Lack of School Choice and the Mental Health of Rural Parents: A Phenomenological Study

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Department of Community Care and Counseling, Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of parents whose children have limited educational options in rural North Carolina. The theory chosen to guide this study was choice theory, founded by William Glasser, as it explains that all behavior including reactions to others' choices, and the body's reaction to stress are chosen by the individual (Glasser, 2001). Additionally, choice theory recognizes the basic needs of survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun, and their impact on behavior which Maslow identified in his hierarchy of needs model (Glasser Institute for Choice Theory, n.d.). Parents want to feel as if they are making the right decision for their child's education, and choice theory supports a parent's behavior and reactions to available educational options for their children (Tan, 2011). Data was collected through a series of interviews, journaling prompts, and cognitive representations. Upon completion of the data collection, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed for themes. Parents reported that lack of school choice ranged from having no negative impact on their mental health to feeling anxious, frustrated, in turmoil, angry, and saddened by the educational choices for their children. The experiences described were also influenced by their child's needs, if they had lived in rural North Carolina their whole lives, and if they had ever had school choice options at a previous time in their life.

Keywords: educational opportunities, lack of school choice, mental health, rural parents.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

School Resource Officer (SRO)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

School choice has increased in popularity over the years and has provided many students with opportunities they may not have had otherwise. Programs such as the North Carolina Opportunity Scholarship enacted in 2013 (NC State University, n.d.) provide scholarships to qualifying students in order to facilitate access to private schools, widening the available options from attending a public school out of district to attending a private school. While there are many arguments on both sides of the school choice and school voucher programs, rural families are often left with limited options as other educational facilities are simply not available in rural areas (Bæck, 2015). Through reviewing literature regarding school choice, mental health, and the impact it has on communities, it was discovered that very little research has been done to understand rural parents' experiences with lack of school choice. Therefore, the reason for this transcendental phenomenological study was to develop a better understanding of rural parents' perceptions regarding the lack of school choice and how it has influenced their personal mental health. The current study allowed rural parents to express their lived experiences with rural education, lack of school choice, the effect it has had on their families, and how it has affected their personal mental health.

Parenting children in today's society is stressful. Among parenting stressors are education-related factors such as safety, educational opportunities, and quality of education (Cucchiara, 2013). Rural families face challenges when it comes to education options as these areas often do not receive the same funding as their urban counterparts (Preston et al., 2013). Reduced funding impacts professional development, educational programs, sports programs, mental health programs, infrastructure, quality and quantity of staff, and staff retention (Preston

et al., 2013). As a result, this has an impact on parental satisfaction with educational opportunities and the stress they experience due to a lack of resources for their children.

This chapter details the research background. The information herein explains how the phenomenon applies to the researcher personally, the purpose of the research, research questions, and how the information within relates back to the research questions. Language specific to this research project is defined in this chapter, as well. Additionally, this chapter examines the history and the development of the problem over time.

Background

School choice refers to the rights parents have to choose how their child will be educated (Hentschke, 2017). While the issue has not always been as prominent in school systems and families as it is today, the desire to educate children in the best way parents see fit has been a recognized concept for years (Hentschke, 2017). School choice allows parents to remain in control of what their child learns and how.

Historical Context

The concept of school choice dates back to the beginning of school systems where families had the right to choose whether their child attended their local public school or a private school (Hentschke, 2017). Beginning in 1985, school choice began to evolve as the state of Minnesota created a public-school choice program that was based upon available space in schools (Hentschke, 2017). The cities of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Cleveland, Ohio, followed by creating and implementing the first school voucher program to deter people from leaving urban areas en masse to escape low-performing city schools (Hentschke, 2017). The Opportunity Scholarship Program in North Carolina was enacted in 2013. In 2014-15, the program began

providing funding to eligible students for up to $4,200 per school year. Students could use this scholarship to attend a participating private school of their choice (NC State University, n.d.).

Additionally, with the introduction of the COVID-19 pandemic, families opted increasingly for homeschooling (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021). The pandemic impacted formal education as the presence of the virus posed a great health risk and required children to learn from home. Homeschooling is not a new concept, as it dates back to early centuries when many indigenous people taught their children by passing knowledge on from generation to generation (Fontenelle-Tereshchuck, 2021). Since the pandemic, homeschooling has evolved as parents discovered a hybrid form in which the child attends school online and the parent provides support as needed (Fontenelle-Tereshchuck, 2021). This has provided yet another educational option for parents who have access to the technology needed to educate their children in this manner. However, this option is not always readily available to rural families.

Social Context

Families in urban areas often have the ability to choose from various public schools, charter schools, private schools, or they also have the option to homeschool. In rural areas, many families are limited to either public school or homeschool. Depending on the geographical location, many homeschool families face the additional challenge of being able to access reliable internet or cellular connections (Harris, 2022). While these issues may not exist for urban families, these added hurdles can increase school-related stress for rural families because they do not have the resources needed to meet the needs of their family (Cronin et al., 2015).

With the introduction of the North Carolina Opportunity Scholarship, many families have benefited from the opportunity for their child to attend a school that meets their educational goals. However, many rural families are still without access to the education they desire for their

child because schools that participate in the program either do not provide education for grades K-12, or participating schools are simply not available in their area.

Theoretical Context

An important variable to consider when relating school choice to rural locations is that, because of the geographical location of rural communities, many of these communities have very limited options for school choice, even if a state school voucher program is in place. For example, in Macon County, NC, there is a public school system and one private school that serves children in grades kindergarten-8th. There are no additional school choice options for high school students other than the traditional public high school or the public early college, which serves students in grades 9-12 and allows them to graduate with a high school diploma and associate's degree if they are accepted to the program.

When considering choice theory as the theoretical framework of the current study, a better understanding of how parents perceive lack of school choice impacts their daily lives can be developed (Glasser, 2001). More in-depth knowledge of how education-related stress impacts modern day parents can be accomplished by examining the historical foundations of school choice, how it has evolved to meet current-day needs, and what is still lacking according to experiences described by rural parents. Choice theory recognizes that only the person experiencing the phenomenon can interpret it, and much of this interpretation is based on how the person chooses to respond (Glasser, 2001). Urban parents do not experience the same education-related stress that rural parents do. By allowing rural parents the opportunity to express their personal experiences with rural education, better ways to educate rural students can emerge and programs can be developed that better support this population.

Situation to Self

The current study developed out of my own personal experience with lack of school choice in a rural area of North Carolina. My family faced many challenges when it came to schooling options for the children, and I began to notice the stress I was personally experiencing as a result of frustrations with the lack of school choice. I wanted a Christian education for my children; however, our county had one Christian school that went through 8th grade. This left public school or homeschool as the only choices for the high school aged children.

After discussing my thoughts and experiences surrounding school choice with friends and family, I discovered we were not the only ones struggling with schooling options in our area. Many of our friends faced similar challenges when trying to choose the best options for their children. Being in a rural area, quality internet service is not readily available at all homes, and this was a barrier to homeschool or online schooling options for some. This limited even public virtual school for many families. Many parents strive to provide their children with the best tools possible so that the children have the optimum transition into adulthood. I wondered how not being able to provide the desired education for one's child impacted the parent. As I began to research school choice in rural areas, I discovered I could not find any information on how lack of school choice influenced the parents mentally and emotionally.

In developing this topic for my dissertation, I brought my own personal experience with lack of school choice and how I have perceived the effect it has had on my children's education and our family. Additionally, I was able to develop this project using my personal philosophical assumption and interpretive framework preferences. My preferential philosophical assumption is an ontological view, or one that studies different perspectives and how reality is seen through many viewpoints (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Choice theory, my preferential interpretive

framework, allows one to develop an understanding of the world in which they live, which pairs well with an ontological philosophy, as they both consider reality and lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glasser, 2001). This research project is a culmination of an issue that has touched me personally, research modalities and techniques that I enjoy, and a topic that is of interest to my community.

Problem Statement

In general, the problem for the current study was the lack of qualitative research focused on the mental health of parents of rural students who face a lack of educational opportunities. Education impacts students and their families in multiple ways as it influences much of who the student becomes through college preparation, quality of curriculum and programming, safety while on campus, mental wellbeing, parent inclusion, and engagement in learning (Arrastia-Chisholm et al., 2017; Bæck, 2015; Cucchiara, 2020; Semke & Sheridan, 2012; Shakeel & Maranto, 2019; Walburg, 2014). All these aspects of the school experience shape what a student is interested in and who they choose to become. However, there are few studies focused on rural parents' perception of how a lack of educational opportunities for the child influences the parent's mental health. The current study is an endeavor to understand rural parents' experiences with the lack of educational options for their child and how they perceived its influence on their personal mental health.

The focus of the research was to identify what parents experience when there are few options for school choice. Research does show that parents experience anxiety, stress, guilt, and shame in relation to a variety of educational variables such as safety, security, quality of education, availability of resources, transportation, and opportunities for financial support (Cronin et al., 2015; Cucchiara, 2020; Duncan, 2014; Ruckstaetter et al., 2017). However, each

parent may experience the same educational obstacle but process or react differently based on their own personal history and unique experiences (Ruckstaetter et al., 2017). The current study recognized each participant's unique experience with a similar phenomenon. The population sample consisted of parents of students in elementary, middle, or high school, or in the first two years of college (public, private, or homeschool). The participants all resided in Macon County, NC.

While past research does focus on different areas of parental mental health such as stress, anxiety, guilt, and shame, there are major gaps in the research related to how a lack of educational opportunities influences these areas of parental mental health (Cucchiara, 2020; Ponnet et al., 2012; Ruckstaetter et al., 2017). This was an important phenomenon to study because research shows that a parent's mental health directly influences a child's wellbeing (Cucchiara, 2020). By conducting a qualitative study that allowed parents in rural areas to verbally express their experiences with education, a holistic overview was developed in relation to their lived reality and how their mental health and everyday life was influenced by the choices they made regarding their child's education.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of parents whose children have limited educational options in rural North Carolina. This study prioritized choice theory as the interpretive framework. Choice theory, founded by William Glasser, states that people choose how they behave from birth to death (Tan, 2011). Because the educational experience greatly impacts both the child and parent and lived experiences at home involve both the child and parent, choice theory was chosen because of its dedication to interpreting human behavior in response to lived experiences (Tan, 2011). Choice theory facilitated a better

understanding of how stress related to educational options, and this information can help build stronger families and communities.

Significance of the Study

A lack of educational options for children influences the mental health of rural parents in several ways. The current study was significant in that it revealed how parents experience education-related stress and their awareness of how this stress affects their families. As noted by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), parental stress and their child's education influence one another. Additionally, the stress introduced by not having the resources needed to meet one's needs impacts families daily (Cronin et al., 2015; Ponnet et al., 2012). Coping with stress is an important part of creating positive mental health in children, as their environment contributes greatly to healthy development (Cucchiara, 2020). By identifying ways in which education and family life influence one another, students, parents, and educators can create opportunities to work together for the betterment of students.

Additionally, through the current study, school systems can develop a better understanding of the experiences of rural parents and implement programs that contribute to the improvement of rural education. As discussed by Preston et al. (2013), rural parents desire to be involved and acquainted with school leadership. The information the current study contains can be used to improve the lives of rural parents, especially if discussed in collaboration with school leadership (Preston et al., 2013). Educational leadership can use this research project as a tool to help improve their systems through parents identifying weaknesses in the current education system, opportunities to strengthen those weaknesses, the impact of these weaknesses on families within the community, and ideas for how communities can work together to strengthen their education system.

Research Questions

Based on the problem and purpose statements of the current study, the following research questions were created:

RQ 1: How did parents in rural areas describe the experience the lack of school choice has had on them and their families?

Aiming at the core of phenomenological research, this question aimed to reveal the lived experience of the study participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This question examined how different families experienced the "lack of school choice" within the same community.

RQ 2: How did parents in rural areas describe their ability to provide quality education for their children when there were fewer educational opportunities available to them than their urban counterparts?

Adhering to the ontological assumption held within this research, this question was an attempt to understand the nature of each participant's reality within this lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within ontological assumptions, the researcher recognizes that multiple realities will exist since individuals experience life differently; that is why it was important to examine multiple realities and search for recurring themes within the stories told (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RQ 3: How did parents perceive how available schooling options influenced the familial relationship of the rural family?

At the heart of phenomenological study are lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This question focused on the parent's lived experiences and how their perception of education influenced relational bonds within families. Additionally, Maslow's hierarchy of needs focuses

on how humans function based on resources available to them that support proper development (Maslow, 1943).

Definitions

1. *Anxiety* – refers to feelings of being keyed up or tense, restless, issues with concentration, fear of something bad happening, or fearing a loss of control of self (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

2. *Educational opportunities* – programming within an educational setting that equips students with skills and knowledge (Bæck, 2016).

3. *Guilt* – associated with a private sense of having done something wrong or having behaved in a way that violates one's conscience (Cohen et al., 2011).

4. *Mental health* – includes a person's psychological, emotional, and social state of mind and their ability to cope with stress (Cronin et al., 2015).

5. *Rural families* – family units who live in less populated, non-urban areas; family units in geographical areas who have less access to non-traditional schooling options (Shakeel & Maranto, 2019).

6. *School choice* – families choosing which educational opportunities best fit the needs of their children and the right to choose which educational institution fits that need (Hentschke, 2017; Shuls, 2017).

7. *Shame* – associated with a sense of having done something wrong, but the feelings focus on the person, not the action, leading to a sense of negative feelings about oneself; generally felt when wrongdoings are made public (Cohen et al., 2011).

8. *Stress* – relates to a real or perceived threat or challenge; an emotional response when one is unable to meet a child's needs or does not possess adequate resources (Cronin et al., 2015; Rom & Reznick, 2015).

Summary

Stress is introduced when the available resources do not meet the needs of the person or family (Ponnet et al., 2012). Rural families do not have access to the same school choice options as their urban counterparts (Bæck, 2015). When rural families do not have the resources needed to educate their children as they see fit, this can introduce stress. The response to this stress greatly influences the development of children in the home (Cucchiara, 2020). The problem identified in the current study, and the purpose of the current study, was to understand how the lack of educational opportunities influenced the mental health of the rural parent. Parental decisions regarding education for children is not a new concept. However, given the rise in demand for school choice, the implementation of voucher programs, and the Covid-19 pandemic's influence on homeschooling options, rural parents have faced new frustrations. Providing new research into how rural parents have experienced school choice allows insight into how these families can be better supported by education professionals.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

School choice, student achievement, parental involvement, and the impact a parent's mental health has on a child's education are all topics widely discussed in research (Altenhofen et al., 2016; Cucchiara, 2013; Goodall & Montgomery, 2013; Schachner, 2021). In addition to these factors, residing in a rural location presents its own unique challenges to both parents and educators alike, about which there is significant research (Bæck, 2015). However, there is very little research available regarding the experiences of people living in rural communities and how the lack of school choice influences a parent's mental and emotional health when educational options simply are not available for their children. This chapter focuses on the theoretical framework of the current study which includes choice theory, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and stress theory (Choice Theory, n.d.; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Maslow, 1943). Additionally, related literature is reviewed and discussed concerning educational concerns for parents, quality of education, safety in school, diversity, parental inclusion, extracurricular activities, trust, conflict in the home, shame, anxiety, guilt, and parental stress. This chapter examines how psychological theories impact today's learning environment and how parents are impacted both mentally and emotionally.

Researchers have examined how school choice options impact students, but there is very little research focused on how this impacts parents (Shuls, 2017). Within the realm of child-student education and parenting, the stress brought onto parents by lack of educational options in rural areas must be examined. Families in rural communities know the stress of not having sufficient community resources (Bæck, 2015). When basic needs are not met, stress levels rise (Maslow, 1943). Rural families are often impacted by financial, educational, housing, and

resource deficits (Semke & Sheridan, 2012; Yoshikawa et al., 2012). Lack of educational opportunities for children should not be another battle families in rural areas face. In an effort to understand how parents are impacted by lack of school choice in rural areas, a synthesis of related literature was developed in order to further explore the experience parents have with school choice and which factors contribute to their personal story.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of a research study is the foundation on which it is built (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The theoretical framework chosen influences research questions, hypotheses, interview questions, and the general approach to research (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). When choosing the theories and frameworks that will guide a study, a researcher should consider their own values and beliefs, what research is available to support the chosen theory, and how the theory influences the problem being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The theory chosen to guide this study was choice theory. Choice theory provided a broad spectrum in which behavior, choices, and participant experiences were applied to this current study (Glasser, 2001). This theory also recognized a person's reality as it is experienced by them and honors individual values (Glasser, 2001). Additionally, Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Lazarus's stress theory supported this theoretical framework.

Choice Theory

Choice theory, articulated by William Glasser, is built upon the idea that all people *behave* from the moment they are born until the moment they die (Tan, 2011). In the late 1990s, Glasser renamed his "control theory" to "choice theory." This change allowed for clarification of this theory from one that controlled others to one that promoted self-control and personal responsibility, which was always at its core (Tan, 2011). Glasser (1997) believes that through

nurture and support, both students and parents can succeed. Additionally, Glasser (2001) includes in choice theory how a successful life depends upon good relationships. As Maslow (1943) recognized the need for relationships by including love in his hierarchy of needs, Glasser (2001) also recognized the impact love and belonging, and their absence, have on a person. Glasser (2001) posits that much of human suffering comes from poor relationships. However, he puts forth an idea in choice theory that we, as humans, actually "choose everything we do, including the misery we feel" (Glasser, 2001, p. 3). Additionally, through choice theory, a researcher can explore how a person's behavior influences the phenomenon being studied.

In choice theory, an individual's total behavior is broken down into four parts: acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology. Within each of these parts, a person is free to choose how they will respond, react, and behave in life (Glasser, 2001). The Ten Axioms of Choice Theory provide the theoretical framework for reality therapy but also lay out the basis for which choice theory incorporates behaviors, relationships, and decision-making into everyday actions (Tan, 2011). The Ten Axioms of Choice Theory are as follows:

1. The only person's behavior we can control is our own.

2. All we can give another person is information.

3. All long-lasting psychological problems are relationship problems.

4. The problem relationship is always part of our present life.

5. What happened in the past has everything to do with who we are today, but we can only satisfy our basic needs right now and plan to continue satisfying them in the future.

6. We can satisfy our needs only by satisfying the pictures in our quality world.

7. All we do is behave.

8. All behavior is total behavior and is made up of four components: acting, thinking,

feeling, and physiology.

9. All total behavior is chosen, but we have direct control only over the acting and thinking components. We can control our feeling and physiology only indirectly through how we choose to act and think.

10. All total behavior is designated by verbs and named by the part that is most recognizable. (Tan, 2011, pgs. 187-188)

Within choice theory, Glasser (2001) explains all behavior including choices, reactions to others' choices, and the body's reaction to stress. Additionally, choice theory recognizes the basic needs of survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun, and their impact on behavior that Maslow (1943) identified in his hierarchy of needs model (Glasser Institute for Choice Theory, n.d.). Parents want to feel as if they are making the right decision for their child's education, and a parent's behavior and reactions to available educational options for their children can be found within choice theory (Tan, 2011). In line with the Ten Axioms of Choice Theory, and bearing direct influence on the current study, parents realize they can only control their own choice regarding education and cannot control the environment in which they place their child for school, unless they opt to homeschool (Holmes Erickson, 2017). However, for parents in rural areas, school choice is not always an option limiting parents to choosing a school that may not be best for their child. Not having the desired resources for their child can cause stress to a parent, and this is of direct interest to the current study, as well (Duncan et al., 2014). In responding to this dilemma, parents *behave*, or react, to the situation. Depending on the nature of the chosen reaction, additional forms of stress can be introduced to the family.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham Maslow introduced the world to his model of human needs with the publication of his hierarchy of needs in 1943. The model posits a hierarchical view of the basic needs of humanity and life span development (Maslow, 1943). Within this hierarchy, Maslow (1943) proposed that all humans have the same basic needs of physiology, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. Directly related to this current study is how each of the needs impact parents, their student-child, and how each need influences parental emotional and mental stress as it relates to available educational opportunities.

At the base of Maslow's hierarchy of needs are physiological needs (Maslow, 1943). This category encompasses the foundation of survival and refers to items necessary for homeostasis such as water, air, food, and sleep (Maslow, 1943). A person who is lacking a physiological need, such as food, will place that need above everything else and sacrifice other areas of need such as safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). When physiological needs are met, a person is then able to pursue other goals within the hierarchy (Maslow, 1943). Persons who live in poverty and have little access to proper nutrition, shelter, etc. will focus primarily on satisfying those needs. Once those needs are met and satisfied, those individuals are free to pursue other desires as they are no longer experiencing want in physiological areas (Maslow, 1943). As the current study develops, the satisfaction of physiological needs will play an important role in recognizing which parents are able to focus on educational goals for their children. Parents who are struggling to simply put food on the table may not be as concerned with school choice as a parent who is able to satisfy the family's physiological needs.

