) but emphasize the importance of appropriate digital education (Bach et al., 2013; Balleys, 2017).

In conclusion, the appropriation of the non-schooling culture and the integration of literacy are not linear. Choices and adaptations reflect the intrinsic dissonances within cultural practices. These adaptations, balancing convictions and pragmatism, may ultimately be the true driving force behind literacy learning within families practicing unschooling.

Development of Literacy Over Time: The Chronosystem

It remains challenging to elicit relevant, clear, and precise information about the development of literacy through retrospection. Parents have provided varying levels of detail regarding their children's literacy development. Some recalled precisely when a particular child began decoding at a certain age with a specific book, while others remembered that some children started writing on the keyboard before doing so manually. All parents indicated that their children evolved in an environment with plenty of books and computers. They all read many stories to their children and allowed them to learn at their own pace. Parents who mentioned exerting pressure (due to beliefs or the weight of

institutional controls) also explained that their children showed resistance. Only when this pressure was lifted could they engage in reading and writing or improve their mastery. Thus, the mediations proposed by parents to support their children are diverse. The development of literacy occurred through the three characteristics identified by Goelman et al. (1984), namely the physical environment (vacation workbooks, books, comics, online games, computers, gaming consoles, board games, mobile phones, regular visits to the library, media library, and toy library), interpersonal interactions (travels, encounters, games with billboards, license plates, and store signs, parents who read extensively and respond to children's questions), and emotional and motivational climates (respecting the child's pace, protection, support, and encouragement in the face of external institutional pressures).

Ultimately, the accounts are not always very precise in the timeline. Parents often recount anecdotes (e.g., the moment they realized their child was reading or when the child realized they were reading) and share their feelings about what may have been crucial in this acquisition (e.g., comics or video games). However, they did not observe specific stages with clear-cut steps as presented by theorists of Emergent Literacy, and for some, they did not observe anything at all. Furthermore, providing an age for an acquisition that takes place over time and may not be visible, neither to the child nor to their parents, is not necessarily straightforward. I questioned parents about the ages at which their children entered and mastered reading, handwriting, and keyboard writing. The children entered reading (recognizing letter names, their own name, developing phonological awareness, writing letters or words for communication) between 3 and 10 years old and mastered reading between 7 and 16 years old (reading fluently and understanding what was read). Regarding writing (handwriting and with keyboard), the entry into handwriting occurred between 3 and 16 years old, and keyboard writing between 2 and 13 years old. The mastery

of handwriting ranged from 5 to 22 years old, while the mastery of keyboard writing ranged from 8 to 18 years old. These ages are highly heterogeneous, and it seems impossible to identify inter-family invariants. Almost all parents indicated at some point that their children learned to read and/or write with digital tools or that digital tools played at least a significant role. However, some parents observed a direct and prominent influence of digital tools on literacy development, particularly computers (video games, the internet), and mobile devices. These technologies facilitated entry into reading and writing and the mastery of these skills through leisure, socialization, and communication activities.

Discussion

The discussion will focus on three important elements regarding child development and literacy within the context of unschooling: the development of children's interests and desire to learn reading and writing, the perception and metacognition of children and parents in literacy development, and finally, parental responsibility and authority versus child agency and choices.

Development of Interests and Desire to Learn Reading and Writing

How do children's interests and desires arise? Don't they originate from observing other children and their desire to imitate? What about children who are in an environment devoid of written materials? All parents have, at one time or another, talked about the importance of following their children's interests and respecting their pace. However, a paradox or at least a question emerged during the interviews and after analyzing the data: How can a child be fully and voluntarily engaged in their learning if they are not aware that they are learning and do not perceive what they know? This question was also present in the discourse of some parents who drew parallels between social acculturation (such as hygiene) and acculturation to writing, which remains a parental responsibility in early childhood.

