Parental Information Seeking and Use in School Choice Decision Making

by

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Abstract

One of the most important responsibilities parents take on is deciding where their children will be schooled. Alberta offers the most choices of schooling types in Canada, including public, separate, charter, private and homeschooling (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016). Parents engage in information seeking to make school choice decisions for their kindergarten- and elementary-aged children. Researchers have looked at why parents choose particular types of schooling, but how parents make school choice decisions is less well-known. I interviewed 10 parents with elementary school-aged children to gain insights into what information they sought when choosing their children's schools. The purpose of my qualitative case study was to explore:

1. What information do parents obtain about school choice?

2. From where and from whom do parents derive information about school choice?

3. How do parents use this information in making school choice decisions for their children?

I used Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) as a theoretical framework. This framework guided my analysis of sixteen interview transcripts. I structured the information sources and types used by parents into four themes that matched with Bronfenbrenner's four systems of influence: emotional factors/microsystem; social factors/mesosystem; material factors/exosystem; and cultural factors/macrosystem. As the decision makers, parents were at the center of these four spheres of influence. Parents were active information seekers. They filtered information through their family values when making decisions. Emotional information was the most influential force on parental decision making. These findings are important for educational stakeholders, who want to ensure that information is accessible by and useful to parents.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Leanne Thompson. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name "Parental information seeking and use in school choice decision making", No. Pro00083122, July 18, 2018.

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Chapter One: Outline of Study

One of the most important responsibilities parents take on is deciding where their children will be educated, and school choice is one of the basic values underlying education in Alberta. The concept of school choice was formalized in the *Education Act* (2012). In the preamble, the *Education Act* states that the Government of Alberta "... is committed to providing choice to students in education programs and methods of learning…" and:

> ... believes in and is committed to one publicly funded education system that provides a choice of educational opportunities to students and that honours the rights guaranteed under the Constitution of Canada in respect of minority language and minority denominational education…(p.11).

Alberta offers the most choices of schooling types in Canada, including public, separate, charter, private and homeschooling (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016).

The Government of Alberta also notes "... parents have the right and responsibility to make informed decisions respecting the education of their children…" (*Education Act*, 2012, p.11). Researchers have looked at why parents choose particular types of schooling, but how parents come to that decision is less well-known. The purpose of this research was to explore:

1. What information do parents obtain about school choice?

2. From where and from whom do parents derive information about school choice?

3. How do parents use this information in making school choice decisions for their children?

According to Statistics Canada (n.d.), at least 97% of live births in each year from 2014 to 2018 were to women over the age of 20. It is reasonable to assume that the majority of parents

are adults. Parents are adult learners and adult learners are influenced by biological and environmental factors, historical and current contexts, as well as their specific life events (MacKeracher, 2004). As primary decision makers for their children, an understanding of how parents use information to make decisions is useful to educational stakeholders (Crocco et al., 2017). My aim in this case study was to provide insight into how parents seek and use information to make decisions about schooling in a province that holds dear a policy of choice.

Study Rationale

My personal experience with information seeking started me on this thesis journey. I began to notice that most internet searches about medical topics returned results that were blog post opinion pieces, and it was difficult to find answers substantiated with scientific evidence. Political campaigns in both Alberta and the United States demonstrated how social media manipulated the information people were exposed to and used in forming their opinions. I was struck by the range of information sources my adult peers used to support their beliefs.

As I progressed through graduate studies, I expanded my own beliefs as to what constituted "evidence," coming to understand that "educational evidence based on qualitative data has its place in informing debates, engaging intellectualism, and enriching the experience of school and teaching" (Stelmach, 2016, p. 30). Being once again part of the Faculty of Education, I was drawn back to my previous experience within the field of education. I attended public and Catholic schools, and I was an early childhood educator and classroom teacher in both a public and a private school. As I learned about homeschooling through a friend's journey, and gave birth to my first child, I became more interested in school choice.

The Alberta Student Population Statistics gives an overview of school choices made by Albertan parents. For 2019-20, this overview showed that of the 741,082 students, 66% attended

public schools, 23% attended separate schools, 1% attended charter schools, 3% attended private schools, and 4% attended schools in other school authorities not addressed in this study (Government of Alberta, n.d.-c). Homeschool students are not reported because they are registered within an existing school authority, but a Government of Alberta Education Analyst provided data showing 2% of all students were enrolled in some sort of home education program (S. Mickelson, personal communication, February 26, 2020).

Parents choose different types of schooling for different reasons. Some choose homeschooling to have direct control over their children's education (Bhatt, 2014; Boschee & Boschee, 2011; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007). Religious beliefs can be a major factor in the choice of schooling (Beaubot & Cambre 2013; Boschee & Boschee, 2011). Geography sometimes plays a role in school choice decision making (Bell, 2009; Silver et al., 2012). In wondering how parents made school choice decisions, I found that Bosetti and Pyryt (2007) and Smrekar (2009) included information source questions in their studies, but the majority of research looked at why parents made particular school choice decisions. My qualitative research study addressed the gap in the scholarly literature by looking at how parents made school choice decisions.

Understanding parental information seeking and decision making for school choice is important for educational stakeholders. A better understanding of how parents use information in making school choice decisions, as well as the types and sources of information parents use, can help the government, school authorities, and individual schools ensure that they are providing useful and accessible information to parents. Enhancing our knowledge of how parents use information in their school choice decision making adds depth to the reasons they give for why they choose to educate their child in a particular type of schooling.

School Choice in Alberta

Choosing how your child is educated is a hallmark of a free society (Donnelly, 2012). The government is responsible for ensuring all citizens have a basic level of education, but in Alberta, the *Education Act* (2012) specifies this is a shared responsibility with parents. As an example of how this is translated to the school authority level, Edmonton Public Schools, one of the largest school authorities in Alberta, explicitly promotes choice as a responsibility of parents to do what is best for their individual children. Their publication *Alternative Programs: An Overview* (Edmonton Public Schools, 2016) states that students cannot, and should not, be educated all in the same way. Although school authorities throughout Alberta attempt to offer program choice within their jurisdictions, the type of schooling—public, separate, charter, private or homeschooling—a child will attend is also a choice.

Most Albertan parents choose to send their children to government-funded public or separate schools (Government of Alberta, n.d.-c). Within both of those school systems are alternative programs that emphasize a particular language, culture, religion, subject-matter or teaching philosophy (*Education Act,* 2012). Examples of government-funded alternative programs that exist in Alberta include: non-denominational Christian faith; sports-specific such as hockey, lacrosse, and soccer; learning environments based on aboriginal cultures, languages, and traditions; and international baccalaureate certification.

Charter schools are also fully government-funded and cannot charge tuition fees. Charter schools were created in 1994 to "provide enhanced or innovative delivery of public education to students. This means that parents and students have increased opportunity to choose an education that best serves student needs" (Government of Alberta, 2015, p.1). The Minister of Education approves charter school applications, which must be renewed every five to fifteen years with

clear evidence of success in meeting the terms of their charter (Alberta Learning, 2015). Charter schools are mandated to follow the Alberta Programs of Study, but they have some leeway to "meet the needs of a specific group of students, not every student in Alberta" (Government of Alberta, 2015, p. 8). As of January 2020, there were 13 charter schools in Alberta (Government of Alberta, n.d.-a), with learning philosophies such as traditional and teacher-directed, or centered around a specific musical teaching method.

Private schools do not have to teach the Alberta Programs of Study, but must at least "inspire all students to achieve success and fulfillment, and reach their full potential by developing competencies of Engage Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit, who contribute to a strong and prosperous economy and society" (Government of Alberta, 2017, p.3). Private schools can receive partial per-student funding from the government. Both the level of funding and the number of parents choosing to place their children in private schools have increased since 1967 (Bosetti et al., 2017).

