Parents of a Child with any Disability & Their Experiences with School Choice:
A Descriptive Phenomenological Study

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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This study used descriptive phenomenology to address the research question: *What is the experience of parents who have a child with any disability in selecting a school for their child?* Nine parents of a child with any disability from the Greater Vancouver area participated in this study. Through one-on-one in-depth interviews, the parents shared their experiences in selecting a school for their child. Using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method for analysis, six broad themes were revealed that described the parents' experience of finding a school: a) the school itself, b) the child's needs, c) the parent's own experience, d) the family's involvement in the decision, e) non-school supports; and f) availability or lack of choice. Findings were discussed in relation to relevant literature, implications for both parents and school systems were addressed, and further research options were offered.

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Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the parents who took the time to participate in this study. Their generosity and honesty in sharing their experiences was an incredible gift and I hope that this thesis provides a small token of my appreciation to each of them.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This study was inspired through conversations with my sister about my nephew who was born with cerebral palsy. He was three at the time and she was looking into what school would best support him for kindergarten. At the time, I was looking at studying parents' feedback on the school program for their child with any disability. As my sister and I were talking, it occurred to me that, perhaps, I was leaping one step too far and began to ask myself how one goes about selecting a school for one's child with any disability. As I began to explore this topic, it turned out that the experience of parents of a child with any disability warranted much more research. With respect to discussing the experience of selecting a school, parents who have a child with any disability have had few opportunities to share their experiences and inform others about their knowledge and their struggle. The study that I describe here is a small step towards allowing such parents to be heard.

A preliminary literature review that helped me to orient my approach to this study revealed a great deal of research that examined a variety of influences on the school choice of parents of children without a disability. A few of these studies (Ball, 2003, as cited in Bosetti, 2004; Bauch & Goldring, 1995, as cited in Bosetti, 2004; Bosetti, 2000, 2001, as cited in Bosetti, 2004; Coleman, 1988, as cited in Bosetti, 2004; Reay & Ball, 1998, as cited in Bosetti, 2004; Reay & Lucey, 2000, as cited in Bosetti, 2004; Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 1994; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Manley-Casmir, 1982) attempted to describe how parents of children without a disability made such choices by looking at these influences. I was able to find only six studies (Glatter, Woods & Bagley, 1997; Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006;

Rogers, 2007; Taylor, 2005; Trussel, Hammond, & Ingalls, 2008) concerning parents of disabled children and the factors that influence their school selection. Absent from all of the research are parental descriptions of their experiences of selecting a school for their children with any disability within Canada. I wanted to offer an opportunity for these parents to describe, in their own words, the selection process they went through, and with the parents' permission, conduct a descriptive phenomenological analysis of the data that that these interviews would generate.

I believe that this information will be beneficial for other parents of disabled children as it may help them to make their own decision, or at least show them that others have had to go through the same process. Because of my experiences with the educational system in Ontario, I believe that educators also will benefit from learning about the parental decision-making process. In the interest of guiding this exploration, I proposed the following research question:

What is the experience of parents who have a child with any disability in selecting a school for their child?

Disability Defined

Before further describing the parameters of my study, I believe that it is important to define the term "disability." The National Centre for Health Statistics classifies someone as disabled if they have the following characteristics: severe limitations of daily tasks; required use of assistive devices (e.g., wheelchair); use of specialized programs or services; behavioural indications of developmental delay or disability; and a specific physical, mental, or emotional disability (White, 2002). While this is one way to define disability, it may not encompass every individual that

defines him or herself as being disabled. For the purposes of my study, it was stated in recruitment flyers that to qualify to be a participant, one had to be a parent of a child with any disability. The term, disability has now been defined for this particular research study; however, it is important to note that disability exists not only in terms of individuals but also within a culture of its own: disability culture.

Disability Culture Defined

Smith (2009) and Hall (2002) define disability culture to include people beyond those who have been diagnosed as disabled to encompass those who have been marginalized because of how they are viewed by others. This definition of disability culture permits a more inclusive definition of the term "disabled" beyond a mere medical diagnosis to include those who self identify as disabled. As well, individuals who have invisible disabilities (i.e., mental illness and chronic health concerns) are included in disability culture (Smith, 2009).

Gill (1995, as cited in Devliegera, Albrecht, & Hertz, 2007) has broken down disability culture into five elements: unity through common disparate issues; communication through shared rituals that represent disability; collective gatherings; expressions that strengthen the identity of disabled individuals; and recruitment of new individuals. Other ways to identify disability culture include: (a) through its opposition to the norm (Hahn, 1985, as cited in Devliegera et al., 2007); or (b) through its lack of recognition and/or oppression by mainstream culture (Altman, 2001, as cited in Devliegera et al., 2007). The focus on creating an oppositional space for individuals (i.e., disability culture) can assist with empowering those who identify as disabled to resist oppression.

Disability culture is created through discussing individual responses to identity, values, and meanings (Devliegera et al., 2007). Neith and Shriner (1998, as cited in Galvin, 2003) describe disability culture as being "…a kinship based on identification of shared understandings of common life experiences" (p. 218). Brown (2002) shares the story of a South African Minister who uses the term "disability culture" as a cause for celebration; while recognition of those belonging to this group may not come for a long time, it is important to celebrate its uniqueness today. This would be in marked contrast to the generally negative attitude that individuals often have towards those within the disability community.

The creation and recognition of disability culture is important for historic reasons, given the following facts: individuals with a disability were abandoned or destroyed in early civilizations (Smith & Erevelles, 2004); the industrial revolution founded a society premised on ranking individuals based on their ability to assist the economy and produce profits (Russell, 1998, as cited in Smith & Erevelles, 2004); moreover, at present, individuals tend to neglect and/or fail to acknowledge systematic historical acts of torture against individuals with disabilities conducted by institutions (Smith & Erevelles, 2004); and there continues to be systemic discrimination against those who are disabled as they pursue education and/or employment opportunities (Michalko, 2002, as cited in Smith & Erevelles, 2004). This discrimination is deeply ingrained in society as the historical record shows (Smith & Erevelles, 2004).

Barnartt (1996) proposes that within disability culture, there is the opportunity for subcultures to exist and notes that within a given subculture, there

can be shared norms that set it apart from the larger group.

Gilson, Tusler, and Gill (1997, as cited in Galvin, 2003) states that there could be some benefits to aligning oneself with disability culture, including: being proud of being disabled, supporting role models within the community, encouraging exposure to one's group, creating groups for change, confronting self-prejudice in a safe space, and developing skills for self-advocacy. Murphy (1987, as cited in Galvin, 2003) continues to support the notion of joining disability culture in that it would allow for, "…one of the best forms of rehabilitation" (p. 157). Another important reason why disability culture should exist for those who feel connected to it is the idea that great change can occur from this space (National Council on Disability [NCD], 1996; Pfeiffer, 1993; Shapiro, 1993, as cited in Hall, 2002).

One distinct feature of disability is that disabled people do not usually share this cultural difference (i.e., being disabled) with members of their own families (Hall, 2002). For this reason, an inclusive school environment that welcomes disabled young people provides an opportunity for children with a disability to meet and interact with other individuals like themselves (Hall, 2002). In summary, Gill (as cited in Brown, 1997) states:

> If we neglect the cultural aspects of our movement, we will fail. There's only so far you can get with intellectual ideas, or even political clout. If you don't have your people fed and charged up, liking who they are and liking each other, wanting to stand by each other, you will fail. (p. 341)

The disability culture movement points to five items that occurred over three years in the early 1990s that helped to establish the movement (Brown, 1997):

1. Cheryl Mary Wade from Berkeley, California delivers a powerful performance in support of an organization promoting disability arts;
2. David Hevey presents a photography book that promote disability imagery;
3. the establishment of the Disabled Student Cultural Center at the University of Minnesota;
4. the founding of the not-for-profit Institute on Disability Culture; and
5. finally, the National Endowment for the Arts recognition of Cheryl Mary Wade's work – this being the first to recognize disability culture. Additionally, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was adopted in December, 2006, followed by optional enforcement by governments occurring in April, 2008, with all countries minus U.S. and China signing on (Bickenbach, 2009).

This introduction to disability culture helps to situate this study within a broader context. Further, this study is situated within a subculture within disability culture, that is, the focus is on parents of a child with a disability.

The remaining pages of this chapter introduce the concept of school choice and provide an overview of just what "school choice" is and the options that school choice offers parents (not just those of disabled children).

School Choice Defined

School choice is another term that must be defined. School choice refers to the parents' ability to select the school of their choice for their child (Bosetti, 2004). School choice can refer to any policy that is designed to reduce the restriction on students seeking the school of their choice (Lamdin & Mintrom, 1997). School

choice can take different forms. It can be restricted to a selection of schools within a particular district or a choice of schools from a number of different districts. It should be noted at the outset that funding is always implicated in school choice. Because school funding is based on a per diem basis, offering student mobility either from school to school or from district to district choice creates financial pressures for individual schools and districts, as the funding for any student who moves out of a catchment area could be transferred out with the student (Goldhaber, 1999). All students attending any school are assigned an amount of funding and this amount follows them to whichever school they choose to attend. Bosetti (2005), in a review of school choice in Alberta, states that school choice may extend to include religious (i.e. Catholic) and for-profit (i.e. private) education institutions too (Bosetti, 2005). Offering school choice therefore also invites a certain risk and a potential for inter-school and inter-district competition for students who can easily be seen as education consumers who must be wooed.

School choice policies exist to allow parents to choose the school their children will attend (Ehlers, Hafalir, Yenmez, & Yildirim, 2011). To create a diverse environment, school districts often implement controlled school choice programs that allow for choice, while ensuring racial, ethnic, and/or socio-economic balance at schools (Ehlers et al., 2011). Ehlers and colleagues further note that prior to such school choice policies, children were simply assigned a public school in their immediate neighbourhood.

Bosetti (2004) lists a number of different school options presented to parents including: designated schools and non-public schools (designated refers to the

school in a given neighbourhood); public schools with an alternative program; alternative schools (usually offering a theme or specific program to attract students, for example, sports or special education); and private schools. As well, Bosetti notes that many locations have private and public religious schools as additional options from which to choose.

There are also school choices that exist outside individual school districts. These come in five different categories: charter schools, school vouchers, tax credits, private schools, and home schooling. Each choice subsequently comes with fewer regulations and less assistance from the government (Forster & Thompson, 2011). Charter schools require government approval before they can receive funding per student, whereas home schooling is the least regulated and has minimal support from the government (Forster & Thompson, 2011).

Forster and Thompson (2011) also discuss an additional type of school choice, the weighted funding system that can be found in Edmonton, Alberta. Students are assigned a certain amount of funding and it follows them wherever they end up. The funding a child receives is based on their educational needs, for example, English as a Second Language (ESL), disability, behavioural issues, etc. (Forster & Thompson, 2011).

Another type of choice involves charter schools, public schools that are mostly independent from the school district. The funding follows the child to their chosen school (Forster & Thompson, 2011). The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools (TAAPCS) (2011) describes charter schools as: "a tuition-free public school that provides choice in education" (para. 1). The TAAPCS (2011) further qualify that

charter schools: “are tuition-free public schools; are operated by non-profit organizations; employ Alberta certified teachers; are accessible to all students; have no religious affiliation; offer curriculum approved by Alberta” (para. 2).

Supporters of school choice believe in market theory, which states that school choice will create competition amongst schools for students and result in schools that are more responsive to the needs and interests of students (Bosetti, 2004). As well, some supporters believe that competition between schools and districts will lead to innovation and improvements in education for all children (Bosetti, 2005). This notion is supported by the claim that if given a cornucopia of choices, parents will seek out high achieving schools, weighted against the cost of switching, to determine the best school for their child (Leonard, 2011).

The basic intent of school choice is twofold: (a) to enhance student achievement; and (b) to extend educational opportunity available to students who attend schools in more affluent neighbourhoods to the economically disadvantaged (Bosetti, 2004, 2005; Goldhaber, 1999). Supporters of school choice argue that since parents, in a free society, have the right to raise their children as they please, this should extend to the type of school that their children attend (Levin, 2000, p. 7, as cited in Bosetti, 2004; Forster & Thompson, 2011). Specifically, the issue of school choice is important to disabled students, as they are often the population most poorly served within the public school system (Forster & Thompson, 2011).

Ball and Lund (2010) have found that, “For a variety of economic, political and pedagogic reasons, public education systems in many Western countries have begun experimenting with reform initiatives such as school choice” (p. 36). Essentially,

school choice programs consist of: governments opening enrolment (i.e., no longer confined to one's district); offering compensation for the costs associated with choice (e.g., paying for transit costs); promoting a specialized curriculum supply (e.g., arts focused, sports focused, etc.); or funding private schools (Rambla, Valiente, & Frias, 2011).

The inclusion of parents' descriptions of their experiences in choosing a school for their disabled children is an important area on which to focus. Professionals may change; however, parents are constants in a child's life (Graham, Pemstein, & Curley, 2009; McIntyre, Kraemer, Blacher, & Simmerman, 2004). Generally, I found more studies that focused on the professional's experiences with disabled children; however, this ignores the knowledge residing with the most consistent figures in children's lives, their parents. It is parents who first bring the disabled child's problems to the attention of professionals (Lindsay & Dockrell, 2004). This perhaps provides the greatest justification for including a description of the parents' experience in selecting a school. Coons and Sugarman (as cited in Manley-Casmir, 1982) argue that the parents are in the best position to choose the school, as they have the most intimate knowledge of what would satisfy the child's educational needs. It is in conducting this research study that I began to see how true this statement was.

Chapter Two presents a literature review that delves more deeply into the specifics of school choice within Canada. The literature review also discusses: the factors that influence the parents of a non-disabled child in selecting a school; the factors that influence the parents of a disabled child in selecting a school; different

types of school choices made by different types of parents; and the parent decision-making processes. Chapter Three presents the research design for this study. Chapter Four explores the findings of the study. Finally, Chapter Five presents a discussion of how these findings can assist the parents of a child with any disability with school choice and how both school staff and administrators can best assist these parents in finding an appropriate school for their children.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Search Parameters

I conducted a broad literature review using the University of Victoria's Summons and Google Scholar. I completed multiple keyword searches using the following terms in many combinations: school choice, disability, children, parents, youth, and decision-making. Further, I refined my search using the articles that I did locate to determine whether other articles may have been of interest. In addition to the electronic sources, I sought out a number of books on the topic of school choice too.

This literature review was conducted and continued to be refined starting in January 2011 up until March 2012. Even within this short span of time, there were new articles published in 2011 and 2012 that pertain specifically to school choice within Canada and assisted me in completing a thorough literature review.

The literature review revealed four main areas that I examine in further detail throughout this chapter. First, I review school choice in Canada and the options that exist within different provinces. Second, I delve into some studies that have been conducted on what parents of non-disabled children are looking for in their choice of a school for their child. Third, I present a review of the limited number of studies that have been conducted specifically on parents of a child with a disability. Fourth, this literature review concludes with a short description of the research on parents and their decision-making process in selecting a school.

School Choice in Canada

In Canada, school choice policy has been positively received within the political sphere and the media as a way to improve education (Jennings, 2010). Taylor and Mackay (2008) state that 92% of the country's population have access to various publicly funded school choices. Education is a provincial matter and as such, each province has a different way of expressing school choice. For the purposes of this review, the differing school choice options in Canada are outlined; examples of school choice within three specific provinces – Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta –are discussed; and finally, the rights to education for those who identify as being disabled are described.

School Choice Options in Canada

Holmes (2008) reports that there are five school choices within Canada: choice of language (French or English); alternative schools; publicly funded Catholic schools; charter schools; and independent schools.

The first choice that parents and students can make is attending school based on Canada's two official languages (i.e., French or English). Currently, nine provinces allow parents of public school students the option of attending school in either English or French; the exception is Quebec (Holmes, 2008). Holmes further notes that in 2003, 324,000 students outside Quebec (6% of total enrolment in Canada) were enrolled in a French immersion school.

The second choice available is attending alternative schools within school districts (Holmes, 2008). Across Canada, most urban and suburban districts have one or more alternative schools. At the elementary level they are less common.

There are a few "progressive" and fewer "traditional" schools (Holmes, 2008). This option can be anything from attending a school designed for individuals with a disability, for those who require a different pace than offered at other schools, or a school specifically designed for the arts, sports, or another niche subject. Particularly in British Columbia, a type of alternative school that exists are mini schools that reside within regular public school buildings, sharing their facilities and offering an alternative to the standard secondary school curriculum (Yoon, 2011).

The third category is publicly funded Catholic schools. Publicly funded Catholic schools are the most popular school choice that is exercised by students in the three provinces (i.e., Ontario, Alberta, and Saskatchewan) where the option is a constitutional right (Holmes, 2008). Holmes (2008) notes that within Ontario, in 2005, 32% of publicly funded enrolment was within Catholic school boards, while in Alberta, 22% were enrolled in Catholic schools in 2007.

The fourth category is charter schools, which are schools that receive public funding, but can offer a curriculum that is different than that offered within neighbouring public schools in the same district (Bosetti, 2004). In Canada, charters are almost nonexistent (Holmes, 2008). Alberta remains the only province with charter legislation, but with charter school numbers in single digits (Holmes, 2008). Bosetti (2001) states that charter schools are, "…autonomous public schools organized by like-minded parents and educators…" (p.103). The definition of charter schools will be further explored in the section on Alberta.

The independent school is the fifth category. An independent school may be more commonly referred to as a 'private school.' It is a school that parents are likely

to only receive a subsidy or a tax credit for the tuition that they will need to pay for their child to attend (Holmes, 2008). Selecting an independent school is an option throughout Canada; however, it is not readily available outside the major cities and their suburbs for logistical and economic reasons (Holmes, 2008). This creates limits on the options for those people living in rural areas. As noted above, education is a matter of provincial jurisdiction within the Canadian federation, and it is therefore important to describe in more detail how school choice differs within three of our larger provinces, Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta, the three provinces that had been most thoroughly researched with regard to the topic of school choice.

School Choice in Ontario

The context in the province of Ontario, Canada's largest province, is unique as it has two publicly-funded school boards: public boards and Catholic separate boards. The Catholic high schools are required to accept non-Catholic students (Leonard, 2011), whereas the elementary schools are not. Therefore, each student in Ontario who attends high school has at least two choices. As well, as Leonard (2011) notes, there are private schools (both faith-based and non-faith-based schools) that students and their parents can choose from. In addition, they may be able to choose among high schools within the available school districts, as many boards guarantee a spot in an assigned high school near a student's residence, while also allowing a student to attend another school within the board (Leonard, 2011). Moreover, Leonard states that some students may also have the option of attending a French Immersion district school or French Immersion Catholic school. Out of the five

categories named in the previous paragraph, Ontario has all but the charter school option.

School Choice in British Columbia

Within Vancouver, the city and province both have official policies of open enrolment, which allows students to choose any school in the city, but it has not been found to be common practice to make use of this range of school choice (Yoon, 2011). Instead, Yoon found that most high school students are selecting mini-schools. The Vancouver School Board (n.d.) describes mini schools as,

> developed for students who demonstrate significantly high potential, talent and need for a challenging program in preparation for post-secondary education. Even though these programs are hosted within secondary schools they offer unique course content that emphasizes acceleration or enrichment and are distinct from other courses offered (para. 2).

Yoon (2011) points out that mini-schools did not exist prior to the 1970s, although presently, 27 mini-schools operate in Vancouver, in addition to the 18 regular public secondary schools. Generally, mini- schools exist within regular public school buildings, sharing their facilities and offering an alternative to the standard secondary school curriculum. Referred to locally as mini-schools, Vancouver School District Specified Alternative Programs offer three categories of education, Yoon explains. One allows for early graduation through accelerated learning; another allows for enriched in-depth learning when compared to provincial standards by allowing students to delve further into subjects of interest; and finally there are those with a unique focus upon such areas as the arts, science, programs for the

gifted, and sports such as hockey (Yoon, 2011).