Ultimately, the material environment is a didactic environment, but it may not be the most significant for everyone. Indeed, the most significant factor is the person who creates this environment and is at the heart of interactions: in this case, the parents with their beliefs, values, and ideas. It is not entirely absurd to think that curiosity and interest (or at least the subjects they are interested in) do not come solely from within. The child may indeed engage in learning when they see an interest or when they are developmentally ready, which could align with a maturationist perspective. In their longitudinal study on how emergent literacy predicts reading acquisition in languages with transparent writing systems, Pinto et al. (2016) suggested that the only significant predictor of reading was conceptual knowledge of the writing system. This indicates that in transparent systems, phonological awareness supports reading development when combined with an understanding of the writing system's features. In practice, the child is guided and never truly learns alone. At best, the child can choose from the available environment, but it is difficult to speak of complete free will and absolute choice. As Sandvik et al. (2013) point out, even in structured educational settings, educators' beliefs and practices play a significant role in shaping children's emergent literacy engagement, highlighting the importance of the surrounding environment.

In essence, the child is influenced by their environment and primarily learns and develops through it. The Emergent Literacy concept perfectly illustrates this idea. There are even programs implemented in preschools and kindergartens worldwide, such as in Canada, South Africa, Sweden, Finland, New Zealand, Yugoslavia, and the United States, allowing children to learn to read without being formally taught (Carr, 1994; Dahl, 1993; Edwards et al., 1994; Josic & Savic, 1973; Korkeamakin & Dreher, 1995, 1996; Kriegler et al., 1994; Labbo & Teale, 1998; Mason et al., 1989; McCormick & Mason, 1996; Morrow, 1989, 1989b; Saint-Laurent & Giasson, 1999; Strickland, 1989; Sulzby et al., 1989;

Thorsjö, 1994; Westerveld et al., 2015; UNESCO & Mount Carmel International Training Centre for Community Services, 1993; Yaden et al., 2000).

Recent studies provide additional depth to these findings. For example, Piasta (2016) emphasizes the importance of structured, intentional environments in fostering emergent literacy. Rohde (2015) extends this by proposing a comprehensive model of emergent literacy, emphasizing the interactive processes of skills and environmental context rather than linear development. Similarly, Norling et al. (2015) underline the role of engagement and instructional formats in enhancing emergent literacy practices in preschools, showing that children's participation is significantly influenced by the classroom climate and the quality of instructional interactions. These studies collectively reinforce the idea that literacy is not only an individual journey but also a process deeply embedded in social and environmental contexts.

However, not all children may choose to learn to read and write, raising philosophical questions for both traditional schooling advocates and unschooling practitioners. Advocates of traditional schooling sometimes argue that the right to education and literacy is a universal right that some unschooling parents deny their children. Yet, this right is not necessarily denied; it is approached differently. In unschooling, the child becomes an active participant, not someone passively taught but someone who learns and learns to learn every day. Carroll et al. (2018) highlight the importance of nurturing children's literacy interest, which, when combined with a supportive environment, can significantly enhance literacy engagement and attainment. This perspective aligns with the reflections of many interviewed parents, who expressed a willingness to trust their child's intrinsic motivation and developmental trajectory.

Could it be that through this practice, unschooled children are not only actors in their own lives but are also learning to become such? Could this be the key to their

autonomy? Adjustments between philosophy and pragmatism, as noted by parents, may indeed explain how literacy acquisition occurs in unschooling families. Such an approach underscores the balance between child-led exploration and parental or environmental guidance, emphasizing that literacy development is rarely a solitary or entirely autonomous process.

Perception and Metacognition of Children and Parents in Literacy Development

Several parents indicated that there was a moment when they noticed that their child could read and/or write, but the child was not aware of it. Some parents also explained that they did not know that their child could read and/or write, and they were unsure of how the child had learned. Beyond observing that some children are not aware of their ongoing acquisition, it is noteworthy that they also do not seem to be conscious of the outcome of their own learning, indicating a lack of metacognitive awareness.

Metacognition, as defined by Flavell (1976), refers to an individual's awareness of their cognitive processes, underscoring the importance of recognizing one's own acquisitions and learning processes.