Parents are also increasingly choosing homeschooling (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Bosetti et al., 2017; Glanzer, 2013). In Alberta, homeschooled students must be registered with an existing school authority and be evaluated twice a year by a teacher from that school authority. Parents receive guidance from the *Alberta Home Education Handbook* (Government of Alberta, 2010), which provides a simplification of the *Home Education Regulation* (2019) section of the *Education Act*, (2012) as well as advice on planning, preparing and implementing a home education program. Homeschooling families can receive some government funding to support learning activities, but they are not required to follow the Alberta Programs of Study (Government of Alberta, 2010).

In Alberta, parents can choose which type of schooling their children attend: public, separate, charter, private or homeschooling. Parents are responsible for making school choice decisions. The government believes that children's education is a responsibility shared with parents, and believes that Albertan parents want as much choice as possible.

The School Choice Market

Bosetti et al. (2017) argued that demand by parents for school choice has grown in Canada partially in response to the growing knowledge-based economy. Parents increasingly worry that "effort and ability alone are insufficient to ensure advancement in a globally competitive labor market" (p. 5). Parents recognize that intellectual capital will help their child succeed in such a market; therefore, parents feel pressured to make the best possible educational choices for their children.

A market-based assumption underlying school choice is that parents' decisions are made based on the educational needs of their children and by making choices, parents encourage schools to improve, thereby improving the education system for all (Altenhofen, et al., 2016; Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007; Sahlberg, 2016). In addition, by supplying the choices parents want, the demand by parent preference is met (Stein et al., 2011).

School choice is a way the government can appease parents as stakeholders in the education system. But school choice is also a way parents can rebel against "governmentality", which are the ways "social institutions seek to guide, shape, and direct the behaviour of others *and* the ways individuals govern themselves and their actions" (Baez & Talburt, 2008, p. 27). Parents who are wary of government interference in their private lives may prefer smaller, private institutions that have less government involvement (Bosetti et al., 2017).

Parents may view school choice decision making in terms of "return on investment" (Giustinelli & Manski, 2018). Looking at choice through an economic lens assumes decision makers choose their preferred option after gaining a full understanding of all the available choices. Anxiety around their child's future success may see parents marking their child's kindergarten experience as the beginning of the journey to eventual success in the working world. This worry is particularly seen in middle class parents (Reay, 2004).

The school choice market is well-established in Alberta, and it is only going to become more entrenched when the current government passes its proposed *Choice in Education Act* (Government of Alberta, n.d.-b). Choices abound between types of schooling and within each type of schooling. Parents must seek information about a multitude of choices in order to make the best choice for their children.

Definitions

Two terms require defining to clarify my research study: school choice and parent. *School choice* is the option for parents to enroll their children in one of the types of schooling available in Alberta. *Parent* is the term used to denote the adult responsible for the care of a child and is not limited to a biological relationship.

Delimitations

This case study was bounded by parents with children entering kindergarten or elementary school in Alberta. I focused on parents making decisions for their children in kindergarten or elementary school. In later years children might participate in decision making, but near the start of children's educational journeys, parents will be the primary information seekers and decision makers. A good understanding of how some parents obtain and use

information to make school choice decisions could help improve the ways choices about schooling are communicated, which would benefit all parents.

I used the social media networking site Facebook for recruitment. It was convenient and did not incur costs to use. However, this meant that only people who are connected to Facebook would easily have the opportunity to volunteer for my study.

Limitations

Using case study methodology meant I could look deeply into parental information seeking and decision making, but because the sample size was 10, findings were impossible to extrapolate to the whole population (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study included only parents who contacted me to participate. The parents in the sample all belonged to a higher socioeconomic status, inferred by the fact that all participants reported a post-secondary qualification for both themselves and their partners; each participant belonged to a two-parent household. Nine of the 10 participants were mothers; I use the inclusive term "parent" throughout the study. Nine of the 10 participants lived in urban areas and the one rurally located parent chose homeschooling before moving to the area, so information seeking in rural Alberta school authorities is not represented. None of the parents chose charter schooling, or were currently enrolled in private schooling.

Methodology and Methods

In this case study, I interviewed 10 parents who lived in Alberta. I conducted 18 semi-structured interviews either face-to-face or over the telephone, interviewing eight of the parents twice. The first round of interviews was part of a supervised pilot project occurring throughout the summer of 2018. The successful pilot became my thesis research and I did a second round of interviews in the spring of 2019. For the entire project, I used Bronfenbrenner's Ecological

Systems Theory (1979) as a guiding theoretical framework. His model of four systems of overlapping influence was a useful way to analyze my data and conceptualize how parents used information to make school choice decisions.

Thesis Organization

My thesis is organized in five chapters. In this introductory chapter, I explained the context, purpose, and rationale for my study, described the methodology and methods I used, and provided definitions, delimitations and limitations for my research. In Chapter Two, I synthesize literature related to adult learning, decision making, school choice, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). Chapter Three explains the case study methodology used, data collection and analysis methods, as well as the use of Ecological Systems Theory as a theoretical framework. In Chapter Four, I present my data and the themes I created. The final chapter of this thesis describes those themes in the context of the theoretical framework, and discusses the answers to my research questions, the implications of my findings, and suggests some future research directions.

Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

In this chapter I synthesize literature pertinent to situating my research questions. Because the purpose of my study was to learn about parental information seeking and decision making for school choice, I focused on literature having to do with parental information seeking and decision making in relation to children, including health and education strands. My preference was for Canadian research, but I necessarily included research emerging from other countries, choosing those with somewhat familiar education systems such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia. I also looked at studies that used Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to support using it as my guiding theoretical framework.

Information Seeking and Decision Making

The main focus of my study was information seeking and decision making. To review this strand of the literature, I used ProQuest Education Database, Education Research Complete, and ERIC. I utilized the search terms "theoretical framework" AND "decision making" AND "parent". I repeated this process using "theoretical framework" AND "school choice" AND "parent", and also with "information seeking" AND "decision making" AND "parent". I searched for scholarly English-language articles with a publication date no earlier than the year 1994, which is the year charter schools were established in Alberta, creating the unique school choice situation (Government of Alberta, 2015). My search cast a wide net, and I found results in strands of literature having to do with business, sociology, education, and health. I scanned the abstracts and selected a broad range of research, favouring studies that were conducted in Canada or in the somewhat familiar school systems of the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia.

For my research, health and education literature strands were the most relevant. There is also a robust strand of business literature having to do with organizational decision making. Wanting to broaden my understanding of decision making, I perused the *Handbook of Decision Making* (Nutt & Wilson, 2010), a book which the authors state is useful for PhD programmes in business schools.

Nutt and Wilson (2010) thought of organizations as "any collective social, economic, or political activity involving a plurality of human effort" (p.3). Using this definition, I thought of a family as an organization. Decision making is a situated activity, occurring in specific contexts. At a macro-level, organizations—in this case study, families—can look similar because they are in the same social, economic, and political contexts. Investigating decision making at the micro-level—a decision maker within a family, the parent—can highlight differences in the process of decision making. Decision making is a process "with several steps that embrace intelligence gathering and implementation in addition to choice" (p. 15). Organizational decision making is a significant area of scholarship; however, my study focuses on information seeking and decision making at the individual level.

Information seeking is key to decision making. Crocco et al. (2017) outlined seven types of information that might be used in decision making: statistical data; research; expert judgements; personal experiences; anecdote/secondhand experiences; examples; and laws/policies. However, Crocco et al. found that during decision making, people were apt to filter information through their existing belief structures and be more wary of information that challenged those beliefs. In addition, evidence drawn from social groups tended to be more seriously considered.