School Choice in Alberta

Alberta, where charter schools have existed for more than 15 years (Bennett, 2010) is unique in its offering of charter schools. These are publicly funded schools that are created by parents and educators, with the intention that these schools are able to provide innovation and to enhance the education system (Bennett, 2010). Bennett states that a movement that supported the creation of charter schools in Alberta was orchestrated by parents wanting more choice within the educational system. Charter schools follow strict legislation where they "…must provide the basic, provincially-mandated curriculum, and students are required to write all Provincial Achievement and Diploma Examinations" (Bosetti, 2001, p.103). As well, their charter contract is approved for a 3-5 year term; must receive approval by the Minister of Education or local school board; and pass an external examination at the end of the 3-5 year term (Bosetti, 2001).

Presently, as Bennett (2010) observes, Alberta continues to embrace the notion that charter schools are the best option for increasing school choice and currently supports 13 different charter schools. TAAPCS (2011) states that their charter schools offer, "innovative and enhanced methods of instruction; opportunities for meaningful parental involvement; a safe, caring and responsive environment; active and effective leadership; certificated and dedicated staff; dedication to excellence" (para.3). Charter schools are particularly popular in Calgary. In 2009, 5,930 of the 7,161 students enrolled in charter schools in Alberta were attending the six charter schools in Calgary. Further, the number of charter

school attendees has more than tripled over the past decade (Bennett, 2010).

According to Holmes (2008), Edmonton, Alberta, remains the North American school choice leader. There are fewer charter schools in Edmonton, because the public school board in that city anticipated the desire for school choice and responded by creating its own diversity of alternate program choices, thus limiting the need for charter schools to open (Dosdall, 2001; Edmonton Public Schools, 2007, as cited in Ball & Lund, 2010). As well as Catholic and some charter and independent schools, the public system offers the widest variety of choice available on the continent—31 alternatives in 90 locations, including Christian, Hebrew, and Waldorf (Holmes, 2008). In 2008, says Holmes, 52% of elementary and 56% of junior high and high school students attend a school other than their designated school. That is not simply a result of diverse choice; the system has programs for those with special needs and an open boundary policy (Holmes, 2008). While choice has been operative for more than 30 years, it has been invigorated and expanded in recent years (Holmes, 2008).

One drawback of charter schools is that they are difficult to initiate in rural areas due to limited student population and lower financial resources (Ball & Lund, 2010). Under these circumstances, school choice in Alberta remains largely a middle-class and urban phenomenon designed to provide options for parents and students in how they are schooled, and to enhance the educational experiences of students attending these programmes or schools of choice (Bosetti, 1998; O'Reilly & Bosetti, 2000, as cited in Bosetti, 2004).

School for those with a Disability in Canada

Thus far, this literature review has focused on the school choice options for all students. It is important to highlight the fact that options were not always available to all students, in particular those with a disability. Starting in the late 19th century, the first services were established for students with visible handicaps (deaf and blind students) and were offered in separate, residential settings in Canada (Jahnukainen, 2011). Jahnukainen (2011) found that within Alberta, all hard of hearing students, as well as some students with visual impairments, were sent out of the province until the 1950s – though he did not indicate where they were sent to.

The Standards for Special Education document (Alberta Education, 2004, as cited in Jahnukainen, 2011) defines inclusive education the following way: "In Alberta, educating students with special education needs in inclusive settings is the first placement option to be considered by school boards in consultation with parents and, when appropriate, students" (p. 493). Inclusion, by definition, refers not merely to setting, but to specially designed instruction and support for students with special education needs in regular classrooms and neighbourhood schools (Jahnukainen, 2011). Unfortunately, states Jahnukainen (2011), during recent recession years the resource-room type of service was cut off and only two service options remained: the full-time inclusive classroom or the full-time special classroom. It is disappointing that services have not advanced to a greater extent as this could potentially mean limited school choice options for those disabled children and youth.

Factors Influencing the School Choice of Parents of Non-disabled Children

To begin, I present a review of the documented factors that generally influence parents when they select a school for their children. Among others, these factors include: social class, education, access to information, peers, the availability of enrolment, location of the school, access to transportation, and the school's reputation.

The existing literature highlights a connection between school choice and social class (Gewirtz et al., 1995). In some cases, these authors argue, choice is presented as between two possibilities: (a) the belief that everyone has the opportunity to make a choice; or (b) that the educational market is actually based on class with middle-class parents taking more advantage of choice than lower-class families (Gewirtz et al., 1995). It can be argued that one's social class, together with educational and cultural factors, not only inform one's choice, but also the recognition that such a choice exists and the ability to follow through with one's choice (Gewirtz et al., 1995). This argument is quite telling, as some parents may not even be aware that they have the option of sending their child to another school.

Another factor influencing school choice is the message that parents appear to be getting from the media, politicians, and peers, that education alone determines a child's future. There is, therefore, great pressure on parents to select "the right school" (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 1994). This pressure is particularly acute when parents know, especially from their social networks, where their peers are sending their children. This is a common finding in the existing literature (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Manley-Casmir, 1982; Coleman, 1988, as cited in

Bosetti, 2004; Bauch & Goldring, 1995, as cited in Bosetti, 2004; Reay & Ball, 1998, as cited in Bosetti, 2004; Bosetti, 2000, 2001, as cited in Bosetti, 2004; Reay & Lucey, 2000, as cited in Bosetti, 2004; Ball, 2003, as cited in Bosetti, 2004). This also highlights the importance of a school's reputation as a deciding factor (Gewirtz et al., 1995). The reputation of the school can be influenced by word of mouth, which connects to the influence that peers have over parents' school choices.

It is noteworthy that Manley-Casmir (1982) found that parents were not overly concerned with academic reputation, although this Canadian study was examining children at the kindergarten level and the finding could differ for parents of children at other ages and/or grade levels. From the same Canadian study, it was determined that ethnic diversity was cited as a concern for parents, in that they wanted to see a classroom that welcomed and supported diversity (Manley-Casmir, 1982). Different studies have not found this factor in other countries and this could speak to the social diversity that existed in Canada in the 1980s.

Lack of transportation access due to family income level can also play a part in school choice. Many parents are limited to only one school, that being within walking distance (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 1994). This factor could be linked to the parents' social class, as a lack of transportation and/or funds for transit indicates limited income.

Another restriction on having the opportunity to make a choice is the availability of a placement. Simply put, most desirable schools are usually full and thus removed as an option for most parents (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 1994).

Existing studies also note that parents rely on their intuition when choosing a school. Parents make intuitive assessments about a school's atmosphere as indicated by the school's administrators, teachers, students, building, and location (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Manley-Casmir, 1982). In 1982, Manley-Casmir's study conducted in Canada, parents were generally most concerned with teaching style of the child's teacher.

One's geographical location obviously plays a large part in the choices that are available. The Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (1994) notes that France and the Netherlands have public and religious schools; the U.S.A. has only public and private schools; and the United Kingdom has church schools that are integrated into public schools. This author states further that in most countries one has the option to attend private schools for a fee; which is still a common practice within Canada (Holmes, 2008)

The Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (1994) also describes how, throughout the world, parents are given the option and make selections based on differing criteria: In Australia, the upper middle class is likely to select a private school for their child; in France and Scotland, parents within the lower class will attempt to select a school in a higher-class neighbourhood; and in England, working-class parents take into account both academic and non-academic opportunities within a school, although in London parents are most influenced by their social network's opinion of a school.

The Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (1994) also examined the top three factors influencing school choice in different countries. In Sweden, these

were a strong peer atmosphere, small classes, and good teachers; in England, the top three factor included the child's preferred school, convenience of location in relation to home, and academic standards; in France, the top three factors were academic success, quality of teaching, and reputation; and finally in the U.S., the top three factors were quality of teaching staff, maintenance of school discipline, and courses offered.

For parents of children without disabilities, the choice of a school for their children appears to revolve around location interconnected to a variety of factors from social class to peer influence to academic opportunities where school choice is concerned. The focus will now shift to the choices of parents of a child with any disability and the factors influencing their selection of a school.

Factors Influencing the School Choice of Parents of Disabled Children

One of the main factors influencing school choice for many parents of a child with any disability is legislation. Legislation directly influences school choice in relation to parents' ability to challenge school placements (Glatter et al., 1997; Hess et al., 2006; Rogers, 2007; Taylor, 2005; Trussel et al., 2008). The ability to challenge legislation may well be connected to being aware that such a possibility even exists as an option. As previously noted, it was found that parents within lower socio-economic classes may not even be aware of their right to make choices with regard to the type of education their child receives as outlined by a given piece of legislation. Legislation in Canada and its impact on school choice has not been reported on within the literature that I was able to review. Stack (2001) points out that although Canadian citizens are protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights &

Freedoms, there is still little evidence that the courts have been asked to uphold these rights to enforce special education provisions.

While government policies can promote the importance of involving parents in school selection, studies have indicated that parents may not feel included in school choice but rather, may feel uninformed, misinformed, and overwhelmed by the process of selecting a school (Rogers, 2007). An important factor for parents of children with disabilities to consider is the school's attitude towards them and whether the school is supportive of parental involvement in the decision (Booth, Swann, Masterton, & Potts, 1992, Glatter et al., 1997; Trussel et al., 2008). In a study from 1992, schools may even reject a child citing that they are unable to cope with the child's needs (Booth et al., 1992). There were no studies available to determine if this is still a common occurrence. If it were to be the case that children could be rejected based on their disability, this would obviously have a strong influence over parental ability to make a choice since the option to do so would be non-existent under these conditions.

An obvious factor that differentiates parents of a child with any disability is the very fact that their child has a disability. Other parents may have already paved the way for children with any disability within their school districts and this could make things easier for new parents choosing a school (Glatter et al., 1997). Parents of a child with any disability may receive support from a peer group or volunteer advocacy group (Booth et al., 1992; Rogers, 2007). In one study, parents of children with a learning disability were able to successfully lobby for more funding for their children to attend school (Booth et al., 1992). An area requiring further

investigation is determining whether the peer influence noted in the existing literature facilitates the finding of peer support groups.

One factor that supersedes potential supports is that in some cases there is a long wait-list before a child can be properly assessed and diagnosed as having a disability (Rogers, 2007). Without this diagnosis, parents are unable to push for their right to choose. Rogers (2007) also observes that in other cases, parents do not agree with an assessment and must initiate a legal battle to have their choice respected. Even once parents have received a diagnosis and agreed upon an assessment, there could be a shortage of placements (Glatter et al., 1997). Another area that requires further study is the length of time that it takes for parents to determine their school choice leading to this question: Was this influenced by factors such as wait-lists and/or waiting for assessments?

Along with a shortage of available placement options, another factor that influences choice is whether parents wish their children to be placed in mainstream or specialized classrooms (Rogers, 2007). As children age, parents tend to discover that the option of attending a mainstream classroom no longer matches the supports required for their children (Rogers, 2007). The idea that mainstream classrooms may no longer be an option due to the severity of needs of older children could be a factor for the choices parents of these children make.

A final factor that could influence parents' choice is the child's location, especially in a rural environment. Research has indicated that rural parents of children with a disability have neither the same access nor participation rate compared to urban parents (Trussel et al., 2008). This factor could be associated

with many other factors. For example, if there were fewer schools in the rural neighbourhood, it would limit the parents' school choice, especially, if they lacked the funds required to transport their child to a school in another area.

Types of School Choosers

Throughout the existing literature, some classification systems have been described for categorizing parents of children without a disability based on their school choice. Gewirtz et al. (1995) suggests that there are three types of choosers: privileged/skilled choosers, semi- skilled choosers, and disconnected choosers. These authors link these types of choosers to social class, namely middle class, mixed class, and working class respectively. According to Gerwirtz et al., privileged or skilled choosers are aware of their choice, will likely engage in the process of making a choice, and are more likely to want a school that suits their child's personality and interests. Semi-skilled choosers have a strong desire to make a choice, but lack the ability to engage in making the choice. These choosers are least likely to utilize an appeals process if it is available to them. Disconnected choosers tend to see all schools as being the same with distance and convenience of the school their main concern (Gewirtz et al., 1995). In the case of disconnected choosers, another possibility is that they may or may not be aware that there is a choice (Manley-Casmir, 1982). These three categories would benefit from more detailed investigations to confirm their existence and characteristics. If there is a demonstrative link to one's income to the type of school choice that they make within my study, it could help to strengthen this argument.

Bosetti (2004) presents parents as either active or non-active choosers. In a

study of school choice in Alberta of 1,500 parents, Bosetti (2004) found that parents utilize rational choice theory to inform their school choice, suggesting that parents make their decisions based on calculations of the costs, benefits, and potential for success. As well, Bosetti's study paid close attention to differentiating between the active or non-active choosers. Active choosers were parents who sought the appropriate information to decide in which school to place their child; non-active choosers were those parents who sent their children to their designated neighbourhood school. Discovering whether delineating parents this way illuminates the responses of the participants may become apparent through further research.

Parents and Decision-making

While the previous sections describe factors that may influence the decision of the parent of a child with any disability makes in selecting a school, what is still missing is information about the actual experience of making this decision. The literature examining school choice decision-making appears to suffer from a lack of any exploratory questions around these parents' selection process. Although quantitative surveys have been utilized to determine the kinds of choices Canadian parents make (Bosetti, 2004) there are no reported studies of parents meeting one to one with a researcher to share their in-depth experience of making such choices.

Even with legal and best practice knowledge that focuses on parents and staff as being co-members within special education, many parents are barely involved in the decision-making process (Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skirtic, 2000; Salisbury & Dunst, 1997; Spann, Kohier, & Soenksen, 2003; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2006; all as cited in

Sheehey, 2006). Some insight into the lack of parental involvement in their child's school has referred to the parents' own experiences within school as a student (Salend & Taylor, 1993; Thorp, 1997; both as cited Sheehey, 2006), the view that professionals are the expert (Harry, Alien, & McLaughlin, 1995, as cited in Sheehey, 2006), and cultural barriers (Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skirtic, 2000; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2006; both as cited in Sheehey, 2006).

Sheehey (2006) utilized a qualitative case study method in an effort to step away from highlighting correlational factors involved in parental decision making towards gathering a rich story of the participants' experiences of making a school choice decision for their children with severe disabilities. The analysis from this study led to three important findings:

1. parents' definition of school involvement differed greatly from the legal definition;
2. parents were required to be advocates; and
3. parents' involvement in the decision-making was reduced when faced with completed independent education plans

While Sheehey's study highlights some of the parents' experiences after they were involved in the system, there is a definite lack of a focus on their experience entering the system.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997, as cited in Anderson & Minke, 2007) created a model that looks at parents' involvement in decision-making linked with student outcomes within the school system. The model contains five levels, with the first two focusing strictly on parental decision-making. The parents' initial

involvement in their child's schooling stems from two items: role construction and self-efficacy (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Role construction within this model refers to the parents' thoughts on what role they should take within the system, while self-efficacy refers to their beliefs around how their involvement will positively influence their child's outcome (Anderson & Minke, 2007). The second level influences on parental decision-making stem from their knowledge and skills, the time they have available, and invitations to participate from their children and teachers (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Again, this study is looking at the experience *within* the school and not the experience of *deciding upon* a school in which to place a child.

This literature review has provided a description of the type of school choice options that exist for disabled and non-disabled students in Canada, with a particular focus on options in Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia. There are studies that review the factors that influence parents' school selection for the general population, but fewer that delve into the experiences of parents of disabled children. Factors were highlighted that influence parents of both disabled and non-disabled students. Finally, the categories of chooser so far described in the literature were described. It was discovered that no Canadian studies review the experiences of parents in deciding to select a school for their child with a disability. This then is clearly a gap in the literature on school choice where parents of children with disabilities are concerned, a gap that this study seeks to deal with.

The next chapter outlines the methodology of this study, including the descriptive phenomenological approach, participant recruitment, data collection, approach to analysis, and trustworthiness of the data.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology that I used to identify the experience of finding a school by parents of a child with any disability. The selection of descriptive phenomenology as my methodology is discussed and explained. As well, my data collection methods and analyses are described. Finally, I present ethical considerations that were relevant for this study and offer a reflection that presents my personal connection to this study.

My first decision with respect to this project was the choice to engage in a qualitative research study. As Corbin and Strauss (2008) note, "qualitative researchers lean towards qualitative work because they are drawn to the fluid, evolving, and dynamic nature of this approach" (p. 13). This approach better suits my research question, as I am interested in engaging with participants' stories in a way that quantitative methodologies do not typically allow. Qualitative research focuses on how individuals make sense of the environments they interact with (Berg, 2007), and that was my intention where each parent in this study was concerned.

Among the range of qualitative approaches available, I chose descriptive phenomenology. Researchers use descriptive phenomenology to investigate the "lived" experience of a phenomenon by those who are experiencing it (e.g., Kornhaber & Wilson, 2011; Martins, 2008). Examples of previous studies that are exemplars of descriptive phenomenology are largely studies that fall within the field of health care, specifically nursing: Beck's (1992, as cited in Lopez & Willis, 2004) study of women with postpartum depression used descriptive phenomenology,

asking the question, "What is the essential structure of postpartum depression?" (p. 731). Seven women were asked to fully detail their experience with this condition and the transcripts were then analyzed using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method (Lopez & Willis, 2004). A second study using descriptive phenomenology examined the experiences of nurses who work with patients with severe burn injuries (Kornhaber & Wilson, 2011). A descriptive phenomenological approach helped to create themes to describe the nurses' experiences. These experiences were analyzed, again employing Colaizzi's method. Kornhaber and Wilson (2011) used the descriptive phenomenological approach, as they wanted to describe the experiences of these nurses instead of offering an interpretation of the experience. A final study using descriptive phenomenology described the experiences of homeless people within the health care system (Martins, 2008). Martins (2008) chose this method because "the aim was to examine a phenomenon as it is experienced by individuals and to directly describe it" (p. 421).

Each of the above-noted studies focuses on descriptions provided by those who directly experience the phenomenon. This was also the aim of my study. I chose this methodology to explore the experience of parents deciding upon a school for their child with any disability because descriptive phenomenology requires that researchers step outside of their prejudices and learn to observe data with fresh eyes (Martins, 2008). Husserl (2001, as cited in Wojnar & Swanson, 2007) refers to this observation with fresh eyes as "transcendental subjectivity" – where one is able to abandon his or her own reality and describe the data in its purest sense. Husserl believed transcendental subjectivity could be achieved through the process of

"bracketing", which involves removing all of one's personal biases and previous knowledge when engaging with the description of a phenomenon (Tymieniecka, 2003, as cited in Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). While this process was difficult to realize, it nevertheless allowed me to try my utmost to present the data in its most direct form without additional layers of interpretation. Parents of disabled children have had limited opportunities to share their experiences of making this decision. If I were to offer my own interpretation of that experience, I would only continue to limit access to these parents' experiences in their terms. I engaged in the bracketing process during both the data collection and analysis stages of the research. Doing this involved my making a commitment to acknowledging that despite having engaged in a literature review, I would endeavour to remain present and allow each individual experience to be told to me without my own biases and knowledge entering into my rendition of the stories that were told. This was accomplished through my asking open-ended questions intended to delve into the parents' experiences of finding a school throughout my interviews and initiating the conversation with the question, "Can you tell me about your experience in finding a school for your child?" Moreover, while I did follow up with clarifying questions to each parent, the majority of the sessions involved them sharing their stories with minimal interruptions.