Some parents attribute this to the lack of systematic and daily feedback or control over learning, as it is not part of their educational culture, as it might be in a traditional school setting. Generally, they provide feedback only when the child requests it. According to Stanislas Dehaene (Collège de France, 2016), the four pillars of learning that determine the speed and ease of learning are attention, active engagement (the importance of evaluation and metacognition), feedback (error signals, motivation, and reward), and consolidation (automation and sleep). No parent mentioned evaluating their child, but several parents mentioned providing feedback while playing games with their children, during reading sessions, or simply by answering their children's questions. As for metacognition, no specific data was gathered. Some schools specifically work on

developing students' metacognitive abilities to improve their learning. This approach allows students to question their own functioning daily, identify difficulties, and take measures to address them, as well as become aware of their thought patterns and evolve them. What about the stance of unschooling parents on this matter? Due to a lack of data, it would be interesting for more in-depth research to be conducted on this subject, questioning, for example, the possible links between unschooling practice and the development of a child's metacognition. Such research could bring to light the metacognitive awareness (e.g., procedures) and abilities and controls (e.g., self-regulation or prediction) of children and adolescents engaged in unschooling, even if not all aspects of metacognition relevant to traditional schooling (Doly, 2006) may be applicable to homeschooling, such as the issue of transfer of skills, which often occurs in specific contexts, or academic achievement, which is not a concept present in unschooling.

Parental Responsibility and Authority versus Child Agency and Choice

Some parents explained that they were aware of their role and responsibility regarding their children's education and the values they transmit, understanding that reading and writing are tools for intellectual emancipation. They acknowledged that if their child encountered difficulties in acquiring literacy, they might need to organize more formal learning approaches. Thus, behind these choices and practices lie philosophical considerations, and it is essential to move away from the traditional school paradigms in this approach. Not all parents express the same stance regarding their practices and value systems. Some adopt an activist attitude, while others simply want to live peacefully. The boundary between a child's free will and the adult's responsibility is thin and difficult to define. For some parents, unschooling is a choice based on principles, but faced with reality, they may make different decisions, even ones that contradict their initial choice, such as sending their child to school or providing formal instruction. All these attitudes and

practices reveal different perspectives on children's learning.

Everyone seemed to agree that, in line with the principles of unschooling, a child can learn on their own without formal instruction and make their own learning choices. However, it is possible that this philosophy may not always align with the child's reality, leading to different decisions being made. Parents are aware that they sometimes need to adapt to their children and the societal context, where reading and writing are essential skills. This may result in some children being enrolled in school or receiving specific instruction.

In France, families practicing homeschooling must declare it to the local mayor and the academic inspection, and they are subject to monitoring. Article R131-13 of the Education Code, created in 2016, stipulates that the educational control of the child is based on the expected outcomes of the common core curriculum. Circular 2017-056 of July 14, 2017, specifically requires at least one pedagogical control per year. Therefore, the state exercises more or less direct control over what all children must learn, allowing limited freedom over content while respecting families' pedagogical methods. These institutional obligations and controls can sometimes be perceived as pressure by families, leading to anxiety among some parents who, contrary to their philosophy, try to impose certain content and/or instruction on their child(ren).

Moreover, in the context of my first hypothesis on the perception and agency of the child, I did not expect that parents, children, and adolescents would be unable to trace their own learning processes and that some would not even be aware that their children could read and/or write. The data on perception, metacognition, desire, and interests of the children raised several questions. Could it be possible that if a child is unaware of what they are learning, what they know, and unable to identify and correct their errors, as well as lacking awareness of their procedures and skills, informal learning, though seemingly more