Next within the hierarchy are safety needs (Maslow, 1943). The need for the next level of hierarchal needs cannot be met if the previous level is not satisfied. Therefore, the need for safety

can only be met once a person obtains all needed resources for basic survival (Maslow, 1943).

While the need for safety is present in all human beings, Maslow (1943) explains that this level

is more easily seen in the behaviors of infants and children. The reason is that adults have been

conditioned to restrict their emotional responses to threats through societal constraints (Maslow,

1943). The need for safety can be seen in children through their desire for routine and

predictability. The presence of disorder causes children to feel anxious, uneasy, and unsafe

(Maslow, 1943). Disorder and dysfunction within the family unit can cause children to see the

world as "unreliable, or unsafe, or unpredictable" (Maslow, 1943, p. 377). Children may carry

this childhood worldview with them into adulthood if their needs are not met. Felt safety and

security within adulthood allows parents to self-regulate, practice self-control, and provide an

environment for their children that is absent of significant chaos. Adults who feel unsafe may

look to others to provide this unmet need (Maslow, 1943). In relation to a child's education, a

parent may place unrealistic expectations on a school system, or they may look for particular

offerings by a school that meet their unmet need for safety.

Love needs are the third step in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy. Once physiological and

safety needs are met, a person can begin to attend to their need for love, both the giving of love

and the receiving of love (Maslow, 1943). Within this category, love provides many

opportunities for belonging, affection, and a place in which one feels connected (Maslow, 1943).

An absence of love contributes greatly to maladjustment and psychological dysfunction

(Maslow, 1943). An individual who is free to experience love is able to feel confident with

themselves and "overcome loneliness and alienation" (Medcalf et al., 2013, p. 1325). However,

if love is absent within a child's immediate family, the child will look for this need for belonging

and acceptance in dangerous places such as gangs, as even the risks of being in a gang is worth

meeting the need for belonging (Medcalf et al., 2013). Parents who are able to experience love and belonging, even if not in a committed relationship, are able to provide this same need to their children.

Fourth within the hierarchy of needs is the need for esteem, or self-respect, self-esteem, and the respect of others (Maslow, 1943). When the esteem need is met, a person can experience freedom, worth, stability, and confidence regarding their own capabilities (Maslow, 1943). The absence of this need for esteem produces feelings of helplessness, inferiority, or weakness (Maslow, 1943). It is important for adults and children to feel competent, valued, and respected as these things help a person reach their highest potential (Medcalf et al., 2013). The current study will examine how a parent's esteem impacts their ability to help their child reach their fullest potential academically.

Finally, the need for self-actualization tops Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. Self-actualization recognizes that a person's needs are primarily satisfied, and they have the ability to become who they are capable of becoming, provided they are doing what suits them most (Maslow, 1943). Self-actualization appears differently in people. Some individuals may desire motherhood, while some aspire to be musicians, artists, or business-minded (Maslow, 1943). This could also be recognized in the parent determined to find the best academic fit for their student-child. While self-actualization can be left to personal interpretation, Compton (2018) sought to clarify myths surrounding this topic. In his quest, Compton (2018) recognized that self-actualization can occur even if there are gaps in other levels of the hierarchy, an aspect some overlook. He also granted that a person's individual motivation and personality greatly affect the quest for self-actualization (Compton, 2018). Additionally, Compton (2018) clarifies that happiness is not an automatic by-product of self-actualization. Achievement of happiness can be

subject to change depending on the individual person's definition of happiness (Compton, 2018).

Given the highly independent variables that influence self-actualization, this level of the

hierarchy is not obtained uniformly.

Parents help meet the needs of their children in many of the ways listed above. Many

parents provide food, housing, affection, and the tools with which children develop self-esteem

and the desire to become the best versions of themselves (Kenrick et al., 2010). Schools often

support the growth of self-esteem, and education plays a vital role in this development (Kim &

Hill, 2015). Often, however, school counseling professionals focus on the esteem aspect of the

hierarchy and neglect to consider issues children are facing at home before they arrive at

school—physiological needs, then safety, then love and belonging (Levers, 2012). This circles

back to the issue that if a parent's mental health is not good (if their basic needs are not being

met and there is stress) and the child's basic needs are not met, their education will suffer

(Cronin et al., 2015). Maslow (1943) posited that any disruption in a person's basic needs

prohibits that individual from having complete freedom to, in this example, learn freely. It is

important for educators to consider the whole child when considering how Maslow's model can

best serve to support a child's education (Cronin et al., 2015; Levers, 2012). While having the

option to choose a school that better meets a child's academic needs can be beneficial, a child's

ability to succeed starts with stability within the home.

Through additional research regarding how parental stress impacts mental and emotional

health, the themes that emerged only strengthened Maslow's model by revealing that having

basic needs met, or not, has an impact on stress levels and the ability to function at one's highest

potential. Parental stress manifests in a multitude of ways including parental reactivity to

children's stress, socioeconomic status, a lack of resources (physical, emotional, educational,

mental, financial, etc.), and more (Borelli et al., 2015; Dizon-Ross, 2019). Additionally, a lack of financial resources impacts a parent's ability to provide many basic needs for children, and the lack of resources increases parental stress (Yoshikawa et al., 2012). According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (2021), there were an estimated 27 million children in near poor or poor families in 2019. Living in conditions where basic needs are not met makes it more difficult for children to succeed academically (Yoshikawa et al., 2012). As a parent, not being able to meet the needs of the family increases stress, decreases stability, and contributes to the cycle of poverty where one cannot achieve their highest potential (Yoshikawa et al., 2012). A child needs a healthy, safe environment where stability and routine are predictable (Maslow, 1943). Rural families experience higher rates of poverty and fewer options for school choice. As Maslow's hierarchy of needs demonstrates, supporting rural families directly correlates to the academic success of the children and family unit. In direct relation to the current study, we can see that when a parent's hierarchal needs are met, they can in turn support their student-child more effectively. Parents will experience less stress and an increased ability to provide support to their children when their own needs are satisfied. The overarching wellbeing of familial mental health and self-actualization can be found in the compilation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs being met in both the parent and child.

Lazarus's Theory of Stress

Richard Lazarus developed a model that claims people perceive stress either as a threat or as a challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This dichotomous model explains stress perceived as a threat will be met with an emotional response, and if it is perceived as a challenge a more logical response to the stressor will emerge (Rom & Reznick, 2015). The origin of stress can be widespread and may include time, financial, transportation, health, or parental demands (Cronin

et al., 2015). A parent's response to stress may impact how their, or their child's, basic needs are

met, tying the stress response to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Cronin et al., 2015; Levers, 2012).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) recognized how parental stress influences educational decisions for

their children. Expected situations are often not seen as sources of stress; however, if a situation

that is unexpected arises, parents can often see this as a source of stress and react based on if the

source is a challenge or threat (Cronin et al., 2015). The source of the parent's stress can be

related back to Maslow's hierarchy of needs in order to identify which basic need might be going

unmet. For example, if a parent is experiencing financial strain, their ability to focus on the

child's needs may be impeded because of the need for a second job. This could impact the

child's ability to complete homework, eat properly, or receive enough sleep at night. This

financial strain could be linked back to the physiological needs level within Maslow's (1943)

hierarchy.

Additionally, Lazarus and Folkman state that how one perceives, or appraises, their

surroundings influences the intensity of the stress reaction (Biggs et al., 2017). The appraisal of

the environment can include events, stimuli, personal values, goals, beliefs, or the demands

placed on a person (Biggs et al., 2017). If the individual determines no threat exists, they will

return to normal. However, if an individual perceives that their surroundings could bring them

harm or keep their needs from being met, their stress level will rise, their coping skills will be

activated, and the outcome of the situation will, in part, be reliant on how that person chooses to

behave in that situation (Biggs et al., 2017). The intensity of the reaction will also depend upon if

the individual perceives the stress as emotion-focused or problem-focused (Biggs et al., 2017).

This information links back to choice theory and Glasser's belief that all humans do is behave as

well as Maslow's hierarchy of needs which recognizes human reactions to unmet needs (Glasser

Institute for Choice Theory, n.d; Maslow, 1943). A person's reaction to stress is influenced by many factors and depends greatly on their ability to react appropriately. Coping well with stress can be difficult when emotions are high, there are great outcomes at stake, or one does not have the ability to regulate themselves.

Overall, Lazarus's theory allows for a deeper understanding of stress based on its origin, its perceived impact on a person, and how people respond to the presence of stress in their lives (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). To conduct research on how the lack of school choice impacts a parent's mental and emotional health, Lazarus's stress theory will be used to identify if parents see the lack of educational options as a threat or challenge to their unique situation. Depending on a parent's stress perception, their reaction and choices regarding education may vary. Because every person is uniquely equipped with different perceptions, experiences, and coping skills, their reaction to education related stress will not be the same as someone else. For example, an individual who has experienced different types of educational options (public, private, charter, homeschool, etc.) may be more stressed by a lack of options than someone who has lived in a rural area their entire life because their experiences are different. Lazarus's stress theory directly impacts the current study by recognizing the origins of stress and how stress influences individuals in familial and community relationships.

Related Literature

The incorporation of related literature into a research study allows the researcher to analyze previous research in order to discover issues related to their own field of study (Randolph, 2009). While writing a dissertation, a researcher must review existing literature to discover any gaps that their research study may fill (Randolph, 2009). The related literature to

the current study focuses on parents' concerns for their children's education and how these

concerns and available resources impact their personal, emotional, and mental health.

Educational Concerns for Parents

Parents cite a variety of reasons that influence their decisions in relation to their child's

education. These topics include college readiness, quality of education in rural areas, school

safety, mental health services, amount of parental involvement, school choice, and academic

engagement (Arrastia-Chisholm et al., 2017; Bæck, 2015; Cucchiara, 2020; Semke & Sheridan,

2012; Shakeel & Maranto, 2019; Walburg, 2014). With school choice becoming more prevalent,

parents in urban areas are afforded many more school options that might be a good fit for their

child-student than their rural counterparts (Bæck, 2015; Holmes Erickson, 2017). Urban and

rural parents share many areas of concern regarding education, like quality of education, safety,

mental health, diversity, parental inclusion, extracurricular activities, and trust within the school

environment (Allen et al., 2016; Altenhofen et al., 2016; Fazel et al., 2014; Holmes Erickson,

2017; Semke & Sheridan, 2012). However, rural parents do not share in the abundance of school

choice urban families have and are more limited to which areas of concern may take priority

(Bæck, 2015). Because of this, rural parents often do not relate to urban school policies as they

do not apply to their personal needs (Shakeel & Maranto, 2019).

Burnout among high school students can impact the quality of the educational experience

for students and parents alike (Walburg, 2014). Children spend more time at school than any

other organized instructional facility during the week; as a result, parents and professionals are

recognizing the importance of having mental health support in school (Fazel et al., 2014).

Programs that boost involvement and engagement work to avoid burnout and improve the quality

of education which keeps students more engaged and involved in their own education (Arrastia-

Chisholm et al., 2017; Walburg, 2014). Arrastia-Chisholm et al. (2017) discuss the importance of programs that promote skills such as self-regulation to students; however, in rural areas, many school counselors work alone and implementing such programs may not be as feasible as they are in urban areas. Additionally, Cucchiara (2020) highlights the rise in parental anxiety regarding the perceived risks of making the right education decisions for their children. Parental involvement at school positively impacts a student's success and can help alleviate parental anxiety as they become more involved in their child's education (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). Parental engagement also fosters the spirit of belonging and builds trust among students, parents, faculty, and staff (Allen et al., 2016). Most parents across both urban and rural areas share the same concerns and hopes for their child's education, except parents in rural areas may face more difficulties in securing options that match their desires.

Quality of Education

One area of concern for parents regarding their child's education is the quality of instruction and the ability of the school to get their child to graduation (Dupéré et al., 2015; Semke & Sheridan, 2012). Many aspects that relate to the school environment impact education quality such as teacher retention, college and career preparation, available resources to rural educators, and burnout among students in upper grades (Arrastia-Chisholm et al., 2017; Bæck, 2015; Hughes, 2012; Preston et al., 2013; Shakeel & Maranto, 2019; Walburg, 2014). Rural areas face additional challenges when there are few educational opportunities available.

Low-income communities traditionally have higher teacher turnover rates than their more affluent counterparts, which impacts the quality of education through lack of consistency and predictability, which children benefit from (Maslow, 1943; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Lower-income communities often face challenges concerning parental involvement, which is known to

directly influence a teacher's job satisfaction as parental involvement strengthens a teacher's morale (Simon & Johnson, 2015). Teacher retention impacts the quality of education offered and is something rural principals struggle with (Hughes, 2012; Preston et al., 2013). When teachers in low-income school districts leave their jobs, they either change career paths or go to school districts that have higher rates of pay, better student performance, and better job satisfaction ratings (Simon & Johnson, 2015). When teachers are not supported by the student's family and the school district is unable to compensate the teacher for the additional struggles they face, many teachers find themselves looking for better work environments, which perpetuates the issues in rural communities.

College and career programs in rural areas are often underdeveloped. According to Every Child NC (2022), North Carolina "has the nation's second-largest enrollment of rural students, with more than one-third of all students residing in rural communities." Because of the lack of funding in rural districts, students do not have access to programs that promote college and career readiness (Every Child NC, 2022). Rural communities face a cyclical issue related to education and economy. These communities need more workers to build the economic welfare of the community, but educational programs are not available to build this workforce, which reinforces the cycle of poverty and lack of education in rural communities.

According to Walburg (2014), socio-economic status, poor family relationships, and a negative school climate increased burnout, especially among academically-focused girls. Support from teachers, positive motivation, and positive coping skills were all contributors of low rates of student burnout (Walburg, 2014). Students who feel empowered and supported are less likely to experience feelings of anxiety that lead to burnout. When students experience school burnout, rates of depression increase, directly linking school success with mental health (Walburg, 2014).

Walburg (2014) notes that school burnout affects females more than males and is more prevalent in students who are on academic tracks versus vocational.

Safety at School and Mental Health Services

Parents express feelings of anxiety regarding their children's education for many reasons, one being their child's physical and emotional safety while at school (Cucchiara, 2020). Mental health issues and access to services within school are components parents look for in choosing a school (Fazel et al., 2014). Parents also want an environment where bullying is not tolerated, and their child does not have to deal with extra stress while learning (Smith, 2016). While many factors influence safety at school, knowing a school takes these issues seriously gives parents more peace of mind.

School safety is of paramount concern to parents, educators, and administrators. One aspect of school safety is bullying. In order to effectively handle bullying, criteria for behaviors that define bullying must be identified in order for all staff and administrators to address bullying consistently (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). Additionally, school discipline policies that are ambiguous perpetuate inequality among racially diverse student populations and can lead to minority populations feeling isolated, helpless, and alienated (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). Fairness and equality must be present in discipline policies, and bullying cannot be left up to situational interpretation.

The implementation of school resource officers (SROs) in school buildings is thought to deter school violence (Johnson, 2017). Schools with SROs are more likely to have an emergency response plan and routine patrol of school grounds; students who have a positive view of the school's SRO are more likely to report crime and feel safer while attending school (Johnson, 2017). However, simply placing an SRO on school grounds does not necessarily mean students

will feel safer. Johnson (2014) suggests that the SRO must have more than just physical presence; they must facilitate a positive relationship with students and staff in order to avoid militarization of the school. Relationship quality takes precedence over physical presence in the case of the SRO.

Parental anxiety regarding school choice has increased over the years (Cucchiara, 2020). In rural areas where there is little educational choice, a parent would not be overwhelmed by choice due to the number of options, but by the risks involved with the choices available and if there is an option that will be a good fit for the child-student (Cucchiara, 2020). Since mental health has become a more prevalent subject in recent years, mental health resources are something parents look at when choosing a school (Fazel et al., 2014). Parents want educational environments that promote learning and do not tolerate stress-inducing behaviors within schools (Smith, 2016).

Mental health is not just isolated to the school environment. Students bring issues from home to school with them daily, and many of these issues do not have a direct correlation to events happening at school (Rossen & Cowan, 2014). Students can be preoccupied with issues like parental divorce, poverty, lack of resources, relationship stress, health issues, and mental health diagnoses (Rossen & Cowan, 2014). While parents want their children to have access to safe and positive school environments, poor familial relationships can negatively influence a positive school environment (Rossen & Cowan, 2014). Mental health issues can detract from learning, and these issues can directly increase stress reactions in students, teachers, and administrators (Rossen & Cowan, 2014). School safety and mental health wellness complement one another and can work to alleviate issues where the other is concerned.

Diversity, Parental Inclusion, and School Choice

When choosing a school, parents report diversity as an important factor (Altenhofen et al., 2016). Additionally, parents also want to feel as if they are invited into their child's educational experience. Things such as gender, race, educational background, income level, familial structure, transportation, and more influence parental involvement (Jafarov, 2015). However, the desire for diversity and inclusion is often contrary to the actions parents take.

While many parents report diversity as being important, other parents are often frustrated with the extreme poverty levels in their area school, and it causes an interpersonal conflict as they desire to not only provide a good education for their child, but they also want to be good community partners (Mayer et al., 2020). When given the choice, white parents will opt out of racially diverse neighborhood schools (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012). While diversity is reported as being important when making a decision, school choice appears to be widening the inequality gap and uncovering a gap between what parents say they want versus what parents choose (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012). It is possible that parents want diversity, but given safety concerns in neighborhood schools, safety trumps the desire for diversity (Hamlin & Li, 2019). While diversity is something parents look for when choosing schools, other factors may take precedence.

When a parent is sensitive to their child's needs and are involved in their education, they are in a position to be a better advocate for their child versus the parent who is unaware of their child's needs (Mesman et al., 2011). Schools often encourage parental inclusion in a student's academic life. However, some parents may be restricted by time, money, and flexibility and are unable to be involved in school activities (Williams & Sánchez, 2011). Even so, many parents want the option of inclusion and involvement when choosing a school for their child.

Extracurricular Activities Offered

Many schools offer activities for children to become involved at all grade levels. Extracurricular activities generally take place after formal school hours and allow children to interact with their peers outside of academics (Oberle et al., 2019). Benefits linked to extracurricular activities include leadership skills, physical health and strength, team building skills, self-control, and time management (Oberle et al., 2019). Extracurricular activities include clubs, sports, music, and art. These activities support positive development of participating youth and can foster a sense of inclusion for parents as the activities provide opportunities for community and school involvement (Martinez et al., 2016). The positive influence these activities offer makes schools with extracurricular activities more appealing to parents who recognize the benefits of participation.

When considering school options for their child, some parents look for the availability and selection of extracurricular activities (Holmes Erickson, 2017). Twenty-one percent of parents in the state of Georgia selected private schools based on their extracurricular programs (Holmes Erickson, 2017). While extracurricular activities are not the sole reason parents chose a particular school, they are considered in conjunction with academic quality; different families do prioritize extracurricular activities (Holmes Erickson, 2017). School choice is impacted as parents recognize the positive influence extracurricular activities can have on youth.

Trust Within the School

Belonging builds trust, and schools that are good at creating a welcoming environment also have a trusting relationship with parents (Allen et al., 2016). Trust within the educational environment is something parents look for when choosing a school for their child. They want to reassurance that their child is safe, that their child is cared for, and that they can trust that what is

happening within the school environment is best for their child (Strier & Katz, 2015). In addition, school counselors working with minority families do well in building trust through cultural understanding (Gonzalez et al., 2013). As trust increases, so does the positivity of the learning environment.

Good relationships between professionals and parents improve all aspects of a child's education (Weist et al., 2012). Also worth noting is the fact that parental involvement and parental engagement are not the same. Parents can be involved in school activities but not in their child's education. Parents can be hesitant to become engaged in their child's learning if there is not a trusting relationship between teacher and parent (Goodall & Montgomery, 2013; Strier & Katz, 2015). A trusting environment helps to foster success and builds a positive climate within the school (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Additionally, teachers who have a trusting relationship with the school's principal are more likely to remain engaged, and this positively influences student success (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). When trust is present in educational relationships, parents are more at ease and engaged.

Stress Related to Educational Options

Stress can infiltrate lives in many different ways. Of particular interest to the current study is how stress related to educational opportunities affects married individuals and how the availability or lack of educational resources for children-students impacts parents. Individuals perceive stress differently, and the lasting impacts of stress depend on a person's ability to cope well (Duncan et al., 2014). Some parents may not respond to education-related stress, while others may be consumed by it. This section synthesizes literature related to stress, parents, and education.

Conflict in the Marriage

Psychological distress within the home as a result of parental conflict leaves lasting effects on a child's development (Duncan et al., 2014). Children living in poverty commonly face more distressing factors because of the likelihood they will live in noisier, more crowded environments. These children often live in neighborhoods that have higher crime rates, inadequate community support, and higher levels of air pollution (Duncan et al., 2014). These factors contribute to higher levels of stress within the home which in turn leads to higher levels of parental conflict (Duncan et al., 2014). Some examples of parental conflict within stressed homes are poor communication, heightened hostility in conflict, and blaming behaviors (Duncan et al., 2014). Additionally, children living in these environments are more likely to attend overcrowded, underfunded, and academically disadvantaged schools which perpetuates familial cycles (Duncan et al., 2014). All families experience stress within the home, but how parents handle that stress has the greatest impact on a child.