The internet is the most relied upon source of information for parents making health-related decisions for their children (Grant & Hoffman, 2016; Sharpe et al., 2016; Tracey et al., 2018; Walsh et al., 2015). Parents of children with disabilities used the internet as a starting point to find out information about their children's diagnoses and to connect with other parents (Grant & Hoffman, 2016; Sharpe et al., 2016; Tracey et al., 2018). Although the internet is a convenient information source, parents across studies felt that it could not replace person-to-person communication. Health professionals were the most trusted source of information, and the advice of parents in similar circumstances was highly valued.

Within the education-related literature, the most influential source of information is a parent's social network (Altenhofen et al, 2016; Beaubot & Cambre, 2013; Joshi, 2014; Wanat, 2012). Bosetti and Gereluk, two educational researchers who have focused on the Canadian education system, noted that "decision making…is part of a social process influenced by indicators of social class, race, and gender, and networks of social relationship" (2016, p. 25). When it comes to making choices about school, family members and friends will have opinions and "word of mouth" spreads within different community groups. Parents might also do primary research by attending school tours and open houses, by talking to principals and teachers, or by reading websites.

My case study adds to literature that explores parental information seeking and decision making by investigating the types of information parents use. My study also looks at where parents source their information. By asking how parents use information for decision making, I provide a new angle to the existing research.

Who Chooses?

In school choice literature that discusses parental decision making, there is agreement among many researchers that parents of higher socioeconomic status are the parents who engage most in decision making for school choice. Seghers et al. (2019) delineated a clear association between social class and school choice. As a parent's social class increased, so did the likelihood that they had engaged in information seeking and decision making up to a year earlier than working class parents. Middle-class and upper middle-class parents were more familiar with educational pathways, and were more likely to steer their children along the path to university instead of a technical or vocational career. Those parents also had networks who could provide relevant advice.

Smrekar (2009) found that the school choice literature tends to assume all parents have access to the necessary information for making school choice decisions. However, she noted that districts vary in what information they provide. The less information available, the more work a parent had to put in to discover the options. Lower income parents might have fewer resources such as time and ability to actively participate in school choice decision making (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Reay, 2004; Smrekar, 2009; Swift, 2003). With fewer resources, it is less likely that parents in lower-income households would engage in school choice information seeking. Working-class parents experienced barriers to information seeking such as not speaking the dominant language, having less informed social networks, and being less familiar with where and how to obtain information (Seghers et al., 2019). Even when working-class parents were active choosers, they saw themselves as disadvantaged by having less knowledge about available choices (Ellison & Aloe, 2019).

Parents with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to seek out schooling that will give their children an advantage, with the perception that private schools produce better student outcomes (Altenhofen et al., 2016; Bosetti et al., 2017). Bosetti and Pyryt (2007) found that families in the highest income bracket were most represented in private schools. Private schools require tuition payments and usually incur additional fees with extra program offerings. Parents most likely bear the responsibility for transportation to private schools. Homeschooling usually requires one parent to be constantly supervising their children, making it more accessible to families who can afford to live on a single income. Exploring school choice options may be more feasible for families with more income.

Bosetti & Gereluk (2016) stated that school choice could be positioned as a way to increase equity by providing enhanced programming to families who otherwise would not be able to afford those options. Findings by Bosetti and Pyryt (2007) were contrary to the narrative that only higher income parents engaged in school choice decision making. They conducted research in Alberta that surveyed parents about their elementary school choice decision making for their children. When looking at the demographic data collected, Bosetti and Pyryt found that parents with lower incomes tended to choose schools with alternative programs, such as language immersion or a special focus on the arts, sciences, or sports. On the other hand, middle-class families were represented fairly equally in private, public, and separate schools, as well as in schools with alternative programs.

The literature shows that schools assume that parents are able to seek information about their choices. Many researchers agree that parents in a higher socioeconomic status are more likely to investigate different choices, though this premise has been challenged. My study builds

on the idea of parents being active choosers, who are able to access information about the available choices.

Why do Parents Choose Particular Types of Schooling?

Research conducted in two large, urban school systems in Alberta showed that 83% of parents selected their neighbourhood elementary school and of those parents, 47% did not look at other options (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007). For parents who chose a public school, their top three reasons were its location in relation to their home, the school's academic reputation, and the reputation of the principal. For parents who chose a public school offering an alternative program, their top three reasons were the school's academic reputation, programming, and underlying philosophy. For parents who chose a private school, their reasons were the underlying school philosophy, academic reputation, and pedagogical style. These reasons for choosing a certain type of school recurred throughout the literature.

Geography can play a varying role in parents' choice of schools. School proximity to home and convenience of location, especially in terms of transportation options, are often driving forces in school choice decision making (Joshi, 2014; Smrekar, 2009). Bell (2009) described geography as having varied roles in school choice. She used the term "framing role" to indicate when choice is made within a defined area, and used the term "shifting role" when distance limited how far a parent was willing to travel even though they preferred a certain type of school. Bell then labeled geography as having a "non-existent role" when a parent prioritized a specific need and was willing to travel to a school that fulfilled that need.

Where one lives affects which public schools are available (Neal, 2009). It also affects the availability of non-academic schooling features such as sports, fine arts, and religion, which

may prompt parents to make certain school choices. If these activities are not available outside of school, parents might be drawn to schools that offer them.

Academic quality is cited by many parents as the main characteristic driving school choice (Davies, 2015; Holmes, 2008; Smrekar, 2009; Stein, et al., 2011). Dougherty et al. (2013) created an online tool to show local schooling options in a sort of "independent consumer report", which also provided links to the individual school websites. Parents in their study usually sorted the options by distance and student achievement scores. However, the schools that were their top choices tended to be the ones with the higher student achievement scores.

Parents may look at certain types of programs to give their children an academic advantage. For example, French immersion is a well-established program choice, with the goal of promoting bilingualism. However, because there are typically fewer students with special needs in French immersion, some view French immersion as "private education without tuition" (Holmes, 2008). Parents who are underwhelmed by the academic programming available in the traditional schooling system may choose to homeschool (Boschee & Boschee, 2011).

A growing factor in school choice is parents' desire to provide programming individualized to their children's needs (Bhatt, 2014; Pricharda & Swezey, 2016). This coincides with the growing culture of "intensive parenting" within the middle class where children are seen as the number one priority (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016). Some parents believe children should be allowed to flourish within a curriculum specific to all aspects of their identity, such as religion and ethnicity, rather than one that is state-mandated and generalized (Glanzer, 2013).

Parents of children with disabilities also prioritize elements that specifically would support their children, such as specialized staff and equipment (Glenn-Applegate et al., 2016). How their children would interact with teachers, materials, and peers were important factors. For

children with disabilities, parental decision making for school choice was highly motivated by their children's emotional well-being (Mann et al., 2018).

Other common reasons for choosing particular types of schooling are to focus on the familial connection, cement religious identity, and promote certain ideological or pedagogical beliefs. (Belifield, 2009; Bhatt, 2014; Boschee & Boschee, 2011; Holmes, 2008; Smrekar, 2009). Some parents, regardless of their religious beliefs, are under the impression that faith-based schools do a better job of character-building (Beaubot & Cambre, 2013). Parents may seek out a school community that shares similar values, in turn reinforcing the "cultural capital of the school" (Reay, 2004). Parents often base their decisions on their perceptions of the school environment: whether it is a positive community, has little social problems like bullying, and seems to be safe (Belifield, 2009; Boschee & Boschee, 2011; Ellison & Aloe, 2019; Smrekar, 2009). Holmes (2008) also pointed out that parents are attracted to schools that appear to promote collaboration with families.