natural and suitable for the child, might be cognitively more challenging for the child and/or adolescent? This raises the question of metacognitive awareness, abilities, and controls, which could benefit from further exploration to understand how these children and adolescents apprehend and use the new knowledge and skills they acquire. These questions also lead to more philosophical reflections: Should we let the child make their own choices? From what age? What role and responsibility do parents and society have? Can parents accept letting their child make their own choices, even if it goes against their personal preferences? To what extent do parents influence their children's choices? Children learn by constructing their own knowledge through interactions with their physical and social environment. But to what extent can we claim that a child follows their own interests, and is it objective to say that they can make their own learning choices? Is it the responsibility of the mother, the father, both parents, or the individual themselves if they make their own choices? Can all parents assume that their child might not know how to read and write once they reach the age of legal majority? How can a person exercise their legal capacity and rights if they are unable to read and/or write? Article 371-1 of the French Civil Code states that parental authority is a set of rights and duties aiming at the best interests of the child, including their safety, health, morality, education, and development. French law thus seems to impose, through pedagogical controls, a certain level of control over parental authority, with the goal of protecting the child's interests, facilitating their development, and respecting them. Therefore, it is up to parents to empower their children concerning reading and writing skills. However, empowerment does not necessarily mean teaching. Moreover, illiteracy is prevalent among adults who have attended school. As Rancière (2005) wrote, "Whoever teaches without emancipating stupefies. And whoever emancipates doesn't need to worry about what the emancipated person needs to learn. They will learn whatever they want, perhaps nothing" (personal

translation, p. 33). Hence, all parents, whether they school their children or not, are dependent on their child's future ability to exercise their citizenship in society and demonstrate critical thinking.

Conclusion

The guiding thread of this research was to explore how we could account for the evolution, development, and learning of a child when no formal lessons are taught and no assessments are conducted. My hypothesis was to consider literacy as an acquisition within the framework of child development and to analyze the political, social, cultural, and individual components of the environment of children practicing unschooling in order to understand how literacy develops in them. This approach proved to be relevant. Indeed, this study demonstrated that examining the literacy development of children practicing unschooling aligns with Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and is consistent with Barton's (1994) conception of literacy, which views it as a socially constructed phenomenon studied from an ecological perspective. This research highlights the influence of the child's overall environment on their development, particularly in terms of literacy.

The study reveals that parents' beliefs, representations, and values related to the unschooling culture, public educational policies (including institutional controls), and social and family pressures influence their practices, attitudes, and, consequently, the child's development. These families have all chosen unschooling with the aim of respecting their child's developmental pace and allowing them to learn according to their interests, with the ultimate goal of fostering autonomy, even though slight variations in their practices were observed. This led to dichotomies such as a desire for emancipation versus letting the child emancipate on their own, regulating digital practices versus providing unrestricted access to screens, or adopting a militant stance versus a desire for a peaceful life, which can be found in the philosophies of different homeschooling associations. The

findings suggest that unschooling could be considered an extension of nurturing or even one of its components. Furthermore, some parents reported feeling pressured by their social circle, family, and representatives of the French National Education system, which they sometimes conveyed intentionally or unintentionally to their child(ren).

We demonstrated that literacy development and the mastery of reading and writing can occur at any age, and there was no specific critical period (age before which a child cannot learn to read or write) or cutoff point (age beyond which children could no longer learn to read or write) in our sample. So, while some researchers and pedagogues suggest critical periods for literacy acquisition, this study supports a more individualized and flexible timetable. Further research could explore the interplay between these perspectives. Our results align with the findings of Anbar (2004), Cohen and Söderbergh (1999), Pattison (2016), and Thomas (1999). Furthermore, the study shows that the theories of Emergent Literacy can be applied to children beyond six years of age and for learning to read and write in French. It was shown that parents influence the literacy development of their children through the physical environment, personal interactions, and emotional and motivational climates. This supports the results of Goelman et al. (1984). This research highlighted that some children and adolescents began reading as late as 10 years old and only mastered it by the age of 16, while others began handwriting at 16 years old, and some started typing at the same age. These findings are also consistent with the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) and confirm his hypotheses. The family microcosm is significant, but it is important to note that the physical environment, parents' attitudes, and the family climate are influenced by these preceding elements. The elements highlighted in this study, such as the importance of having books in the environment, reading to and with children, and establishing a climate of trust, confirm the results obtained in Emergent Literacy research.