Parental conflict also impacts a child's perceived safety and security. Children living with parents who are mentally and emotionally suffering in turn suffer themselves (Ruckstaetter et al., 2017). Parents who are stable and exhibit healthy coping skills, healthy conflict resolution, and proper communication are able to maintain their levels of stress and tend to react to stress in healthier ways (Ruckstaetter et al., 2017; Yoshikawa, 2012). These children are able to focus on their education and are less distracted by basic needs that are not being met (Levers, 2012). Marital conflict within the home can negatively impact a child's development at the neurological level (McCoy et al., 2013). When a child experiences marital conflict, the risk of developing adjustment disorders increases, as well as emotional and relational conflict (McCoy et al., 2013). When parents experience stress related to educational options and marital conflict is present, a

child is at risk for feeling as if the conflict is their fault (Ruckstaetter et al., 2017). Parents can also cause stress through differing opinions about what topics are more important in navigating school choice. All individuals experience life differently, and their personal worldview influences what is important to them (Altenhofen et al., 2016; Maslow, 1943). For example, a father who enjoyed sports and feels he gained a great deal of skill through participating in sports programs may place sports programs above music or art. However, the mother who places high importance on the arts in school may look for programs that support her values, possibly leading to conflict between her and her partner. Exploring parental stress and how it is influenced by available schooling options will have a direct impact on understanding how this phenomenon affects rural communities.

Shame Related to Inferior Educational Opportunities

When a child comes from a family that is economically disadvantaged, they are at risk for developmental delays, reduced access to additional support services, increased familial stress, and increased behavioral distress such as helplessness, sexual promiscuity, and cyclical poverty (Duncan et al., 2014). These issues can introduce feelings of shame among both students and parents alike (Ruckstaetter et al., 2017). Shame comes from having a negative view of oneself, and parents who experience shame are likely to withdraw, which can impact how a child's basic needs are met (Ruckstaetter et al., 2017). When parents suffer mentally because of their ability to meet their child's needs, children will learn to feel the same sense of shame.

Increasing a family's income through programming such as food stamps, housing vouchers, or educational scholarships decreases the gap spent on resources between lower and higher income children (Duncan et al., 2014; Egalite et al., 2020). By closing this gap, the shame felt by parents in lower income brackets starts to wane as these parents are then able to provide

the same opportunities to their children as higher income families (Duncan et al., 2014; Egalite et al., 2020; Yoshikawa et al., 2012). Shame impacts the quality of parenting a child receives (Scarnier et al., 2009). If a parent becomes permissive or neglectful because of felt shame, a child's basic needs may go unmet and perpetuate cycles of inferiority and insufficiency (Maslow, 1943; Scarnier et al., 2009). Because shame can produce avoidant behaviors, parents may disengage from programming that can help bridge gaps and provide better educational opportunities (Duncan et al., 2014; Scarnier et al., 2009). It is of great importance that, when recognized, shame be addressed in order to avoid the wide array of negative impacts it can have a child's development.

Conflict Between Parent and Child

Parental engagement is an important aspect of educational success for children and adolescents (Boerchi et al., 2019). When conflict between parent and child is present, children have difficulty reaching their full potential (Ruckstaetter et al., 2017). Conflict can arise over numerous topics including, but not limited to, chores, screen time, manners, homework, unmet expectations, and grades. Children learn conflict resolution at home, and those skills carry over into educational settings and the development of social-emotional competence (Domitrovich et al., 2017). If a parent has poor communication skills within familial structures, children can adopt those behaviors as well (Duncan et al., 2014). Children learn how to handle conflict and communication by watching their parents.

It is important that parents and children learn to communicate in healthy ways (King et al., 2012). Healthy communication opens the doors for a child to focus on tasks instead of being preoccupied with conflict and unmet needs (Boerchi et al., 2019; Levers, 2012). Reducing conflict in a child's life allows for opportunities for more healthy psychological growth (Levers,

2012). Because parental involvement is already lower among families in poverty, it is vitally important that positive communication skills be taught in school (Murray et al., 2014). Proper communication within families helps support growth. Healthy communication also alleviates negative conflict and promotes positive, healthy relationships in all aspects of a child's life, including classroom interactions with teachers and peers.

Parental Inclusion

The lives of children typically revolve around family, school, and friendships. While there is much focus placed on academia and classroom techniques intended to improve retention, schools must focus on providing support to parents in order for them to continue supporting the efforts made inside the classroom at home (Barger et al., 2019). Parental inclusion explicitly impacts the current study as the parent's mental health in relation to school choice is the focus of the current study.

Schools can provide support materials to parents allowing the parent to feel included, empowered, and involved. By encouraging home-based involvement, parents can encourage their child or help in areas that are causing confusion (Barger et al., 2019). Parental involvement significantly impacts a child's ability to advance academically (Sapungan & Sapungan, 2014). When a child sees their parent actively participating in the classroom, they feel supported and communication is enhanced between parent, teacher, and child (Barger et al., 2019). As previously mentioned, and worth repeating, children learn how to engage by watching their parents. Children from engaged, healthy homes will generally experience more positive outcomes.

Not only does parental inclusion impact the child positively, parents also have positive reactions to being invited into the school setting (Barger et al., 2019). Parental inclusion relays to

the parent that schools care about the whole family unit; it builds a relationship between teacher and family, and it reinforces educational goals and allows parents' trust in their child's school to grow (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Strier & Katz, 2015). Trust has a cyclical impact on parental participation and involvement. Parents are more likely to participate if there is trust, and if there is trust they are more likely to participate in their child's education (Strier & Katz, 2015). Trust can be built by schools through offering activities that promote community and conversations among staff, parents, and children.

School Choice and Its Impact on Parental Mental Health

There is a gap in the literature about school choice and the influence it has on the lived experiences of parents. However, by analyzing and studying literature related to different aspects of school choice and how parents feel stress, one can begin to identify how education, resources, and felt stress can influence a parent's experience and how they perceive its effects on their mental and emotional health. This section reviews literature related to causes of parental anxiety, guilt, shame, and stress.

Anxiety

Anxiety refers to feelings of being keyed up or tense, restless, issues with concentration, fear of something bad happening, or fearing a loss of control of self (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Parental anxiety is on the rise, and parents are becoming increasingly concerned about issues that impact their child's education and the environment in which they learn. Issues parents are concerned about include safety, security, and quality of education (Cucchiara, 2020). The introduction of school choice has given rise to the risk associated with possibly choosing the wrong school, which heightens parents' anxiety over providing the best possible education for their child (Cucchiara, 2020). In turn, rural families lack school choice

options, and this impacts anxiety based on parents' desire for academic success for their children (Bæck, 2015). While anxiety can never be completely eradicated from one's life, having good options to choose from helps minimize the influence anxiety has.

Additionally, being a parent has evolved from being a descriptive term to identify a person with children to being a verb that describes the act of raising children (Faircloth & Murray, 2014). In earlier years, parents did not recognize their role in the development of their children. Instead, children in agricultural areas were expected to participate in daily work life with little regard given to specialized, personal care (Faircloth & Murray, 2014). As mental health research has developed, and the impact childhood experiences have on maturing individuals is becoming more known; parents are taking on more responsibility for the outcome of their children, increasing the pressure to raise children who meet society's expectations (Faircloth & Murray, 2014). Parents are developing the understanding that children can be active participants and still be cared for individually and with thoughtfulness to their long-term development (Faircloth & Murray, 2014). Furthermore, basic activities such as feeding, bathing, playing, and interacting have become riddled with pressures to complete these basic tasks correctly so the parent can avoid feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, shame, and guilt (Faircloth & Murray, 2014). As children move through infancy and toddlerhood, the pressure on parents increases as they must make decisions with higher stakes, such as how the child will be formally educated.

Rural families face an added stress caused by lack of school choice options. Rural schools often face issues of size, quality of instruction, and access to funding, which are issues that are out of the control of administration and parents alike (Bæck, 2015; Cucchiara, 2020). When parents are faced with the stress of not being able to provide the education they want for

their child because of rural placement, anxiety increases. Overall, parental anxiety can be impacted by several factors such as socio-economic status, child behavior, available time, and frustrations about school inclusion of the parent (Williams & Sánchez, 2011). Some factors are out of a parent's control, such as school programming, teacher availability, and resources available to the school simply because of the geographical location of the community and its financial resources allocated for education (Bæck, 2015; Cucchiara, 2020). Managing expectations and leveraging available options are good ways to reduce parental anxiety.

The evolution of parental involvement directly impacts the current study as the location is in a rural community with agricultural roots. Parental anxiety has been on the rise as individuals have begun to recognize the enormous task of raising children in today's society. As culture has changed and developed, parenting has evolved from teaching children to work with the family to promoting their safety, security, basic needs, and proper development. This includes the pressure of choosing the right educational path for children. This current study will examine how rural parents experience the obstacles they face and how they describe the impact this has on their mental health.

Parental Guilt and Shame

Parental guilt and shame stem from emotions that have their roots in morality (Ruckstaetter et al., 2017). Ruckstaetter et al. (2017) states that parents feel these two emotions because of a negative assessment of their actions and/or behaviors. The level to which parents feel guilt and shame is unique to the individual. What leads one parent to feel guilt or shame may not make another parent feel the same way (Cucchiara, 2020; Ruckstaetter et al., 2017). Each person has unique experiences in life which impact the way guilt and shame are experienced.

Some parents feel guilt or shame by not being able to provide the same level of education as other families. This may stem from available familial resources such as transportation or income (Duncan, 2014; Ruckstaetter et al., 2017; Yoshikawa et al., 2012). No matter the source of the parental guilt or shame, the impact can be devastating to a child's development (Cucchiara, 2020). Avoidant behaviors are linked to shame and guilt in parenting which can lead to parents becoming detached from their child's educational experience (Scarnier et al., 2009). Shame and guilt also influence the presence of other negative emotions such as anger, which can lead to devastating developmental consequences if parents do not manage it correctly (Scarnier et al., 2009). Recognizing the presence of guilt and shame and the impact they have can help parents remain engaged.

Additionally, parents in rural areas report less access to community services, educational options, and mental health services for themselves and their children (Reardon et al., 2017). Rural areas face educational issues unique to their geographical location and the availability (or lack) of resources often puts additional pressure on educators and parents (Parsley & Barton, 2015). Studies have shown that parental involvement, stress, socio-economic status, emotional health, and mental health can all contribute to a child's academic success (Banerjee, 2016; Boonk et al., 2012; Horby & Blackwell, 2018; Schachner, 2021). With school choice options being geographically inconsistent in rural areas, meeting the educational needs of children can be difficult, if not impossible, contributing to sources of parental stress, shame, and guilt (Schachner, 2021). While efforts have been made in North Carolina, specifically, to make school choice more readily available to all families through the North Carolina Opportunity Scholarship Program, if rural areas simply do not have the schools to choose from, the scholarship is of little assistance to rural families (Egalite et al., 2020).

Parenting Stress

Parents feel stress when they perceive the demands placed on them are greater than the available resources (Ponnet et al., 2012). Parents who do not have positive coping skills or manage their stress in appropriate ways can develop stress- and anxiety-related disorders, which can then impact the development of their child psychologically and academically (Ponnet et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2017; Schachner, 2021). Because of vocational pressure or other factors, some parents must make abrupt choices in housing, making housing the primary decision-making factor, not education, which can then result in education choices that are not the best in quality, increasing parental stress (Altenhofen et al., 2016; Ponnet et al., 2012). Learning stress management skills can decrease the negative impact stress has on families.

Meeting a child's needs can be a significant burden to bear in the best of situations. When needed resources are not available, the stress of being an effective parent increases. Parents feel stress in relation to meeting a child's needs and the ability to do so effectively (Cronin et al., 2015). This stress can come in the form of financial stability, the presence of poverty, discipline techniques, parent education level, communication skills, parental involvement in the child's education, and more (Cronin et al., 2015; Semke & Sheridan, 2012). When parents are faced with a significant amount of negative stress, the effects of this stress can infiltrate into parenting techniques and cause additional stress between parent and child (Cronin et al., 2015).

Parenting stress and child behavior issues have a cyclical impact on one another (Neece et al., 2012). When a parent cannot self-regulate well and introduces stress and conflict into the home, a child can react negatively as their own personal stress levels rise (Maslow, 1943; Neece et al., 2012). When a child's behavior elevates to a level that promotes stress within the home, the parents' stress levels can rise, continuing the pattern in which parent and child feed off one

another's stress. Stress that is unregulated or managed poorly can cause individuals to make decisions that negatively affect everyone in the household.

Summary

The literature offers ample research regarding school choice, parental anxiety, the importance of communication with the child-student, and the issues educators face in today's classroom. However, the gap in literature is substantial regarding a parent's mental and emotional experience when the education they want for their child is not available in their rural community. The issues related to rural education have gotten little attention in research. As seen in the literature, a parent's mental health has a significant impact on a child's educational performance. There is a need to examine further how a parent's experience with insufficient educational opportunities for their child impacts them personally. Stress can be introduced in ways that a parent may never expect. Some parents may have never considered the impact lack of school choice has had on them, while some parents may be keenly aware of the unmet academic needs their child is experiencing and how it impacts them. A person's experience with stress related to school choice will vary greatly upon their own academic experience, background, and worldview.

The current study was an opportunity to understand the experiences of rural parents who are impacted by the lack of school choice, what lengths parents are willing to go to in order to provide a quality education for their child, what a quality education is perceived to be by rural parents, and how all of these aspects of raising a child influence their personal mental and emotional health. The current study shows that educational options affect rural families on multiple levels. The relationships between schools and parents were impacted, and parents' emotional and mental health was impacted through restrictions presented by rural school

geographical location. Feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety were present among rural parents making educational choices.

The questions were explored through a phenomenological approach to qualitative research. Through this approach, this researcher was able to develop an understanding of parents' experiences with rural education choices through interviews, journal entries, and cognitive representations, and then the data was analyzed for emerging themes. Because of the intricacies in relationships between parents, children, schools, educators, and peers, it is vitally important to understand how parents respond and react to these relationships. Relationships and settings that increase parental stress and anxiety can be detrimental to the development of the child, and in a world where parental anxiety is on the rise, identifying ways in which to bridge these gaps is vital to the proper development of families, children, and communities. Schools can provide opportunities for parents to learn more about regulating their own emotions, how their emotions impact their student, and how to navigate stress within the home.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of parents whose children have limited educational options in rural North Carolina. Rural communities often report having less access to resources than urban areas. This impacts rural families in many ways. One prominent issue in rural communities is education (Bæck, 2015). Therefore, to explore the impact the lack of school choice/options for the child-student has on a parent's mental and emotional health, a phenomenological research method was proposed. The inquiry into this phenomenon was important because a parent's mental and emotional health directly influences the development of children in the home (Ryan et al., 2017). In addition, academic stress in children influences a parent's stress levels, as the child-parent relationship is reciprocal (Neece et al., 2012).

This chapter describes the research design and why this specific method was chosen. Thorough descriptions of research questions, the setting of the study, participants, procedures, personal involvement, and data collection are also included in this chapter. Additionally, interview questions are identified, and rationale are provided for these questions. Finally, important topics of trustworthiness and ethics are thoroughly explored.

Design

Qualitative methods of research allow a researcher to enter the world of the participant to gain a full understanding of how a particular phenomenon truly affects them. These methods give participants a voice instead of a number (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through conducting a qualitative research project, participants had the opportunity to share their experiences with lack of school choice. A phenomenological approach allows for stories to unfold that reach across

multiple layers of the family structure and its place within the community (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through the current study, the rural community had an opportunity to explain how a lack of school choice impacts them at family and community levels.

Qualitative research allows for participants to be observed within their natural environment, and it brings forth an understanding of how a specific phenomenon impacts people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Some words commonly used in explaining qualitative research include interpretation, representations, meaning, and voice. These words describe what is done during a qualitative study—the phenomenon is interpreted, the people are represented, their stories are given meaning, and they are provided with a voice (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A phenomenological study within qualitative research is an opportunity for the researcher to bring forth the meaning a distinct phenomenon has had in the lives of the participants. This specific form of study focuses on the "what" and the "how" of the experience—what happened and how it was experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within phenomenological research, there are two approaches—hermeneutical and transcendental (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For the purpose of the current study, a transcendental approach was used. Transcendental phenomenology allows a researcher to remove their own experience with the phenomenon (bracketing), collect data from participants, analyze that data into themes, and then form a description that summarizes and explains how a certain phenomenon impacted others (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This form of study was chosen for this research project because it allowed parents to explain the "what" (lack of school choice to rural families) and "how" they perceive it impacted them.

Research Questions

RQ 1: How did parents in rural areas describe the experience the lack of school choice has had on them and their families?

RQ 2: How did parents in rural areas describe their ability to provide quality education for their children when there were fewer educational opportunities available to them than their urban counterparts?

RQ 3: How did parents perceive how available schooling options influenced the familial relationship of the rural family?

Setting

Macon County is in the western part of the state of North Carolina, bordering the state of Georgia. This mountainous part of the state faces several complications regarding school choice options and education expansion. One complication is that this part of the state lacks access to consistent, quality internet and cellular phone services. Given this barrier to connectivity services, many residents are unable to have internet connections at their residences. This limits the ability for rural families to participate in online education services for their children such as online homeschool and/or virtual public schooling. Another complication rural families face is that many facilities in the area are unable to pass fire and/or sanitation inspections, making the start of a new private school an unattainable option. Not every facility has access to city water and the fire department has limited access to some areas given the terrain of the area. Facilities that may be willing to host a private school, in addition to not being able to pass inspections, may also not have the ability to access the quality internet needed to operate a school. Both complications restrict the rural family's ability to access additional schooling options.

Privacy and being able to speak freely were of paramount importance to the current study. Participant interviews were conducted in a private business office that is centrally located within Macon County, NC. This site was chosen for this project because it afforded privacy, confidentiality, and convenience. The business office chosen is not affiliated with any schools within the county and allowed for participants to speak freely without fear of being overheard.

Participants

Criterion sampling allows for quality within research and ensures all participants have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants for the current study were recruited purposefully and met certain criteria in order to be eligible for participation in this study.

Upon receiving appropriate permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), advertising was conducted for study participation. Advertising and asking for participation in the study was done via social media and through leveraging my personal network of parents. Because of the response received, additional recruitment methods were not developed since the desired number of participants was obtained through social media and word-of-mouth advertising (Namageyo-Funa et al., 2014). During participant recruitment, a researcher can expect to experience recruitment issues (Namageyo-Funa et al., 2014). Recruitment issues that were anticipated for the current study were that a prospective candidate may not have a child in school, live out of the target area, may not be involved in parenting choices, or be unable and/or unwilling to communicate about their experience, although none of these issues were experienced.

Thirteen participants were selected for the current study. Interviewing 13 participants and drawing data from those interviews allowed for data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data

saturation, simply put, means no new themes emerged while collecting data (Saunders et al., 2017). In phenomenological research, interviews are the primary method of data collection, so saturation is reached when no new information or themes appear, and redundancy in interviews becomes apparent (Saunders et al., 2017). While there is no magic number to achieve data saturation in qualitative research, interview questions and a quality participant pool should allow for no new themes to emerge once interviews are complete (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

To qualify for the current study, participants had to be a parent of a child in elementary, middle, or high school, or in the first two years of college (public, private, or homeschool). This requirement ensured that the study topic was either currently experienced or experienced recently enough for the participant to be able to recall details of how it impacted them personally. Participants had to live in Macon County, NC and must have resided in this county for at least two academic school years. Macon County, NC is a rural county with little to no school choice. Requiring that study participants live in this county ensured that each participant reported related experiences within the same county school district. The third criterion for study participation was that the interviewee be at least partly responsible for making decisions about their child's education options. Lastly, the participants had to be able to articulate or write about their experience with the lack of school choice options. Participants were not compensated for their participation in any way.

Procedures

Institutional review boards (IRBs) provide oversight of researchers. These boards require the researcher to put forth knowledge of ethical guidelines, awareness, and plans regarding the ethical issues one may face within their research project (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These boards ensure that participants are respected, protected, treated fairly, and that consideration is given to

the impact the study may have on the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Prior to beginning

research, researchers are required to seek approval from their IRB. This ensures that the

researcher is adequately prepared to conduct research in an ethical manner (Creswell & Poth,

2018). When using social media as a source in research, special care must be taken to ensure

there is no unforeseen negative impact on participants (Kosinski et al., 2015). Institutional

review boards are a resource that provide not only oversight, but direction and security within

research, especially for novice researchers who may not be aware of the pitfalls in qualitative

research.