Husserl, who is considered the developer of descriptive phenomenology, aimed to present an unbiased study of the phenomena of interest (Valle & Halling, 1989, as cited in Dowling, 2005). Husserl's descriptive phenomenological view insists on researchers doing their utmost to elicit descriptions in the "pre-reflective

state" and to avoid focusing on post experience on the reflection (Caelli, 2000, as cited in Dowling, 2005, p. 132). The pre-reflective state involves having a participant share their experience at a certain time as opposed to their reflection of that moment. This meant that I concentrated on asking parents to retrospectively share their experiences of school choice in the moment, divorced from what they would have thought about these experiences in hindsight and/or upon reflection. This was accomplished by first attempting to find parents who had recently made this decision and then, second, by asking them to share their thoughts and feelings during that time as opposed to reflecting on their thoughts and feelings in the present.

Descriptive phenomenology has further been selected because it exemplifies the belief that "the meaning of lived experiences may be unraveled only through one-to-one transactions between the researcher and the objects of research" (Husserl, 1970, as cited in Wojnar & Swanson, 2007, p. 173). Giogri is a rigorous follower of Husserl's writings and maintains that descriptive phenomenology is only achieved "through a direct grasping (intuiting) of the essential structure of phenomena…" (van Manen, 1990, as cited in Dowling, 2005, p. 135). The choice of interviewing individuals in person and then following up by allowing them to review my writings assisted me with grasping the essence of the parents' experiences in selecting a school.

Participant Recruitment

This study was undertaken with a small number of participants, which is common within qualitative studies (Graham et al., 2009). According to Graham et al.

(2009), there is no absolute sample size needed for data saturation in qualitative studies – analysis can be done with as few as six interviews. For my study, the aim was to engage six to eight people for 1 to 4 sessions each, which would allow for an analysis to be conducted using descriptive phenomenology.

I was able to recruit nine participants from the Greater Vancouver area. Each was the parent of a child with any disability, who was presently in an elementary or secondary school environment. Of the nine participants, seven were recruited through an online posting on the Centre for Youth & Society's (CFYS) website. The CFYS (2008) is located at the University of Victoria and aims, "to promote the well-being of youth from diverse social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds, across developmental transitions, and in evolving societal circumstances." I selected CFYS due to a prior professional relationship, where I saw a commitment to the field of disability and knew that their newsletter reached a number of community providers across British Columbia that would likely have connections to parents that would participate in this study. One participant was recruited based on this person's interest in the study prior to its commencement. One of the participants received the website listing from a friend who had already agreed to be in the study. Three participants became aware of the Centre for Youth & Society's website through an unsolicited e-mail posting to a group in Vancouver called, "Moms on the Move". As well, three participants saw a link to the Centre for Youth & Society's website on three other different online postings: One was an online forum called, "Reddit," another was on the Learning Disability Association of British Columbia's Facebook page, and another was on the Cerebral Palsy Association of British Columbia's

Facebook page.

A short description of the research study with my contact information (e-mail and telephone number) was made available to the Centre for Youth & Society website and once through their online weekly newsletter. As well, they included my recruitment letter (see Appendix A) and flyer (see Appendix B) as links individuals could click on to review. Seven of the nine participants contacted me through my e-mail address; two of the participants contacted me by phone. When the participants sent me an email, I promptly replied and confirmed that they had a child who (a) was presently attending a school, and (b) who was identified as having a disability. Once this information had been confirmed, each participant was sent a copy of the consent form to review (see Appendix C). When the participants contacted me by telephone, I confirmed their information and offered to send a consent form via e-mail. Face-to-face interviews were then scheduled and completed at a mutually convenient location in the Vancouver area. Prior to the start of the one-to-one interview, each participant was given the opportunity to review the consent form; he/she had to sign the form, and were offered a copy of his/her own.

Participants

Each participant self identified as the parent of a child with any disability who was presently attending school. Two of the nine participants self identified as a parent of two children with any disability. Seven of the participants are mothers of the child with any disability; one participant is a foster mother; one participant is the father. All nine participants came from the Greater Vancouver Area and each of the children attended a school within this area. Five of the participants' children

were attending a high school, four were attending a middle school, and two were in elementary school. The children came from the following different British Columbia school districts: Nos. 39, 42, 43, and 44. To ensure the children's confidentiality, individual schools will not be named. In adherence with the ethical guidelines of this study, individual disability diagnoses specifics are not discussed. Each child is described based on the broad categories within which his or her disability falls. Table 1.1 provides the parent's assigned named for purposes of anonymity, the child's assigned name for purposes of anonymity, number of schools that they have attended, current grade, disability, type of classroom, and school district.

Table 1.1.

Parent's Name	Child's Name	No. of schools	Grade	Disability	Classroom Type	School District
1. Mary	1. Tanya	5	7	Intellectual	Mainstream with adaptive programming	39
2. Karen	2. Tamara	3	8	Physical & Intellectual	Specialized	39
3. Rachel	3. Francine	2	10	Physical & Intellectual	Mainstream with modified program	39
4. Lori	4. Greg	3	11	Intellectual	Mainstream	39
	5. Jon	2	9	Intellectual & Developmental	Specialized	39
5. Cindy	6. Dave	6	11	Intellectual & Developmental	Mainstream	39
	7. Andy	4	9	Intellectual & Developmental	Mainstream	39
6. Jen	8. Robert	1	1	Developmental	Mainstream	44
7. Rose	9. Laura	1	1	Developmental	Mainstream	44
8. Amy	10. Mike	3	5	Intellectual	Specialized	42
9. Tim	11. Sara	1	4	Physical	Mainstream	43

As a resident of the Greater Vancouver area, each child falls within the laws and legislation of the Province of British Columbia. British Columbia has implemented "a single service delivery model providing a province-wide, standardized, and coordinated service delivery system placing the onus on the community..." that is covered by the province's School Act (Canadian Council on Learning, 2010, p. 13). This means that every child with any disability within B.C., including each participant in this study, should have the same access to education as any other child who does or does not have a disability. The Ministry of Education's (2006) School Act has a specific policy on special education that outlines the following: all children (including special needs) should have equal access to learning. Further, the law clearly states the board's obligation to consult with parents on their children's placements, mentions that parents have the opportunity to appeal educational decisions recommended by board employees, highlights the needs for individual education plans (IEPs) for each student to be completed each year, and clearly states the need for evaluation and reporting.

Data Collection

Interviewing is a common data gathering method utilized by social sciences researchers (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The interview technique was selected in this study as it enabled data to be collected in an in-depth manner on a one-to-one basis. Interviewing is a form of communication between individuals with the specific purpose of gathering information (Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2006; Kvale, 1996). The information collected was quite personal and private, and thus conducive to the one-to-one setting. Interviews facilitate an in-depth discussion that is non- directive,

utilizing open-ended questions to create more of a conversation between two individuals (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). It was my intention to meet with the participants over one to four sessions, to begin each with an open-ended question, and then to add more open questions as the process evolved. With this open-ended style, it is important not only that the researcher asks questions, but also learns the appropriate questions to ask (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Kirby et al., 2006). I had clear open questions that were constructed as a possible guide for the interview prior to the session (see Appendix D); however, flexibility was retained in that these questions were not necessarily asked or they were changed depending on how the interview unfolded. Within unstructured interviews, questions for the gathering of data are prepared in advance; however, probing questions are developed as the interview proceeds (Kirby et al., 2006). Each of my interview sessions ran for approximately one hour with one interview only lasting 30 minutes. I had ethics approval to conduct 1 to 4 sessions per participant; however, in each case, only one interview session was required. Throughout each session, I had ample opportunity to record the participant's story and to solicit more information through the use of probing and clarifying questions.

Each of the interviews was recorded using three audio recording devices. I used a cell phone with Tape A Talk software; an iPod Touch with Audio Pro software; and an iPad with Audio Pro software. Three devices were used to ensure that I was able to capture the interview in case any of the devices failed to work. This permitted the creation of audio files that were safely stored within a password-protected folder on my computer. After each interview, I recorded two items: my

reflections on the interview and a transcript of the interview. My reflections identified what I experienced, any initial themes that emerged, and any changes in how the data was gathered – as per suggestions by Kirby et al. (2006). This encouraged adherence to the descriptive phenomenological approach. After each session, the data were transcribed and then a copy of the transcript was sent to the respective parent for his or her review. The purpose of this was to confirm participant validity in the sense that the statements I had transcribed did indeed capture his or her experience. Of the nine participants, only one participant made a major correction and this was within his/her own error of stating, "years", when he/she meant, "weeks". Two of the parents opted to not review the transcripts. Upon receipt of the approved transcripts, the data was then analyzed for emergent themes.

Approach to Analysis

Wojnar and Swanson (2007) describe six key distinctions that make descriptive phenomenology unique compared to other forms of phenomenology (i.e., interpretive, hermeneutics, etc.) and relate to my approach to analysis. According to these authors, descriptive phenomenology focuses on: (a) describing the essences of one's experience; (b) viewing a person as one representative of the reality where he or she exists; (c) consciousness is what humans share; (d) researchers need to strip previous knowledge and bias to present an "investigator-free" description of the phenomenon; (e) adherence to scientific rigour ensures descriptions of essences; and (f) bracketing permits interpretation free of bias (p. 175). The rigour involved in this methodology challenged me to analyze the data

until the individual essences had been captured. Moreover, it forced me to continually check whether I was being present with the parents' experience, and not allowing my own knowledge or experience to distract me.

Each of these points influenced my approach to analysis using descriptive phenomenology. Prior to each session, I needed to bracket my own previous knowledge gathered from either the literature review or from interviews with other parents to ensure that I was fully conscious and receptive to the experience at hand. After I sent the parents transcripts of our sessions and confirmed their accuracy, I needed to review each session individually. The purpose was not to find commonalities, but to ensure that each piece of data was analyzed on its own. Had I determined that the essence of their experience in selecting a school did not seem obvious from the transcript, it would have required revisiting the participant for another session. For this study, I only needed one session with each participant.

Analysis was completed using Colazzi's (1978, as cited in Kornhaber & Wilson, 2011; Martins, 2008; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007) method for descriptive phenomenology. Colazzi's method of data analysis comprises the following seven steps:

1. Multiple readings of the transcribed interviews of the phenomena;
2. Extracting significant statements related to the research study from the transcripts;
3. Formulated meanings are then extracted from these statements;
4. Meanings are categorized into themes;
5. Results are turned into a description of the experience;

6. Participants then validate the descriptions; and

7. Feedback from participants is then incorporated into the descriptions.

It is my belief that by carefully following these steps my analysis falls within the scope of a descriptive phenomenology. I reviewed each of the transcripts numerous times and then pulled out significant statements. These statements were reviewed for meaning and then placed into themes. These themes permitted the writing up of a rich description of the given phenomenon. An important piece for me was the final step, which involved the participants reviewing the rich descriptions and then offering their feedback that is incorporated into the final results within Chapter 4.

Ethical Considerations

An ethics application was completed that outlined the details of my study. This involved a review by the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Committee. One of my personal ethical considerations was to reveal to the participants my self-identification as a person with a disability. As well, another key aspect was the opportunity to revisit the participants for follow-up interviews using their data to inform my research question. This ensured that the data received is accurate and reflects the attitudes and opinions of the participants involved in the study. Participants had the opportunity to make changes to previous statements if they wished. Finally, confidentiality was a high priority, especially as my data is confined to one geographic location. As previously discussed in this chapter, names were changed for anonymity; however, descriptions of the child's disability and type of school placement may limit the amount of confidentiality that parents will have.

Participants were made aware of these limits to confidentiality both verbally and in writing through the consent form that each had to sign. As well, within the consent form, it was clearly highlighted that participants could experience some inconvenience through their participation in the study.

Limitations of the Methodology

One limitation would be that this methodology requires a skilled interviewer to ask the right questions and to probe effectively (Kirby et al., 2006; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). This limitation exists if the researcher's skill set is not particularly strong within this domain. A successful interviewer knows how to probe appropriately by asking open-ended questions that allow the individual to share meaningful experiences, by probing for specific details on experiences, and by consistently clarifying his/her use of language (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). With respect to this study, I have developed this skill over many years through my employment as a strategist and child and youth practitioner working one-on-one with a wide variety of individuals and having to discover their experiences through multiple sessions. This skill was successfully deployed for this study in my sessions with the parents soliciting their experiences.

Another limitation of the descriptive phenomenological interviews is that individuals will say different things in different situations (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The opportunity for multiple sessions, having the participants review the data, and constant analysis of the data allowed me to check and verify that the participant had similar responses upon each review. With this methodology, the number of participants or even the type of participant is not defined beforehand (Taylor &

Bogdan, 1998). My research design set the limits upon number of participants to recruit and the method that it was to be conducted, there was no limit to the type of parent of a child with any disability who could participate in the study. The methods utilized to recruit participants (i.e. website listing, flyers) may have limited the number of participants that I was able to reach; however, I am satisfied with the results of participant recruitment. Each participating parent was articulate about her or his particular experience with choosing a school and was very able to provide me with rich data to analyze.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative studies emphasize the meaningful nature of the study (i.e., validity), whereas quantitative researchers focus on reliability and replicability (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). "Trustworthiness" speaks to the truthfulness, that is the veracity or accuracy of the transcriptions that have been collected from the participants. In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the results, three processes were undertaken. The first is that the transcribed interviews, i,e., the data, were presented to participants to ensure that my transcriptions were in line with their words and their intentions. This allowed participants to (a) change their transcripts, and (b) correct me if I have described their words incorrectly. Second, the data were reviewed in conjunction with the literature to see if similar and/or contrasting results were found. Finally, the benefit of using descriptive phenomenology is the adherence to the participants' shared data to ensure that my interpretations of the interviews, the data, did not interfere with my descriptions and my rendition and understanding of them. The confirmation from the participants about the results

ensured that my biases were limited and ensured the accurate reporting of the words of the participants. As Wojnar and Swanson (2002) note, "The ultimate test of the quality of a descriptive phenomenological investigation…would be testimony from the participants themselves that the investigator's description of the phenomenon captured their personal experiences" (p. 174).

Reflexivity

Descriptive phenomenology acknowledges that the researcher brings to the research process previous assumptions, biases, and prior knowledge (Martins, 2008). It is because of this awareness that I believed it to be important to describe myself to the participants and to explain why I chose to pursue this topic. I told the participants that I identify as a person with a disability. In addition, I told them that I am a son, brother, uncle, and friend to persons with a disability. I also informed them that I have already conducted quite a bit of research on the topic of disability and how it relates to youth, siblings, and parents.

This insider perspective was revealed to participants to let them know that this is not merely a research project but an undertaking of great value to me both for gaining new knowledge and also in the sharing of the findings with a wider audience. Throughout the analysis, in order to effectively use descriptive phenomenology, I continued to remain aware of personal knowledge, but also worked hard to review the data with fresh eyes. I saw it as crucial to check on myself constantly to ensure that I was not formulating my analysis in terms of my own experiences, which come with my personal biases and interpretations. The ability to hold my biases in check was demonstrated by the continual re-readings of

the transcripts and ensuring that the themes were pulled from the transcripts, not from my own thoughts and/or interpretations of the research data. This involved checking to ensure that direct quotes from the clients were attributed to the correct individual and that I was considering the context in which they had been shared.

Chapter Four: Findings

The following findings come from the one-on-one interviews that I had with all nine parents interviewed for this study. I would like to reiterate that the names of all parents and children have been changed for purposes of confidentiality. As well, specific school names have been omitted and schools are instead defined by the type of school (i.e., independent, private, public, Christian, Catholic, etc.) and the district where the school is located (i.e., independent school in District 39). The findings of my interviews indicated that each parent considered many factors, when making their choice of a school. Through data analysis, I have located six broad themes to describe their experience:

- the school itself;
- the child's needs;
- the parent's own experience;
- the family's involvement in the decision;
- non-school supports; and
- availability or lack of choice.

Each broad theme also contains sub-themes that further describe the essence of the parents' experiences and they will be introduced throughout the chapter. I note that some parents have made more than one school choice and that two of the parents each have two children to make school choices for. Each individual parent's experience of selecting a school was different; the following is a detailed description of the many aspects presented in a sequential manner.

Theme #1 - The School Itself

For many parents, the decision in selecting a school directly involved a review of several schools. For some parents, the experience of selecting a school involved investigating a number of schools in their area. Others considered the school's program in making their decision. Still other parents were more focused on the staff who worked at the particular school. Some parents mentioned that the school's physical location and size played a part in their decision. Finally, many parents shared that the associated costs and fees influenced what school they would send their child to.

Rose, Jen, and Amy's experiences involved reviewing a number of schools in the area. For Jen and Rose**,** it was important to visit the schools and, in particular, their open houses. Rose described her experience: "I went and visited all their before- and after-school care in early summer…"; a few months later, she visited their individual open houses. "In the Fall, when the schools would have their open houses, I went to the schools that the before- and after-school care was at." Next, she would take into account the neighbourhood context and size of the school: "I looked at the area and the size of the school. …'cuz I didn't want it to be a school that was going to be on a busy street, I wanted it to be more of a quiet family neighbourhood."

Jen's process involved attending an open house event too. She attended the open houses that were offered, in the Spring in her case. She noted, "It's usually offered in the Spring. Then they have this night and there were a lot of parents there with their children with all types of different special needs, but diagnosed." In particular, she enjoyed the fact that she could meet the school staff. "So it was great,

they had a school principal… and then they had a few kindergarten teachers, so you kinda got to meet everybody…". In her particular case, it was her attendance at this open house that allowed her to decide on the school that she wanted:

> And I was very fortunate that night, that the principal that was there…and one of the kindergarten teachers that was there, was one of the kindergarten teachers at school District 44. So, umm, afterwards, I actually got to talk to the principal…. So we're not in catchment, we're just out of catchment and he told me, he said, "I will make sure that you get in." And then the kindergarten teacher said, "I will choose him for my class." Because she didn't have to take him, there are 3 kindergarten classes for intake and they turned away 60 kids, but they took him.

Amy spent a lot of time visiting with the different schools to determine which one would be good for her son, Mike; however, this search did not lead to a solution:

> I looked at, actually, I did look. I did look at a couple of other private schools one called independent Christian school in District 39…It's a lot cheaper, umm, not specific to learning disabilities, but umm, it would've been a bit more, sort of, work on my part. I would've had to sort of coordinate getting tutors into school or whatever needed to be done and paying for them privately or whatever, that kind of thing. So we just sort of, once we decided that independent school in District 44 was not in the picture, the other options are like, smaller private schools where you can sort of influence them to do what you want basically, because you're paying. That's the bottom line. I looked at some Catholic schools. I looked at an independent Catholic school in school District 43.

While these three parents very specifically mentioned the work that went into reviewing the schools, many parents focused more specifically on the individual programs that were offered at the school of their choice.

The School's Program

The school's program had an impact on the decision of a number of the parents with respect to what school their child went to. For Rose and Cindy, there was a particular need they were looking for. Rose stated it was important their child's school had a full-time kindergarten program:

> I wanted her to be in full-time kindergarten and at the time, there was only one school that offered it. So I was going to put her there, but then that's when they offered full-time kindergarten at basically all the schools in North Vancouver, other then the French immersion. So I had my choice now and it didn't matter.

Prior to her son, Dave, being diagnosed, Cindy's initial school selection was based on him being able to acquire an extra language. She placed him in a French immersion school, "I wanted him to be, to have the opportunity to be bilingual and I thought, 'Well, most schools teach to the lowest common denominator,' and that could be him, because he's English speaking." Upon diagnosis, the priority of acquiring a language was no longer the focus: "And I thought, 'Well maybe this is just too complicated.' Maybe having the extra language and the transporting. Maybe we just need to go to our neighbourhood school and focus on English and go from there."