This research underscores the significance of screens, particularly video games, the internet, and mobile devices, in the informal development of literacy in some children and adolescents. While much of the literature on Emergent Literacy has historically focused on traditional media such as books and television (e.g., Linebarger et al., 2004), or on more recent tools like tablets and educational apps (e.g., Arnold et al., 2021; Neumann, 2014, 2016, 2018; Neumann & Neumann, 2014, 2015), video games and other forms of interactive digital media remain underexplored in this context. These screens are often used for leisure and communication, becoming integral parts of daily life and contributing to the development of digital and computer literacy, as first suggested by Barton (1994). Unlike traditional educational tools, video games immerse players in interactive, text-rich environments, potentially fostering skills such as reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and problem-solving in a context-driven manner. This study also contributes to the discussion on how these digital tools facilitate literacy development in languages other than English, such as French. The vast majority of literature on Emergent Literacy focuses on English-speaking contexts (e.g., Arnold et al., 2021; Invernizzi et al., 2010), raising questions about the transferability of findings to other linguistic and socio-cultural settings. While Anglo-Saxon and French cultures share similarities in family life, significant differences in public educational policies (such as the greater flexibility in homeschooling regulations in England and certain U.S. states like Texas, Iowa, and Missouri) may influence how children interact with digital tools and acquire literacy skills informally. Touch-screen tablets, for example, have been shown to support emergent literacy skills such as letter knowledge, print concepts, and emergent writing (Neumann & Neumann, 2014, 2015). Their tactile interfaces and interactive features make them accessible and engaging for young children, enabling informal learning even in non-structured settings. The use of tablets for writing activities has been linked to improved

print and sound knowledge (Neumann, 2016), and educational apps like Khan Academy Kids have demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing emergent literacy skills in young children (Arnold et al., 2021). However, unstructured use of digital devices does not guarantee literacy development, as time spent on non-educational or generic gaming content may yield limited benefits in this domain. Another important dimension is how digital tools support literacy in resource-constrained environments. Serenje (2024) demonstrated that digital animated stories significantly enhanced vocabulary and story comprehension among Zambian preschoolers, suggesting that digital tools can bridge gaps in access to traditional literacy resources. Similarly, Hillman and Marshall (2009) proposed a framework for evaluating digital literacy content, emphasizing interactivity, appropriateness, and cultural relevance, key factors that could inform the development of tools tailored for unschooling families.

This study has underscored the importance of adopting an appropriate methodology for examining informal literacy development and highlighted the relevance of Urie Bronfenbrenner's theory of human ecological development in understanding literacy acquisition in unschooling contexts. Bronfenbrenner's framework emphasizes the dynamic interactions between an individual's development and their environment, illustrating how societal influences shape the culture of unschooling, which in turn impacts family dynamics and ultimately the child. Within this framework, belonging to a community influences parents' attitudes and choices, family activities, literacy practices, and the way children perceive and engage with literacy. The child's cognitive development is intrinsically linked to their environment, where interactions across different ecological layers play a pivotal role.

It is important to note, however, that the families included in this study shared certain similar characteristics, such as social and cultural factors, which may limit the

generalizability of the findings. For example, the study did not include families with same-sex parents or other diverse parenting arrangements (single father for instance), which could provide valuable insights into how different family structures influence informal literacy development. Future research should aim to address these limitations by incorporating a more diverse range of family types.

Incorporating these perspectives highlights the need for more nuanced approaches to understanding how diverse digital tools, including video games, contribute to literacy development. Video games, in particular, offer a unique and underexplored avenue for fostering skills such as reading comprehension, vocabulary, and problem-solving. Unlike traditional educational apps, games often immerse players in text-rich, context-driven scenarios, encouraging deeper cognitive engagement through dynamic narratives and interactive tasks. Future research could build on these findings through longitudinal studies, tracking participants over time to examine how sustained engagement with digital tools shapes literacy development. Such studies could explore not only individual learning in home environments but also collective settings, such as schools or community-based initiatives, where shared digital experiences might further enhance learning through collaboration. By expanding research into these diverse contexts, it would be possible to better understand the ecological influences on literacy acquisition, including the interplay between technological tools and cultural or social frameworks. These insights could shed light on how informal learning processes adapt to varying environments, providing valuable perspectives on the role of digital tools in both individualized and collaborative educational experiences.

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Declarations of interest:

None.