After IRB approval, recruitment of participants took place. Participants were recruited

through social media advertising, and from my circle of peers. Thirteen participants took part in

the current study. Data was gathered through conducting one-on-one private interviews with

participants. Journal prompts were offered to participants for optional completion. Interviews

were recorded for transcription. Interviews were analyzed for recurrent themes through

annotating interview transcripts and then studying the information discovered for all possible

themes.

The Researcher's Role

As a mother of school-aged children, lack of school choice in our community has

impacted our family directly. Each child learns differently, and not having an educational

environment that can meet their needs has created stress in our family. I realized through

researching opportunities for my own family that this was not a situation isolated to us only. We

chose to homeschool for the second semester of this school year. We were fortunate to be able to

do so because our county does not have access to internet services in all areas, but we do have

access to this service. Also, I had flexibility in my schedule, which many working families do

not have, which allowed me to be available to my children. Many families in our community seem to have similar experiences, but because there are very limited options aside from public school, lack of school choice is rarely discussed because the situation seems next to impossible to remedy. I decided to research how the lack of school choice impacts a parent's mental health because I am interested in learning about the experiences of other families in the community.

For the interview site, I chose my personal business office. It is private and convenient and offers an environment of where participants were free to share their thoughts without fear of being overheard. Bracketing my own thoughts regarding the subject matter was not the only thing I needed to be aware of (Tufford & Newman, 2010). While I am very comfortable in this space, I needed to remember that the interview may be the first time a study participant had been to this office, and I had to give them time to get comfortable and settled.

Since I did have personal experience with the lack of school choice in the county, I had to bracket my own thoughts and experiences regarding the topic. I did this through journaling, discussing my experiences with my colleagues, and memoing (Tufford & Newman, 2010). I posed interview questions in a non-assuming way and made sure none of the questions were leading or swaying participants to my own thoughts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I had to not look for themes in the data that confirmed my own beliefs but was sure to look at the information with fresh eyes and search for themes among participants as their experiences varied from my own, and I had to allow new themes to emerge that did not confirm my own experience. The current study was not an exercise in confirming my own beliefs, but rather an attempt to understand how this phenomenon impacted the community as a whole. My role as researcher in this project was to simply allow participants to voice their own experiences and analyze the data in a manner that best reflected the experiences of the community members.

Data Collection

Phenomenological research allows for data to be collected through in-depth interviews and journals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thirteen parents of child-students in elementary, middle, or high school or in the first two years of college were interviewed in order to develop an understanding of their experiences with rural school options and how they perceived the lack of school options impacted their mental and emotional health. Journal prompts were provided in case the participants thought of additional information they wanted to share after their interview.

Interviews

The interviews were approximately 60 minutes. The purpose of the interviews was for participants to have the opportunity to share their experience with rural education and the lack of school choice for their child and how this experience had impacted their personal mental health. During the interviews, information emerged that allowed for the researcher to identify trends and themes among the experiences of the study participants. A sample interview transcript is included in the appendix (Appendix F). Following is a list of questions asked in the interviews:

1. How long have you lived here?

2. Where did you go to school?

3. What ages are your children and what grade are they in?

4. What factors are important to you when choosing a school for your child?

5. What factors do you believe make up a quality education?

6. What has been your experience with choosing a school for your child?

7. How do you feel about the schooling options available to your child?

8. What concerns have you had when choosing a schooling option?

9. Have you faced any limitations with choosing a school?

10. How has choosing a school impacted your marriage/relationship (if applicable)?

11. Do you feel schooling options are limited? If yes, how has that made you feel?

12. Do you wish this county had other schooling options available?

13. What do you perceive to be the largest barrier or complication in providing schooling options to your child?

14. Have you personally considered starting a school, a program, or other option to bring more school choice options to your community or to improve the available options?

15. Would you like to add anything else—positive, neutral, or negative—about the experiences you have had with the school options available to you?

All these interview questions were open-ended questions that allowed a participant to voice their experience with this topic. However, interviewing can be difficult for novice researchers, and the researcher must be prepared for complications caused by equipment failure, participant behaviors, and transcription (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All these questions were constructed in a manner to draw forth themes and similarities in experiences among participants. The first four questions were ice-breaker questions and allowed the participant to talk about themselves. These questions were chosen because they encourage communication between the interviewee and researcher and helped build rapport between the two. Questions 5 through 11 explored the personal connection to school choice, personal experience, and the impact school choice had on the participant. These questions were designed to get to the heart of the experience; they were designed to allow the participant to freely answer the question based on their own interpretation of the experience (Roberts, 2020). Within these questions, participants opened up about their own personal experience and themes emerged. Questions 12 and 13 were designed to detect vision and either a fixed or growth mindset where education is concerned.

These questions were not leading, but rather helped to clarify how parental mental health has been impacted through the experience with the studied phenomenon (Roberts, 2020). Questions 14 and 15 were designed to end the interview on a positive note and help the participants debrief and reflect on their experience (Roberts, 2020). Lack of school choice does not always equal a negative experience, and this research reflects the positive experiences individuals have, as well. Debriefing and ending the interview on a positive note are important aspects of qualitative interviewing as it is important to help the participant work through any anxiety or stress created by the interview experience (Roberts, 2020). There was consistent, conscientious, and ethical treatment of study participants during the interview process, and this included providing genuine care and concern at the end of the interview, as well.

Journals

The purpose of journals for this research study was to give participants an opportunity to respond outside of the formal interview. Journaling allows researchers and participants the opportunity to reflect on the research and interview process and explore their thoughts regarding the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Journaling after the interview gave participants the time to reflect on their answers to interview questions, add any significant information they wanted to, and answer the additional journaling prompts as follows:

1. I am interested to know about any new realizations regarding this topic you discovered through this interview and any additional information you would like to add.

2. In comparison to educational opportunities in other locations, how do you feel your child's education compares?

3. If you could do anything differently regarding your child's education, what would it be?

These journaling prompts were administered through a Google document, which allowed participants to answer with ease. The purpose of Prompt 1 was to collect any additional information they may have thought of after the live interview concluded. Prompt 2 sought to gain a deeper understanding of how the parent felt about the opportunities afforded to their child and discover any underlying themes that may not have been apparent in the live interviews. Lastly, Prompt 3 requested the participant's thoughts or wishes regarding changes they would make for their child if they were able to. All three journaling prompts were an opportunity to discover any additional themes present in the studied topic or answers that provided more insight into identified themes that solidified the presence of a specific theme within the research.

Cognitive Representations

Art allows individuals to express their feelings and emotions nonverbally; pictures have depicted meaning and experience even before written language (Tversky, 2010). They have provided direction, feeling, instruction, and communication. In this current study, cognitive representations served to give participants an opportunity to express their perceptions and experiences with the studied phenomenon visually (Tversky, 2010). The words shared in the interviews allowed participants to define their perception of their experience. However, cognitive representations allowed them to go beyond the boundaries placed on words through definitions and express their perception without restraint (Tversky, 2010).

After completing their interview, participants were asked to draw a picture or symbol that represented their experience with lack of school choice in rural North Carolina. This allowed participants to express themselves in a nonverbal manner and gave them the opportunity to present their experience through art. By asking participants to complete a cognitive representation, they had the ability to express what words could not. Additionally, cognitive

representations do not require the observer of the artwork to have any listening skills. The observer of a cognitive representation needs only to observe the artwork and silently interpret what experience, emotions, or feelings are conveyed through it (Tversky, 2010). By adding this additional form of data collection, participants were able to both verbally and visually express their perceptions and experiences, which enriched this current study.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In qualitative methods of research, the method of coding is used to dissect the data (answers to interview questions) and identify themes, patterns, and relationships within the data. Through this process, a researcher can identify corroborating experiences among the data reported by participants and make conclusions based on this (Heppner et al., 2016). Once the researcher identifies the information, the data can be presented. The researcher must be able to present a well-articulated description of the findings without including their own biases. They must be certain to only present participant experiences when presenting the information both verbally and through written presentation (Heppner et al., 2016).

Interpretation of data in the current study was achieved through not only identifying interesting observations and consistent trends among the experiences of study participants, but by reporting body language, laughter, and/or nervous laughter (Bailey, 2008). Being mindful of what the study participants were expressing and bracketing out the researcher's own experience with the topic was of vital importance, as well (Seers, 2011; Tufford & Newman, 2010). During interviews, participants may be tempted to report things they have heard or know others have experienced. It was essential that the researcher not only maintain awareness of their personal biases but assist study participants in remaining focused on their own experience (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Awareness, attention to detail, ensuring the participants report only their

personal experience, and maintaining integrity in research ensured proper data analysis and interpretation in the current study.

In analyzing the data for the current study, the verbal data from the interviews was transcribed into written format where the data was studied at great length, allowing for all details pertaining to the participants' related experience to be noted (Moustakas,1994). Studying the written data allowed the elimination of any redundant or inapplicable information, while applicable information was identified and categorized properly (Wertz, 2005). This information was documented in a spreadsheet in order to track emotional responses to the question, body language, and tone of voice, among other reactions that were identified upon analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). While bracketing personal biases, the experiences of each participant were developed into themes based on their stories (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Many participants shared the same experience with school choice but had different reactions or feelings due to differing beliefs or prior personal life experiences. Being mindful of this assisted in developing specific themes through separating experiences, feelings, beliefs, life experiences, and thoughts from the overarching phenomena being studied (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Wertz, 2005). Moustakas (1994) proposes putting the information into clusters which become the core themes of the data. The same spreadsheet used for initial identification of patterns was continually used for labeling relevant themes. Upon thorough analysis of the data and identifying themes, I was able to then compare the data to the initial research questions and answer those questions accordingly (Wertz, 2005). A narrative was then developed that fully explained the questions being studied and the themes that emerged through data analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Through qualitative research, a researcher is able to discover individuals' personal life experiences and answer questions that can further develop understanding of a phenomenon and

positively contribute to the lives of others (Wertz, 2005). The goal was to do just that through the current study of lived experiences of rural parents.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research can be equated to validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Validity refers to the adherence of reliability, accuracy, and dependability within research. When there is a lack of truthfulness in qualitative studies, the entire study exudes a lack of stability and authenticity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In order to create trustworthiness within a qualitative study, a researcher must rely on constructs such as "credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 256). Adhering to these constructs allows readers of the study to trust in the reliability of the findings.

Credibility

Credibility is based on confidence. It requires evidence in research that is convincing and offers depth of persuasiveness. Credibility is the basis on which trustworthiness is built (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Credibility contributes to the believability of the conclusions found in the research (Nassaji, 2020). In order to equip the research project for a high level of trustworthiness and credibility, the researcher should have ensured quality in the recruitment of participants and in the data collection processes (Nassaji, 2020). Another important aspect to ensuring credibility is to give interview participants the opportunity to review interview transcripts and a summary of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the current study, member checking was conducted. Interview participants were given this opportunity and were asked for their feedback to solidify accuracy in the research. They also had the opportunity to correct any information they felt was erroneous or could identify them. This allowed participants to have more ownership and

confidence in the study.

Triangulation of Data

The process of triangulation of data includes a rich description of the data and a process that involves multiple "sources, explanation, or perspectives" in data collection (Nassaji, 2020, p. 428). Additional ways to strengthen triangulation of data are through studying rival evidence that develops and through clarifying the researcher's own "biases, values, and experiences" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261). Triangulation helps to achieve a more thorough understanding of the study and thus strengthens credibility and trustworthiness (Nassaji, 2020). In the current study, triangulation of data was accomplished using interviews and journal prompts with participants. Peer review was conducted to identify and correct any researcher biases.

Authenticity

Part of trustworthiness within qualitative research is the accuracy of findings. Authenticity plays a large part in establishing the above (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The themes and meanings found in data analysis must be convincing and ensure that the different voices of the participants are heard (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The role of authenticity is to ensure that the researcher brings forth a variety of experiences to establish related themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bracketing, or recognizing researcher biases, allows the researcher to identify their own preconceptions (Tufford & Newman, 2010). This practice contributes to authentic research and was accomplished in the current study by approaching the study objectively and removing any emotional ties of the researcher to the subject.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability of the researcher to draw forth sufficient information about the data in a way that allows the reader to transfer the ideas to other situations that bare

similarities (Nassaji, 2020). When readers can apply information to more than one situation and find validity in the data by doing so, the study gains trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transferability in the current study was accomplished by providing rich details about the characteristics of the participant pool and information about interview questions, length of interviews, details obtained in the interviews, and explanations of how and why the current study is important to the mental health of parents.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability enhance trustworthiness through being reliable and accurate with data reporting (Nassaji, 2020). The conclusions drawn by a researcher need to be easily replicated should someone else review the data. Dependability considers the possibility that, as research progresses, the findings may change (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nassaji, 2020). Both dependability and confirmability require that all steps taken in data coding and analysis are carefully documented (Nassaji, 2020). Being able to adequately confirm the accuracy in research allows for a deeper level of trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Dependability and confirmability were achieved in the current study through providing detailed steps of data analysis and accurately reporting participants' experiences.

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Ethical Considerations

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Ethical considerations must be present in all facets of the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethics in research are extremely important as they ensure that participants are treated with care, concern, fairness, privacy, and respect (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, ethics do not apply only to study participants. Ethics in qualitative research govern the study from beginning to end. There are ethical guidelines related to collecting, analyzing, and reporting data and the manner in which the study is published (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethics also govern

the behavior of the researcher and how to handle issues ethically when they arise (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012). In the current study, ethical considerations were made and followed. Initially, Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol was followed. The oversight of the IRB ensured that study participants were not at risk, and their rights were protected. All participants were treated fairly and ethically. Additionally, professional standards in the corresponding field of study were adhered to, providing an extra layer of ethical guidelines and behavior standards for the researcher. In a proactive attempt to provide clarity, the expectations of the participants were explained, and all information regarding research and publication of the study was divulged in-depth (Sanjari et al., 2014). In being mindful of participants, conflicts of interest were avoided at all costs, and had there been a conflict of interest, it would have been handled in an appropriate manner. Should participants have felt the desire to no longer participate in the study, they could drop out of the study without any adverse feelings or actions by the researcher. Because transparency in research is important, the purpose of the current study was disclosed to participants, and they were given the opportunity to review the data before it was published. Safety and privacy are of utmost importance, and to honor these aspects of research, the current study implemented password protection for interview documents and pseudonyms for interviewees. Trustworthiness was supported through reporting of all data, both positive and negative results. Communication was clear and precise, and honesty was paramount in the reporting and handling of this entire research project. If any issues arise regarding the current study, all efforts will be made to rectify any conflicts or questions promptly, efficiently, and with strict regard to ethical considerations.

Summary

In summary, while the research topic is imperative to the development of a study, the way in which the research is conducted is paramount. This chapter outlines the importance of each aspect of research methodology and ensures the researcher was prepared for any issues that may arise.

Through this qualitative research project, a parent's mental and emotional health in relation to the lack of school options available to their child-student in a rural community was studied through a phenomenological approach. Through this approach, participants had the opportunity to voice their own experiences with this phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In keeping to the standards set forth in criterion sampling, 13 participants were chosen at random from community individuals who met the study criteria and expressed their interest in participating in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As expected, the results of the current study revealed parental frustration, stress, anxiety, and more. Through interviews and journaling, an understanding of how each participant's experience has impacted them personally was formed. Data analysis uncovered themes and this information was able to be presented in a well thought out and thorough report. Researcher bias was bracketed, which allowed the experiences of the participants to rise to the top (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Through the collection of data in interviews and journals, research was done to develop a greater understanding of parents' experiences with their children's education. Although this is important to the study itself, of greater importance is the way in which the research was conducted and analyzed. A research project is only as good as its validity and trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Being mindful of ethics, personal experiences, and the proper

interpretation of participants' experiences provided a trustworthy and thorough exploration of the topic being researched.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of parents whose children have limited educational options in rural North Carolina. Chapter Four includes a description of the participants and their experiences with educational options and school choice in Macon County, North Carolina. Data collection was completed using in-person interviews, cognitive representations, and optional post-interview journal prompts. The research questions used to form and guide this study were:

RQ 1: How did parents in rural areas describe the experience the lack of school choice has had on them and their families?

RQ 2: How did parents in rural areas describe their ability to provide quality education for their children when there were fewer educational opportunities available to them than their urban counterparts?

RQ 3: How did parents perceive how available schooling options influenced the familial relationship of the rural family?

After completion of data collection, the data was analyzed, and themes were developed from the experiences shared by the participants.

Participants

Thirteen participants agreed to share their experience with the lack of school choice in rural North Carolina, particularly Macon County. Twenty children were represented among the thirteen adult participants. All of the participants were responsible for making decisions regarding education for the children represented in the study. Additionally, all 13 participants had lived in Macon County, North Carolina for at least two years.

All of the participants personally attended public school with four not attending public

school in Macon County, while the remaining participants (nine) did attend public school in

Macon County. The 13 participants represented six children in elementary school (kindergarten

through fourth grades), three children in intermediate school (fifth and sixth grades), four

children in middle school (seventh and eighth grades), and seven children in high school (ninth

through twelfth grades). The majority of the participants' children attended traditional public

school (15), with one attending public early college, and four children homeschooling.

The 13 participants are listed in Table 1 below. Following Table 1 are participant

introductions. Gender specific pseudonyms are used to protect participant identity. Each

participant approved their pseudonym and introduction. The pseudonyms are culturally sensitive

and are not intended to stereotype anyone or in any way be derogatory.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Type of School Participant Attended/Location	Age of Child/Student	Grade Level	Type of School Child/Student Attends
Anita	Public/Not in Macon County	13	8	Homeschool
		13	9	Public Early College
Beth	Public/Not in Macon County	6	1	Public
		7	2	Public
Carrie	Public/In Macon County	6	1	Public
Donna	Public/In Macon County	15	11	Public
Esther	Public/In Macon County	11	6	Public

Fiona	Public/In Macon County	11	5	Public
		13	8	Public
Georgia	Public/In Macon County	10	6	Public
Hope	Public/Not in Macon County	14	9	Public
		14	9	Public
Isla	Public/In Macon County	15	10	Public
Josie	Public/Not in Macon County	12	8	Homeschool
		12	8	Homeschool
Kay	Public/In Macon County	9	4	Public
		15	9	Public
Leita	Public/In Macon County	6	1	Homeschool
		16	10	Public
May	Public/In Macon County	7	2	Public

Anita

Anita is a married, mother of two children, both aged 13. One child is going into ninth grade and the other into eighth grade. Anita has lived in Macon County, NC for three years. She grew up in Michigan and attended public school herself. She has homeschooled her children for their entire educational careers. Raising kind children is of utmost importance to Anita, and she believes that surrounding her children with good influences supports her goal. In her experience, Anita believes public school can expose children to negativity and bullying. While Anita believes a good education is important, she also believes it is not the only thing that contributes to raising good, kind, well-rounded people. Anita and her husband agree that they want their

children to be around both socially and morally positive influences. This coming school year will be different as one child has opted to attend public early college and the other will continue to homeschool, as there is not an option aside from homeschool that meets her needs. When asked about choosing a school for her children, Anita said the following:

> We have not had to choose a school because we homeschooled up until now, until (my child) decided that (they) wanted to go to public school, and I gave (them) one option because, in my opinion, that's the only one option that we have that I would even think about sending my kids to here in Macon County.

When asked if she has faced any limitations with choosing a school, Anita replied as follows:

> No, because we were accepted. My child was accepted to the early college, but if they were not accepted then we would absolutely have faced some limitations.

> However, Anita's above answer only referred to one child. She also expressed that there

are limitations for her other child as there is not a choice within the county that would work well for that child. For 8th grade, Macon County only has one public middle school and one Christian school, with neither providing the standard of education Anita wants. Before Anita and her family moved to Macon County, NC, they homeschooled and participated in charter school options in their area. Anita expressed that she does feel the limitations within the county regarding education as there are only two options for high school—public high school or public early college. Overall, Anita has experienced feeling overwhelmed during their educational journey. However, she sees the time she has had homeschooling her children as a positive experience. Even though she is optimistic about the public-school transition, she does experience times of anxiety and nervousness about the transition and it being their only option for high school in the county (the public high school is not an option for them), aside from

homeschooling for high school. She is hopeful about the coming school year and the choices they have made for their children's education.

Beth

Beth is a mother of two children, aged six and seven. Her children are rising first and second graders who are in public school. Beth is employed by the public school system and has lived in Macon County, NC for a little over two years. She attended public school in another state for her personal education. Given her and her husband's employment, homeschooling was never an option for providing an education to their own children. Beth feels comfortable having her children in public school because of her personal involvement. Because of limited public school system self-pay preschool options at the time, Beth's preschool-aged child was not able to attend their home district school. Beth had to apply to an out-of-district school and, thankfully, when the preschool accepted her younger child, they also agreed to take her kindergartner out-of-district. This has proven to be an excellent fit for the needs of one of her children, and she is thankful the situation has ended up being a benefit to them. While this option worked out well for them, they did feel the stress of limitations within the county when their in-district school did not have any preschool openings, and they were faced with the possibility of navigating two different schools. Beth believes in having a loving, accepting environment for her children to learn in. While she is currently happy with where her children are in school, she does have concerns about future limitations. When thinking about middle school years in public school, Beth said she feels discouraged and expressed the following:

> This might sound very extreme, but it is almost like if I have to choose to stick with the public education at that point because of the limitations, I almost feel like you're sacrificing your kids and their future because of the impact that it can have. I hear a lot

about the bullying that happens at the schools that is, apparently, I don't know for a fact that, like not being taken care of and addressed.