A common discussion point among many parents was the question of selecting a mainstream program versus a specialized or modified program for their child. Jen describes the argument from both sides; however, she ultimately felt that a mainstream program was the right place for her child:

> I guess there's two kinds of ways of looking at it. Like, I talked to a lot of parents about special needs, about why they sent their kids to particular schools in North Van, and it just seems to be two ways of looking at it, is what I found. One was, "I sent my child to this school, because they have a lot of kids with special needs and they're good at it." Right or, "I sent my kid to a school like this, because they're very few kids with special needs and I felt like he might get, she might get, umm, more ah attention." And some people just go, "That's my local school and that's where I'm sending them." They're neither one way nor the other. But I thought for Robert that it be important that he kinda be in a typical class. I felt like it would be good for him socially to move him up and to kinda try to be more like his peers and I think that it is working.

Jen would have reconsidered and selected a specialized program had there been a school within the area that specifically dealt with her child's disability.

> Yah, I think it would've been different if I had thought it was this great school in

> the lower mainland that was specifically for autism and it was all ABA training. If I thought that there was something like that, then I would've, you know, you have to think about that.

For Cindy, her decision revolved around whether to keep Dave in a mainstream program or place him in a specialized classroom. After much debate, she opted to remove him from a mainstream program in favour of a specialized program:

> The expectations are different, so he was starting to feel...different. You know? He was isolated in a way, he had to go to the nurse at lunchtime to take his medication, because he needed it part way through the day. So there were all these things that made him different and he began to isolate himself. They started taking him out of the classroom for certain things and then, once again, that was an isolating factor. And so, I was always concerned about, should you – how do you say this – should you be with your own kind doing the same thing, like having problems, in certain areas?

Yet, once he was in the specialized program, she was concerned with the school having low expectations of their students. Cindy continued:

> So I tried to, you know, he was making fairly good progress. I found the expectations to be very low in the class and I just thought, "Wow, you aren't really setting the bar very high. You set it low." Like they're not going to strive higher than you set the bar. I felt like in that year and a half, he did make improvements on some level. But in other ways, the expectations were so low that he was kinda going backwards.

When considering a high school in the light of this experience, Cindy felt there was a need to attend the local school; however, her preference was that there be an alternative program at the school:

> I guess probably the end of Grade 6, I started thinking...yikers, I better start thinking about this big transition that's about to happen for him. That's when I started thinking that maybe he should get back to his neighbourhood school and have his peer group and go to the next school with. And they also had… a program, and that was for kids who needed to have extra help.

For Cindy's younger son, Andy, the priorities for high school involved having access to resources. "He wanted to go to another school, just because his friends were

going there. I actually looked at that school and I just said, 'You know, it's a much bigger high school. I just think that you're not going to end up with the same resources.'"

Lori, upon receiving the diagnosis for her elder son, Greg, found that her choices were fairly limited. She had determined that she wanted a school that specialized in learning disabilities, "Well there's just two that focus on language-based learning disability." This focus continued with her youngest child, Jon, as she found that, "At private school…they use the Orton-Gillingham method for reading. It's a very systematic way of introducing consonant blends, vowels; they have a drill that they memorize. It's very...decoding, it's very... and that's what works." As well, she liked the fact that every child received access to a personal tutor. "They see their own tutor one- on- one, that they see every day, who works on whatever their particular struggle is." The access to an onsite tutor at the school was something Lori required after her earlier negative experience of taking Greg, during school hours, to a tutor at another location:

> And so we started taking him to tutoring, I think it was twice a week then. It was hard, because their feeling was, it was enough for the kids to have a school day, without bringing them to tutor afterwards. So they scheduled all their tutoring during the school day. Which meant that I had to go pick him up and pull him out of school. I was trying to work around it, but it was not very practical. So the school sort of tolerated it for a few months, but then they said that for Grade 2 that it wasn't workable. That was when I knew that I had to move him, because he couldn't really get the kind of support that he needed.

Then for high school, she wanted to ensure that Greg's transition from a private to a public school was a smooth one and that he had access to resources:

> In Grade 8, which seemed like a natural transition. I spoke with the counsellor and discussed his IEP, in order to get extra time on tests, being able to use a laptop. His difficulty has been with the handwriting. Using the laptop is

> essential...umm, and so, I thought everything was ticking along…So that was Grade 8 and I didn't discover until the very end of the year, when a counsellor called me in about May, "Oh, I'm reading all this IEP, I didn't know any of this." The counsellor that I had originally seen, I gather, had been transferred to another school. And so the new person, I guess, not everything had been flagged. I suppose, because he was more, he didn't require a lot of accommodations. And so basically, he didn't really get any of the support that had been listed.

For Rachel, it was important that her daughter remain in the mainstream school program with modifications as opposed to a specialized program. She stated that this is a rarity:

> Vancouver is really big about life skills programs, so it's very rare. There's not that many kids who are in, with a modified and in a typical program. Because the easy answer for the school district is just throw all these kids into life skills programs and then for me, personally, from what I've seen, they're just warehousing them…I have the philosophy that she can learn life skills at home and that her time would be better spent trying to learn her academics at high school.

While the individual school's program can certainly impact a parent's decision, whether the school offers full-time kindergarten, language immersion, or the choice of mainstream and/or specialized programs, some parents mentioned that it was the staff at a particular school that influenced their decision.

School Staff

School staff can have a direct relationship to the selection of a school and parents shared their experience of meeting school staff, in the process of making their choice of a school. Parents spoke about their experiences with the school administrators (i.e., principals, vice-principals), the teachers, and the support staff and the impact such experiences had on selecting a school.

For Rose**,** her selection process involved paying attention to the reception that she received from the school administrators:

> So yah, you know, those were considerations, like what kind of reception I received. How open they were taking any of your ideas or your suggestions or meeting your needs? So I would have to say that so far, I've had a very good experience.

Jen spoke of meeting with the school's administration to determine her feeling towards selecting a school. In her case, it was through an open house, "…they have an open house, like a little evening, a meet and greet for parents with a special needs."

> Then they have this night and there were a lot of parents there with their children with all types of different special needs, but diagnosed. So it was great, they had a school principal …and then they have a few kindergarten teachers, so you kinda got to meet everybody and they talked about what kindergarten would look like, depending on your child, and what the aide would be responsible for... And I was very fortunate that night, that the principal that was there, was actually the principal at school District 44. And one of the kindergarten teachers that was there, was one of the kindergarten teachers at school… So we're not in catchment, we're just out of catchment and he told me, he said, "I will make sure that you get in."

In Karen's case**,** it was actually the principal of her elementary school who located the appropriate high school for her daughter:

> The principal at her elementary took me there. It was a brand new program; it didn't exist the year before. So no one could've offered it to me…we saw the classroom, we met the teacher, we didn't meet the support worker, but we met the teacher and had a conversation with him about what it is that my daughter needed and if she would be a good fit. We felt that she would be, given her particular set of issues…I didn't meet the support worker, but I did meet the teacher and thought it would be a good fit for her…

Not everybody encountered experiences as supportive as Karen's experience. Rachel mentioned having difficulties with a former principal; however, with new staff came improvements:

> Yah, the principal is now online. The principal, at the time – we have a new principal, who is more welcoming to special needs – but the former principal and I butted heads. From the get go, she wanted Francine to be in the life skills programs…

A negative experience for Mary turned into a positive one as she made contact with a school superintendent who assisted with finding a public school for her daughter to return to:

> And they promised that if we wanted to come back, they would help us find a program and so at the end of Grade 5, I went to the lady who is the district coordinator for special needs and said that I needed help getting back into the public school system. Umm…she went to three administrators and asked who was willing to provide the support, provide the program for our daughter and…came forward with both a resource teacher who said she was willing to take it on and an administration who supported it and it's been an amazing experience.

As well as having both negative and positive experience with administrations, many parents shared how their experience with a particular teacher had impacted their selection of a school. For example, when pressed to determine if there was any one particular cause that persuaded her to select one particular school, Cindy determined that it was likely the resource teacher at Dave's school:

> I think that probably just meeting that teacher and hearing his background and his enthusiasm. We saw the space, the classroom, they would, and you know, we sort of got a feel of what the program was going to be…So just having that instructor, umm...basically welcome us and just also being really forthcoming with his time, to be able to take an hour on the phone, and plus another conversation and bring the kid over, so I just felt that he was taking care of me.

Lori too could point to one experience that assisted with selecting a school for her son, Greg. Greg met the school's music teacher and that sealed the deal. "So he went down and he saw all these guitars and musical equipment and he met the music teacher. One of the music teachers, who is terrific, and that was it, he was sold." In Jen's case, it was actually the kindergarten teacher who selected her child. "And then the kindergarten teacher said, 'I will choose him for my class.' Because she didn't have to take him, there are three kindergarten classes for intake and they turned

away 60 kids, but they took him."

Mary also shared about how a positive experience helped to shape her selection of a school:

> I just think again it's the staff, the willingness of the staff to talk to me as a parent; I was always invited into the classroom, if I had concerns. I was welcome to talk to them. As a staff, they are very child and family focused. And just, it was a feeling of being a team and if I had felt like I was worried about something, I could phone the teacher, I could talk to the teacher. I was welcomed. Umm...and that was one of the things that I said, I got to feel like we can work together and that's this school, it's been amazing that way. And an amazing one-to-one worker who's again, and again, they not only chose a good school, a good staff, but also then the support worker has been...like...a mature lady who again was willing to talk to me like a mom, but also a person who has a bit of an education. I'm a teacher. Yes, but the sense of being a part of a team instead of being shut out – this is the door, don't come by it – which was our experience in Grade 4.

While the majority of experiences with teachers were quite positive, there were nonetheless negative experiences that many parents had endured with teachers who caused them to move on to a new school. In Mary's case**,** as mentioned above, her negative experience was in Grade 4 and involved laying a formal complaint against a teacher:

> We laid a complaint about the teacher in Grade 4..umm…because she wasn't implementing our daughter's IEP and would not let anybody else implement it. So we laid a formal complaint and it went all the way to the superintendent of school boards.

For her son, Andy, Cindy was pushed into considering another school because Andy had no permanent teacher in grade 4 and therefore nobody was taking ownership of working with Andy on an ongoing basis:

> So pretty much he struggled in Grade 3 and Grade 4 was a write-off. Plus, he had about three different teachers. One got in a car accident and then there was a teacher on call every week. Finally for the last couple of months, they had, they hired one person that was there constantly. So there was never any regular person who knew him. He had a person, the teacher for the first 3

> months, who was very good with him. But unfortunately, she ended up with a personal injury…she was actually doing extra work with him and when she wasn't there any longer, he was just dangling. I went to the principal and I went to the school-based team and said, "What can we do for my kid? This is a problem." "Yes, we all agree." There was five of us agreeing that it was a problem, but nobody could do anything about it.

Rachel's first experience in kindergarten, when a kindergarten teacher would not support the use of a communicative device for her daughter, has shaped her future reaction towards teaching staff:

> She wouldn't let her have that communicative device. In the classroom, she would post all the kids in the class, but she wouldn't include Francine. Luckily, she had a really good principal, who saw that it was really unfair, so he moved her then to a different kindergarten teacher. But that teacher didn't work out either, because it was really...you probably don't want to go into this. The union actually was trying to get Francine out and just put into one of those education classes from the get go.

This experience has continued with her child's teacher placements; however, it has now become an expectation and does not change her choice of school:

> That's right, from all the years, and she's in Grade 10 now, from kindergarten to Grade 10, I've only had, in 11 years, maybe one teacher, in the 11 years, who actually did the work, who would actually modify and who was interested in Francine's education.

This echoes Karen's earlier experience within the school system, when the teachers' lack of training actually prevented her from placing her daughter in the school. She had transferred schools due to a location change; however, as Karen explains, "They wouldn't let her attend as nobody had seizure training, in a school of 600 students, not a single person had seizure training…"

Many parents shared their positive and negative experiences with individual teachers. However, many of them also indicated that the school's support staff influenced their school choice in a positive manner, in the sense that it was the

services offered by the support staff that influenced their school choice, or in some cases, will influence their future school choices. In Tim's case, for example, the decline in one-on-one school staff support (i.e. Supportive Education Assistant), who works one-to-one with his daughter, is impacting his future decision about where he will place his child. He stated, "I told them that I prefer one-to-one and they told me that this was what they were going to do. So I may change to another school or school district." In Amy's case, moreover, it was actually on the encouragement of the public school staff who assisted her with making an initial change of school post-diagnosis. She recreated the conversation: "I talked to them pretty bluntly and said, 'What would you do if this was your kid?' and they were like, 'No, I would take him elsewhere.'" In another school experience**,** the support staff was, in particular, her reason for staying with the school. While Amy and her husband were generally not happy with the school, she was, however, happy about the support her child received from the staff:

> We were happy, because the OG tutor was the same that he had the previous year. We were very close to her, she was a very strong link for Mike and had provided a lot of support to him in a lot of different ways. So we kinda decided that we were paying $18,000 for OG tutoring. It's kinda how it ended up being, which in hindsight was really awful

When Cindy was searching for a high school for Dave, she spoke with the support staff already available at the elementary school that Dave was attending, called the school, and also visited an open house at the prospective high school:

> I probably talked to our elementary school, who are one of the feeder schools…I then asked our resource team within the elementary school what resources would they offer in high school. Then I found out that they had this alternative program. And I contacted the high school and I spoke with the teacher, who was the resource teacher at the time. I spoke with him on the phone for about an hour. We had also gone, as a family, to the school. Because

> the school, in February, puts on an open house, where you can just go…we really got a, as a family, we got a good feeling about the family and the students…Then a separate time, I went in with him and met with the teacher of the program.

Mary was pleasantly surprised by the detailed questions asked by the staff when she searched for a high school program for her daughter:

> The first thing that the counsellor said to me was, "What's your daughter's strengths?" and I said, "Really?", like again, my instant response, as a mom was, "You want to know what she's good at? Thank you!" They immediately throw to, "What are her deficits and what are our problems?"; instead this lady, she started with, "What are her strengths and what is she good at?"

To summarize, the school staff, the administrators, teachers, and support staff, can have an enormous impact on a parent's selection process and experience. Rose**,** for one, highlighted how having all the staff involved led to a great feeling about her selected school:

> My first IEP meeting, I walked in and I was just a little taken aback, because it was a room full of people. The Learning Support Teacher said, "This is the million dollar team." I mean, I had the vice-principal, principal, just all these people who were there for Laura and I have to say it was quite the wonderful feeling that these people were here.

Thus far, discussion has centred around the results of parents' review of the schools, their interest in the schools' programs, and the influence of school staff upon parental decisions. For a number of parents, the location and size of the school also influenced their decision.

Location and Size of School

The physical location and size of the school played a part in many of the school choices parents made. The location was discussed in relation to its proximity to their homes, the number of busy streets between the two locations, and even in terms of socio-economic class. For some parents "size" related to the physical size of

the school and for others, the size of the classes in the school.

Many parents explained how their decision was made when selecting their neighbourhood school. As Tim succinctly stated, "Yes it is the closest…", while Rose decided on a school in her own neighbourhood because it met many of her location and size requirements: "You know, oh okay, it's in my neighbourhood, it's in a residential area, it's not right by any busy roads." Amy's first experience selecting a school was also based on proximity to home: "It was just because it was close to us…it was just like down the block from us." Cindy too described the importance of a neighbourhood school of a smaller size: "I chose this high school, because it was in our area for one reason. And also, it happens to be the smallest high school, not physically, but the least amount of students in all of Vancouver."

Cindy's desire to be closer to the high school was the result of Dave's elementary school years having been much farther. "He could walk to school, take the bus…which he didn't have that when he was at an away school, and had to get up early, and take a bus, and then come back at 4 o'clock. So, you know, he was really isolated. That was the problem." When it came to her youngest son, Andy, attending high school, it was easiest to have them both in the same location. "I guess...I didn't...I wanted to have everybody in the same place. It's just a lot of work to have to be a two-parent advisory committee. Then I'm racing through two different schools…"

To cite another example, Amy changed schools when the school moved to a new location. At first, moving to a new location was not an issue as Amy and her husband wanted their child to be with the same staff. But when the school's

program changed, along with the new location, they determined it was no longer the appropriate situation.: “After everything changed and the location changed to North Vancouver and the tuition went up, and some stuff in the school started to fall apart, we weren't really getting what we needed.” Previously, they had selected this school as the location was a good fit in relation to Amy’s and her husband’s work locations: “I work in New West, but my husband works in Burnaby, so we thought we'd go to the independent school in District 44, as it was in Burnaby. It was close to both of us in terms of work… It was basically a location reason.”

Rose’s experience was about finding a school in the right location, but it also meant reviewing the school’s size and physical location to main streets:

> I looked at the area and the size of the school. Is she going to be lost in the school? Is the school on a main street or not? ’Cuz my child tends to escape, so you know, that was important. ’Cuz I didn't want it to be a school that was going to be on a busy street, I wanted it to be more of a quiet family neighbourhood.

Lori’s selection was helped by the school being a 15-minute drive from home and close to a bus route:

> Well, there's just two that focus on language-based learning disability. At that time…it was further away, I visited both schools, and I liked it, in each case, but it was proximity for the private school, it may be a 15-minute drive from our house and it's on a bus route. So when he got older, he could take the bus.

By contrast, taking a bus actually dissuaded Karen from one program: “Their requirements were that they were able to take the bus by themselves and get around by themselves. She cannot do that.” However, this problem was resolved through another school where the bus picks up her daughter, Tamara, right outside her door. “I’m lucky now that she gets a bus that picks her up and drops her off every day.” While in university, she did consider moving closer to the university, but then

determined that there was probably the same amount of funding within the inner city schools. Karen explains:

> I was thinking about moving to the university...which would've been great in terms of it's a rich area, so there would've been lots of benefits in sending her, but then again, inner city schools and all these inner city schools get a lot of funding than others do.

Other parents mentioned that location and class size influenced their decision positively. Lori actually found that Greg's elementary school was too small and that he would benefit from being in a larger population for high school. "Since his class for whatever reasons, his grade, there were never any more than 10 kids. …So that's been great for him." This differs from the experience in selecting a school for her younger son, Jon, where the smaller class size was what she wanted, "I just don't think, he could cope in a class of 30 kids."

Jen was the only parent who stated that the location of the school, with respect to socio-economic class, was a consideration. "It's a very middle-class place, so to be honest with you, if he went to any school, it would be fine, you know." She later added that, "But I knew that because of that, they have the elitist attitude, that it would be a very middle-class kind of school. It wasn't going to be a ton of kids with behavioural issues or special needs." It was one school's proximity to a native reserve that dissuaded her from selecting that particular school:

> So my feeling about the school was that if I sent him to the schools that were closest to us, near the reservation, that there would be other kids there with or without diagnoses with their own social issues. And, umm, if they were poorly behaved, I kinda felt like Robert would compete for that lowest spot. Well, they're poorly behaved, I can go there. Whereas, if I sent Robert somewhere where there wasn't that kind of enrollment, I kinda felt like Robert would be the worst behaved kid.

So a school's location and size was a consideration for many parents, in

particular if it was their neighbourhood school, was in a socioeconomic environment to their liking, and had appropriately sized classrooms. Many parents noted that the actual cost of the school was another item that required a great deal of consideration when selecting their school.

Financial Concerns

The financial cost weighed heavily for many parents when sharing their experiences of finding a school. For some, the high costs acted as a deterrent preventing the selection of a school, for others they were able to afford the extra costs to meet their child's needs, and one parent even found that they were paying strictly for the extra support.