Some parents choose to take direct control of their children's education by home schooling (Bhatt, 2014; Boschee & Boschee, 2011; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007). Parents may not think there is anything wrong with traditional schooling, but they view educating their children as their own responsibility so they opt to become their children's teacher (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Reay, 2004). Opting to homeschool is the most radical choice a parent can make, as it requires almost wholly withdrawing from the traditional institutional system. Donnelly (2012) suggested that although most homeschooling research is American-based, motivations of parents are similar around the world. He noted that negative factors related to academics or social issues "push" parents away from publicly funded schools and positive factors such as family or religious values "pull" parents toward homeschooling.

Many of these reasons could reasonably be applied to the decision to choose between other types of schooling: public, separate, private or charter.

School choice decision making literature helps us understand why parents make the choices they do. However, there is little discussion in the literature about how parents come to their decisions. My study broadens this area of literature by focusing on the information sources and types that parents use, and how they use information in making school choice decisions for their children.

Studies That Use Ecological Systems Theory

I used Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) as a lens through which I viewed and analyzed my findings. As a novice researcher, I felt it was important to have good understanding of the theoretical framework I intended to use. To ensure I interpreted and applied Ecological Systems Theory effectively, I read about how others used it. I performed a literature search using the terms "Bronfenbrenner" OR "ecological systems theory" AND "school choice" AND "information seeking" AND "decision making." Four studies were particularly useful, as they showed how Ecological Systems Theory could be adapted to place the decision maker at the center of four systems of influence.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) has been used in research related to parental decision making. Marquis (2004) explained choices made by parents when purchasing food. She proposed that eating behaviour is affected by four levels of influence, based on a combination of social cognitive theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. The primary level of influence is the individual/microsystem, which includes psychosocial factors. Next are social environmental/mesosystem factors such as peers. The third level contains the physical environment/exosystem influences of the community. Finally, the societal/macrosystem

level includes cultural norms. Viewing the decision maker at the center of the varying levels of influence coincided with the intent of my study.

Orders (2012) adapted Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ideas to explain the experiences of mothers as they made educational decisions for their gifted children. She conceptualized the parent at the center of Bronfenbrenner's four concentric circles: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Orders used these four levels to interpret the barriers and facilitators mothers experienced in their educational decision making journey, such as mothers' intuition (microsystem); other parents of gifted children (mesosystem); location of gifted centres (exosystem); and societal views of gifted education (macrosystem). This was similar to how I saw parents operating in school choice information seeking and decision making.

In looking at decision making for physical activity, Kiley and Robinson (2016) explained how Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems overlap with each other, while interacting with the decision maker at the center. For example, academic goals of the individual were in the microsystem, peer influences were in the mesosystem, and educational policies were part of the macrosystem. Different sets of systems had varying levels of power to influence the decision maker. Ravindran and Myers (2012) demonstrated that one system can dominate. During their research into autism treatment decisions, they found macrosystem factors—cultural beliefs— shaped what families believed about disability and impacted decisions about treatment.

Initially conceived to explain child development, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) has been successfully adapted for use in research about adults. The literature showed that adult decision makers can be imagined at the center of Bronfenbrenner's four systems of influence. This was a useful lens through which to view parental information seeking

and decision making for school choice and my study added to the literature using Bronfenbrenner's theories.

Summary

Reviewing literature increased my awareness of what information parents use. I gained an understanding of who tends to make school choice decisions, and why parents make certain choices. I discovered the usefulness of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory as a theoretical framework. My case study added to this collective knowledge, and enhanced it, by addressing how parents used information to make school choice decisions. In the next chapter, I outline the methodology and methods used to inquire into what information parents obtained, from where and from whom they obtained information, and how they used information in school choice decision making.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods

This study began as a pilot project, which was expanded and revised for my final thesis work. For both the pilot and the subsequent thesis research, I conducted a case study of Alberta parents and used semi-structured interviews to discuss school choice information seeking and decision making. Using Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to analyze the data, I developed four themes to explain what information parents obtained about school choice, from where and from whom they obtained information, and how they used this information in making school choice decisions for their children.

Methodology

The province of Alberta was an ideal location for conducting a case study investigating parental information seeking and decision making about school choice because compared to other provinces and territories, Alberta offers the most school choice and enshrines choice in its *Education Act* (2012). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that a case study allows for high-quality descriptions of research phenomena. They defined a case study as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37). The bounded system of my case study was parents within Alberta; in particular, parents who were information seeking and decision making for school choice. In later years, children might participate in school choice information seeking and decision making but near the start of their educational journeys, parents are the primary information seekers and decision makers.

The nature of qualitative research is to go deep, not broad (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). There are millions of parents in the world who all seek information on any number of topics. In my research, I specifically wanted to know about the phenomenon of parental information seeking and decision making in the context of Alberta school choice. Case study allowed me to

delve deeply into the experience of Albertan parents. I learned from where and from whom some parents gathered information about school choice and I described how they used that information to make school choice decisions.

The Pilot Study

I first piloted this research study as part of an independent study project, during which I conducted semi-structured interviews with nine participants. The pilot helped me learn about myself as a researcher and about the research process. Through the first set of interviews I was able to get to know my participants, as well as gather an initial set of data about my research topic. By analyzing the initial data, I discovered what more I wanted to know.

I was comfortable with the conversational aspect of semi-structured interviews, and the pilot helped me learn how easy it was to follow a participant on an interesting tangent. I was truly interested in people and their experiences, but I had to become better at redirecting the discussion back to the research focus. Through completing the first set of transcriptions, I learned to comment less and rely more on non-verbal cues to encourage participants to continue sharing their thoughts. The pilot also taught me to immediately create backups of audio recordings.

During the pilot, I gathered rich data about sources of information about school choice and how parents used information when making school choice decisions. The complexity of my research topic was illustrated by the range of different information and information sources that parents used when decision making. The pilot also confirmed that I wanted to pursue my original research questions.

The pilot helped me develop a second set of interview questions (see Appendix C) by making me aware of where I wanted to dig deeper into the research phenomenon. I wanted to probe into parents' own schooling experiences as an influence on their current behaviour and

discuss how their schooling type was similar to or different from the choices they made for their children. I also wanted to find out more about the power of first impressions of schooling spaces, as well as ask about other possible information sources such as the news media and standardized test scores.

I deemed the pilot study a success. It was useful in refining the research design and provided relevant data for thesis research. I amended the pilot project into a thesis research project. I recruited one more participant and conducted a second set of interviews with participants from the pilot. The University of Alberta Research Ethics Office approved the pilot and subsequent amendment, reviewing the application, recruitment material (see Appendix A), participant consent form (see Appendix B), and interview questions (see Appendix C).

Participant Recruitment

Merriam and Tisdell noted that "initial informants can be found through the investigator's own personal contacts, community and private organizations, advertisements on bulletin boards, or on the Internet" (2016, p. 127). The online social networking site Facebook could act as a digital version of a free bulletin board. Brickman Bhutta (2012) used Facebook as a tool for survey research and noted its recruitment potential for qualitative research, due to the ease of sharing and vast number of possible "views" of shared posts.

I created a simple website describing my research study and shared it as a post on my personal Facebook page, where it was potentially viewed by the more than 300 people in my personal online network. Facebook allows you to see who shares your posts, so I saw that eight individuals in my online network shared the post about my research study. Collectively, those eight people had more than 2,500 people in their own online Facebook networks who may have seen the post and it is possible that it was shared even further. This wide-reach was an advantage

to using a social networking site for participant recruitment. A disadvantage was that it does not guarantee a representative sample of the general population as it excludes those who do not have access to the Internet or who do not participate on social networking sites (Brickman Bhutta, 2012).