In Beth's experience, raising children is emotionally challenging, and having them in school adds an extra layer of concern and can exacerbate the challenges, but the challenges do not exist simply because of the limitations her family faced in choosing a school. While she does feel a certain amount of guilt for not being able to send her children to a more expensive private school because of finances, she realizes geographical location plays a large role in limiting school options, and she feels like her children are in the best place possible for now. Even if they could afford the neighboring state's private school, getting them to and from school would be logistically impossible, making Beth feel even more limited and stressed. Beth portrayed these concerns in her cognitive representation (see Appendix H). Because of the limitations in place in Beth's life, she chooses to make the best of where her children are in school. Beth would like to see more options for education in the county, although she is not clear on what those might be, and she has not considered starting something new on her own.

Carrie

Carrie has lived in Macon County, NC all her life and went to the public schools within the county for her personal education. She is the mother of a six-year-old who is going into first grade. Carrie's child has an Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) diagnosis and has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which affords her child specialized instructional services. Carrie prefers a Christian education for her child because she feels teaching the heart of the child is very important. However, in her experience, the K-8 Christian school option in the county could not meet her child's individual educational needs, and she had to place him in public school. Because her child cannot conform to society's behavioral standards in school, she

feels her child is still not receiving a quality education in the public school system. Her child has faced ridicule from public school teachers to the point she did not feel her child was welcome in class on the last days of the school year. Describing her experience with her child's education brought her to tears during the interview. When asked how her experience has impacted her personal mental health, Carrie responded as follows:

> It takes a toll. It does. Because I want my child to be in a place that they're loved. Again, I can teach (my child) the academic part, but I want (my child) to be able to learn and function in the classroom and be loved by the teacher (Carrie is crying). You don't see that very often, and if you do, then you need to be really thankful for that teacher.

> Throughout the interview, Carrie expressed how her experience has been difficult

because of the lack of school choice available in the county. In discussing her experience further, Carrie also said she has experienced sadness, anger, helplessness, feeling overwhelmed, and fear for the future. Because of her child's special needs and the limited educational options available in rural areas, Carrie portrayed her experience in her cognitive representation with a drawing of her holding her child with a tear coming down her face. Through her experience, Carrie learned that children with special needs face additional challenges, and it is heartbreaking for her to see her child not have access to services that could help them excel.

Donna

Donna is a mother of a 15-year-old who will be a junior in high school in the fall. Donna has lived in Macon County, NC her entire life. She attended the county public school system herself. When considering school options for her child, one thing Donna identified as important is academic choices. She wanted her child to be able to take classes that are challenging and prepare them for the future profession they want. She wanted her child to have access to a wide

variety of electives. However, in her experience, the county high school did not have a broad range of electives, and the ones that it did have did not meet her child's needs. Additionally, when asked what her experience had been with choosing a school for her child, Donna replied:

> I don't have a choice so, so if I don't have a choice—if I went to a bigger town, bigger city, then yes, I mean, I'd have a choice with that. But then how are we going to get (my child) there, and I don't live in a bigger city. I live where I live, right? So, it's this school or you go to a private school and not in our county because our county has no private schools for high school.

Donna described watching her child lower their expectations because they do not have access to the education needed to achieve the dreams they have. Through this process, Donna expressed feeling actual grief and sadness because she cannot help her child since there are no other options for school in the county. Donna also expressed feelings of frustration, guilt, and anxiety. She described getting to a point where she must avoid thinking about the situation because it will overwhelm her to where she begins to take her education-related frustrations out in situations that are not related. In these situations, she described taking anger and frustration out on her friends, family, and even her child. She realizes that geographical location plays an active role in the schooling options available in this county; however, she feels there are opportunities where leadership could always do better for the students.

Esther

Esther is the stepmother of an 11-year-old who is going into sixth grade. She is very involved in creating the best possible educational experience for her stepchild. Personally, Esther went to public school in Macon County for her K-12 career. Because Esther's stepchild has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), her family looks for additional services, like behavioral and

occupational therapies, when choosing a school. She believes a quality education starts with a teacher who takes the time to understand her stepchild, and she also believes tailoring the school day to fit their needs is important as well. Because of her stepchild's needs, there were no other schooling options in the county or surrounding area that would be any better than where they are now, which leaves her feeling frustrated at times. She believes there would be better options for her stepchild if they were offered nearby. When asked about her perception of barriers and complications that impact schooling options for her child, Esther named financial resources for the state of North Carolina to attract more teachers, geographical location, and parents being uneducated about options for their children. She did not know about IEPs until her friend mentioned it, and she feels that, like her, parents do not know about resources that are available to them because the school system does not readily offer them; resources have to be requested. When asked if she ever personally considered starting a school, program, or other option to bring more school choice options to the community or to improve available options, Esther replied:

> Well, no, I've thought about starting on homeschool for my kid, but I've not ever thought about, like, starting a whole entire school. If anybody wants to at this point, I'm very down to. But no, just basically thought about homeschooling really is the only thing that I thought about.

Esther knows her family is not the only family in the county struggling to find just the right fit for their child, and she wishes there were a more accessible charter or Montessori school for children who would benefit from it. She has considered career changes so she could work at the school, simply to be more accessible to her child. Esther knows firsthand the stress, anxiety, frustration, and sadness that not being able to provide the best education for your child brings,

even though she is very thankful for the professionals who have worked with her child the best they could with the resources they had.

Fiona

Fiona has two children, aged 11 and 13. They are going into 5th and 8th grades. She is a public school teacher, and her children are in public school, as well. Fiona has lived in Macon County her entire life and attended Macon County Public Schools for her educational career. One of Fiona's children has an IEP, so it is important to her family that the school they attend be able to meet their needs. She also feels a quality education includes teachers who are not just there for the paycheck but are invested in their job and want children to have a good experience. She has not considered another option for her children aside from public school and, while she realizes there are not a lot of schooling options in the county, she has not been negatively impacted by lack of school choice. Fiona and her family have had positive experiences within the school system, and she feels her children have received all the services and care they need. When asked if she ever faced any limitations regarding school choice, she initially said no. However, further into the interview, she realized there were some limitations when preparing her child with the IEP to transition to intermediate school. She initially wanted to put her child into the block of students without an IEP because she was looking for a different experience for her child. However, she found out that if her child was not in the block of students with IEPs, her child would not receive needed services. She felt like that was a limitation, but not a major concern

that impacted her mental health negatively. When asked how she feels about the schooling options available to her children, Fiona replied:

> I'm comfortable and we've had good experiences, considering (her child with an IEP). I'm leaving (my other child) out, but (that child) is pretty self-sufficient and has done well.

> Fiona realizes her situation may be different if she was not a teacher in the school system, but because of her connections and ability to be so involved in her children's education, she has had a positive experience, and the lack of school choice in the county has not impacted her negatively. She is thankful for the services provided to her children and knows that these services have helped her family tremendously.

Georgia

Georgia has lived in Macon County, NC her whole life. For elementary, middle, and high school, she attended the local public schools. She has two children, one adult child and one child who is 10 years old and going into 6th grade. She values being able to get to know the teachers, staff, and administrators, and she also believes it is important for schools to do well in testing, and to show that their students perform well. She also believes mental health and nursing staff are important in schools. She believes quality education includes open communication between staff and parents, a focus on the students, and individualized attention for students. When asked about her experiences with choosing a school for her child, Georgia said, "I didn't really have the opportunity to choose a school, per se. We were in the district for (the local elementary school). From there, it is the intermediate school, middle, and high school—those are really the only options, I guess." When asked how she feels about the schooling options available to her children, Georgia said, "I've not really thought about it because I've lived here my entire life,

and that's just how it's been—you go to this elementary school if you're in this district and then you transfer to the intermediate school, middle school, high school, and graduate. It would be nice if there were actual options."

Georgia believes her child would benefit from an option that offered more flexibility and hands-on learning. Because of the lack of options, Georgia has accepted that the education system in the county "is what it is" and it has not negatively impacted her mental health. She described feeling indifferent about the options, and while she feels anxious about her child's safety and quality of education at times, it is not directly related to the lack of school choice she has. She feels her child could learn more in a different environment, but that her child has had good teachers. She knows that there is room for improvement, but also realizes things could be worse.

Hope

Hope is a mother of adult children but is responsible for her family members' education. The children are twins, 14 years old, and going into 9th grade. In the past, she has homeschooled them, and they are currently in the public school system. Hope values flexibility, individual learning, and keeping kids active in the learning experience. Hope recognizes that options are limited in the area, and that leaves her feeling slighted, limited, and frustrated to not be able to offer educational options to the children. Some limitations and barriers that Hope named include geographical location, internet access, and out-of-state private schools that are very expensive (finances/access—no options in the county she lives in). When asked about how the situation impacts her mental health, Hope responded as follows:

It's very frustrating. Because no matter how much you try to talk to the teachers and try

to be involved, it still just doesn't really matter. That's how it makes me feel, you know?

Is that it just doesn't—what we have to say, our opinions—don't seem to really matter.

Hope named frustration, sadness, and anger as some of the feelings she has felt about the

educational options for the twins. She feels some staff do not care—that they are simply trying to

make it through the week themselves. It also frustrates her because the way she feels about the

schooling options provokes emotions that conflict with her personal values. For example, Hope

sees herself as a nice person, but when she becomes angry over a school situation, she feels

conflicted over her response to the educational stress. While she does feel the twins learned more

when homeschooling, she does realize that high school is more difficult to teach and feels the

twins are in a good place.

Isla

Isla is the mother of a 15-year-old who is entering 10th grade at the local public high

school. Isla attended public school in Macon County, NC for her K-12 years. She is aware of the

school options surrounding counties offer, but they opted to stay with the public school system in

the county for her child's education because of their work/life schedule and sports options. Isla

expressed that, when choosing a school for her child to attend, it is important to her that her child

be taught things about life after high school, like military and college options. It is also important

to her that the school is safe. Additionally, Isla wants her child to have access to a quality

curriculum where what is taught in science and history is factual and real. While safety is

important to Isla, she has had to help her child with significant bullying issues and feels they are

not supported, that the bullies do not receive punishment for bullying her child, and that much of

what takes place in the school system is biased toward individuals who have power within the

school system. She also feels like she has no options for her child in this county other than the public high school. Isla has thought about homeschooling or private school options, but those options would take away her child's ability to play school sports. When asked about how her child's schooling experience has impacted her personal mental health, Isla stated that she has experienced shame, guilt, heartbreak, anger, and frustration, and she feels like she has let her child down. Isla also said the following:

> Sometimes I feel like it makes me crazy. I mean, some days are really, really, really good. And then, some days I just feel like we're in it alone, especially when (my child) has gone through some of the things they've been through. Nobody supports—they can go talk—but nobody supports, and nobody gets in trouble for the things that they've done to my kid.

While she has not personally considered starting a school, Isla would like to see other options become available in the county. She knows the experience her family has had with the available schooling options has impacted their mental health negatively at times. Isla feels she is deeply impacted by the lack of schooling options for her child and wishes there were other options for her child to take advantage of that would still allow for extracurricular activities.

Josie

Josie is the mother of two upcoming 8th graders who are twins. She personally attended public school in another state. With her own children, they have approached education several different ways. They have homeschooled, attended charter school, Christian school, and public school. She believes that core classes like English, math, science, and history are important in education, but also believes that the arts contribute to quality education as well. Josie's children both enjoy visual arts and playing instruments, so she likes a well-rounded education option.

Josie's husband was in the military, and after he retired, they were able to travel while homeschooling, which she feels enriched the learning experience because they were able to see landmarks they were studying. Another option they enjoyed was a magnet school where they had a no-homework policy, the curriculum was rich, and Josie was satisfied with what the children learned. Recently, Josie's children attended the local public intermediate school, but for 8th grade, they have decided to homeschool again. Josie stated they considered the local private school, but at the time her children would have been the only 6th graders in the school, and she felt they did not offer anything she could not accomplish with homeschool. Josie stated that if there were an affordable, local private school that offered sports or arts, she would highly consider that option for her children. When asked how lack of school choice in the area has impacted her personal mental health, Josie said the following:

> I mean, I was pretty devastated when we couldn't afford to go (to the private school) outside of the county (and across state lines). I'm like, you know, we live right here. Kids are coming from other countries and I'm sure they need that education as well, but I'm right here and I can't afford it. I went to college, my husband went to college, and so these are our choices and, I don't know you just feel…I get mad every time I drive by (the out-of-state private school).

Josie went on to say she also feels like if they made more money her children would be able to go to the more expensive school, and she does feel some frustration, anger, and guilt over the subject. However, being a Christian, when she looks at it through a biblical lens, she does feel that her children are where they should be, even though she would like to be able to offer them more sometimes.

Kay

Kay is a foster mother and has experience with children in elementary and high school. Currently, Kay is fostering a child who just completed third grade and is nine years old. Last year, Kay and her husband fostered a 15-year-old child who was in 9th grade. Kay grew up in Macon County, NC and completed K-12 in the local public school system, left the area for several years, and moved back three years ago. When asked about what she thinks a quality education consists of, Kay said the following:

> I think quality education would be teachers who are understanding of multiple needs. There seems to be a lack of that here. A quality education is also fun. Sometimes there are no rewards that go along with learning, and there should be. I feel like learning should always be a fun experience for the children.

Kay's experience with school choice is different since they do not have the ability to homeschool foster children, even if they as the foster parents recognize that it may be a great choice for that child. Kay is able to choose which school district the child attends elementary school in, but that is all since the county only has one option for high school. Kay would like to see more options in the county that foster parents could access, as well as for children who are not in foster care. Kay likes to help children who are struggling, and she feels very frustrated when the resources needed are not available. She believes all children deserve a "solid quality education where they have resources that can help them, and that's not an option." Kay's experience with obtaining needed resources from the public school system for things like IEPs has been a struggle, and help is usually not readily available. She recognizes that Macon County Schools are not as bad as other places she has lived, but she does believe there is always room for improvement.

Leita

Leita is the wife of a public middle school teacher and the mother of four children, of which two are school age. One child is six years old and going into 1st grade. The other child is 16 years old and entering 10th grade. Her six-year-old is homeschooled, and her 10th grader attended public high school for 9th grade. However, for 10th grade, her child chose to attend public virtual school. Leita herself attended Macon County public schools for K-12.

When asked what factors are important to her when choosing a school, Leita identified curriculum, class size, and communication with the teachers/schools. Leita stated that Macon County does not have any options for school choice, and she would like to see more choices like Montessori or charter schools. With her husband being in public education, Leita knows firsthand how hard the public school teachers try, but they face limitations with resources and teacher aides. She knows the students suffer because they are not getting individualized attention and instruction. Leita said that the lack of school choice has not directly affected her marriage, but that school choice is something they discuss often to make sure there is not a better option for their children, or to ensure they are doing what is right for each child. When asked how lack of school choice and limitations make her feel, Leita responded:

> It's, you know, it's kind of discouraging that we don't feel like there's another option. You know, we do know of things like Montessori schools and charter schools and other things that we just don't have here. I get frustrated and, you know, left wanting more— unsatisfied with what we have.

While Leita has not personally considered starting a school or program in the area, she would love to see some other options become available. She recognizes that school choice does add stress to her life, but it is not overwhelming. She expressed that her high schooler's

education is more stressful and that she feels stuck where that is concerned. Leita also identified limitations within the existing public school system like large class sizes, lack of individualized attention, and children who need access to the alternative school, but cannot get it because the school starts at 7th grade, leaving behavioral issues in K-6th classrooms. She believes that many public school teachers are doing the best they can, but the local public school cannot support and provide for the abundance of needs in the county.

May

May is the mother of a child who is seven years old and entering 2nd grade. May attended public school in Macon County for her K-12 career and is very satisfied with the schooling experience they have had with her own child. May's child attends an out-of-district elementary school, and she feels very satisfied and confident with her child's education. She feels safe dropping her child off at school. Factors that are important to May when choosing a school include a teacher who communicates well with her and a teacher who does not play favorites with the students in the classroom. She values education that is taught on grade level and a teacher who spends time with each student to make sure they are all understanding what is being taught. When asked how she feels about the schooling options available to her child, May said, "I'm ok with the schooling options. I'd pick a different school I'm sure, if I wanted to, but I'm ok with the school (my child) is at."

Additionally, when asked about what concerns she has had when choosing a school for her child, May said that she has not had any concerns. In relation to her own mental health, May stated that she is confident with where her child is and that it has not impacted her in a negative way.

Results

This section includes answers to each of the research questions after data collection and analysis. Through data analysis, themes were developed based on the answers given by participants in the interviews, cognitive representations, and optional journal entries. The themes that emerged provided direct answers to each of the research questions.

Theme Development

Through the interviews, cognitive representations, and optional journal prompts, participants repeated certain words, ideas, and phrases. After analyzing these repetitions, I developed themes by putting the information into clusters that allowed core themes to evolve naturally from the analyzed data (Moustakas, 1994). As I developed the themes, I recognized similarities of my own experiences in the participants' stories. Realizing this, I was careful to bracket out my own experience and judgments and focus solely on the participants' experiences through memoing (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Major Themes

Eight major themes and seven subthemes were identified during data analysis. These major themes and subthemes were used to answer the research questions as described more in detail below. The first major theme confirmed that the lack of school choice does impact the mental health of rural parents. Major themes two and three related to academic and school choice. Within major theme number two, four subthemes relating to academic choice were identified. Participants reported that school choice had not negatively impacted their marriages and relationships in major theme four. Major themes five and six identified that teachers had a significant impact on parental satisfaction, and six participants identified that they had no choice when it came to where their child attended school. It was in major theme number six that the

subthemes of cost of school and transportation logistics prohibited school choice for these families. Major theme number seven circled back around to mental health where five participants specifically mentioned experiencing parental guilt as school choice options do impact their mental well-being. The subthemes of feeling limited and stuck also surfaced. Finally, major theme number eight related to a child's individual needs not being met. Four participants identified this issue, and the subthemes that were identified relating to this issue were lack of resources due to funding and the county's rural location.

Theme Number One. The first major theme confirmed, as expected, that participants' mental health was impacted by lack of school choice in rural North Carolina. While all 13 participants expressed some way their experience with school choice had impacted their mental health, four participants were especially vocal about the negative impact the lack of school choice had on their mental health, which is described in more detail below in research question three. While fear, feeling helpless, stressed, stuck, and ashamed were all briefly mentioned, the specific ways in which mental health was impacted are described in Table 2 below.

While I expected participants would express guilt, anxiety, frustration, and feeling overwhelmed, I was surprised at the expression of anger, feelings of not being equipped, and the apathy/detachment expressed by the participants. I expected participants to be impacted by the lack of school choice in a rural area, but I had not considered how they coped with the roadblocks they faced, which came out in coping through being apathetic and detached and expressing an "it is what it is" mentality.

Table 2

Descriptive Words Used to Describe Negative Impact on Mental Health

Descriptor	Number of Participants Expressed
Guilt	5
Anxious	4
Frustrated	4
Anger	3
Ill-equipped	3
Overwhelmed	3
Apathy/Detached	3

Theme Number Two. This theme was unexpected as I had only considered the lack of school choice in rural areas. However, 12 participants discussed the lack of academic options within the context of the available school options. This major theme was an opportunity for participants to discuss the following, which became four subthemes of concern to the participants: (1) individual interests addressed, (2) broad variety of electives and core classes, (3) different learning experiences, and (4) college and career prep. Through the tone of conversations in the interviews, this major theme and its subthemes are areas of high frustration for participants.

Subtheme Number One. Addressing the child-student's individual interests was a topic mentioned by four participants when discussing the lack of academic options (within the lack of school options). While parents recognize the lack of physical school locations to choose from, they also reported a lack of academic options within the available schools which led to the

discussion of their child's individual interests being met. Because there are so many limitations in place already, meeting an abundance of individual needs is another uphill battle. Participants want their child's interests to be attended to in order for them to learn about opportunities for their futures.

Subtheme Number Two. Subtheme number two is also related to subtheme number one in that a broad variety of electives and core classes would help address more individual interests. Participants reported that there is not a large variety of classes for students to choose from. The participants believe the cause of limited resources stems from rural location and funding; however, this does not change the fact that the participants want their children to have access to classes that capture their attention and speak to their interests.