Amy puts into perspective how much the financial costs weighed on her decision:

> We got some money and that was great, but not everybody can get that. So I think the money is a massive deterrent to anybody doing any of this. And I think that's a crime actually, because these kids, I don't think, really can get what they need from the public school system. …if we didn't have the option, if for some reason, we didn't have the money and we just couldn't do it, who knows what would happen? I guess, he would limp through and figure it out, one way or the other. I don't know if it would be a good thing, so I mean, those are my main issues with that. I think those are sort of the main roadblocks that people would come up against in terms of that. So we sort of look at, we interviewed at both schools. The independent school in District 44 was out as it was 25 grand per year and that's not really doable for us.

Amy also demonstrates that some parents will stick with a school even if the costs are too much for them, if there's a strong school support staff:

> We kinda decided that we were paying $18,000 for OG tutoring. It's kinda how it ended up being, which in hindsight was really awful. We're not rich people, but, you know, the other thing was, mentally and emotionally, he was sort of in an okay place and that was good for us too. Because he can twist off and not be in a good place very quickly. So it was kind of the path of least resistance for us too. We were just like, "This is a good thing that we are not having to take him

> to children's hospital," or something like that. So that was huge for us at that moment. Looking back, it was the wrong thing to do, because it was a waste of year.

Mary had to weigh costs into making her school choice as well. However, she's aware that not everybody has the option:

> It's distance ed, it's online. We would register with them, they'd provide the funding to us. 'Cuz there's $16,000 a year that's put out for each special needs child, it's given to a school. When they take on a child, they get $16,000. They take $16,000, they keep $6,000 for administration, and then $1,000 a month is given to the family to choose enrichment or support, whichever they need to help their child get through their courses. Well, in our case, it's support, she doesn't need enrichment, she's not gifted, so there's a tutoring service… so and basically, we have the $1,000 a month to pay for that. It's going to cost us $15,000, and it's going to give us 10. So for $5,000, she's getting a program that's individualized to her and Grade 8 classes. But I have to have money to be able to do that. Not everybody is able to do that. I have a friend who's a single mom, she's not able to afford that, so she's stuck with the public school, because, she didn't have that kind of money.

Mary is used to having to pay money to educate her child:

> It was $24,000, we can't afford it, we can't continue on this path. She's in Grade 5 and that's another 7 years, that's a lot of money and, I mean, my husband has a good job, but there's only so long that you can do that. So yah, we had...and at that point, we had two kids that were in university, so you're helping with university education and we're established. Yah, I mean, it was financially not, and again, when I look out there with children who have learning disabled, so what families can afford $25,000 a year and that's not fair that some kids get stuck in the public school system who don't have that kind of money.

Mary raised the fact that schools may turn your request down if they claim that there is a financial burden. "Umm…because of our funding and because she's special needs, a school has the right to turn her down. They can say they just don't have the funding. There's all sorts of reasons. But yes, they can turn you down."

While some parents could afford the tuition, Karen found that the costs of private school were not an option for her. "Apparently – and I just heard about this recently – there's some place in North Van…and it's for disabled kids and it's 25

grand a year, so I'm not going to be trying that any time soon." Cindy was also unable to pursue certain school options due to cost being a deterrent for her:

> And then even though some of these places say that they have grants, it's still just...was...not even...would not even be able to be a consideration. Then you just try to work with what you have, which is the public school. …Well, unfortunately, one of the things to look at is finances. It does seem like there's the haves and the have-nots. Most of us have to choose public schools. …To be honest, I looked around at other schools. They were at private schools and I would be looking at between $12,000 to $20,000 a year to actually teach him. I, also, looked at, I got lots of information from the LD society and you know, they suggested tutoring. The Orton-Gillingham way and that was around 30 dollars. I was a single parent and I still had to take care of after school care and all the rest of that.

Cindy further stated she had already been paying for the schooling through her taxes, so why should she have to pay more:

> I was a single parent and I was working and going to school, I think at that point, I tried to...uhh...make a better life for us. But once again, it wasn't the possibility of extra tutoring or anything. And I really did think that, you know, this is a public school. You know, our taxes are going into this. If there are these issues, how are we going to sort them out? It can't just be my problem. I can't just be the only person with a kid that's having these kinds of experiences and so, you know, I don't know. Should there be a grant, in order to be able to get a psycho ed outside of the public education system? Because you know, who can afford the $1,500 or $2,000, whatever it is? I really felt at the mercy of being poor and of an education system that maybe isn't equipped to deal with people who have alternate ways of learning.

The cost of tuition was described as a deterrent for two parents and two others shared that they were able to pay for it but not without having to sacrifice.

I have explored how influential the actual school and ancillary themes can be when parents make a choice for their child. It involved a review of the schools to determine if the school's program, school staff, location, and financial costs fit with parental needs and expectations. I will now examine the next theme, parents' descriptions of how the child's needs influenced their school choice.

Theme #2 - Child's Needs

For many parents, their child's individual needs was a consideration of paramount importance in the process of school placement. These needs included: (a) finding a school that had other disabled children; (b) ensuring that the school could support their child's emotional needs; and (c) finding a school that gave them confidence that their child was in a safe environment. As well, a number of parents highlighted the notion of taking into account their child's social needs in making their school decision. Finally, when looking at their child's needs, some of the parents used their child's diagnosed disability to influence their school choice.

Amy stated that it was important that other children had similar needs as her child: "I don't know, but for me and my life, I feel like it's important for him to be in a school where he's not the only person that has the problem, so he doesn't feel set apart so much, because he's super sensitive, so that's important." When the staff of one Catholic school informed her that her child could not attend there, she had no thought of trying change the decision as, "No, I don't want my kid somewhere where nobody wants him. He needs a lot of support emotionally and he's very sensitive to what other people think." At his present school, she feels that his needs are being supported and that it was the right fit for him. Amy elaborates:

> Umm, the material was presented in a way that a kid with learning disability and reading problems can assimilate it. It's lots of structure, very clear instructions, support when you need it. I can e-mail the teacher any time and say, "You know what, Mike's having a bad day. He was a bit teary this morning, can you let me know that he's alright." So we have that sort of support and it means a lot. I mean, for us, obviously, we want him to read. That's our overreaching goal, but to get him there without sacrificing his psyche and his sense of self. That's kind of my main worry.

Rachel also described the importance of finding a school that is willing to work with

her daughter, Francine:

> Yah and that hopefully the teachers who are willing to work her and you know. I think that they are accepting and that they're willing to try and if they don't know, that they're willing to work with my advocate and they're willing to work with the resource teacher with the school district to get the materials they need, and to be open that she has the ability to learn and to reach her potential.

In Amy's experience**,** she is willing to personally sacrifice to ensure that her child is in a safe environment that supports his needs:

> No, it was not going to work. Just for him, he's an extremely anxious guy and this was like coming home and expressing suicidal ideation. I was like, "No, that's not tolerable for anybody." I don't really care if I have to work 14 jobs, he's going to go a school that can support him… We're not rich people, but, you know, the other thing was, mentally and emotionally, he was sort of in an okay place and that was good for us too. Because he can twist off and not be in a good place very quickly. So it was kind of the path of least resistance for us too. We were just like, "This is a good thing that we are not having to take him to children's hospital," or something like that. So that was huge for us at that moment. Looking back, it was the wrong thing to do, because it was a waste of year.

This theme of safety for their children continued with Mary. Mary found that her child's safety influenced her decision of a school for her daughter:

> So yah, you know, it's...we did it for a year and it wasn't a great program for her for academic. They were into their program. Did it help her? God only knows, but umm...it kept her safe, and I didn't know about...and again, you can only do it when things aren't working, you begin to spread out and there's just not a lot of help out there.

Somewhat related to the notion of safety, Jen and Rose chose schools that they hoped would have positive impacts on the behaviour of their children. Rose specifically did not choose one school as she was worried about how it would impact her child's behaviour. Rose said:

> "No, no, these are typical kids with behavioural problems. I don't recommend that Laura go there." She knew that was one of my criteria. I didn't want Laura to pick up bad behaviour, because she's a real monkey see, monkey do. Downs

children tend to learn by watching…

Jen shared Rose's concerns that her child would learn to act the same way as the other children:

> So my feeling about the school was that if I sent him to the schools that were closest to us, near the reservation, that there would be other kids there with or without diagnoses with their own social issues. And, umm, if they were poorly behaved, I kinda felt like Robert would compete for that lowest spot. Well, they're poorly behaved, I can go there. Whereas, if I sent Robert somewhere where there wasn't that kind of enrollment, I kinda felt like Robert would be the worst behaved kid, but he would be up here versus heading down.

For Cindy, it was about focusing on Dave's self-esteem and ensuring that he had a normal experience:

> At that point, I really wanted to salvage his self-esteem, and I really felt that the peers were going to be a big part of that. And then just also having the freedom or the independence to be able to get to and from school on your own steam. After that one and a half years of taking the bus and having to get up so early and come home so late, that was just exhausting for him. So I really felt that his neighbourhood school was going to offer the same as every other public school. This way, I felt like it was going to be a more normal experience.

Lori reviewed the class size and satisfied herself that it was a good fit for Jon's needs:

> Yah, we realized, I just don't think, he could cope in a class of 30 kids. You know, and they're really, I'm not aware of that there's any other way of...it just seems to be the model.

As the preceding descriptions indicate, the parents wanted to ensure that the needs of their children were being met and thus attempted to find an environment where other children had the same or similar disability, an environment that was safe, a school that would discourage negative behaviour, a class size that was appropriate, and – as discussed below – a milieu where their child's social needs would be attended to. All these factors directly impacted their choice of a school.

Social Needs

Three of the parents mentioned that the social aspect of the school played a part in their decision. For Cindy and Lori, it was important that their sons, Greg, Dave, and Andy attend school along with the kids from their neighbourhoods. Rachel actually found that it was important that Francine be in a mainstream program, as it was a benefit for the other children.

Cindy highlighted that she wanted her son, Dave, to have the opportunity to attend school with his friends:

> He could walk to school, take the bus, and still be able to hang out with his friends after school. Which he didn't have that when he was at an away school, and had to get up early, and take a bus, and then come back at 4 o'clock. So you know, he was really isolated. That was the problem.

This was a common theme for Cindy**,** who had previously taken Dave out of a specialized classroom and transitioned him in Grade 7 to a school where he could be more social:

> So that's when I thought, "Wow, Grade 7 is, you know, and then Grade 8." So how am I going to help him to normalize? He needs to get back into a school where he's going to have peers. …So I went back and talked to the first school that he had transitioned over to...the...social development class and I, you know, said, "Would you have him back for Grade 7...I really think it's important for him to be with his peers to be able to make the transitions to high school…

She continued describing the social aspect that influenced her decision: "So I really felt that his neighbourhood school was going to offer the same as every other public school. I wasn't going to get anything, any better or worst, in the public school. But, it had the fact that he did know people there, it was within walking distance."

In the same way, Lori described the importance of the social aspect with respect to her decision of a high school for her son, Greg: "I really wanted him to

have the social opportunity to be in the neighbourhood." This was influenced by the small class sizes that he had previously experienced. "Since his class for whatever reasons, his grade, there were never any more than 10 kids…so it was very limiting."

Rachel was motivated to ensure that Francine was placed in a regular classroom, but also believes that it is important for the other students or "typicals" as she calls them to be exposed to students with a disability:

> I think it's to the benefit of the typical kids as well, that they be around special needs students, as they're all different and that's what society is made up of and so, you know, it kind of harkens back to the old days when kids were institutionalized. So why should they be off separate and apart from everybody else? They're a part of the community and should be included.

For Rachel, Lori, and Cindy, the decision was influenced by the child's needs. Their child's specific diagnosis was another factor considered by many of the parents in selecting a school matched to the needs of their child.

Diagnosis

Directly related to the child's needs, of course, is finding an appropriate school matched to their child's individual needs based on the child's diagnosis. For some parents, the experience of choosing a school was influenced, even dictated, by first getting a diagnosis and then finding a school matched to their child's need.

Amy, for example, was unable to get her child into a school that she wanted until she had a diagnosis. Plus, the school was unable to offer financial support in facilitating a diagnosis, which she had to pay for herself. Amy elaborates:

> Well, you have to have an IEP, if you don't have an IEP, then you can't get in, oh sorry, a psych ed. So for us, they weren't, the school district was unwilling and unable to provide one. So we had to pay for it and that's 2 grand and plus, you have to find somebody who's reasonable and able to do it. There's lots of people out there who suck and you have to figure out which one doesn't suck. I've known people who have had psych ed's done. I actually had one done on

> my daughter that was useless and I was really mad about that. So, you have to figure that out, and if you don't sort of have an idea and have somebody to sort of walk you through that, it could be bad, and you could waste your money, which I've done.

When pressed about why the school would not pay for a review, their reasoning was, "…basically, what they told me was at that time, that they wouldn't test him until he was two grade year levels behind in reading, which wouldn't have been until Grade 3." Both Amy and Lori mentioned that having the diagnosis allowed them to get into the school. Lori stated that you cannot register without a documented diagnosis: "No, you have to have a psychoed report that shows that you have a learning disability."

In contrast, Cindy found that she was able to get some movement without a diagnosis thanks to the assistance of a principal and then she looked into a specific school upon receiving an official diagnosis:

> And at the end of Grade 2, the Principal said, "You know, I've been observing him and he seems to really have attention deficit, he's looking out the window, he doesn't bother anybody, he's polite, but he's just...he doesn't focus, he's somewhere else a lot of the time. I wonder if you should get that checked out." And given all this other stuff going on I thought, "Okay, let's check it out." I went to the family doctor. I went to the hospitals, psychiatrist, whatever. I started looking at schools and in Grade 3, we got the diagnosis and tried working in a different way. Anyways...when we found out that there were these actual issues, how could we, what could we do about them? And I just had to start looking at other types of schools that would teach specifically to these concerns...

Once, she received a diagnosis, Cindy brought up the reality of the grieving process she experienced: "I think I probably took some time. I think it's a little bit, you have a little bit of a grieving period, when you think that your child is different." However, it was not all bad news, she did get to see some of his strengths: "So I was very proud of him on the things that were high and on the other one's I was like,

'Hmm...well...that's interesting.'" For her youngest son, Andy, Cindy struggled to get him diagnosed:

> But it still took some time, we're pretty sure that he has an issue with quotation marks around it. So can we get the psycho ed done? And all that was done through the school board. So basically, I asked for it in Grade 3, it didn't happen. I asked for it in Grade 4, it didn't happen. It didn't happen until Grade 5. So with him, even though, we all knew that there was an issue and he had his ADHD, which is very common, that other things come along with it. He was kind of left to dangle and I was at the school very regularly. "So how can we get this done at school?"; "Oh you can't get this done unless you have the psycho ed."; "Well how can we get the psycho ed?"; "Well, he's on a list." So pretty much he struggled in Grade 3 and Grade 4 was a write-off.

Rachel began to worry about her daughter's schooling when she diagnosed at age 2: "So I learned about that when she was 2. So as soon as I found out, I started to worry about her future. I was told that she might never talk and that she would have a learning disability and so at the age, I started worrying about her education." She now ensures that her child receives the support Rachel believes she is entitled to by focusing on and reinforcing her child's needs as dictated by her diagnosis. Rachel expands on her advocacy:

> She has a one-to-one worker, she's always had a one-to-one aide throughout her primary and, and that was also, it's almost like the squeaky wheel gets the grease. To get that aide support, so parents are wanting to help their child progress as far as they can academically and, uhh...to the truth of the matter...they tend only give those aide supports, if you have a health reason or a safety reason, so like it's a health reason, or there's something's physical, like they need help with a breathing tube or whatever. …it was more of a safety issue, as because of her brain injury, you're more...over the years, she's been known as a runner. So she was very unsafe. So yah, I was able to frame it that way to get her support. So I'm looking at it in terms of she has that extra help through school.

Many of the parents described in great detail how the issues around consideration of their child's needs influenced their selection of a school. They further tied the selection process to social needs as well as needs around their

diagnosed disability. The next theme explored below shows how the parents' own experience has impacted school choice for their child.

Theme #3 – Parents' Own Experience

Some of the parents shared the fact that their own personal and/or work experience impacted the school choice they made for their child. As well, they specifically related how having an older child had influenced their choice. Finally, a few parents are already looking towards what their child's future experience will be when making their present school choices.

In Amy's situation, her work as a health care professional has given some basis to her decision. She explains, "I work in a street clinic and everybody that I see is learning disabled and decided to go down the other road. So I'm pretty worried about that." Jen revealed that her decision was also influenced by work that directly involved going into the different schools: "We were in and out of every school in the lower mainland. So I knew all the demographics, so I knew which schools in North Van were considered to be, lower demo, socio-economics, so that's how I kinda picked it." As well, she had some personal familial experience, in that she believes that her sibling, although undiagnosed, has the same condition as her son:

> My Mom is a fabulous resource, so I'll say, "This is going on." She'll go, "Oh, I just had a flashback." It's strange; I'm walking in my mother's shoes… I told them exactly about what my brother was like, where he was at, what he was doing, the problems and challenges that he had, and the things that I noticed about him. And they were like, "Yah, he's totally in the spectrum." Undiagnosed, but now when I see Robert**,** it's just so strange. He can't lie, right, well my brother is a terrible liar, right? So the behavioural stuff, the language, the lack of speech, and then he was in a special needs class, because they didn't integrate in the 1970s…

Cindy's experience as a single parent who was working and trying to make a better

life impacted keeping her child in the public school system, as she describes:

> See, I couldn't keep him at home. I was a single parent and I was working and going to school, I think at that point. I tried to...uhh...make a better life for us. But once again, it wasn't the possibility of extra tutoring or anything. And I really did think that, you know, this is a public school.

Karen and Mary shared that their specific systemic experiences that influenced their ability to make a decision. Karen discussed how her past personal experience assisted with navigating murky but familiar waters when making a school choice: "Well, I had a lot of experiences, umm, over the years in dealing with welfare or dealing with other organizations like that. And I was in care when I was kid, so I sort of understood all of those systems." Mary specifically used her past experience of finding one school for her child to assist her in subsequently finding another school after receiving subpar choices:

> Hmmm...it actually...because I had some of the names, I'm sending some missiles to some of the high end names. You know, they've offered us two terrible classes and told us that there's no choice and I just keep firing it back.

While some of the parents used their work experience or their actual work to make their decision and others used their personal experience within the system to do so, several other parents mentioned how the earlier experiences of their elder children influenced their choice of school.

Elder Child

Having an older child who had been through the school system was mentioned by Amy, Cindy, Lori, and Mary as playing a part in their process of selecting a school. For example, it influenced how Amy went about getting her younger son diagnosed:

> So we had to pay for it and that's 2 grand and plus, you have to find somebody who's reasonable and able to do it. There's lots of people out there who suck and you have to figure out which one doesn't suck. I've known people who

> have had psych ed's done. I actually had one done on my daughter that was useless and I was really mad about that.

When Cindy's sons were younger, "I always just wanted them to go to one school." Her high school decision for her youngest son was also made with the idea of having both of them in the same environment even though he wanted to be elsewhere:

> I don't know, again, Mom overruled. I guess...I didn't...I wanted to have everybody in the same place. It's just a lot of work to have to be a two-parent advisory committee. Then I'm racing through two different schools and I guess a part of me thought, "Well what's good for one is good for the other."

Lori mentioned that having an elder child attend the school meant that she knew what she was getting into:

> Because his older brother went there, and…that there was a dynamic, young, teacher who was doing choir and music. And that, also, that they had a good drama department, he really liked drama too. And I had seen that there were teachers that I liked. And I, also, felt like it was a welcoming school. That if I had a personal concern, that I could phone or go in, and that would be solved.