Interested parents contacted me via email, and I selected parents who were making school choice decisions for their kindergarten or elementary school-aged children. This was purposeful random sampling, where the selection of participants was related to their relevance (Yin, 2016). I emailed the participants an information letter and consent form that outlined the study's background, purpose, and procedures. These documents also gave an overview of the benefits, risks, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. Participants either signed the consent form and returned a scanned version via email, or gave me a signed paper copy at our face-to-face interview.

After interviewing nine participants, I felt I had reached saturation, which "occurs when continued data collection produces no new information or insights into the phenomenon" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.199). Interviewing a tenth participant confirmed data saturation, but, due to a technology glitch, the data from nine participants was ultimately used. This study looked at the parental information seeking and decision making within the unique school choice system that exists in Alberta; therefore, all participants lived in Alberta. They all operated within two-parent households, with both partners having varied levels of post-secondary education. Participant employment status ranged from full-time stay-at-home parent to part-time and full-time work-outside-the home parent. A summary of participants and their school choice decisions is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Participants' Children and School Choice Decisions

Participant Name (Pseudonym)	Number of Children	Ages of Children	School Choice Decision
Alyssa	2	9, 12	Homeschooling (current) Private school (previous)
Violet	2	9, 12	Public school (current) Private school (previous)
Iris	2	4, 5	Public school
Jasmine	1	5	Public school
Rose	3	2, 3, 4	Public school
Lily	2	4, 7	Public school
Daisy	2	3, 5	Public school
Erica	3	5, 7, 10	Separate (Catholic) school
Poppy	2	5, 9	Separate (Catholic) school

Data Collection

Semi-structured individual interviews were the chief data source. I interviewed 10 participants either face-to-face or over the telephone, eight of whom I interviewed twice. I audio-recorded all interviews, and two were lost due to a technology glitch. I excluded one participant's data from the study because after the loss of their recorded interview they did not respond to further communication. One participant did agree to a second interview after the loss of their first interview and one participant was only available for one interview. In total, I transcribed 16 interviews for analysis.

I used the same sets of questions to guide each interview, letting the discussion emerge. As suggested by Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013), I aimed to bring awareness to my biases by balancing the key role of listener with the role of prompter who encourages thoughtful pauses, manages transitions, and seeks clarification.

At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the participant consent form and gave participants the opportunity to ask questions about any aspect of their participation, such as anonymity or confidentiality. I reminded them of their right to discontinue their voluntary participation and/or to withdraw all or part of their data from the research study before data analysis began. I reiterated this option when I sent them their transcripts with a short, preliminary analysis. Giving participants the opportunity to review their transcripts was a form of member checking that helped establish trustworthiness of data (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013).

I used a researcher journal to keep an audit trail, record reflective field notes, and write memos after each interview. During transcription and data analysis, I also wrote memos within the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. I used Pedable and NVivo to transcribe the audio-recordings. Google Docs and Google Sheets were instrumental for organizing and analyzing my data. Google Docs was the main word processing program I used to make memos and write drafts. Keeping track of codes and subsequent analysis in Google Sheets allowed for easy sorting and reorganization of data.

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously to maintain rigor and inform next steps, as directed by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). For example, when I wrote my reflections after each interview, I mused about potential answers to my research questions. This assisted me in facilitating the discussions with the next participants in that I could steer the conversation toward a point for elaboration. This was particularly helpful when I began to see that parents filtered

information through their family values; I knew to probe further when a participant brought up an information source that could be interpreted differently depending on the participant's values. I was also primed so that when a participant brought up this idea of filtering of her own accord, I was able to discuss it as research finding and get her thoughts about it.

Theoretical Framework

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was originally designed to explain how a child's environment influences their development. The theory is built upon the premise that four systems influence an individual. The microsystem is the primary setting of the individual. The mesosystem is one level removed and includes the multiple secondary settings in which the individual interacts. The exosystem contains settings that affect the individual, but in which the individual does not actively participate. The macrosystem acts on all of the systems, being made up of the broader culture of the individual. In my study, I replaced the developing child at the center of the systems with the decision-making parent.

Bronfenbrenner viewed himself as a participant observer as he reflected on his own life course (1995). The individual at the center of the four systems is an active participant and they influence, and are influenced by, each system in ways that are unique (Darling, 2007). The systems in this theory each contain different environments, relationships, and concepts with which the individual at the center can interact. Ecological Systems Theory assumes that the systems surrounding an individual affect that individual's development. This can be applied to a parent as an information seeker and decision maker. Different sources and types of information surround the parent and influence their school choice decision making.

Bronfenbrenner described the systems as nested Russian dolls. This metaphor aligned with my assumption that the parent is at the center of other spheres that influence them. For

example, Bronfenbrenner's microsystem is what I assumed has the strongest influence on parents. The microsystem contains the "patterns of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). In my study, I expected to find parents most closely influenced by such sources of information as their own lived experience with schooling, their children's specific needs, their home location, and any existing connections with schools.

Microsystems interact with each other and make up the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For the mesosystem in this study, I expected to find parents influenced by interactions with extended family and peers. I also expected this second sphere of influence to contain information gathered from social media and school open houses.

The third sphere of influence on parents was the exosystem. This sphere influenced parents, but parents generally had little control over aspects of the exosystem. Throughout my study, I expected the exosystem to contain school authority publications, school trustees, and local infrastructure.

Finally, the ideology, beliefs, and culture surrounding parents make up the macrosystem. The macrosystem influenced parents at the broadest level and influenced the other three spheres surrounding the parent. In this study, anticipated macrosystem examples were the concept of school choice, school policies, and the Alberta Ministry of Education.

Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory as a theoretical framework was well-suited to this study. During data analysis, I kept in mind the visualization of a parent at the center of four spheres. The lens of Ecological Systems Theory helped me to code, categorize, and create themes in the data to answer my research questions:

1. What information do parents obtain about school choice?

2. From where and from whom do parents derive information about school choice?

3. How do parents use this information in making school choice decisions for their

   children?

Data Analysis and Interpretation

I employed NVivo qualitative analysis software to manage the data. I imported my audio

recordings into NVivo and transcribed the interviews within the software. After using NVivo to

conduct some preliminary analyses, I found that old-fashioned paper and highlighter (and the

technological equivalent in Google Docs and Sheets) was more suitable to my personal learning

style.

While reading through a paper copy of each transcript, I highlighted passages that I

considered relevant to my research questions and assigned those passages a code. Codes often

came from the words used by the participants, as part of in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016). This

reading, reviewing, recognizing, and recording led to a list of 90 codes. For example, I picked

out each mention of an open house, coding those excerpts as "open house". Open houses are

promotional events organized by schools to which parents are invited and they were important

sources of information that usually involved a presentation by the principal and a tour of the

school.

During the next phase of data analysis, I used the Constant Comparative Method of

Analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). As I read a digital copy of each transcript, I copied and pasted

relevant excerpts into a Google Sheet and assigned each excerpt a code. When I came across the

next piece of data that should be assigned a code, I compared it to the existing code list and

either gave it a code that already existed or a new code. Glaser and Strauss (1965) noted that the

analyst should record memos reflecting their own thought processes. This coordinated with

Saldaña's (2016) advice to make a memo on each code. Therefore, in the column beside each data excerpt and code, I noted why I decided to assign a particular code to each particular piece of data. Continuing with the open house example, beside each data excerpt with the code open house, I wrote a description of the inclusion criteria, such as "mentioned open house", "did not consciously rate the information from the open house as useful", or "was able to get information about both grades at the open house". This helped me maintain the "freshness of the analyst's theoretical notions and to relieve the conflict in thought" (Glaser & Strauss, 1965, p. 440).