Subtheme Number Three. Participants also reported that they value different learning experiences. Not all students have the same learning preference. Participants want teachers to address their child's learning style within the classroom to expose students to different ways to learn and retain knowledge. Parents also believe that this keeps learning exciting and keeps their child engaged.

Subtheme Number Four. The final subtheme in this set is college and career prep. The participants that identified this as important want their child to have knowledge about what options await them after high school. One participant specifically wants her child to know college is not the only option; there are military options as well. While the participants did not directly name how they feel the schools do in this area, it is an area of importance to them, and they want their children to know there are many options awaiting them in the future.

Theme Number Three. "We need other options" was reiterated throughout the interviews. In this instance, participants were referring to physical schools (academic options

were addressed in major theme two). Participants realized the existing schools have limitations that will take years to overcome. Additional options in the form of charter, private, or Montessori schools are welcomed thoughts among participants, even though they realize those options may not be in this county for years to come. Twelve participants vocalized their ability to see other options are needed, even if they may not utilize them personally.

Theme Number Four. The fourth theme that surfaced throughout the interviews was that lack of school choice had not impacted participants' marriages in a negative way. Seven participants said the lack of school choice and discussions about available educational options had in no way impacted their relationships. Five participants said that these discussions had actually helped their relationships by nurturing communication skills and building relational bonds. One participant is a single mother, and this question did not impact her.

Theme Number Five. "Teachers make all the difference" is the fifth major theme. This sentiment was repeated by seven participants with Esther saying, "Because if you don't understand (my child), we're not going to be able to educate (them) properly." This statement emphasized not only her team-approach mentality to education, but that a teacher who takes time to understand their individual students makes a significant impact on how the year goes for the child-student, the parent(s), and the teacher. Participants stated that teachers who like children, care about them, and are good communicators have been the ones who have improved the quality of their child's education.

Theme Number Six. Major theme number six is "I had no choice." This phrase was utilized multiple times with six participants stating it specifically in response to interview questions regarding the educational options they had for their child. Two subthemes arose in

relation to this major theme. They are (1) cost of private school and (2) logistics/transportation to an out-of-county or out-of-state option.

      Subtheme Number One. Participants felt they had no choice but to attend public school. However, one driving force behind this feeling was the cost of a private option. Macon County, NC has only one private school in the county. It serves grades K-8 and is of the Christian faith. Many participants felt they could not justify the cost of tuition compared to what the school offered. Josie pointed out in her interview that the school is not accredited, it uses a curriculum she can purchase on her own for homeschool, and that they do not offer extracurricular sports teams or clubs. She felt that what the in-county private school offered, "I can do that myself (at home)." When researching neighboring private schools, she met the cost barrier again. Neighboring private schools had more to offer academically and socially, but the cost was unaffordable for Josie.

      Subtheme Number Two. In addition to cost, participants named logistics and transportation as a barrier to school choice. If a parent wanted their child to go to a private school with more to offer than the in-county option, they would have to transport them out of the state or county (Macon County, NC is on the Georgia/North Carolina state line). Additionally, there is a charter school in a neighboring county; however, it is approximately 45 minutes one-way and not an option for the participants in this current study.

      Theme Number Seven. This major theme was somewhat of a surprise. "My mental health was impacted" was not a surprise. But the driving force behind this sentiment was guilt. Five participants expressed feeling guilty they could not provide more schooling options, even though they recognized rural location as being a barrier, something no one can change.

Subtheme Number One. In addition to guilt, the feelings of being limited and/or stuck were repeated. Participants vocalized different experiences from being unable to move to another town to feeling stuck because of their financial situation, all of which perpetuated their feelings of guilt. Surprisingly, participants vocalized knowing that lack of choice in rural areas was not their fault, but they still experienced guilt.

Theme Number Eight. Theme number eight addressed the child's individual needs not being met. Four participants identified that their child had struggled with getting their individual needs attended to. Subthemes that arose during these conversations that perpetuated individual needs not being met were (1) a lack of resources/funding and (2) geographical location.

Subtheme Number One. A lack of resources can happen anywhere. However, participants identified this as being a reason their child's individual needs could not be met, both in private and public schools. Carrie preferred the county's private school, but they were not equipped to handle the needs of her child, and she had to place him in public school. She feels many of his needs have still gone unmet because the public school does not have the staff needed to attend to him and help him achieve his best. Esther's child has an IEP, and she still faces roadblocks because the school lacks the funding to provide additional staff and programs to help with their needs.

Subtheme Number Two. While frustrations with the rural education system can often come out on staff and teachers, the participants agreed that the teachers are doing the best they can, and they believe that many of the issues faced in the area are because of geographical location. Being in a rural location limits access to many resources that larger cities have. The participants believed this impacts funding which in turn impacts resources available to their children.

Themes were developed from words and phrases that were used repetitively during data collection. Table 3 below lists those words and phrases that were important in building themes. As interviews were conducted, these expressed needs and thoughts were ones that continued to appear, prompting further analysis and subsequent theme development.

Table 3

Words and Phrases Used in Repetition

Repeated Words and Phrases	Codes	Identified Themes and Subthemes
Academic variety	AV	Need options
Individual needs met	IN	Need options
Forced to use public school	FP	Need options, Limitations
Didn't have a choice (of school)	DC	Need options, Limitations
Communication with teachers	CT	Communication, Relationships
Lack of resources	LR	Limitations
Financial strain	FS	Need options, Limitations
Transportation/Logistics	TL	Need options, Limitations
He is supportive/didn't impact marriage	SU	Relationships
Frustration	FR	Mental health
Guilt	GU	Mental health
Anxiety	AX	Mental health
Anger	AN	Mental health
It is what it is	II	Mental health

Overwhelmed	OW	Mental health
Teachers are doing their best	TB	Communication,
		Relationships

Research Question Narrative

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of parents whose children have limited educational options in rural North Carolina. In order to accomplish this, three research questions were constructed and answered through interviews, cognitive representations, and optional journal prompts. The themes that emerged are detailed below and organized by research question.

Research Question One

Research question one asked, "How do parents in rural areas describe the experience the lack of school choice has had on them and their families?" Several themes and subthemes emerged as participants described their experience with the lack of school choice and how it related to their families.

I Had No Choice. One of the main themes that emerged in relation to research question one was "I had no choice" concerning which school their child would attend. Six of the participants named this as part of their experience with school choice. The main reason behind this statement is because there is not another option for high school in Macon County aside from public high school or public early college, which a child has to apply to and be accepted, so there is no guarantee of this option. The Christian school in the county ends at 8th grade, and there are no other options within the county. Two subthemes emerged when participants were asked about accessing other resources: cost and transportation. The private schools in neighboring counties

and in the state of Georgia are expensive/unaffordable and, even if they were affordable, the

logistics of transporting a child 45 minutes to an hour one-way to access a different school was

near impossible for these participants. When asked about her experience with choosing a school

for her child, Donna replied:

> I don't have a choice so, so if I don't have a choice, if I went to a bigger town,
>
> bigger city, then yes, I mean, I'd have a choice with that. But then how are we
>
> going to get (my child) there and I don't live in a bigger city. I live where I live, right? So
>
> it's this school or you go to a private school and not in our county because our
>
> county has no private schools for high school.

We Need Other Options. Donna's above sentiment was echoed by other participants

who shared the same frustration, especially parents of high school aged children. When asked

about their feelings regarding the available options, six participants identified that other options

were needed within the county. Anita stated her experience with options: "Um, I believe that

Macon Early College is a phenomenal choice. If my children did not get accepted into it, I would

feel that our options were terrible." Several participants stated that they feel the teachers and staff

are doing the best they can given the available resources, and they are not to blame. Anita's

comment comes from the familial value of raising kind children, and she does not want her

children exposed to bullying and negative behaviors. This is a sentiment echoed by Isla, whose

10th grader has been repeatedly bullied. Isla has experienced deep frustrations and heartache

because she is unable to homeschool or send her child elsewhere. When specifically asked in the

interviews, "Would you like to see more schooling options?" 12 participants replied "yes" and

one replied "possibly."

My Child's Individual Needs Are Not Being Met. It was clear through this study that parents care about their children's education, and they want their child's individual needs met. Four participants identified this theme as part of their experience with available school options. Leita, whose husband is a middle school teacher, understands how difficult it is for educators to meet every child's needs when class sizes are large and there is a lack of resources, a subtheme that emerged in this area. Leita stated, "My husband is a public school teacher. There's only so much you can do when you have 25 kids in your class. There's not really a way to individualize the attention." She went on to say, "The lack of resources really is not materials. As a teacher— my husband feels like, feels like he has a lot of items, but not necessarily a teacher's aide, things like that."

Hearing this issue addressed from the spouse of a teacher was helpful in understanding both perspectives—teacher and parent. However, for parents, it can be frustrating to feel like their child is being left behind, even if the child has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in place, as is the case with Esther's son:

> So having an IEP, we thought we were gonna be able to be worked with a little bit more and it's still just kind of where, "we think this will work," it's like "well we're his parents, we think this will work, so, let's find somewhere in the middle," and that's not necessarily happening. So, it's a little frustrating that we're not being worked with as much this year on what we think and what we've seen works for him and that's frustrating.

Additionally, Esther brought up a good point. She stated that she did not know about Individualized Education Plans (IEP) until her child was in kindergarten, and she was unable to get the IEP until her child was halfway through 1st grade, costing valuable time where her child

could have benefited from additional services. She realized that she is not the only parent who was unaware of the resources that are currently available because they are not discussed or readily offered.

      School Choice Options Do Impact My Mental Health. Parental guilt was a running theme throughout the data collection process. Five participants mentioned guilt in their interview. Beth mentioned guilt in her cognitive representation. Isla mentioned feeling guilty several times and we had the following exchange:

> Me: So isolated, alone, like you have no help. Does that make you like, when you say those things like, how does that make you feel? Like anxious, depressed, shame, guilt, anything like that?
>
> Isla: All those things. And, then, when I look and see that (my child) feels it, because (they are) there the most because (they are) there every day, I get mad. My heart breaks. It's every, every single emotion I can have, I have.

The participants described feeling guilty for not being able to provide a better option, even though the majority (12) of them said "yes, we need more options." Of interest was that even though it was recognized more options are needed, guilt for not being able to provide more, even when there are no other choices in the county, was one of the main themes identified.

      Additionally, feeling limited and/or stuck with the options was identified by three participants, including Esther, whose cognitive representation was a picture of her family in a jail cell (see Appendix F), representing the trapped feeling they all feel. Three participants also identified the limitations of the Christian school within the county, the only other option for K-8 students aside from homeschool. The limitations they identified with this option are lack of accreditation, cost, no extracurricular activities, and a curriculum that they could use themselves

in homeschool. Josie stated in her interview that she had looked into putting her children in the county's Christian school, but an established music arts program is important to her and her children, and the school did not offer anything extracurricular, including sports. Josie's children did attend the public intermediate school for 5th grade, but her children opted to homeschool for 6th grade. Josie did consider sending her children to an out-of-state private school that neighbors the county but identified cost as the prohibiting factor. When she realized the cost of going to this school, she stated that she felt devastated:

> I mean, I was pretty, oh, I was devastated when we couldn't afford to go outside the county. Yeah, because I'm like, you know, we live right here. Kids are coming from other countries and I'm sure they, they need that education as well, but I'm right here and I can't afford it, umm, and I went to college and my husband went to college. And so, these are our choices and, and I don't know you just, I get mad every time I drive by (that school).

Research Question Two

Research question two asked, "How do parents in rural areas describe their ability to provide quality education for their children when there are fewer educational opportunities available to them than their urban counterparts?" The themes that emerged related to providing quality education included communication and relationships with teachers, variety in academic options, and frustration with the available options.

The Teachers Make All the Difference. Throughout data collection, one sentiment that participants repeated related to the teachers. Many participants stated they believed the teachers were doing the best they can with what they have. In May's cognitive representation (see Appendix G), she drew a happy face and a sad face with the phrase, "The teacher makes all the

difference in how I feel about the schools." She was not alone. Seven participants stated that open communication and positive relationships with their child's teacher goes a long way in providing quality education. Georgia stated when asked what factors are important when choosing a school, "Being able to meet and get to know the teachers, staff, and faculty," and when asked what makes up a quality education, she went on to say, "Informed teachers and staff communicating with parents, really focusing on children and making sure that they get some individualized attention that's geared toward how they learn best." The participants relayed the message that they know the limitations faced in rural education has little to do with the teacher and more to do with geographical location and the lack of resources in rural communities.

We Need Academic Choices. This study focused on the lack of school choice in rural areas, with the main focus being on actual schools available. Donna had a different view. Her thought process was, "This is where I am, I have to make the best of it." While she would like to see more school choice, she would also like to see more academic options within the high school currently available to her child, as she feels they are limited. When discussing quality education, four participants stated there needs to be a broad variety of electives and core subjects. Four participants stated quality education involves different learning experiences, lending itself to the same theme of academic choice. Four more participants wanted to make sure their child's individual interests were addressed. Donna said it best:

> Academic choices. So, so that meaning that if (my child) has a special interest in something that I want classes to be available that (they) can, that will gear towards what (they) are wanting to do in life, you know, not just oddball stuff.

> A subtheme that occurred from this is college and career preparation. Donna wants that

for her child, and so did two other parents of high school aged children. Isla also believes that

schools should present college, career, and military options to children. The more they know, the more of an educated decision they can make for their future.

Research Question Three

Research question three asked, "How do parents perceive how available schooling options influence the familial relationship of the rural family?" Many factors influence relationships in families. The participants like small town communities and the family-feel they provide, but as Josie pointed out, small town community comes at the cost of educational options and limited healthcare resources. Additionally, Donna first said she likes the safety of the small town, but then went on to say that, while there is not a lot of violence, there are a lot of drugs, alcohol abuse, sexual assault, and petty crimes. While each participant had reasons for living in Macon County, each had an experience that was different.

Not in a Bad Way. Four participants used this phrase when describing how lack of school choice had influenced their marriage. Four other participants said that lack of school choice had actually made them communicate more and that their spouse was helpful and supportive of the decisions they made regarding education. Carrie's child has special needs that require resources that the Christian school in the county does not have. Even though she would prefer to have her child in a Christian school, she and her husband have to utilize the public school because of the therapeutic options required for their child. While they have had a difference of opinion regarding options and choices, she stated that it has not negatively impacted their relationship, and it has provided opportunities for them to work through their differences. Overall, seven participants said that school choice had not impacted their marriages, five said it had strengthened their relationship and communication, and one participant was not married, and the question did not apply.

My Mental Health Has Been Impacted. Four participants—Carrie, Isla, Kay, and Donna—were vocal about the negative impact lack of school choices has had on them and their children. These stories were hard for the participants to articulate at times, with several participants visibly showing sadness and frustration. Carrie's cognitive representation, which is included in the appendix, was hard to see as it depicts her holding her child with a single teardrop on her cheek. This expressed the sheer heartbreak of not being able to provide her child with the Christian education she desires *and* the resources needed because there are simply no options that can accommodate their needs in the county. Her cognitive representation said more than words ever could. Additionally, Isla's cognitive representation was a sad face with tears, a broken heart, and the sun with the words, "Sometimes, but very few," depicting very few bright spots in their days. Kay's cognitive representation depicted her in a box, being able to only choose from the options "inside the box." She also included pictures of "no help" and "child's needs dismissed." Donna's cognitive representation was a puzzled face and four scribbles on the page, which she said represented turmoil and utter frustration.

Donna was perhaps the most vocal about the impact lack of school choice has had on her mental health and how it has impacted her relationships with friends and her child. Donna began by explaining that she does feel schooling options are limited. When describing this, she used the words "infuriated," "frustrated," and "angry." We had the following exchange:

Donna: I do believe that school options are limited, and it infuriates me. I get extremely frustrated, and I have to limit the time that I commit to thinking on it because otherwise I'm going to be walking around constantly angry all the time, mad at everyone.

Me: So, it's that if you think about it, it really impacts you.

Donna: Yes! I become extremely angry and then I find that I'm frustrated with

everything. Totally unrelated to what I'm angry about and then I can even take it out on

(my child), I can take it out on friends, I can take it out on whoever and you know, when

it boils down to me being frustrated because I can't give my child what (they) need.

When describing how their mental health had been impacted, five participants said guilt, four

participants said anxious, four participants said frustrated, and anger, ill-equipped, and

overwhelmed were said by three participants each. Other descriptions included fear, helpless,

stressed, stuck, and shame. Three participants expressed apathy indicating they had become

detached from the situation to avoid any additional negative impact on their mental health and

relationships.

The Experience Was Positive. Several participants named positive experiences they had

had in the past with homeschool. Anita and Josie had previously incorporated travel and hands-

on experiences in homeschool which they both expressed great joy in doing. Hope stated that she

felt her children had learned the most while homeschooling and had enjoyed the time they spent

together. All three participants were also able to articulate positive experiences regarding

homeschool, which made them miss that experience since the needs and desires of their children

had changed and they had to make different arrangements.

Additionally, even though they acknowledged the lack of school choice, Beth, Fiona, and

May all reported positive experiences with the public school their children attend and have more

concerns about the future than they do about elementary school.

Summary

Chapter Four describes the experiences of 13 parents of school-aged children and their

stories related to the lack of school choice options in rural Macon County, North Carolina. All 13

participants have shared experiences in navigating educational decisions for their children. The 13 participants represented 20 children: six in elementary school, three in intermediate school, four in middle school, and seven in high school. All of the participants had attended public school for their personal education, with nine participants attending school in Macon County. When asked if they would like to see more schooling options available in the county, none of the participants responded "no."

Participants shared experiences with the studied phenomenon through in-person interviews, cognitive representations, and optional journal prompts. The information about each participant was discussed in biographies for each participant. Data analysis allowed the research questions to be answered fully, with four themes being discovered for question one, two themes for question two, and three themes for question three. The themes discovered for research question one were *I had no choice, we need other options, my child's individual needs are not being met, and school choice options do impact my mental health.* The two themes that were discovered for question two were *the teachers make all the difference,* and *we need academic choices.* The three themes discovered for research question three were *the teachers make all the difference, we need academic choices,* and *the experience was positive.*

Participants expressed they had all been impacted in some way by their experience with the lack of school choice, and some had more positive experiences than others. Some participants had yet to experience any notable negative consequences related to the lack of school choice, but had anxiety and fear about what the future holds as their child ages. Overall, participants expressed that the studied phenomenon did have an impact on their mental health and, while living in a rural area does have positives, providing for their child's educational needs in a rural area can be difficult.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of parents whose children have limited educational options in rural North Carolina. The problem was the lack of qualitative research focused on the mental health of parents of rural students who face a lack of educational opportunities. This study allowed parents of children who attend school in rural North Carolina to describe their experiences with the lack of school choice in their area. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1.   How do parents in rural areas describe the experience the lack of school choice has had on them and their families?

2.   How do parents in rural areas describe their ability to provide quality education for their children when there are fewer educational opportunities available to them than their urban counterparts?

3.   How do parents perceive how available schooling options influence the familial relationship of the rural family?

The chapter begins with a summary of the findings discovered through data analysis described in Chapter Four. Following that is a discussion of this study's findings considering the theoretical framework and related literature. Additionally, this chapter includes the implications of the study in theoretical, empirical, and practical terms. To close out this chapter, delimitations and limitations of the study are examined and recommendations for future research are given.

Summary of Findings

Eight major themes and seven subthemes were revealed through data analysis. These themes related to the lack of school choice in rural North Carolina and how participants

experienced this phenomenon. The first major theme was that the participants' mental health had been impacted by the lack of school choice in rural North Carolina. The second major theme to emerge was that there is a lack of academic options within the available school options. This theme produced four subthemes which were (1) individual interests of students addressed; (2) a broad variety of both elective and core classes; (3) different learning experiences; and (4) college and career preparation. Thirdly, the theme of "we need other options" emerged. This theme referred to actual school choice, not academic options within a school. The fourth major theme to emerge was that the lack of school choice had not impacted the participants' marriages in negative ways. The fifth major theme was that the teachers make all the difference in how the school year goes. Coming in as the sixth major theme was the feeling of "I had no choice" when choosing a schooling option for their child. This theme had two subthemes. They were (1) the cost of private school and (2) the logistics and transportation involved in transporting a child to an out-of-county or out-of-state school. Guilt over not being able to provide more schooling options to their children was the seventh major theme that emerged. Finally, the eighth major theme to emerge was that the child's individual needs were not being met. This theme had two accompanying subthemes of (1) lack of resources in both private and public schools and (2) geographical location impacts the ability to meet the academic needs of students.