Mary had not one, but two older children that had attended the school of choice and this influenced her decision to send her younger child there because that choice afforded, "…a little bit of history, both of my older kids had been there. I knew the staff and I knew that it was a school that was committed to children."

The parents' experiences in the past with seeing what had worked and had not worked for their elder children played a part in their school choice. For Amy, Rose, and Cindy, they are already thinking towards the future and what choices they will need to make.

Future Thinking

Amy, Rose, and Cindy described looking towards the future and anxiety around how their present choice will impact their child in later years. Amy's son is in Grade

5 but she is already looking ahead and having difficulty around how the choice of his next school will be made: "It's hard, because we don't know what we're going to do in the future. His school only goes until Grade 7." Rose has already made her decision with a view towards her daughter's future, stating that she "…would like her to be in mainstream for all." Cindy's child was in grade school when she began to think ahead to what kind of school he should be in for his high school years: "Umm, I guess probably the end of Grade 6, I started thinking...yikers, I better start thinking about this big transition that's about to happen for him."

This exploration of how the parents' own life experiences influenced their decision to choose a school involved both work and family experiences, in particular, the experiences of their older children. It seems clear that school choice is an ongoing preoccupation for these parents as three of them mentioned how their thoughts of the future influenced their present-day decisions. Next I will explore whether these parents made their decisions on their own or did they involve other family members in the process as well.

Theme #4 - Family's Involvement in Decision

Thus far, we have heard about the nine parents involved in this study's examination of how parents experience making a school choice. What has not been discussed to this point is the role of their families in the choice selection. Partner and family support was brought up by many of the parents and, in particular, the lack of such support that often existed. For some, there was support from their partners in coming up with a decision, but for many, as single parents, they had no family support whatsoever. Finally, it will be discussed if their affected child was

involved in deciding their own school.

Partner's Involvement in Decision

For Amy**,** it was necessary to make the decision on her own at first because her husband was still in denial about their child's diagnosis. She describes this problem:

> I was trying to convince my husband that we should spend the money. Because he was in worse denial than me. I could see that we couldn't allow him to stay in the public school system. And my husband was in this whole other state and was like, "You're making trouble and he's fine. We just need to read to him more." And I'm like, "Well we're way beyond that now." But that took about 6 months.

It took time, but eventually her husband accepted the diagnosis: "Yah, he's come on, he accepts that this is what it is and has realized that this is how it is and we have to deal with it."

Jen is also the main decision-maker; her husband allows her to make the decisions around their child's schooling, some of which may also relate to his denial concerning the child's disability. Jen elaborates:

> Well, I ask him, you know, I ask him, you know, I think he defers to me quite a bit. Just because, I just happen to have this base of knowledge… So I think for the most part he defers, but other times, I think that my, you know, I'm more of a push push, my husband is more like he just unconditionally loves him. He just thinks that there's nothing wrong him and he's just a typical 6-year-old. Which is great for him, but you know, I kinda see the areas that need to be worked on and filled in. And my husband doesn't have to worry about that, because I just kinda do that part for us…

Lori can relate to being the sole decision maker:

> The one thing that I should tell you and that I haven't said is that I've had to largely make these choices. I've said to my husband, "This is what I think we should do." And he'll say, "Well maybe look into this." And then I'll have already done it or I'll do it, but it'll be largely be my choice….He works long hours, he's never been able to come to the parent/teacher interviews, and so he'll come to the school concerts and those things, if he's able to.

Mary discussed including her husband in the decision much like Lori, but that it was

ultimately her decision. As well, as a foster mom, she is required to include the social worker in the decision too. Mary describes this interaction:

> We talk about everything around school. When we went to private school, it was a major financial decision. So yah, I mean we, as a team, and technically we have to involve the social worker, but we have a lovely social worker, who says, "Well you know her best," it's unusual, but we're lucky. She's been with us for 8 years, so she trusts us and knows that we go the extra mile to pay for her school and stuff. So he's kinda just said, "You know, I support you, if you think this is right."

Two of the parents are single parents and discussed making the school choices without any support from their family members. Rose stated that she is a single mother and does not have support from her child's father or extended family in making school choice decisions:

> I'm a single mother here. All of my side of the family, my side of the family is all in Victoria. Her father doesn't even live with us. He lives on the island up in Comox. His mother lives here, I was going to say in Burnaby, but she's travelling most of them time and she wouldn't be able to run after Laura. …So pretty well, I make the decisions on my child. The father has never had much involvement in these big decisions.

Karen is also a single mother and can relate to not having access to family members to assist in making a school choice. "Historically, it's all been done by me. My family...uhh...you know, Tamara's got these weird sort of things and it makes people nervous. They are afraid of her seizures…"

While some of the parents did consult with their partners, it appears that those parents interviewed for this study were the ones making the decisions about school choice. One piece that has been missing from the experiences of selecting a school is how involved the affected child was in this process.

Child's Involvement in Decision

As previously discussed, these parents noted their selection of a school

generally was related to their perceptions of their children's needs. Cindy and Lori also shared their experience around how much involvement their children had in selecting their own school. For Cindy, even though her son, Dave, was entering high school, it was still mostly her decision:

> Yah, I think that probably, ultimately, it was my decision. Umm, all of the stress and anxiety that we had from elementary school, I really wanted to minimize that and sort of give him a good start that I didn't feel that he got in elementary. I felt like, in elementary, I saw him falling through the cracks and we were all standing there and waving, seeing him go through the cracks. And I just wanted to try and be on top of it…

Cindy's youngest son, Andy, expressed an interest in attending another school; however, she decided it was best to have both of her children in the same school.

> He wanted to go to another school, just because his friends were going there. I actually looked at that school and I just said, "You know, it's a much bigger high school. I just think that you're not going to end up with the same resources." …I don't know, again, Mom overruled. I guess...I didn't...I wanted to have everybody in the same place. It's just a lot of work to have to be a two-parent advisory committee. Then I'm racing through two different schools and I guess a part of me thought, "Well what's good for one is good for the other."

Lori asked her son Greg for his input around the question of his high school: "So we did say to him, you know, 'How do you feel about this scenario? If you're not here, where would you like to go?' and he chose the high school that was in the neighbourhood." This is consistent with her involving Greg in the process of deciding what private school to attend. She discussed that decision:

> Well, really...he made the decision for me. Because I took him with me to see the school. And he was really unhappy about moving schools and didn't want to do it. Then he went to the school, it's in an old bank building, and so the music program is in the vault in the basement. So he went down and he saw all these guitars and musical equipment and he met the music teacher. One of the music teachers, who is terrific, and that was it, he was sold.

Theme #5 - Non-School Supports

This theme describes the non-school supports the parents have either sought out and/or received. While I have explored how the actual schools in question have influenced parents' school choice, a number of parents also highlighted the non-school supports that assisted making their school choice too. In particular, they mentioned other parents as a key support and cited the aid they received from outside organizations (e.g., The Learning Disability Association, hospitals, etc.).

Other Parents

Tim, Rose, Lori, Rachel, and Karen stated that knowledge and experience gathered from other parents assisted them with selecting a school. The information gathered from other parents was focused around the approval and/or disapproval of various school options. In particular, Tim was new to the area and found the support, advice, and information from the neighbourhood parents to be helpful. Tim tells how:

> We also discussed with other parents about the reputation of this school, the reputation of this school is okay. I mean, there's some schools that we have not a very good idea about, some schools, but this school before we went to this school, we just talked with other parents.

Rose acknowledged that one parent was quite helpful as they were not only a fellow parent, but also a teacher who knew about many of the schools in the area. "I, also, talked to some parents. One of the parents at the daycare was the teacher, so he knew all the schools in the area. He did recommend the one that I had looked at…" Another parent, that knew her daughter, actually worked at one of the schools that she was interested in, but she changed her mind after speaking to this individual:

> She actually worked at the public school... And she said that, because I told her

> that I really like the school and the Principal, and they were very welcoming, and they were umm...they would love to have my child there and she didn't recommend it. She said that were a lot of children, kids that had behavioural problems. Well I said, "My child is is a special needs child." She said, "No, no, these are typical kids with behavioural problems. I don't recommend that…"

When Rose finally selected the school of choice, other parents assisted with her decision. "…I talked to other parents, some other parents who had special needs kids and stuff like that. And they all praised the school quite highly."

Jen was also positively influenced by another parent when it came to making her school choice. In her case, hearing another parent's experience caused her to keep her child in one school and not explore others. She describes this interaction:

> I remember her telling me at the end, she goes, "My son at 15, finally told me," she had two kids that had these issues and the oldest son finally said, "I don't have any friends. I've been going to different schools, specialty schools, you've been shopping me around to all these different schools and I don't have a friend in the world. I don't know any of the kids that we live around, because I've never been able to go to the local community school….And she said, "If I had stayed..." in retrospect… she said, "If I had worked with the administration, if I had worked with the teachers, at least my kids would have friends and I don't think that we would be any worse after having spent enormous amounts of money and time and maybe just chasing your tail."

Lori consulted with other parents and the fact that they approved of the school helped to make her decision: "I had heard great things about it from people who had kids who were a bit older than ours." This mirrors her experience in selecting another school, where she consulted with other parents when making her decision.

> So I knew about his experience and then somebody else that I knew who had gone in a couple years older than my son. He was there, so in each case, I talked to both of them. And then somebody else that I know has a son, who I guess, was a year younger. And so, you know, so it was partly talking to people…

Rachel found that parents are the major source of information for her:

> Parents are the biggest source of information. And what you will hear from all

> the parents is that we will make individual choices for our own kids. I have a friend, a good friend, who is at the life skills program and for her, she's okay with that. It's not my philosophy, but it's her philosophy, so I'm not going to knock her.

Other parents actually disapproved of Rachel's school choice. She was faced with refusing the advice given by other parents when locating a school placement for her child. "It was really difficult, people were, like, 'Just pull her out, it's not worth the stress.' I wasn't willing to do it. That was her community school and I really felt like she had to stay the course."

Mary had differing experiences seeking information from other parents in the public and private systems. It was supportive within the public school system where, Mary notes, "…you talk to lots of parents and that's the resource, is parents. 'What do you have?' 'What have you experienced?' It gets to be...telewomen...it's like...moms talk to other moms." Within the private school, however, she did not have the same experience: "No, because we were at a private school, we didn't have that community."

Karen's experience is similar to Mary's experience of lacking a community of other parents. Karen believes that she has been kept from speaking to other parents. She believes that a mini school specifically for children with a disability would help with bringing other parents together. She elaborates on this concept:

> Where you could identify other parents with kids, there's...even in hospitals, it's very secretive...these kids are disabled and we're not allowed to talk about. So you can't identify what kids have stuff unless they have something visible like a hearing aid and then there's no effort made to get those parents together, you know, in a way that is beneficial, so that they could advocate on their own behalf. And part of it, you know, I don't want to seem paranoid, I'm not a paranoid person, sometimes, I feel like it's on purpose, so then it's just me coming in to complain to the school board and it's not 300 parents coming in to complain to the school board. Because they keep everything separate, but if

> you were together and you were one school and you all had the same goals and the same ideas and you knew each other's kids, then that would be different.

While many parents talked about receiving support (or lack thereof) from other parents, Amy, Jen, Rachel, Cindy, and Karen all described the support that they had received from support groups and services when making their school choice.

Support Groups or Services

Support groups and/or services influenced how Amy, Jen, Rachel, Cindy, and Karen chose a school. The supports and services they accessed ranged from supports groups found via the Internet to organizations that offer specific services to those with a specific disability.

Amy, for example, was seeking support from wherever she could find it: "I was grabbing any information that I could find from any different…the Internet, different people, talking to learning disability support groups and things like that." Rose's experience mirrored Amy's in the use of outside services to assist with finding a school:

> I have to say Centre for Ability, the social worker, was a great advocate….Like helping me to decide which school and when I decided, she was making sure, she really advocated for a full time SEA instead of a shared one, because of the safety issue of her taking off.

Jen speaks about the value of one priority, that is, having continued access to her child's preschool daycare program throughout grade school, when searching for a school:

> Robert was at daycare in North Shore neighbourhood house…and they have a mandate of taking kids with special needs over and above anybody else first….So they got me in and I was really happy, what I didn't realize was that they did most of the after school care programs in the, not every elementary in North Van, but umm, a large number of them, right? So, umm, when I started getting ready for kindergarten, they told me that Robert would have priority, so

> a lot of the parents in Robert's daycare, they may or may not be able to get in even though they were North Shore neighbourhood house kids.

For Cindy, the use of outside sources, specifically the ADHD parenting program, assisted with her making a school choice and she would recommend this program to others too:

> I got referred to the ADHD parenting program and, of course, then you're hooking up with other parents who have issues. "So what have you tried?" That's where I heard about the LD society and got some information from them. That's where I heard about Orton-Guillingham. It's all just the game and it just seems like everybody had another piece to the puzzle. But if you didn't ask, then you wouldn't find anything, as people weren't that willing to say, "Oh, we have something going on here. This is everything that you should look at." Right? So if...for...a parent, it's yah...you're like, it's like having a disability yourself. You're blind; you're trying to find some sort of answer.

Karen also used outside sources to assist her with the selection of a school:

> So you know, talking to people at Sunny Hill was often enlightening. Sunny Hill is an offshoot hospital, where they do treat a bunch of assessments down there…I had several public health nurses and one of them was really helpful in a way that other ones weren't.

Rachel differs in her use of non-school supports; she actually brought in her own support for each meeting around school placements. She refers to this person as her own "advocate." Rachel continues:

> I'm a single parent and I've never gone into a single meeting without an advocate. I've had the same advocate for Rachel's child since kindergarten, and she's really good. She used to be a teacher herself…She can consult and suggest different ways and how to do it… So that advocate who has a teaching background can come up with really good ideas and to be honest, sometimes, they don't really listen to the parent, they tend to listen to the experts. I've gone into those meetings with speech therapists, behavioural therapists, just so that they can hear from the experts.

Many of the parents highlighted their positive experiences using non-school supports. The final theme that follows describes the degree to which many parents felt they had no choice at all.

Theme #6 – Availability or Lack of Choice

Ironically, for a study that reviews parental experiences of school choice, there were a number of parents who emphasized what they felt was actually a lack of choices available to them.

Initially, to cite one instance, Tim was happy about the support that his daughter was receiving at her school. She had started with a full-time one-on-one worker but with each passing year, there was less and less time for such an interaction, but he does not feel there was anything that he could do. Tim expands on this:

> You can't decide on her teacher or what SEA or who you are going to attend to, so you're just going to, there's not a choice for the parents to make. I told them that I prefer one-to-one and they told me that this was what they were going to do….No choice.

Amy**,** also found herself without a lot of choice. While some options; such as, home schooling may exist for some, this was not appropriate for Amy, which left her with only three options. "Unless you were comfortable with…like if I was teacher maybe, I could support him at home…I don't know, but for me and my life, I feel like it's important for him to be in a school where he's not the only person that has the problem." One of her school choices ceased to be an option once they discovered that her child had a learning disability. "I looked at an independent Catholic school in school District 43, which is another private school, but they basically told me that if your kid has a learning disability that they can't come there." Once she found a school that she wanted that did accept students with a disability, it was not as easy as simply enrolling. It involved, "…you have to fill out reams of paper to get into these schools. Oh, and then you have to promise to spend and you have to support

them with volunteer hours.... Which is fine, but they kind of have you over a barrel a little bit, you don't really have much choice." When asked why she did not pursue public school, Amy replied, "I could see that we couldn't allow him to stay in the public school system."

Similarly, Lori also no longer saw public school as an option early in her child's school experience:

> I was trying to work around it, but it was not very practical. So the school sort of tolerated it for a few months, but then they said that for Grade 2 that it wasn't workable. That was when I knew that I had to move him, because he couldn't really get the kind of support that he needed.

Karen was quite abrupt when discussing her experience with a lack of choice. When it came to selecting a high school for her daughter, she stated:

> I didn't have a choice. I asked for two years for assistance for her, I was given none, and finally, we were taken to a program at another school...umm...their requirements were that they were able to take the bus by themselves and get around by themselves. She cannot do that. The program was only for two years. It was not a good fit for her.… We had been looking for a school for the past year and I went to the school board and everything. I was really mad as the…people said that they wouldn't let me do school shopping for disability services, so I had quite the run-in with the school board to go there and still didn't get any choices.

Mary can also relate to the reality of not being given any choice, given her recent experience. Board staff had specifically told her that there were no other choices for her child and she was unhappy with the choice she had been given thus far. "You know, they've offered us two terrible classes and told us that there's no choices and I just keep firing it back, 'I can't believe in the district of Vancouver, you have nothing better than this.'" She has been told that by turning down this option that there is no guarantee that another one will become available: "'What happens if I turn it down?' and they basically said, 'Well, you are out of luck.' Like we don't

guarantee you anything else, we made the recommendation, you turn it down, you are on your own." This is reminiscent of Mary's earlier experience trying to find a school for her daughter: "I mean I gave them three choices. Only one came back, so literally out of three schools that are semi in the district, that was the only one that came back to look at it. Nowhere else, so yah, that was our choice, so there's not choice. You don't have a choice." The experience of not having a choice has led two of the parents to look further at the legislation around school placement. Rachel met with success; however, for Mary, legislation empowers the school to be able to reject her choice.

Legislation

Only two parents, Rachel and Mary, brought up legislation as a factor involved in their decision. For Rachel, this was in relation to school staff trying to make the decision for her; however, she was aware of her rights and stated:

> I mean, I remember meeting with 16 people sitting at the table from the Vancouver school [board], with superintendents and assistant superintendents, and they knew the easy answer. I was like, "No, you legally have an obligation to provide her with an education and you have to do everything that you can and until you show me that you've done everything that you can, then you have to keep her."

She then had to go the extra step of involving a lawyer. "I did get a lawyer and he helped, I had to hire a lawyer for a little bit and that, you know, and sometimes, you have to take those drastic steps." Mary was unable to use her lawyer to enforce legislation and she believes that the schools use the legislation to their advantage:

> There's nobody out there helping you to negotiate the system, finding out what's available…. They have to meet with you before October 31st to write up the IEP, they have to, it's the law, and they don't have to review it at the end of the year. So we'll write it up, this lovely piece of paper, but we can use it how we feel and if the teacher decides that she doesn't want to do it, the legislation

says that she doesn't have to.

This study was seeking to examine the experience of parents in choosing a school for their child with a disability, and it was disheartening to see so many parents express the view that a choice did not actually exist for them.

This chapter highlighted the six broad themes that were located through analyzing the parents' data. The six themes included: the school itself, the child's needs, the parent's own experience, the family's involvement in the decision, non-school supports, and that there was a lack of choice. Each theme was then broken down in subthemes to further capture the essence of the parents' experiences. The next and final chapter will explore in detail the parents' experiences in relation to the literature previously presented in chapter 3. There will be an analysis of the data gathered from this study and the research that has previously been presented within the literature on the topic of parents and school choice. Finally, there will be a discussion around the areas of: the impact that the findings of this study may have; the limitations of this research study; and areas for further research.

Chapter Five: Discussion

As noted in Chapter Four, the parents of a child with any disability who participated in this study shared six broad themes that described their experience of finding a school for their child. The purpose of this chapter is to explore these findings, in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. As well, the areas that reveal new findings from my study when compared to the literature reviewed will be discussed within a wider lens of the field of disability. I also discuss the implications of the results for other parents of a child with a disability and for the education field in general. To conclude, I discuss the limitations of this study, suggestions for further research, and offer my final remarks.