Constant comparison necessitated reflecting and re-strategizing. When finished with each transcript, I sorted the Google Sheet containing my analysis by code. This sorting placed each piece of data with the same code next to each other. This allowed for easy review of the data, the growing list of codes, and the descriptions I gave each code. I considered each grouping, checking if I should alter the criteria used to guide the inclusion of a piece of data to an existing code, rename the code, or leave it as it was. As I examined the inclusion criteria for the code open house, I noticed that data coded as "tour" and as "orientation" had similar inclusion criteria: They all involved a description of a visit to a school by a parent. This prompted me to group the data for these three codes together into "school visits".

By the end of that data analysis phase, I created 41 codes in my codebook. The next step was to, as Glaser and Strauss (1965) explained, delimit the data through a process of reduction to "a higher level, *smaller* set of concepts, based on discovering underlying uniformities" (p. 441). I accomplished the reduction of codes into categories by examining each set of data assigned the same code and reflecting on the memos written for each. During Constant Comparative Analysis, I followed Saldaña's (2016) advice to keep track of the name of the code, a description of the code, and the inclusion criteria for each datum. In reviewing the data grouped by a particular

code, I also considered whether each datum was a typical exemplar of the code. This helped deepen my understanding of each code and guided reflection of the relationships between codes.

I considered the codes, and the relationships between the codes. I looked for commonalities in types of information, sources of information, and ways the information seemed to influence parental information seeking and decision making. For example, when reviewing the data assigned to the various codes, I found that data for school visits related to data coded as "personal interactions", and so I decided to collapse these two sets of coded data into a category of "personal experiences". Following this process, I collapsed the codes into 11 categories. These categories were then ready to be scrutinized for themes.

After reviewing my field notes and journal reflections, I once again combed through my categorized data set. I also reviewed the memos written throughout analysis. I applied my theoretical framework, Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), to create themes from the data. I compared each category of data to the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem, assigning each category to one of the systems. A cluster of categories assigned to a system became a theme, and I thought of a broad explanatory phrase to be the name of each theme. In the example of "personal experiences", when viewed through my theoretical framework, I considered personal experiences to be primary sources of information for parents that directly impacted their emotions, and so placed personal interactions into microsystem, and named the theme "emotional factors".

Emotional factors was the first theme developed. These were information sources and types that produced an emotional reaction in the decision maker and are related to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) microsystem. The microsystem was the most immediate influence on parents. For my participants, the emotional factors were their thoughts and feelings, which

included their primary experiences, personal interactions, and perceptions of their children's needs.

The second theme I created I called "social factors". Related to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) mesosystem, social factors were information sources and types that were one level removed from the decision maker, but with which the decision maker still directly interacted. The mesosystem consisted of external forces that interacted with parents' microsystems. These external forces included digital information, advice from others, and the community.

Applying Bronfenbrenner's (1979) third level, the exosystem, I created the theme "material factors". The exosystem indirectly affected the parent at the center of the systems, but cannot be easily affected in turn by the parent. In my data, material factors tended to be visible, tangible things such as geography, infrastructure, and class size.

Information sources and types that permeated the exo-, meso-, and microsystem were included in the macrosystem. The macrosystem was the outermost level of influence on the parent at the center. The theme "cultural factors" came out of my data, matching with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) macrosystem. These factors were overarching belief structures that are woven through the fabric of society, such as political ideology. In Alberta, the provincial government sets the framework for schooling. Within the provincial framework exists the concept of school choice, as well as curriculum, policy, and standardized testing.

Summary

A successful pilot study turned thesis research formed my case study of parental information seeking and use for school choice decision making. Transcripts of semi-structured interviews with Albertan parents formed the bulk of my data for analysis. I used Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to create themes, and the final step in the process of

making sense from my data was to directly address the gap in the literature of how parents seek

and use information in school choice decision making. I mined the analytic memos I had made

for each code, category and theme, asking the question "How do parents use [code] in

information seeking and decision making?". My findings are presented and discussed in the

following chapters.

Chapter Four: Presentation of Data

Parents gather multiple types of information from multiple sources when they are learning about school choice. I applied Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) to create four themes that organized these information types and sources: emotional factors, social factors, material factors, and cultural factors. These four themes give structure to the following presentation of data about how parents use information in making school choice decisions.

Emotional Factors

Emotional factors were powerful influences on parental information seeking and decision making. These factors were part of parents' microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem was the sphere of influence that most closely surrounded a parent and contained parents' personal experiences. Parents' emotional reactions, what they thought and felt about those experiences, made up the theme of emotional factors. With the microsystem being the most influential system, it made sense that a large portion of data belonged to the emotional factors theme.

A significant information source for school choice was parents' own school experiences. Each participant clearly remembered their early elementary school experience. Their memories were emotional, and positive and negative emotions related to a school influenced their decision of whether their children would attend. During our interview, Alyssa made an important realization. She explained:

> But now that I homeschool and I look back on my education, I see things that happened during my traditional education that reminds me of homeschooling that I think was a catalyst for my curiosity and what I really liked to do in learning that I see sometimes replicated in homeschooling.

Alyssa, like some participants, had not consciously considered how her own school experiences influenced her choices for her children. Upon reflection during our interview, she was able to articulate how her thoughts and feelings about her own school experiences affected her school choice decision making.

Other participants were acutely aware of how their own school experiences influenced their information seeking and decision making. Some parents specifically sought out, or avoided, similar experiences for their children. This sometimes led to them seeking only information about one of the choices of type of schooling, such as public schools, for example.

More recent experiences with schools also influenced parents. Almost all participants attended an open house, personal tour, or orientation session. The way parents felt about how they were treated during these experiences had a significant impact on their information seeking and decision making. Poppy recalled:

> We had called [Name of School] and I didn't know that open houses happen so early in the year, so we had missed their open house and the secretary was really rude so we never ended up going to the school or looking it up at all. When I called [Name of School], the secretary was "Come on over, our principal will show you around." They had us come in during school time and they brought us in to the kindergarten class for [my son] and they were so welcoming and so willing to invite us in, that's what got us in [Name of School].

Poppy was not the only parent who felt unwelcome by a person in a school. When parents felt this way, this terminated their investigation, and they did not consider it as an option for their children. The opposite also held true; when school staff made parents feel welcome, those parents were motivated to find out more, and they seriously considered sending their children to that school.

Another way that emotions played a significant role in school choice decision making was through the first impression parents felt when they visited a school. Many parents used words like "cozy" and "homey" to describe schools to which they were attracted. Erica summarized this impact:

> It would be useful information to administration I think of schools, because maybe they don't realize the impact that those first moments when a parent enters their school for the first time, how meaningful those can be. But they absolutely influenced our choice. How the school felt when you walked in the front door.

Walking the school halls was a primary source of information and imagining their child in that space was an important emotional factor that influenced parental decision making.

Unsurprisingly, what a parent perceived as their children's needs were major factors affecting parental information seeking and decision making. Parents strongly desired a school environment that met those needs. Violet explained:

> Ultimately it was finding the right place that was specific enough to the needs of our children. And I think that whether that changes anything the school does with our kids or not or if they've always done that. Our perception is that [the school staff] know who they are as human beings and people and learners. For us that is what we looked for.

Parents considered their children's academic, social, and emotional needs when thinking about school choice. Some parents were drawn to find out more about a school due to its academic reputation, while others looked at how well equipped the school was to deal with individual student mental health.

What parents wanted, or specifically did not want, for their children drove their information seeking and decision making. This was usually based on parents' residual feelings

from their own experiences. For example, when choosing which schools to explore, some parents looked at only Catholic schools because they cared deeply about religion, and felt it was important for their children to have exposure to religion. Other parents looked at only public schools because they were adamant that religion had no place in schools. Language was another polarizing force. Rose loved learning a second language and so specifically wanted her child to have to similar positive experience. In contrast, Lily viewed language immersion as "dangerous" from her time working in private tutoring and was scared to place her child's learning at risk. Lily said:

> I noticed that so, so many of the kids over the years who had been in French immersion were coming to Sylvan [Learning] for remedial English and so I just got the impression that it was a dicey move to put your child in French immersion if they have no basis in reading yet at all.