The first research question, "How do parents in rural areas describe the experience the lack of school choice has had on them and their families?" was answered by major themes three, six, seven, eight, and their accompanying subthemes. The intent of the first research question was to understand the lived experiences of study participants. Major theme three revealed that participants feel they do not have enough options, which was expressed through frustration and the repeated phrase of "we need more options." Participants reported that the lack of school

choice did not have an impact on their marriages in a negative way, which was major theme four. However, the lack of school choice left participants feeling guilty for not being able to provide other options, even though these same participants recognized that Macon County has a lack of schooling options and limited resources, which is out of their control. Major theme eight helped provide a broader view of the experiences families have had with the lack of school choice in Macon County. In this theme, participants vocalized how their child's individual needs have not been met, with the subthemes of (a) a lack of resources in both public and private county schools, and (b) geographical location influencing the ability to meet their child's individual needs. Data analysis revealed that participants expressed their families had been impacted by a lack of schooling options, the unreachable options because of finances or logistics, and the inability of county schools to meet their child's individual needs, but that participant marriages had not suffered negatively because of these barriers.

The second research question, "How do parents in rural areas describe their ability to provide quality education for their children when there are fewer educational opportunities available to them than their urban counterparts?" was a chance to understand the nature of each participant's reality within this lived experience. Major theme two and its subthemes and major theme five shed light on how the participants felt they were able to provide quality education to their children. Participants were frustrated by the lack of academic options, which was revealed as major theme two. The subthemes that emerged—(1) individual interests addressed; (2) broad variety of electives and core classes; (3) different learning experiences offered; and (4) college and career preparation—showed that participants felt individual interests were not always able to be accommodated, there is not a broad variety of electives and core classes available within the schools children can attend, learning experiences often lack variety of presentation, and children

could have more exposure to future options. Participants were frustrated by the limits within the limitations. Additionally, participants realized that teachers are doing the best they can, and they believe the teachers truly make all the difference, especially when choices are limited, and teachers are able to make the best of the resources they have access to.

The third research question, "How do parents perceive how available schooling options influence the familial relationship of the rural family?" was answered by major themes one and four. This research question allowed participants to express their perception of how education influences relational bonds within families. Major theme one—participant mental health was impacted by the lack of school choice in rural North Carolina—revealed that participants felt the strain of limitations. Frustration, guilt, and feeling overwhelmed and stressed were revealed. However, some participants expressed positive experiences with their schooling option of choice even in the face of limited options. Several participants who had chosen to homeschool over the years reported a positive influence on relational connectivity and familial bonds growing stronger. While some of these families are no longer homeschooling due to the changing needs of their child, they have fond memories of the time they spent together. Additionally, major theme four—lack of school choice had not impacted marriage in a negative way—revealed a sense of strengthening through adversity. Even though participants reported that sometimes communication was strained or there was a difference of opinion regarding schooling, communication had improved in their relationships because of the in-depth conversations needed to resolve educational needs within the families.

Discussion

The theoretical framework for this study revolved around William Glasser's choice theory. Additionally, Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Lazarus's stress theory support the

theoretical framework. Choice theory puts forth that all people do is behave; in response to a person's reality, all they can do is choose how they will respond (Glasser, 2001). However, Maslow's hierarchy of needs supports choice theory by recognizing human needs, and Lazarus's stress theory adds value by addressing the origins of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Maslow, 1943). As a whole, these theories corroborate with one another to support participant responses to their lived experiences with the lack of school choice. Included in this section is a discussion of this study's findings as they relate to the chosen theoretical framework and the related literature regarding origins of parental stress and education in rural communities.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework

William Glasser developed choice theory based on four parts: acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology (2001). Glasser focused on behaviors and choices throughout the construction of choice theory and suggested that people respond and react to circumstances in their lives, and those responses dictate if more stress is introduced into the situation (2001). Glasser (2001) also recognized the basic needs of humans such as survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, fun, and self-actualization, which are also addressed in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943). Additionally, Glasser (2001) recognized the influence choice can have on stress reactions and how not being able to meet the family's needs can be an origin of stress, something addressed by Lazarus's stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Participants in this study confirmed all three theories included in this study's theoretical framework. In direct correlation to this current study, there is the origin of stress, lack of school choice in rural Macon County, NC, which corresponds with Lazarus's stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Next, in relation to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, there are the needs of safety, love, and esteem vocalized throughout the interviews. Safety is a concern for Isla, whose

child has been bullied at school. Many participants expressed a desire for their child to be loved, cared for, and nurtured while at school. All participants wanted their child(ren) to have an opportunity to learn and grow, to gain knowledge and confidence. These experiences culminated in the choices, decisions, and behaviors of the participants in response to how they handled the lack of school choice, which relates directly to Glasser's (2001) choice theory.

Choice theory was confirmed through participants expressing the ways in which they chose to react to their circumstances (Glasser, 2001). Several participants expressed an apathetic response, many expressed feelings of frustration, and others chose to make the best of the available options. The expressions of stress shown by the participants—apathy, frustration, anger, and more—were manifested in different ways. Donna and Isla were obviously frustrated which is evident in their answers to the interview questions and their cognitive representations. Carrie showed her frustration and emotional pain regarding her child's situation through an expression of tears in the interview and in her cognitive representation (Appendix E). All of the participants expressed feelings of stress related to their child's educational journey, which relates to Lazarus's stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of stress was supported many times throughout this current study as participants detailed their experiences with lack of individual needs being met, bullying, and unmet academic needs. These origins of stress also support Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. As identified by Maslow (1943), an individual whose basic needs are not being met, whose safety is compromised, and whose educational needs are not being met will struggle reaching self-actualization. Participants expressed experiences in which they all noted the same origin of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). What differed among participants was which need was compromised or unmet (Maslow,

1943). Additionally, the ways in which each participant handled the stress and which choice they made varied, albeit some experiences were similar (Glasser, 2001).

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Empirical Literature

Data analysis revealed eight major themes and seven subthemes. The major themes and subthemes are detailed in Table 4 below.

Table 4

Themes and Subthemes Revealed Through Data Analysis

Themes	Subthemes
(1) The participants' mental health had been impacted by the lack of school choice	N/A
(2) There is a lack of academic options within the available school options	(1) Individual interests of students addressed; (2) A broad variety of both elective and core classes; (3) Different learning experiences; and (4) College and career preparation
(3) "We need other options" in relation to school choice, not academic choices	N/A
(4) Lack of school choice had not impacted the participants' marriages in negative ways	N/A
(5) Teachers make all the difference in how the school year goes	N/A
(6) "I had no choice" (when choosing a schooling option for their child)	(1) The cost of private school and (2) The logistics and transportation involved in transporting a child to an out-of-county or out-of-state school
(7) Guilt over not being able to provide more schooling options to their children	N/A
(8) Child's individual needs were not being met	(1) There is a lack of resources in both private and public schools and (2) Geographical location impacts the ability to meet the academic needs of students

Theme One

Participants told of their experiences with the lack of school choice in rural North Carolina and how this experience impacted their mental health. Participants named feelings and symptoms related to their experience such as guilt, anxiety, frustration, anger, feeling ill-equipped, overwhelmed, and apathetic and/or detached from their situation. These experiences are corroborated by Cucchiara (2013), who examined parental anxiety related to their child's education choices. Cucchiara discovered that, as in this study, participants' anxiety arose from different sources of stress, but all related to the same phenomenon (2013). Participants expressed guilt relating to their child's education in relation to not being able to provide a better option, which Ruckstaetter et al. (2017) explain is connected to parental empathy. Participants expressed their feelings of guilt by using phrases such as "I feel." Empathy involves the ability for one person to relate to another person's emotional wellbeing (Ruckstaetter et al., 2017). Participants corroborated this by expressing their empathy for their children through parental guilt. Additionally, Cronin et al. (2015) discuss the origins of parental stress and how parents react to such stress in frustration and feeling overwhelmed. Feeling angry, ill-equipped, unprepared, and overwhelmed are all issues parents deal with in relation to raising children (Cronin et al., 2015). Apathy and/or detachment from the situation was not directly addressed by the literature. However, participants in this study did describe the need to detach or be apathetic about the situation in order to cope with their frustrations and move forward.

Theme Two

Indirectly addressed by literature was the second major theme: there is a lack of academic options within the available school options. This theme produced four subthemes which were (1) individual interests of students addressed; (2) a broad variety of both elective and core classes;

(3) different learning experiences; and (4) college and career preparation. Bæck (2015) points out that rural schools often have fewer resources, which limits their ability to have robust academic programs. Additionally, rural and low-income schools traditionally have higher teacher turnover rates which impacts students in several ways—novice or inexperienced teachers, instability in programming, and an inability to build trusting relationships between parents and teachers, as supported by Simon and Johnson (2015). Teachers not planning on staying in a position long are reluctant to build strong programs or put forth a great deal of effort to build a broad array of elective courses because they know they are not in that school with long-term goals in mind (Simon & Johnson, 2015). This impacts the students because there are not many courses to choose from, and burnout rates increase as teachers do not captivate students' individual interests (Walburg, 2014). While the literature does not specifically cite lack of academic choices as a reason for burnout, it does refer to academic stress from "exhaustion, cynicism, and depersonalization," which indirectly relates to lack of individual interests and lack of academic choice (Walburg, 2014, p. 29).

During the interviews, Donna discussed how her child is developing signs of apathy and burnout. The school system does not have classes that directly influence her child's career goals and prepare her child for the future. Because of this, she has begun to witness her child reducing goals and not caring as much about school, which are signs of burnout (Walburg, 2014). This has impacted Donna's mental health as it frustrates her to see her child suffering from the lack of options rural schools are able to offer.

Theme Three

The theme of "we need other options" emerged during data analysis. This theme referred to actual school choice, not academic options within the school, like in theme two above. The

majority (12) of the participants vocalized this concern. Parents want school options such as public, private, charter, Montessori, etc. Participants in this study spent time considering the limited options available to them. As Mayer et al. (2020) discusses, parents want to choose the best option for their child and consider different aspects each option offers. At one point, diversity was important to Josie, but she quickly came to terms with the fact that diversity looks different in rural schools, and she would have to incorporate diversity into her children's lives in a different way. Georgia feels her child would do well in a different learning environment, but there are not any available options in the area that would suit her child well.

Participants expressed multiple ways in which they felt stress related to school choice and not having enough options. Beth is concerned about the available schools meeting her children's needs as they age. Carrie expressed grief, guilt, and frustration with the options available to her child. Josie expressed anger at not being able to afford better options for her children. Leita is discouraged by not having options such as charter or Montessori. These experiences line up with literature in that the participants felt the demands of meeting their child's educational needs are greater than the available resources in a rural community (Ponnet et al., 2012).

Theme Four

Literature had both a contrasting and supporting view on this theme—that the lack of school choice had not impacted the participants' marriages in negative ways. As stated by Duncan et al. (2014), psychological distress in the home can influence children negatively. Educational stress influences parental stress, and this can cause discord among parents (Ruckstaetter et al., 2017). However, participants in this study reported that educational stress had either not impacted their marriage at all or it had increased communication and had a positive impact on the couples' ability to face adversity together. This finding supports literature

by Yoshikawa (2012) that states parents with healthy coping and communication skills create healthy environments in which they process conflict productively without negative outcomes. Participants in this study found ways to communicate with their partners in order to maintain healthy communication patterns in the home, even if there were differences of opinion.

Theme Five

Supportive teachers who communicate well, build trust, and provide motivation positively influence students (Walburg, 2014). This literature supports the fifth major theme found in this study—that the teachers make all the difference in how the school year goes. Participants articulated that teacher-parent-student relationships often influence how satisfied they are with the school year and can often turn a bad situation into a good one. Seven participants named teacher relationships as a main factor in what makes up a quality education and what made a school experience positive or negative. Additionally, participants expressed that a teacher's expertise in how to handle complex situations, how nurturing they are, and if they truly care about the students impacted their child-student. This is corroborated in literature by Dupéré et al. (2015), which states that conflicts with teachers can increase stress in students. Stress in students increases burnout rates, but teachers who are positive and have positive coping skills help decrease burnout rates (Walburg, 2014). Participants stated teachers directly influence the quality of their child's education, and some years they have not felt like they had a good experience because of how the teacher treated their child. Fiona, May, and Beth all had positive teacher experiences, while several of the other participants had mixed feelings about teachers throughout the years.

Theme Six

Literature indirectly corroborated the sixth major theme of "I had no choice" when participants discussed choosing a schooling option for their child. This theme had two subthemes. They were (1) the cost of private school and (2) the logistics and transportation involved in transporting a child to an out-of-county or out-of-state school. Schachner (2021) addressed the difficulties of school choice options being inconsistent in rural areas, making education difficult to navigate for rural community members. This literature coincided with participant experiences. Because of the lack of options for rural families in Macon County, NC, participants felt the guilt and stress of not being able to meet their children's needs. When people feel as if they have no choice, stress increases and leads to other problems (Schachner, 2021).

North Carolina does have a program to help fill the financial gap for families wishing to send their children to private school. The North Carolina Opportunity Scholarship program provides scholarships to qualified families that help cover tuition in private schools. However, Macon County, NC has only one private school that accepts the scholarship, and it does not serve grades 9-12. Families with children in high school wanting to utilize the scholarship would have to travel to the neighboring county. Additionally, the local private school is a faith-based school which Hope, Josie, and Leita expressed concerns with regarding either the faith structure of the school, the curriculum, or the intensity in which religion was taught in the school. While the scholarship provides a much-needed opportunity for families in need of assistance, the help it brings is dependent on resources available to families (Egalite et al., 2020). While the option of having a scholarship is appealing to families, it is only as good as the options available in the area.

Theme Seven

Participants expressed feeling a number of different emotions related to their child's education. One emotional experience five participants reported having was guilt over not being able to provide more schooling options to their children. Some parents experience parental guilt relating to education for not being able to transport their child to a different school location, others name finances as a source of guilt, and other parents express guilt for not being able to provide the same experiences for their children as other families have (Duncan, 2014; Ruckstaetter et al., 2017; Yoshikawa et al., 2012). While the participants that expressed feeling guilt related to education could articulate the understanding that it was not their fault resources were limited, they still experienced guilt related to their child's education. As mentioned before, stress comes from not being able to meet expressed needs with the resources available (Cronin et al., 2015). In the experiences of the five participants who named guilt, stress had transpired into feelings of guilt as if they were directly responsible for the missing links in their child's education. As Ponnet et al. (2012) explains, stress impacts communication, and educational stress can impact the parent-child role.

Theme Eight

The eighth theme was that the child's individual needs were not being met. This theme had two accompanying subthemes of (1) there is a lack of resources in both private and public schools and (2) geographical location impacts the ability to meet the academic needs of students. Participants' experiences varied from their child's needs not being met in any school they attended locally to anger related to not being able to afford the adjoining state's private school. Limited options in rural schools impact their ability to meet every individual's needs (Bæck, 2015). Administrators, staff, and teachers generally have a desire to provide quality education;

they are simply limited based on funding and location (Preston et al., 2013). Everyone involved in rural education feels the strain that a lack of resources causes, which participants expressed. This extra stress put on teachers is one issue rural principals experience as teacher retention rates are lower in rural schools (Preston et al., 2013). Turnover influences many aspects of education relating to this theme. High turnover rates prohibit healthy development of needed programming that can help meet more students' needs (Bæck, 2015; Preston et al., 2013).

Additionally, income in rural areas tends to be lower, preventing many families from affording private school, an experience articulated by Josie (Yoshikawa et al, 2012). Josie expressed anger at not being able to afford an expensive private school for her children, especially given their education and military backgrounds. Rural schools tend to have higher rates of poverty as location and available jobs constrain income in these areas (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). This compounds an already strained education system as families are not able to contribute as much financially to the classroom (Preston et al., 2013). As articulated by participants and corroborated by literature, students' individual needs are not being met, and this compounds stress both in the classroom and at home.

Implications

There are theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for rural parents facing a lack of school choice options based on the findings in this study. It is of great value to recognize the experiences of these participants to address the mental health of rural parents facing a lack of school choice for their children and to identify sources of stress in this demographic before it becomes detrimental to families.

Theoretical

Glasser (2001) suggested that individuals choose their behavior in response to their circumstances. Maslow (1943) put forth that people reach their highest potential when their basic needs are met. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) found that people experience stress from different sources and react to those stressors differently depending on their unique personalities. While each participant's story was related to the phenomenon being studied, each participant experienced and processed the stress in their own unique way, as all three theories support. Participants need to be aware of the sources of stress in relation to their child's education, their personal coping skills, and how their stress impacts their family. If they find weak areas, participants should seek out ways to strengthen their resilience so that they are better able to help their children navigate school.

Empirical

Much of the literature found examines the student and how school choice impacts them. Very little literature was found regarding the experiences of parents in relation to their child's school options and how that impacts the parent's mental and emotional health. Literature did address sources of parental stress, parent involvement in their child's education, and how parental mental health influences the home (Ponnet et al., 2012; Preston et al., 2013; Yoshikawa et al., 2012). However, the literature did not specifically address parents, rural education, and the parent's mental health.

Study participants indicated that the lack of school choice in rural North Carolina did impact their mental health. They developed personal ways to cope with the stress that accompanied their experiences. Participants indicated that stress regarding school choice came from several different aspects of education: teacher-student-parent relationship, individual

education, and resources available for the child. While rural schools are limited in resources, they would benefit from developing their existing strengths—small community connections and teacher-parent relationships. Rural schools should also continue to look for ways to build trust with parents.

Practical

One of the best ways for parents to be involved in their child's life is to volunteer in their school. Many rural schools have limited classroom resources and welcome parent participation (Preston et al., 2013). Parent participation would allow participants in this study to develop better relationships with teachers, start clubs or programs to address individual needs, and influence their child's education. While it is not practical for every parent to volunteer daily, parents can look for ways in which to support their child and their education, which helps educators feel supported and appreciated (Preston et al., 2013).

This study confirms that parents in rural communities do care about their child's education. Parents are impacted by how their children feel about school. The participants in this study had given great thought and attention to which available school option, even though there were significant limitations, would be best for their child. Being involved gives parents a voice when they disagree with something, allows them a more intimate look at what their child experiences daily at school, and allows them more opportunities to communicate with their child about their day. Parents interested in influencing their child's education must be willing to take action and participate in whatever way is feasible to them.

<div align="center">

Delimitations and Limitations

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This study was designed in such a way as to create specific boundaries that provided definition and direction. The Delimitations section explains the decisions made regarding this

current study and how they influenced the study. Additionally, potential weaknesses of the study are identified. Because of the focus of the study, natural weaknesses arose. The Limitations section explains those weaknesses and how they influenced the study.

Delimitations

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of parents whose children have limited educational options in rural North Carolina. Because of the nature of the study, I constructed boundaries that maintained focus on the phenomenon being examined. I chose to conduct the interviews in a business office in Macon County, North Carolina that provided convenience and privacy. Additional parameters surrounding this study included being a parent of a child in elementary, middle, or high school, or in the first two years of college (public, private, or homeschool). Participants had to have been residents of Macon County, NC for at least two academic school years. The participants had to be at least partly responsible for making decisions about their child's education options. The participants had to be able to articulate or write about their experience with the lack of school choice options. These parameters protected the authenticity of the study. By placing boundaries around the study, I was able to ensure the data was pure and trustworthy.

Limitations

Studies experience limitations due to their design, subject, participants, and area in which they are conducted. This study's limitations relate to the phenomenological design, the population interviewed, and the geographical area in which it was conducted. A phenomenological design is based on participant experience, it is subject to interpretation, and it can be difficult to replicate because of the specific experiences of its participants (Creswell,

2013). Another limitation is that experiences in Macon County, NC do not cross over to other areas, as the experiences are limited to participants in this area only.

Additionally, I aimed for elimination of bias in this study. However, being a mother who has experienced this phenomenon personally, I did not attain bias elimination. While I fell short of bias elimination, I did maintain awareness through bracketing out my own experiences by journaling (see Appendix K) and by being cognizant of personal feelings regarding the phenomenon. Memoing and discussing my experiences with non-participants helped me be aware of my own feelings related to the subject.

<div align="center">

Recommendations for Future Research

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While Macon County, North Carolina was an optimal location to research rural education, it is only one rural county in the state. Additional research should be considered that focuses on multiple rural counties, their differences, and the options that other rural counties have in comparison with Macon County.

Furthermore, while qualitative research allows for intimate insight into a participant's experience, a quantitative study in the same county would reach more participants. Questionnaires and surveys are tools used within quantitative methods of research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These methods do not allow participants to vocalize their experiences, but they do allow participants to share information so that data can be collected and analyzed, generally in a numerical form (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This information can provide a broad overview of what is being experienced in the area studied. Additionally, quantitative research has the potential to broaden the demographic studied, and, in regard to this current study, would possibly allow for a male perspective regarding lack of school choice in rural counties. A male perspective may differ from the female perspectives given in this study and may provide a different point of view.

Additionally, all the participants were married except one. Future research that focuses on all married couples or all single parents could provide an opportunity to compare sources of stress between the two different demographics. Obtaining more information about the differences in these two demographics could allow rural areas to develop more strategic ways in which to support parents.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of parents whose children have limited educational options in rural North Carolina. Because little information was found regarding this topic, this study gave rural parents an opportunity to voice their experience, their frustrations, their victories, and their hopes. Rural education can be difficult to navigate when options are limited and engaging in this study allowed participants to vocalize their personal experiences.