Results In Relation to Literature Review

My research study revealed six themes that included:

- the school itself;
- the child's needs;
- the parent's own experience;
- the family's involvement in the decision;
- non-school supports; and
- availability or lack of choice.

For the purposes of this discussion, I will utilize these six themes from Chapter Four to explore how they connect to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

Theme #1 – The School Itself

Holmes (2008) found that within Canada there were five types of choice with respect to schools: choice of language (French or English); alternative schools;

publicly funded Catholic schools; charter schools; and independent schools. With regard to school choice in my study, participating parents placed their children in mostly English speaking schools with one parent (Cindy) placing her two children in French immersion for a short period prior to being switched to English speaking schools. Three parents opted for independent schools, specifically private schools for individuals with a learning disability. Charter schools are not an option in Vancouver; however, there are mini schools. Rachel and Jen stated that had a mini school existed for their child with a disability, they might have pursued it; however, this currently is not an option. As well, there were no publicly funded Catholic schools reported as options by the parents in this study. It would seem then, that these limitations helped to shape the choices parents made.

As the existing literature showed, school choice is also shaped by social class; that is, by the income and education of the parents who make these choices such that middle-class parents take more advantage of choice than lower-class families (Gewirtz et al., 1995). Bosetti (2004), in speaking specifically to school choice in Alberta, concurred that school choice remains largely a middle-class and urban phenomenon designed to provide options for parents and students (Bosetti, 1998; O'Reilly & Bosetti, 2000, as cited in Bosetti, 2004). The participants in my study certainly noted that the financial costs played a major role in their selection of a school. Some parents found the cost of tuition to be a deterrent, while others were able to fund these costs, and one parent paid only for the extra support. Amy was able to afford the cost of tuition for an independent school, but still believes that, "…the money is a massive deterrent…And I think it's a crime actually, because these

kids, I don't think, really can get what they from the public school…". Amy and her husband were paying $18,000 strictly for the OG (Orton Gillingham) tutor at the independent school. Mary, too, has had to pay for school for her daughter to the tune of $24,000 during her elementary school years, and now $5,000 per year for her daughter's high school years to ensure she receives the supports that she needs. Funding can also be a deterrent for schools in accepting a student. For example, Mary highlighted that "…because of our funding and because she's special needs, a school has the right to turn her down. They can say that just don't have the funding."

Cindy and Karen experienced the frustration of not being able to fund either independent schools or extra supports for their children. Cindy stated that, "I really felt at the mercy of being poor…". Karen echoes these statements of the costs being too high, "…it's 25 grand a year, so I'm not going to be trying that any time soon."

Cost alone was not the only class related issue discussed by parents, although Jen was the only parent to mention socio-economic status with respect to the location of the school. She felt that attending a school within a middle-class neighbourhood would mean there would be fewer students with behavioural issues or special needs. A school's location relative to a marginalized and economically challenged neighbourhood dissuaded her from selecting that school, as she was concerned that, "…there would be other kids there with or without diagnoses with their own social issues." Jen's assessment connects to the finding in Manley-Casmir's (1982) Canadian study that parents wanted their children to be in classrooms that had a diverse population and environment, but does so by contrast. In Jen's case, it appears that there are fears connected to exposure to diversity that might include

children with social challenges even though her own child faces such challenges.

The topic of diversity can link to another factor that Rogers (2007) discovered; namely, whether parents wish their child to be placed in mainstream or specialized classrooms (Rogers, 2007). Rogers states that as children age, their parents discover that the option of attending a mainstream classroom no longer matches the supports required for their children. This is true for many of the parents in this study, but for the opposite reason.

The conversation around specialized versus mainstream was brought up by a few of the parents. Jen summed up the discussion by looking at it from two different angles: (a) parents send their child to a school with a number of special needs kids because they will excel; and (b) parents send their child to a school with fewer special needs kids because they will, in all probability, get more attention. Cindy stated that she chose to place her son in a specialized classroom as she felt that he was being isolated in his mainstream classroom. However, she then found that specialized programs had lower expectations and her son was regressing instead of moving forward within this environment. Lori had tried to keep her son in a mainstream school; however, she and the school found transporting him to receive external supports was difficult. Lori wanted a school that specialized in educating students with a learning disability and this left her with only two options. The concern around lacking options is particularly acute when children reach high school, as Rachel shared. Her child is in a modified mainstream program, which is quite rare. Many students either need to fully enter a mainstream program, attend the specialized life skills program offered at each high school, or seek alternative

school options.

Additionally, where school characteristics figure in school choice, the literature suggests that parents were generally most concerned with the teaching style of their child's teacher (Manley-Casmir, 1982). This held true in here as well: all parents in my study mentioned the direct relationship of school staff to their selection of a school. Rose was positively impacted by the reception that she received from the school staff, especially with respect to how open they were to her ideas and suggestions. For Karen, it was the principal who found the high school program for her daughter after several failed attempts to locate an appropriate high school for her. Rachel mentioned having difficulties with one principal, but positive experiences with another, her present one. On the other hand, Mary had such a negative experience with one teacher that it led her to pull her child out of the school. However, this experience led directly to a connection with a superintendent who then assisted with finding her daughter a school placement one year later.

Cindy was able to pinpoint the resource teacher at her son's school as the person who assisted with making her choice. She had a positive meeting with him and heard about his background and saw his enthusiasm for the program. She found that this meeting, coupled with his offering much of his time to answer her questions in person and on the phone, tipped the balance in making a school choice. Lori found that after her son met the music teacher at one prospective school, her son was sold on going there.

Mary appreciated that the staff invited her into the classroom, welcomed her contribution to the conversation, and noted that as a result, she felt she was a part of

a team. This echoed previous research that found that an important factor for parents of a disabled child to consider is the school's attitude towards them and whether the school is supportive of parental involvement in the decision (Booth et al., 1992; Glatter et al., 1997; Trussel et al., 2008).

The positive experiences were aplenty but not universal. For example, Mary (as already noted above) laid a complaint against one teacher when it was determined this individual was not implementing her daughter's independent education plan (IEP) plan. Cindy found it frustrating when her son's Grade 4 teacher continually changed after the original teacher was in a car accident and then was replaced by weekly on-calls before finally getting a permanent replacement. Rachel had a poor experience right from the start with a kindergarten teacher. This teacher would not allow her daughter access to her communicative device. As well, Rachel felt that the teacher's union was trying to remove her daughter from the classroom.

My study also indicated that support staff had an impact on the selection of a school. For example, Tim found the reduction in support staff led him to consider another school for his daughter. Amy was encouraged by the support staff to leave one school and found that she stayed in another school strictly for the OG tutor, indicating that they were paying $18,000 a year strictly for that tutor as they were unhappy with the rest of the school. When Mary was struggling to find a high school placement for her child, she was pleasantly surprised to find that that the contact person for an alternative program wanted to focus on her child's strengths rather than her deficits. Finally, Rose mentioned having her "million dollar team" when first going to an IEP meeting which had led to quite a wonderful feeling knowing

that there was a lot of support for her and her daughter.

A final factor that can influence school choice is the child's location, especially in a rural environment. Research has indicated that rural parents of children with a disability have neither the same access nor participation rate compared to urban parents (Trussel et al., 2008). While none of this study's parents were located in a rural area, a number of parents did, however, indicate that the school's location was a factor in their decision. For example, Tim chose a location in his neighbourhood. Rose too selected a school in her neighbourhood because it fit the requirements she was looking for, in that it was in a residential setting not near any busy streets. Cindy placed her youngest son in the same school as her eldest son to keep everybody in the same place. In Amy's case, she chose a school that was close to work for both her and her husband. Lori selected a school that was 15 minutes away by car and was also on a bus route to enable her son to take the bus when he got older. Access to a bus both enabled and disabled Karen's school choices. One program required her daughter to take a bus by herself and thus was not an option. Her conundrum was solved through another program that also required a bus, but one that would pick her daughter up right at their front door.

The school itself was a theme that illustrated many connections between the literature and the actual experiences of the parents in my study. Many of my parents had experiences dealing with the school funding and discovering an appropriate school location that addressed their needs. More links could be seen around the influence of teachers and other staff on parental decision-making. The next theme relates to the consideration of the child's individual needs.

Theme #2 – The Child's Needs

A key issue identified in previous studies is the problem with the long waiting period before a child can be diagnosed as having a disability (Rogers, 2007). Without this diagnosis, parents are unable to gain access to needed services and make informed school choices. This too was confirmed in my study in that many parents noted having to push for a diagnosis before they could select a school for their child. Amy found that not only could she not get her child into one school that she wanted without a diagnosis, but also that her present school was unable to provide a diagnostic assessment. Amy was required to pay $2000 for her own assessment as the school's reasoning for not providing an assessment was that, "they wouldn't test him until he was two grade year levels behind in reading, which wouldn't have been until Grade 3." Cindy provided another example of a parent having to wait for a diagnosis. She first asked for a diagnosis when her child was in Grade 3, but nothing was done until Grade 5. Amy and Lori each stated that they could not get into a school without having a diagnosis. While not found in the literature review in chapter 2, the issue of a lack of diagnosis relates to broader literature on disability that finds that some parents believed that their chances of receiving any services rested heavily on receiving an adequate diagnosis first and that it was often a battle to get it and their needed services (Band et al., 2002; Bjarnason, 2002; Green, 2007 as cited in Fereday, Oster, & Darbyshire, 2010; Minnes & Steiner, 2009; Westling, 1997).

While receiving a diagnosis is often central to receiving services it also comes with emotional costs that need to be considered. For example, Cindy talked about

experiencing a period of grief upon receiving the diagnosis. She observed, "You have a little bit of a grieving period, when you think that your child is different." She too experienced a waiting period for her younger son.

Where the needs of the children of the parents who participated in this study were concerned, neither academic reputation (Manley-Casmir, 1982), nor academic achievement appeared to be a concern. Behavioural influences rather than academic influences seemed to be in the forefront. Rose and Jen both selected schools they hoped would have a positive impact on their own child's behaviour. Rose did not choose one school that had a reputation for including children with bad behaviours. Likewise, Jen chose not to go to a school where she thought that others would be poorly behaved. Instead, she sent him somewhere that did not have the kind of enrolment where, as she said, "kinda felt like Robert would be the worst behaved kid, but he would be up here versus heading down."

Another issue not addressed in the general literature on school selection but visible in my study, is that parents were concerned whether their child's social needs were being addressed by their school. Cindy wanted an environment that would assist her son's self-esteem and ensure that he had a normal experience. She elaborated, "I really wanted to salvage his self-esteem…I felt like it was going to be a more normal experience." Cindy noted that her son's access to peers also assisted with her decision. Cindy, Lori, and Rachel all highlighted how their child's social needs influenced the selection of a school. For Cindy, the high school was selected because "he did know people there." Similarly, Lori wanted her eldest son to, "…have the social opportunity to be in the neighbourhood." Rachel put a different

twist on the social aspect, as she feels that it is important for the 'typicals' (i.e., the able-bodied students) too. She said, "I think it's to the benefit of the typical kids as well, that they be around special needs students."

It is noteworthy that both past studies and this current study found that parents were not concerned about a school's academic reputation. Whether this is linked to expectations these parents have of their child's academic success was not discussed. It was unfortunate to read that the experience of extended and worrisome waiting for a diagnosis was consistent with the literature, thereby demonstrating that changes have been slow to occur within this domain. Related to this is my study's finding that parents are taking it upon themselves to fund their own diagnoses. Previously, parents have been reported to be funding their own diagnoses, as a diagnosis grants them greater access to support services (Makela, Birch, Friedman, & Marra, 2009; Seigart, Dietsch, & Parent, 2012; Watson, Hayes, & Radford-Paz, 2011). This is an option only for those who can afford to pay for it out-of-pocket and again links choice to socio-economic status. The following theme looks at each parent's own experience and how this influences school choice.

Theme #3 – The Parent's Own Experience

Existing studies note that parents rely on their intuition when choosing a school. Parents make intuitive assessments about a school's atmosphere as indicated by the school's administrators, teachers, students, building, and location (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Manley-Casmir, 1982). The parents in my study did not highlight intuition but, instead, made their decisions based upon experiences related to their careers, previous interactions with the school system, or being a single

parent.

Jen and Amy used their own work experience to determine their school choices, while thinking ahead to the future. Amy mentioned that she works in a street clinic and often sees clients who have learning disabilities. Jen also used her job experience to make her decision as she provided services to a number of schools in North Vancouver and was aware of the socioeconomics that existed in each of them.

Cindy and Karen's experience as single parents were found to be influential in their decisions. Specifically, Karen used her experience as a single parent who understood the welfare system and similar organizations to assist her with navigating the school system. Mary's previous less than ideal experiences with the educational system assisted her when she was having difficulty in locating a school. She was already quite familiar with the names of superintendents and school board members that she could contact.

Amy, Cindy, Lori, and Mary mentioned that the previous experiences of their older children with the school systems had assisted them with making a choice. Amy used a negative experience in getting her eldest child diagnosed to ensure that her youngest received a proper one. Cindy wanted her children to attend the same high school, even though her youngest wished to go elsewhere, but instead, "…Mom overruled. …I wanted to have everybody in the same place." Lori knew what to expect for her second son based on her eldest's high school experience. Lori felt that she knew who the teachers were and that she felt quite welcome by the school's environment. Mary had two older children attend the school her child was about to

attend and like Lori, she noted that she felt that she knew the teachers and that they were committed to the students.

Another factor influencing school choice noted in the literature on the non-disabled population is the message that parents appear to be getting from the media, politicians, and peers that education alone determines a child's future. There is, therefore, great pressure on parents to select "the right school" especially because this can influence a child's future chances in life (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 1994). Amy, Rose, and Cindy are already looking towards the future. Amy's son has another two years at his current school, but she is already anxious about the future. Rose knows that she wants to keep her daughter mainstream throughout her education. Cindy began thinking about her son's future in high school early: "Umm, I guess probably the end of Grade 6, I started thinking…yikers, I better start thinking about this big transition."

It is of interest that the only link between this theme arising from my study and the literature is around a parent's concern over finding the right school for the child. Previous research has indicated that parents feel pressure to find such a school. My study revealed how these parents respond to this pressure and what resources they bring to bear in making a decision with respect to their own personal histories. As noted, previous work experience, one's own family situation (i.e., being a single parent), and the experiences of older children all factored into parental decision-making. The ability to offer insight into each parent's decision is quite valuable, as it could assist other parents in making similar decisions and the school system in discovering how it can support parents of a child with a disability.

Finally, where keeping children's present and future needs in mind are concerned, an additional dimension of school choice that emerged was that parents are not making these decisions on their own; there is family involvement in selecting a school. This dimension will be discussed next.

Theme #4 – Family Involvement in Decision

A dimension of choice that arose in this study is the fact that these parents did not make these decisions on their own; rather, there was family involvement in selecting a school.

The participants in this study mentioned both partner support and their own child's involvement in the selection process although interestingly, even though many of the parents who participated in my study have more than one child, their siblings' school choice and input from the older children was not discussed.

Amy and Jen both found that they were the main decision-makers around school choice. For Amy, this had to do with her husband having difficulty accepting their son's diagnosis. Jen can relate to this with her husband as she states, "He just thinks that there's nothing wrong with him." Lori and Mary too were the sole decision-makers, and while they both included their husbands in the discussion, ultimately, however, it was their decision. Mary stated that, "So he's kinda just said, 'You know, I support you, if you think this is right.'" Rose and Karen are single parents and therefore are the sole decision-makers. Cindy felt that it was mostly her decision for both of her sons. With respect to her eldest son, she said that, "Yah, I think that probably, ultimately, it was my decision. I felt like, in elementary, I saw him falling through the cracks…". Her younger son had asked to attend another

school; however, "Mom overruled." Lori sought input from her middle son on which high school that he wanted to attend.

Although not reflective within my study or the literature reviewed, father's involvement in the caring of a child with a disability has received considerable research. In a study of 60 families with a mother, father, and a child with a severe disability, it was found that the both the mother and father agree that the father participation was highest within the areas of playing, nurturing, and discipline (Simmerman, Blacher, & Baker, 2001). Simmerman et al. found that the mother and father agreed upon the amount of involvement that fathers had in deciding on services. As reflected in my study, while the parents (Amy, Jen, Lori, and Mary) did note that they were sole decision makers; however, this could very well be an agreement made with their husbands that they are comfortable with. Flippin and Crais (2011) reported that the last three decades has seen an increase in father's involvement in their children's lives; however, services are not always inclusive towards fathers. This could be a barrier towards including fathers in the decision making process. It is unknown as to why the topic of other parents and even the actual child's involvement has not been broached before in research. It was brought up by quite a few of the parents within this study and is something that I believe is important to address in this study. While many of the parents were the sole decision-makers, it is important to note that they do receive input and support from other members of their family and from the children for whom they are making the school choice. Additional support also came form other sources. These will be discussed next.

Theme #5 – Non- School Supports

The theme of receiving assistance from resources outside the formal school system and one's family has been previously discussed in the literature and was evident in my study too. Many of the parents in this study were helped by such non-school supports as other parents, support groups, and organizations. Gewirtz et al. (1995) highlighted the importance of a school's reputation as a deciding factor. The reputation of the school can be influenced by word of mouth, which demonstrates the influence that peers may have over parents' school choices (Gewirtz et al., 1995).

Tim, Rose, Lori, Rachel, and Karen stated that knowledge and experience gathered from other parents influenced how each of them selected a school. Tim indicated that other parents helped to inform his decision. Rose acknowledged the assistance of one person who was both a parent and a teacher in her neighbourhood. She chose not to send her daughter to one school based on feedback from another parent who worked at the specific school of interest. Lori, too, received positive feedback on her school choice from other parents. Jen was influenced by another parent who advised that she keep her child at one school instead of sending him to a variety of schools. Rachel concurs that parents were quite helpful in making her decision; however, she still indicates that it is a very individual decision, "Parents are the biggest source of information. And what you will hear from all the parents is that we will make individual choices for our own kids."

Mary's experiences with other parents within the public system and private school differed. She found more support within the public school system where, Mary notes, "…you talk to lots of parents and that's the resource, is parents. It gets to

be...telewomen… it's like...moms talk to other moms." Within the private school, however, she did not have the same experience. Karen can relate to Mary's point about a lack of community. Karen believes she has been kept from speaking to other parents, "…sometimes, I feel like it's on purpose, so then it's just me coming in to complain to the school board and it's not 300 parents coming in to complain to the school board."

Parents of a child with a disability may also receive support from a peer group or volunteer advocacy group (Booth et al., 1992; Rogers, 2007). Amy was seeking support wherever she could find it and this included: the Internet, parent groups, and disability associations. Rose found a lot of assistance from outside services in helping to select a school, "I have to say Centre for Ability, the social worker, was a great advocate….Like helping me to decide which school and when I decided, she was making sure, she really advocated for a full time SEA." Jen wanted to continue her child's daycare and found that they were quite supportive in ensuring that she would find a spot before and after school upon entering kindergarten. Lori received support from other parents by attending support groups and organizations, describing how "I got referred to the ADHD parenting program and, of course, then you're hooking up with other parents who have issues – 'So what have you tried?'" Karen found assistance through Sunny Hill, a hospital in Vancouver.

Rachel took a different approach and actually has had her own advocate, who attends school meetings, for a number of years: "So that advocate who has a teaching background can come up with really good ideas and to be honest,

sometimes, they don't really listen to the parent, they tend to listen to the experts." Rachel's experience of using an advocate is unique to this study. The use of advocates has been mentioned within the field of disability; Bambara, Nonnemacher and Kern (2009) found that in a study within the United States that 80% of their participants had assisted, as an advocate, other parents of a child with a disability in finding an appropriate school placement. Bacon and Causton-Theoharis (2012) studied 17 families with a child with a disability and many utilized an advocate during the IEP meetings held with the school; they found that, "Parents felt that having an advocate with them helped mitigate power imbalances between parents and schools…" (p.13). It appears that my findings are consistent with previous research – of using support groups, other parents, and organizations. Parents actively seek out supports instead of trying to make these decisions purely on their own. Still, even with supports, some parents noted that in the end, there really is a limited range of choice. The factors that limit choice are discussed next.