Opinions about what experiences parents wanted their children to have stemmed from feelings retained from their own school experiences, or from their more current experiences with the education system.

Having insight into the education system through employment, social networks, or research were other influential factors within the parents' microsystem. This insight tended to make parents feel more at ease when information seeking to make school choice decisions. Lily, who works in post-secondary education, said:

> I think a difference is that I happen to live in a world of education, so all my people are educators and so maybe that makes me more relaxed. Maybe I would've been more nervous about making the right or wrong decision if I didn't know very much about it. If I had to make a medical decision and I'm not a doctor and I don't know any doctors, then

maybe I'd be more nervous about it. But because this is the realm I live in, maybe I was more relaxed about school choice.

Lily's knowledge of the education system made her more relaxed about school choice, and she acknowledged that her work in post-secondary education influenced her thoughts about schooling for her children. Learning more about the education system was common among the participants and made them feel more comfortable with information seeking and decision making. Rose regularly read articles sent to her by a professional parent educator and she also did her own academic research. Daisy was a current graduate student and used her university library to read journal articles on topics such as class size.

Some information came from external sources and some came from primary experiences. Parents' feelings about the gathered information were usually coloured by those primary experiences. All of the information was then filtered through parents' family values before coming to a decision. Jasmine passionately explained:

Well, it's kind of a values-based decision. It's not really about [Name of School] itself. We live in the inner city, or pretty close. And [Name of School] is an inner-city school with a lot of marginalized populations represented. If all of the people like us who are more upper middle class with more resources, like native English speakers, if we have all these privileges that make it possible for us to opt for something else, if everybody like that does that then we're leaving the people with the least ability to improve things in a jam.

This filtering affected parents' information seeking and decision making. As parents progressed through their school choice journey, they looked for information that aligned with their values and made decisions that reflected those values.

Emotional factors made up parents' microsystems. These factors were the closest influences on parental information seeking and decision making. They came from parents' direct experiences and parents' emotional reactions to those experiences. Emotional factors were internal thoughts and feelings and spring from parents' primary experiences. The next closest influences were external social factors.

Social Factors

Social factors were in the second sphere of influence surrounding parents. This second sphere aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) mesosystem, which contained factors that interacted with each other, and with aspects of the microsystem. Social factors were external sources with which parents interacted, most commonly in the form of relationships with other people.

Parents' social networks were the best example of social factors. In my study, the main role of social networks was to give advice, which was an important source of information. Advice was garnered from family members, friends, other parents, and educators. If the advice-giver was perceived to have some expertise in the education system, their comments were especially valued.

Rose obtained a lot of information through a parent/playgroup that she attended. The group was run by a professional parent educator, about whom Rose said:

> She has done a couple of sessions in the last couple of years I've [attended the parent program] about the choices for education. She laid out a whole bunch of options for us: look into the option of part school, part homeschool or charter schools or bilingual schools. What are the pros and cons and what costs more, et cetera?

Because this parent educator was an expert, her information was highly respected. Other parents gave similar precedence to advice from principals or teachers. Even when these advice-givers

were speaking parent-to-parent during those interactions, their status within the education system lent weight to what they were saying as compared to other peers.

Parents both asked for advice and received it unsolicited, such as the pros and cons of different types of schooling, and the benefits to different types of programs within different schools. Advice-givers' personal experiences with a particular school or program was a common information source.

These parents appeared to take the initiative within their family in seeking information about schools, but they shared the decision making with a partner. Partners were parents' closest social relationship. For example, in choosing to homeschool, Alyssa's husband was a major influence. She reflected:

> But I think when it came to the point of looking at school and the options when we were travelling with the kids, I think if [Husband] hadn't homeschooled, I don't know if he would have been as supportive of homeschooling. It was pretty unknown. I had known people who homeschooled, not a huge amount but some. But his support was really the encouragement to do it. I think he felt good in supporting me; he said he thought I could do it, could accomplish it.

Participants described their partners as equally invested in making school choice decisions, but partners tended to let the participants take the lead in information seeking. Participants shared what they found out about schools with their partners and partners would give their input. Through this input, partners were a key information source.

Community was another major social factor in parents' mesosystems. Many parent participants expressed the preference to have their children go to school within their home community. This usually stemmed from the idea of children belonging to a social network as

they grew, as Erica explained:

> My husband is a big believer—and maybe this comes down to our experience in smaller
> communities—but he is a big believer in trying to go to a community school, so that the
> relationships they build there are easier to maintain and we have found that to be true. We
> feel like we live around all of my kids' school mates and it's so much fun that they can
> hop on their bikes and go hang out and they don't need us to arrange that for them. So
> that was big, that was our first thing. Ideally finding a community one that was close by
> and then we went through those different schools to determine which one we wanted to
> go to.

This meant that some parents limited their information seeking to their home community.
However, when parents perceived their home community to have a more transient population,
they worried their children would not have the opportunity to form long-lasting social
connections. Those parents instead looked for a school with a strong sense of community within
the school.

When looking for information about school choice, particularly about individual schools,
many parents relied on digital sources. Most parents accessed school websites for information,
and rarely relied on social media. Rose explained:

> My first process was to look at [the school authority website]. They give you an input
> thing "Where do you live? What kind of school are you looking for?" et cetera. I would
> look at that and then it would take you to their websites and then from there some of their
> websites had a link to Facebook. I think I might have looked at the K to 9 one because I
> was curious. But I didn't use [social media] at all. I'm not a social media user myself.

Digital information from school authority websites, as well as from individual school websites,

was often a starting point and prompted next steps by narrowing down what more information parents needed to obtain. Parents used the school authority websites to determine which schools were located within a certain area and therefore warranted consideration. Parents also looked at individual school websites to get information about such aspects as their programs and policies. Digital social networks were less frequently used; parents who did use social media, used it to ask opinions about programming or to ask logistical questions such as when registration began.

News media was a passive information source. For example, Daisy did not follow mainstream news media, but noted:

> There were articles in Vue, in a couple other, the Rabble, the Tyee, like kind of the left of center publications and they had some fairly insightful things to contribute about the various kinds of options available, the various ideas that people had, and what that might play out like in reality. So that was, I guess that was another source of information, but one that we didn't consciously seek out.

Other parents recalled hearing about class size issues in the news, which prompted them to seek out information about student numbers as they were making school choice decisions. If parents derived information from the news media, it was not a deliberate search, but it did impact their thinking about schooling in general and led to more information seeking.

Parents' mesosystems consisted of social factors that were by nature external to the parent. Parents interacted with social factors such as social networks, community connections, digital information, and media reports. Parents' partners' experiences were a major element that affected parental information seeking and decision making. Social factors were the second sphere of influence. The third sphere of influence contained material factors.

Material Factors

The exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was the third sphere of influence surrounding parents. In this study, parents' exosystems consisted of material factors. Material factors were tangible things such as infrastructure or money. These factors were usually not under parents' control; parents interacted with material factors without being able to easily alter them.

Finances were included as a material factor because financial considerations, in the form of tuition, fees, and funding, had an impact on parental information seeking and decision making. However, parents did not have much of an ability to exert force back on those considerations. Finances were a limiting circumstance for some parents when choosing a type of schooling. Daisy summed this up by saying, "Charter and private, no because we can't afford it. We had briefly considered the Waldorf school but the cost is too much for us." Most parents did not even seek any information about private schools, charter schools, or homeschooling. On the other hand, two participants had children enrolled in private school previous to their current school choice and made no mention of finances.