Perhaps the most important finding of this study is the connection between lack of school choice and parental mental health. No qualitative literature was found that allowed parents to express their experience with rural education and how it impacts them. This study contributes greatly to the ability of the rural school to identify ways in which to better support parents, teachers, and students. Furthermore, this study allows parents to develop a deeper understanding of how their personal coping skills influence their children. Children learn coping skills from their parents, and this study allows parents to identify how their reaction to educational stress may influence their own child.

Additionally, I believe this study allowed participants to express their stories, but also reflect on their journey so far and what the most memorable and impactful times have been. Many participants expressed fond memories of a particular time in their child's educational

career, and many expressed apprehensions at the years to come. This study allowed participants to consider the good and bad parts of where they are currently, how they are feeling now, and how to best react to their current situation. Participants had the opportunity to enjoy memories of victories and identify ways in which they can grow personally.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Institutional Review Board Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 25, 2023

Lisa Holland
Richard Green

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-1555 The Impact Lack of School Choice Has on the Mental Health of Rural Parents: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Lisa Holland, Richard Green,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

APPENDIX B: Informed Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: Lack of School Choice and the Mental Health of Rural Parents
Principal Investigator: Lisa DeForest Holland, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University, School of Behavioral Science

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be:
- A parent of a child in elementary, middle, or high school (public, private, or homeschool), or in the first two years of college
- Living in Macon County, NC and must have resided in this county for at least two academic school years
- At least partly responsible for making decision about their child's education options
- Able to articulate or write about their experience with the lack of school choice options

Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of parents whose children have limited educational options in rural North Carolina. This study is being done in order to develop a better understanding of how the lack of school choice in rural areas affects the mental health of parents.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:
1. Participate in an in-person, audio-recorded interview that will last no more than 1 hour.
2. Complete a cognitive representation, a drawing that represents your experience or reality related to the study. The cognitive representation should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete.
3. Complete a consent form to give permission to use your cognitive representation in the dissertation, future use, and publication of the study. Completion of the form will take no longer than 5 minutes.
4. Complete optional, written journal questions that will be submitted via a Google document that will take no longer than 30 minutes to complete.
5. Once transcription is complete, you will be asked to review your interview transcript and developed themes to check for accuracy and confirm agreement. This will take no longer than 30 minutes to complete.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include developing a deeper understanding of how parents experience education-related stress and how this stress impacts families; identify ways parents, students, and educators can work together to build stronger families and communities; and identify ways to contribute to the improvement of rural education.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records of interviews and journals will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts, and then deleted. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Lisa Holland. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ██████████ or ████████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Richard Green, at ████████████.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Flyer

Research Participants Needed

**The Impact Lack of School Choice Has on the Mental Health of Rural Parents:
A Phenomenological Study**

ARE YOU?

- A parent of a child in elementary, middle, or high school (public, private, or homeschool), or in the first two years of college
- A resident of Macon County, NC and you have resided in this county for at least two academic school years
- At least partly responsible for making decisions about your child's education
- Able to articulate or write about your experience with the lack of school choice options

If you answered *yes* to each of the questions listed above, you may be eligible to participate in a research study.

The purpose of this research study is to describe the experiences of parents whose children have limited educational options in rural North Carolina. This study is being done to develop a better understanding of how the lack of school choice in rural areas affects the mental health of parents.

Participants will be asked to:

1. Participate in an in-person, audio-recorded interview that will last no more than 1 hour.
2. Complete a cognitive representation, a drawing that represents your experience or reality related to the study. The cognitive representation should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete.
3. Complete a consent form to give permission to use your cognitive representation in the dissertation, future use, and publication of the study. Completion of the form will take no longer than 5 minutes.
4. Complete optional, written journal questions that will be submitted via a Google document that will take no longer than 30 minutes to complete.
5. Once transcription is complete, you will be asked to review your interview transcript and developed themes to check for accuracy and confirm agreement. This will take no longer than 30 minutes to complete.

If you would like to participate, contact the researcher at the phone number or email address provided below. A consent document will be given to you at the time of the interview.

Lisa Holland, a doctoral candidate in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Please contact Lisa Holland at ▇▇▇▇▇▇ or ▇▇▇▇▇▇ for more information.

Liberty University IRB – 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515

APPENDIX D: Social Media Announcement

ATTENTION FACEBOOK FRIENDS: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education in Community Care & Counseling: Traumatology degree at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of parents whose children have limited educational options in rural North Carolina. This study is being done in order to develop a better understanding of how the lack of school choice in rural areas affects the mental health of parents. To participate, you must be a parent of a child in elementary, middle, or high school (public, private, or homeschool), or in the first two years of college; you must live in Macon County, NC and must have resided in this county for at least two academic school years; you must be at least partly responsible for making decision about your child's education options; and you must be able to articulate or write about your experience with the lack of school choice options.

Participants will be asked to participate in an in-person, audio-recorded interview; complete a cognitive representation, which is a drawing that represents your experience or reality related to the study; complete a consent form to give permission to use your cognitive representation in the dissertation, future use, and publication of the study; complete optional, written journal questions that will be submitted via a Google document; and once interview transcription is complete, you will be asked to review your interview transcript and developed themes to check for accuracy and confirm agreement, which should take about a total of two and a half hours to complete.

If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please contact me at ▮▮▮▮▮▮ or ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. to schedule an interview. A consent document will be given to you at the time of the interview.

APPENDIX E: Cognitive Representation Sample – Carrie
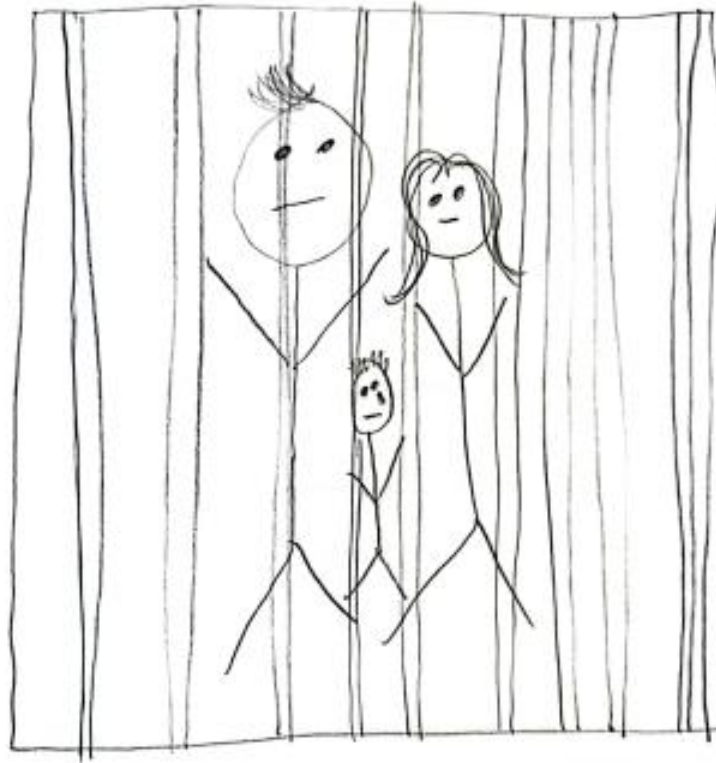
COGNTIVE REPRESENTATION
Participant P 3

Please draw a picture or symbol that represents your experience with the lack of school choice in rural North Carolina.
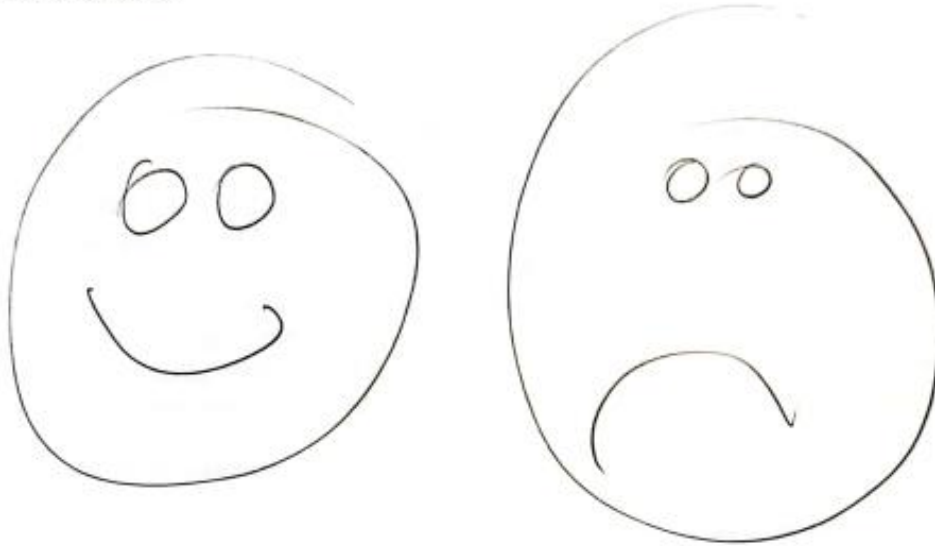
APPENDIX F: Cognitive Representation Sample – Esther

COGNTIVE REPRESENTATION
Participant P 5

Please draw a picture or symbol that represents your experience with the lack of school choice in rural North Carolina.

APPENDIX G: Cognitive Representation Sample – May

COGNTIVE REPRESENTATION
Participant P 13

Please draw a picture or symbol that represents your experience with the lack of school choice in rural North Carolina.
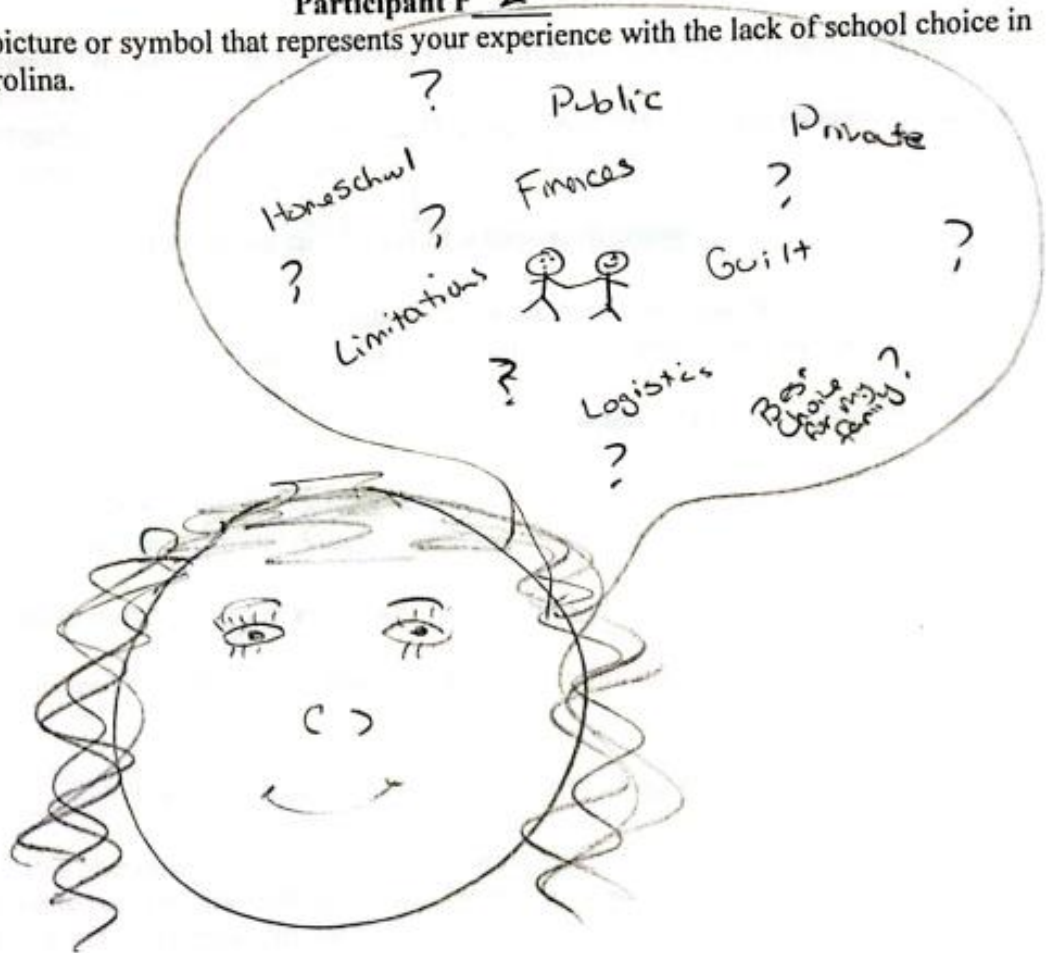

The Teacher makes all the diference in how I feel about the schools.

APPENDIX H: Cognitive Representation Sample - Beth

APPENDIX I: Research Interview Transcript Sample – Hope

Interviewer
How long have you lived in Macon County?
Hope
For 29 years, almost 30 years.
Interviewer
Where did you go to school?
Hope
(Redacted) County Public School.
Interviewer
What ages are your children, and what grade are they in?
Hope
They are 14.
They're twins and they're going into the 9th grade.
Interviewer
What factors are important to you when choosing a schooling option for them?
Hope
Flexibility of learning or teaching the children more individually than grouping them all together. Cause, even though they're twins, they don't…They're very, very different. They learn very differently.
Interviewer
What factors do you believe make up a quality education?
Hope
Education. Ummm…Getting, keeping, getting and keeping the children's attention and keeping them active in that learning experience. Giving them examples and, and, interaction with it.
Interviewer
What has been your experience with choosing a school for them?
Hope
We don't really have many choices. Umm. They, I can basically either home school, which I have done, or the public school, or we have very, very expensive private schools.
Interviewer
And only one in our county.
Hope
Yeah.
Yeah, true.
We'd have to go out of county that for it, for any other private school. And then the only private school that we have is a Christian School, which it's fine. But what if you don't necessarily want

all of that?

You just want education, you know? So we have very little to choose from.

Interviewer

How do you feel about the options that are available to them?

Hope

They're very limited. We, like I said, with the uh, the religious aspect of it - so either we can cram that down their throat, or public school or home school, you know, and if you, you, don't have the time to dedicate to the home school, you know you're basically your only option is public school.

Interviewer

What concerns have you had when choosing a schooling option for them?

Hope

Umm. They're having the uh, I'm sorry, the question again.

Interviewer

What concerns have you had when choosing an option for them?

Hope

What concerns - that if they don't like in public school, it's kind of a double-edged sword, you could either get too much attention for being unruly or whatever or you just kind of get ignored. Umm, you don't make enough noise. You know that you kind of you know, it's like those ones that kind of get forgot about in the middle, you know, umm and then the aspect of the, the, Christian School. You know, if you don't umm, you know that's something you really have to umm, want to put them in that private school here.

Interviewer

So have you faced any limitations with choosing a schooling option?

Hope

Yes, those are the limitations. Yeah, that was it.

Interviewer

How has choosing a schooling, umm, how has choosing a school impacted your marriage?

Hope

It hasn't. I don't think so. I don't, I don't think that that's impacted my marriage at all. Now during COVID, when we did home school that was hard. Uh, we did it. The (twins) wanted to continue to do it somewhat.

Ah, but (redacted), my husband, ah, to start with, it was too much.

Interviewer

Did it cause any conflict? Did you wanna do the home school and he didn't? Or, were you glad he said no?

Hope

Yeah. We didn't really have any conflict over school.

Interviewer

You kind of already answered this one. Do you feel schooling options are limited, and if yes, how does that make you feel as somebody who's trying to provide education?

Hope

Yeah, it's..uh, yeah, they're definitely limited. It makes you feel slighted. Yeah, it makes you feel, makes you feel limited, that you don't have - that you can't offer these other options and stuff for your children.

Interviewer

Would you like to see more schooling options available in this county?

Hope

Yes.

Interviewer

What do you perceive to be the largest barrier or complication in providing schooling options to your children?

Hope

These barriers - are for the county or just for us personally?

Interviewer

Yeah, it can be geographic. The county doesn't have anything, or it can be well, we'd love to send them to (out of state private school), but we can't afford it or, you know.

Hope

Yeah, the and in (redacted), the Internet is definitely very limited, umm, if not nonexistent at times, so that's tough. Umm, the county doesn't have anything much to offer. If we could go to (out of state private school) and, but it's terribly, terribly expensive. I mean, even if you can afford it, can you justify spending that much on elementary and middle school and high school?

Interviewer

So kind of the largest barriers are available options and then for the ones that are around, the affording it?

Hope

Yeah.

Interviewer

Have you personally considered starting a school, a program or other option to bring more school choice options to your community or to improve the available options?

Hope

No**.**

Interviewer

How has your experience impacted your mental health?

Hope

Ohh, we already know (I'm) nuts (laughing). Uh, it's very frustrating. Umm, because no matter, no matter how much you, you, you try to talk to the teachers and try to be involved and everything, it still just doesn't really matter. That's how you feel. That's how it makes me feel, you know? Is that it just doesn't, what we have to say, our opinions don't seem to really matter.

Interviewer

Does that frustrate you? Make you sad.

Hope

All of the above. It's very frustrating. It's makes you very angry sometimes that they don't, they don't seem to really care. It's just to get through the day, get through the school week. You know, if you, you find very few teachers in the public school system that actually really care anymore and it's, it's really quite sad. So yeah, it is sad. It angers me. It frustrates me. It does, uh, makes me get in my car and play really loud, violent music.

I have to get it out of my system so, but yes. And people wonder why I listen to the kind of music I listen to.

This is why - I'm a nice person. I have to get it (the anger) out.

Interviewer

So it's, the way you feel about school conflicts with your personal values of who you think you are?

Hope

Yeah!

Interviewer

That's awesome. That's good information. Thank you. Would you like to add anything else positive, neutral or negative about the experiences you have had with the school options available to you?

Hope

Ah. No, I think you pretty much covered it.

Interviewer

Are they getting what they need? Do you feel like?

Hope

I honestly feel like they learned more when I'm home schooled. I really do. Umm, but I think that that's because we did have more one on one. Umm, but I hope they're getting everything that they, they may need and then again, sometimes you've got some children that just won't apply themselves, you know, and it's like with twins I've got one of each. You know one that is very, very capable but doesn't seem to really care that much. And then one that works harder, it doesn't

come as easy to, you know, so but. Umm, but yeah, they're - it's a tough situation. I don't, I don't necessarily care for the private school here.

Interviewer

Umm well, and it only goes through 8th, so it's not going to help you.

Hope

It isn't going to help me at this point.Yeah. When it comes to high school, there's, there's nothing.

There is nothing and it's, you know, you go to public school or you home school and, and, high school is quite hard to home school and I think. So yeah, they. But I will say that they, they enjoy school. Uh, one enjoys school more than the other.

Interviewer

Do the limitations seemed to bother them at all?

Hope

What the limitations were with the choice of schools? I don't think that they realize you know that there could be other opportunities, there could be other ways of learning, other ways of getting an education, because it's just it's not available. It's not. And, this is, I guess, the only way that they, the home schooling and the, umm, public schools, is all they know.

Interviewer

Anything else?

Hope

No, I'm good.

APPENDIX J: Optional Journal Prompt Sample – May

Interview Follow-up Questions

Thank you for participating in my research interviews regarding lack of school choice in rural North Carolina. Please complete the following journal questions. Your participation in these questions is optional.

Your Name *

▓▓▓▓▓

1. I am interested to know about any new realizations regarding this topic you discovered through this interview and any additional information you would like to add.

How happy I was with my child's teacher last year. And how it makes such a difference in how your child learns and feels about school.

2. In comparison to educational opportunities in other locations, how do you feel your child's education compares?

Not sure. I feel like she learned a lot last year.

3. If you could do anything differently regarding your child's education, what would it be?

Nothing at this time. Just hope she gets a good teacher next year.

7/16/23, 6:18 PM   Interview Follow-up Questions

4. Do you have any additional thoughts regarding this topic concerning your own mental health in relation to your child's education?

It makes a big difference with my mental health when my child is happy and getting a good education at school.

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APPENDIX K – Sample Personal Journal Excerpt

June 6, 2023

Today, I interviewed three participants – Esther, Fiona, and Georgia. Each of their stories were very different and I appreciated hearing the different views all in one day. I found myself comparing my experiences with theirs and made myself aware of this inclination to compare. Esther's story was interesting because of the IEP they have in place – and she still feels as if her child's needs are not being met. I learned a lot from Esther as my experience has been different and I appreciated that very much as I want to learn from other people's experiences. Fiona's story was great! I loved that she has had a good experience so far. I also love the insight she had into the future and how things may change as her children grow. I also loved that as we talked about her experience, she realized she may have faced more challenges than initially thought. Georgia's feelings about how the teacher's make all the difference in how the year goes was something I could relate to (be aware of the comparison!!). I also noticed how this seemed to be a theme that is developing among participants. It was a great interview day!