Theme #6 – Availability or Lack of Choice

Although Gewirtz et al. (1995) argue that everyone is able make a choice, when it comes to selecting a school; some of the parents in this study would disagree. As Booth et al. (1992) already found, schools may reject a child, citing that they are unable to cope with the child's needs. School funding plays a role in this as exemplified by the experience of one of the participants in my study. Funding apparently deterred one school from accepting Mary's daughter, but she highlighted that, "…because of our funding and because she's special needs, a school has the right to turn her down. They can say that they just don't have the funding." While

only discussed by one parent, school funding is a topic that has been discussed within the literature and is found to be quite political. Jahnukainen (2011) discovered that within Alberta, the system of coding and assigning particular dollar amounts to each code "…may have created appalling financial incentives for mainstream schools to identify more of their students as having special educational needs" (p.495). Alberta has created 17 codes that are divided into two categories of severe (4 codes) or non-severe disabilities (13 codes) and the designation of one of the severe codes can earn a school up to 3 times more funding than a non severe code (Jahnukainen, 2011). Jahnukainen further states that while some of the codings are linked to diagnoses that come from assessments, there are those that can be assigned by the school itself.

Specific to British Columbia, the funding formula for public school districts is based on enrolment, with supplementary funding based on the number of: Aboriginal students, students enrolled in programs for English as a Second Language (ESL), and special needs students by category (Battisti, Friesen, & Hickey, 2012). Prior to 2002, supplemental grants were given to districts for individuals with a disability and since they were eliminated, students are now less likely to be designated a diagnosis of a moderate behaviour disorder, mild mental illness, and mild intellectual disability (Battisti et al., 2012).

Another limitation is the degree to which parents feel limited, even excluded, by the control over resources that school authorities can exert. While government policies may promote the importance of involving parents in school selection, studies have indicated that parents may not feel included in the school choice

(Rogers, 2007). Tim, Karen, and Mary found that they had no real choice in their child's schooling. Tim felt that he was receiving less and less one-on-one support for his daughter at school; however, he had no other choice. He was now considering looking at another school or district. Karen too felt that she did not have a choice: "I didn't have a choice. I asked for two years for assistance for her, I was given none." Mary has a similar situation; the school board offered her two choices and she thinks that they are both terrible. This is a similar situation to Mary's earlier experience when trying to find a school for her daughter. She chose three schools but only one would accept her.

When Amy was considering different schools, one of the schools specifically told her that her child could not attend due to his disability, "…they basically told me that if your kid has a learning disability that they can't come there." Even upon finding a school that she wanted, there was a process in place that required them to fill out a large amount of paperwork, and you had to promise to complete a number of volunteer hours for the school. Amy and Lori had already decided that the public school system was not a good fit for either of them and were forced to look into alternative measures.

According to the literature, one of the factors influencing school choice for parents of a child with a disability is legislation. Rogers (2007) observes that in some cases, parents do not agree with an assessment and must initiate a legal battle to have their choice respected. Rachel and Mary were the only two parents to discuss legislation. Rachel found herself at a meeting with school staff and they were trying to make her school choice for her, but she informed them that they had a

legal obligation to provide her daughter with a proper education. She had to engage a lawyer too: "I did get a lawyer and he helped, I had to hire a lawyer for a little bit and that, you know, and sometimes, you have to take those drastic steps." Mary also used the help of a lawyer; however, she found that there is nothing that lawyers can do, because the teachers have the power to implement or not to implement the independent education plan (IEP). The frustration with the IEP process is echoed by Koch (2011); she would fight to get her child access to services and upon receipt of them would then start a new fight to maintain the services. For parents of a child with any disability, dissatisfaction with professionals is actually quite common place (Bjarnason, 2002; Brown, 1998 as cited in Case, 2000; Canary, 2008). In regards to the IEP process, Spann, Kohler and Soenksen (2003) examined 45 families with a child with a disability and the parents' perceptions of the IEP process found that 44% of the families felt that the school was doing little to nothing to address their needs.

The experience of being unable to find a school due to a lack of choice for some parents in this study connected to other previously conducted research (Booth et al., 1992; Rogers, 2007). It is unfortunate that this situation continues to occur. I admit to being surprised that only two parents spoke of using the school's policies or legislation to assist them in broadening school choice. Unfortunately nothing in my data helps to shed light on why this is the case.

Categorization of Choosers

Thus far, I have compared the themes discovered in my research to the literature that was reviewed. A few previous studies in the general literature tried to

determine the type of choosers that parents are, when selecting a school. I will now discuss this aspect in relation to the parents who participated in my study.

Gewirtz et al. (1995) stated that there are three types of choosers: privileged or skilled choosers, semi- skilled choosers, and disconnected choosers. These authors found that privileged or skilled choosers are aware of their choice of school, will likely engage in the process of making a choice, and are more likely to want a school that suits their child's personality and interests. Semi-skilled choosers have a strong desire to make a choice, but lack the ability to make a choice. Disconnected choosers tend to see all schools as being the same with distance and convenience of the school their main concern (Gewirtz et al., 1995). This variation on different types of choosers was not apparent in my research study. Each parent was engaged at some level with his or her school choice. While some of them may not have been content with their options, they still had investigated the different options that were available.

In a study of school choice with 1,500 parents in Alberta, Bosetti (2004) paid close attention to differentiating between the active or non-active choosers. Bosetti stated that active choosers were parents who sought the appropriate information to decide in which school to place their child; non-active choosers were those parents who sent their children to their designated neighbourhood school. The parents in my study may have sent their children to a neighbourhood school; however, this was still an active choice. For example, Tim chose his local school only after he consulted with other parents. Rose chose her local school, but this was after she attended open houses, visited other schools, and spoke with other parents. Cindy chose a

high school for her eldest son after speaking with the resource teacher and ensuring that it would be a good fit and her son would be supported.

As evidenced by the detailed experiences outlined by the parents in this study, each of them would qualify as being quite active in their school choice. It is important to note that the previous studies reviewed were of parents of all students, both able-bodied and disabled. It might suggest that parents of a child with a disability are by default, active parents, as the parents in this study demonstrate the necessity of considering many factors when choosing a school.

Implications of this Study

From the literature reviewed, while this may be the first time that parents of a child with a disability have had the opportunity to share their experience in selecting a school in Canada; I would be remiss to not mention that parents of a child with a disability have been asked about their perceptions of services in a multitude of studies. Parents have highlighted that being able to build a positive working relationship with professionals is one of their fundamental aspects (Trute, 2007). Parents rated that they wanted a professional who was respectful, trust worthy, helped them to network, and to access community services (Bjarnason, 2002; Fereday et al., 2010; Kasahara & Turnbull, 2005). Essentially, it boils down to parents wanting to be treated with respect and to be able to receive all the resources that they need. Other characteristics that impacted their positive impression was the time professionals spent with their child, professional availability, their interpersonal skills, and their willingness to learn from the parents (Band et al., 2002; Brown, Moraes, & Mayhew; Fereday et al., 2010; Minnes & Steiner, 2009).

Studies that reflect parents' particular needs for services included those around the topic of peer support groups. An item listed by parents quite frequently was the need for peer support groups (Reilly & Platz, 2004 as cited in Brown & Rodger, 2009). In some cases, the parents wanted peer support groups to help prevent similar struggles and to share their expertise (Sawin & Thompson, 2009). Some parents cited that the only useful advice had come from other parents of disabled children (Case, 2000). When reviewing all the details on professional expectations from parents, it is interesting that some believe only peer support will assist. Two studies indicated that informal support was perceived as important by these parents (Brown et al., 2005; Poston et al., 2003 as cited in Canary, 2008). Contact with other families was listed as critical to success (Canary, 2008). It would be beneficial for professionals to seek out this kind of support for their clients. One third of parents within one study asked for the opportunity to interact with other parents (Westling, 1997). Some of the reported benefits from peer support groups included: feelings of being understood, learning new skills, and being able to express their feelings with those who understood (Redding et al., 2000 as cited in Brown et al., 2005).

The potential implications of the findings of the present study for parents of a child with any disability could be significant. For example, encouraging them to consider the experiences of others in a similar situation trying to discover a school for their child may prompt parents to speak to one another, something the parents who participated in this study found valuable. As well, it will hopefully allow parents to no longer feel isolated and encourage them to work with one another and

to assist each other. Further, it could lead to the development of new policies and processes to support parents in selecting the appropriate school for their child.

Quite a number of parents mentioned that there does not seem to be a step-by-step guide or even a brochure with information on school choice and perhaps information within this study could help the education system to develop a type of informational pamphlet. Ideally, information from this study may encourage parents to utilize the many organizations, support groups, and school staff that are willing to support parents in their school selection.

The potential implications are not limited to parents; this study could also assist school board personnel in Vancouver. This study's participants were all from the Greater Vancouver area and this allows these districts to review the data and determine if their policies and processes are really addressing the needs of parents of a child with a disability. Each parent's story was unique and provides a rich description of their experience.

It is important for school superintendents and policy makers to review this insider look at their schools and the parents who select them. School administrators may also benefit from getting feedback about school-sponsored open houses from two of the participants and the benefits that they found in them. As well, it would be advantageous to learn how teachers and support staff may influence a parent's decision to stay or remain at a particular school; especially, for example, the parents who were advised by support staff to pursue a non-public school solution to their situation. I know from previous experience that school administrators are reasonable and intelligent individuals who are not always aware of the

environments that are being created in their classrooms. British Columbia's Ministry of Education (2009), has a document entitled, "Special Education Services" and it clarifies the individuals and groups that offered input: "In preparing this manual in 1995, the Ministry of Education received valuable advice from a Special Education Advisory Committee, school district representatives, groups of specialist teachers and administrators, and associations throughout British Columbia" (p. iii). I would suggest that parents also be recognized for their valuable insights and be allowed to offer comments on how they would like to see special education services being presented.

It is my hope that some teachers will reflect on the experience of these parents and how much they appreciate being a part of the system instead of feeling they are on the outside fighting to get support for their child. Fullan (1991 as cited in Lupart, 2000), summed up the importance of teachers by stating that "educational change depends on what teachers think and do – it's as simple and complex as that" (p. 107). I know that many teachers often express their own frustrations about the systems that they work in, and perhaps this could be an excellent opportunity for these groups to team up with one another.

In my experience, support staff are both underpaid and undervalued. I think it would greatly assist them to know how much parents appreciate their support and value their insights and expertise. Finally, I think everybody benefits from the fact that this study is a qualitative review of the school system. It is not merely numbers and percentages, but detailed experiences filled with rich feelings and reflections on a process that many people go through on an ongoing basis.

Limitations and Further Research

With the potential implications detailed above, it is important to also describe the limitations of my study and potential areas for further research. This study has its limitations and there is still a great deal of room for further research and exploration around the experience of selecting a school for a disabled child.

First, it is important to recognize that this research offers detailed descriptions of the experience of a group of parents of children with disabilities, but that for many it is an ongoing experience that may change and unfold differently in subsequent years. Moreover, a number of the parents had children already in high school while others had children now only in the first or second grade. This means that some of the parents had a number of stories to tell about their experiences, whereas others were sharing only their first, almost preliminary, story of finding a school. It would be interesting in future research studies to continue to follow these parents as their children continue and eventually complete their schooling. Some areas of inquiry could include the following: Do new themes arise from the data or are they consistent with the original findings determined from this study? As well, are the parental considerations different as their children approach post-secondary school?

A second limitation is that the data consists of one interview with the parents on experiences that may have been more recent for some parents than others. While each parent was given the opportunity to review his or her transcript and the identified themes, not every parent chose to take advantage of this opportunity. In

future studies, it may be helpful to allow parents to be more aware of the expectations that exist within a descriptive phenomenological study. This stems in part from my own inexperience with this study's methodology. I informed them of the potential for one to four interviews and the opportunity to review the data; however, I could have been more specific around what this would look like. Some parents expressed surprise that their transcripts were 15 to 20 pages long and said they did not have the time available to review that many pages. A future study could include examples of the work that the parents would be required to complete outside of the interview. A number of participants were considerably surprised that I would meet with them at their location of choice. This could have been better highlighted throughout the recruitment materials for this study and, perhaps, would have resulted in more participants.

Third, all of the participants reside in the Greater Vancouver Area. Therefore, this research is limited to this area and even further, the few districts that each of the parents represented. It does not necessarily follow that other parents within the city, Province of British Columbia, or across Canada have gone through the same process in finding a school for their child with a disability. Further research conducted in other districts of Vancouver and throughout British Columbia would assist with determining whether these descriptions of a finding a school are similar in nature to other parents in this province. As well, this study looked at all schools; a subsequent study could target specific types of schools to determine what the experience is within the constraints of this study (i.e., only public schools). Another potential area for further research could involve more specificity regarding the type

of disability that the child has. For this study, any child with a disability was accepted. Parents' experiences could be quite similar or vastly different based on the individual child's disability. Finally, on the topic of participants, it may be beneficial to have a group of parents of able-bodied children within the same city interviewed, in order to examine the similarities and differences that they experience while choosing a school for their children.

Concluding Remarks

The 1950s and through the 1970s in Canada saw a shift away from parents and advocacy groups creating their own separate programs for students with disabilities and instead, it moved towards the public education system taking on more responsible for educating these students (Lupart, 2000). Within the 1980s, education reforms were created in an effort to move away from specialized classrooms towards the inclusion of special needs students into mainstream classrooms (Winzer & Mazurek, 2011). This movement towards inclusion resulted in students with a disability being placed in regular classrooms with supports and/or the occasional removal for particular subjects (Lupart, 2000). This movement continued onwards in the 1990s where inclusive education was the focus and the purpose was to keep all the students in the mainstream classroom with supports provided as needed (Lupart, 2000). Unfortunately, this has resulted in teachers today without the proper training supervising classrooms that required diverse needs and parents on both sides of the issues dismayed with the quality of education being received for their child (Lupart, 2000).

I find that this approach from specialized classrooms to mainstream

classrooms and the confusion that it has caused lends to a lot of the parents' experiences within my study. The parents within my study have openly shared the lengths that they have had to go to ensure that their children receive a proper education. Many have indicated that the public school system with its current mandates are not supportive towards the needs of their child and, consequently, they selected private schools that will offer the support. The parents that are within the system appear to be in an ongoing battle to get services and then each year, they have to continue to fight for that support to continue. Teachers and support staff within the public schools are openly expressing to the parents that this environment is not the right fit for their child and encouraging them to attend other schools. This speaks to the need for more support within areas of training, funding, and frankly, extra staff required to assist with making inclusive education a reality. While this study presents nine perspectives of this situation, I am confident that it is likely a common view on the present situation for many parents across this country.

The experiences presented by each of the parents in this study are both heartwarming and heartbreaking. All of these parents are to be commended for the amount of effort they continually put forth to ensure that their children receive the education that they deserve. Personally, I feel tremendously honoured that they took the time to meet with me and review the descriptions that they shared of their experiences. My purpose at the start of the study was to take a small step toward allowing the voices of these parents to be heard by others. This thesis will be readily available to those with access to the academic community; however, I take responsibility for ensuring that its reach is wider than this. As previously stated,

there are implications in this study for other parents and school staff. Upon completion of this thesis, I plan to contact Vancouver school boards, disability organizations, and parent support and advocacy groups. I hope to find ways in which this information can be received and then forwarded on to those within their purview with whom they have regular contact. I am extremely grateful to the parents for their dedication in devoting their valuable time and support to this project. Personally, I commit to finding ways to ensure that their generosity can be recognized and repaid through future research studies that continue to focus on allowing marginalized voices the opportunity to share their experiences.

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Appendix A: Newsletter Recruitment Script to Participants

Dear Parents of a Child with a Disability:

I wanted to let you know about an exciting opportunity to be a participant in a study for parents of a child with any type of disability who is currently attending school. Presently, I am a graduate student within the Master's of Child and Youth Care program at the University of Victoria.

This research project aims to highlight the experiences of parents of a child with any type of disability and how they went about selecting a school for their child.

Ideally, you would meet with myself at times that our convenient for you. You would meet 1-4 times. Sessions will take place for approximately a half hour to 1 hour. These sessions will be held in person and the audio will be recorded. Additional sessions may be held if it is determined that one session was not enough time to discuss the extent of your experience.

The information that you provide will be kept confidential and all of the data will be stored securely. Your participation in this study is voluntary there will be no compensation for being a part of this study.

If you're interested, I would be happy to arrange for a time for you and myself to get together to review the consent forms and any questions that you have about the project.

Please contact me either by phone at _____ or email at _____

Best regards,
James Cairns

Appendix B: Poster for Recruitment

Are you a parent of a child with a disability?

A graduate student, within the school of Child and Youth Care program, is conducting a research study that focuses on the experiences of parents of a child with any type of disability disability in selecting a school for their child.

Each participant would need to be available to meet for an in-person individual interview between ½ half to 1 hour for a minimum of 1 and maximum of 4 sessions.

These sessions will be audiotaped and held at a location that is convenient for you. Additional sessions may be held if it is determine that one session was not enough time to discuss the extent of your experience.

For more information or to join this study, please contact James Cairns at _____ or _____

This study has been approved by
University of Victoria's Human Ethics Board.

Your participation in this study is voluntary
There will be no compensation for participation in the study.

Appendix C: Consent Form – Descriptive Phenomenological Study of Parents of a Disabled Child and Their School Choice

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled "Descriptive Phenomenological Study of Parents of a Disabled Child and Their School Choice" that is being conducted by James Cairns, a M.A. in Child and Youth Care student at the University of Victoria.

The purpose of this research is to gather information about the experiences that parents of a child with any type of disability have had while selecting a school for their child. This information will be used towards the completion of a thesis as part of the requirements of a M.A. in Child and Youth Care. As well, the research results may be shared with organizations who would benefit from access to the knowledge garnered from this study.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including the dedication of approximately 1-4 interactive sessions for a period of ½ hour to one hour each time. Additional sessions may be held if it is determined that one session was not enough time to discuss the extent of your experience. These sessions will be audio taped. There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you decide to withdraw, your data may be not used without your permission. All collected data will be destroyed by December 2015. All paper data (i.e. interview transcripts will be shredded. All computer data will be erased. It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the form of a final thesis.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by the study data only being made accessible to the primary investigators. During the duration of the study, data is stored on a password protected computer disk and will only be accessible to the study's primary investigator and thesis advisor(s). Your individual experience with finding a school may be possible to identify by those within the community and could limit your confidentiality in participating in this study. To prevent this, pseudonyms will be utilized to protect your identity, no specifics schools will be identified and your child's specific disability will not be mentioned.

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include:

James Cairns, Researcher
_____

Sibylle Artz, Thesis Advisor
_____

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (ethics@uvic.ca OR 2504724545).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	*Signature*	*Date*

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher

Appendix D: Interactive Session Questions for Participants

1. Can you describe your experience of finding a school for your child with a disability?
2. What were some key moments to finding a school?
3. Were there any particular reasons why you chose this school?
4. Did you seek any support from any individual in particular in making this selection?
5. Is there anything that could have been done to support you more?
6. Did you feel like you were a part of this decision?
7. Is there anything that you think could have made your experience even better?
8. What advice would you offer to other parents that are currently going through a similar experience?