A material factor that played an initial limiting role on parental information seeking for school choice was the location of schools. The notion of attending a school within the home community was a powerful social factor, but the geographical location of schools was also a material factor in the sense of creating physical boundaries for searching, in considering transportation, and in the availability of choices. All of the parents were aware of their "catchment area," which is the geographic zone set by the local school authority that determines to which schools children at a particular address are guaranteed entry. The majority of parents began their school choice search in their catchment area, although only three ultimately chose schools within those boundaries.

Another way that physical location affected parental information seeking and decision making was in terms of transportation. Iris noted, "We don't live in the city so it's adding an extra twenty minutes anytime we go anywhere. So, yeah, geography I would say is probably the biggest [factor in our decision]." Parents who went outside of their designated catchment area had to find out their options for transportation and used that information when weighing school choice options.

Physical location played an interesting role in the case of Alyssa. Her choice to homeschool was first trialed when the family moved abroad for six months. They continued to homeschool when they moved to a second country. Upon return to Alberta, their physical location affected the resources to which they had access, although they still chose homeschooling. Alyssa's situation illustrated that the premise of school choice in Alberta does not extend to all areas of the province. Because they lived in a rural area, their only other choices were one Catholic school or one public school. There were no private schools or charter schools in the area; therefore, those choices were not actually an option.

Infrastructure is another material factor that attracted parents to schools. The emotional response parents had to a school was part of their microsystem; in the exosystem, infrastructure takes on a substantial influence. Rose said of a school she did not choose:

> It's one of the older buildings so it doesn't have windows without those grates, those white grates on them and you can't really see out the windows either because they have blinds within the window. There's very little light. The light is coming in but you're not looking out at anything. For me, I would love an environment that was a little bit more open.

In contrast, of the school she did choose, she said:

The school itself has a whole wall of windows for every classroom. So, one of your walls is all windows. The way it works is that there is an atrium in the middle of the building so those students on that side look into the atrium and the other ones look out to the playground or to the community.

Practical matters such as light sources and scenic views were information that some parents took in when visiting a school. They also noticed things like stairs, seating, and art. Many parents also mentioned the playground.

The number of students physically present in a classroom was information with which most parents were concerned. Violet said class size was a determinant in her decision making, "...it was also based on the fact that our designated school, the classroom size was huge; it was thirty to thirty-five students in those classes. And this one provided less than twenty students per class…". Some parents reported they were aware of a common perception that class size has a detrimental impact on learning, with one parent noting she actually accessed her university's library system for research on this topic; all parents who mentioned class size believed that fewer students in a class was better.

Parents' exosystems were full of things that affected them, but that they could not in turn easily affect. These material factors, such as school costs, location, and infrastructure, as well as class size, were information sources that played a role in what schooling options parents considered. This information ultimately affected their school choice decision making. Material factors were the third sphere of influence that surrounded the parent. The fourth sphere of influence was cultural factors.

Cultural Factors

Cultural factors were the most removed from the parent, but permeated aspects of their

information seeking and decision making. Cultural factors coincided with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) macrosystem. The macrosystem was made up of the cultural contexts, as well as the political and economic systems, within which parents live. The concept of school choice is promoted by the provincial government, and so different choices exist throughout the province. The government also decides on curriculum, policy, and testing—presumably reflecting the educational values of the majority of Albertans. How schools implement these cultural factors influenced parental information seeking and decision making.

Only one parent participant attended kindergarten and elementary school outside of Alberta; her schooling experience was in a small town in Saskatchewan, a province next to Alberta. The rest of the participants attended either public or Catholic schools in Alberta, with the majority attending in urban areas. Parents' personal school experiences were part of their microsystems, but familiarity with the education system in Alberta in the broader context was part of their macrosystems.

I bounded this case study to include only parents with children entering the Alberta education system. The policy of school choice unique to Alberta was a cultural factor that was part of these parents' macrosystems. All of the parents in this study were active choosers, and most expressed feelings of stress and anxiety about school choice. More than one parent wished there was no choice, and that children just went to the school down the street, but all participants engaged to some degree in information seeking and decision making for school choice.

The concept of school choice is province-wide, but not all families have access to the same choices. Charter schools are for the most part concentrated in and around the province's two largest cities. Private schools are slightly more spread out, but tend to be located in urban areas. Alyssa, who homeschools, lived in a rural community where her other choices were one

public school or one Catholic school. In contrast, the other nine participants lived in urban areas where they not only had all five schooling types available, but also had numerous choices of individual schools.

Most schooling types are required to follow the Alberta Programs of Study. As a cultural factor, this common curriculum guided the parents in this study differently. Erica read the kindergarten curriculum and felt much less stressed about school choice afterward because she was confident her child would meet the expectations regardless of which school the child attended. Lily eschewed schools with special programming, stating she wanted, "none of that charter stuff, just plain old regular route curriculum." She thought that the quality of curriculum in Alberta was sufficient. Violet looked for information on how a school might provide an advanced curriculum, as that is what they were used to from their private school experience. An advanced curriculum was also a driver for Poppy's decision making.

How sexual orientation and gender identity were addressed in schools was important to both Iris and Daisy, albeit for opposite reasons. At the time of this study, the provincial government was undertaking a major curriculum review, including the Health Program of Studies. Iris felt strongly that sexual education should be in the purview of parents, so was prompted to look into private schools, where parents might have more of a say in how curriculum is translated to the classroom. Daisy, however, was of the opinion that the proposed changes to sexual education in schools were positive and she was keenly interested in how different public schools might approach this aspect of the curriculum.

Daisy made a point to look at the student handbooks of the schools to which she was considering sending her child. She said:

The [Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity] policy of [Name of School Authority] is

quite comprehensive in its telling of how gender fluidity, sexual orientation, all that stuff

is supported and looked at from an inclusive and diverse point of view. That was a good

foundation but I wanted to see how the schools sort of interpreted that and [Name of

School] has it pretty solid; I looked at their student handbook and they had a pretty solid

understanding of how that looked in regard to their role in supporting students.

Education policies are mandated by the provincial government, those official elected by

Albertans to represent them. Policies are meant to reflect the educational values of majority of

the population and are part of the educational culture within which families operate. As part of

the macrosystem, policies had an impact on factors in other systems. Some participants looked at

bullying policies based on emotional factors and social factors within their own micro- and

mesosystems. One parent was concerned with financial resources in her exosystem and so looked

at technology policies. Supporting education for reconciliation was a concern for one parent, and

she looked for this embedded in the fabric of the education system.

Standardized testing has been a cultural factor in Alberta for years. Most parents would

have encountered testing in their own schooling. It often came up in discussions with other

parents. All of the parents in this study were aware of standardized testing and most sought out

further information about how schools performed. Lily said:

I like standardized tests, very very in favour of them. Because again I think I have just an

implicit trust that everything is going okay. [Name of City] is an open district so there is

no poor school, or bad school. I look at standardized testing like it's more a reflection on

the students' ability than the teachers' ability and I know it's not the "p.c." thing to say but

I think social demographics and all the background things going on make a difference in

standardized testing results.

Opinions about standardized testing ranged from favouring them to dismissing them as useless. All parent participants echoed the sentiment that such tests had more to do with the demographics of the area than with teaching and learning. While most parents gathered information about schools' standardized test scores, no parent reported this information as significant in their school choice decision.

Parents' macrosystems are made up of cultural factors. Cultural factors in Alberta schooling included the availability of school choice, the provincial curriculum, and both provincial and local policies. All parents sought out information about these factors to help them understand school choice and to make school choice decisions.

Summary

Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, I viewed parents at the center of four systems of influence. Through data analysis, I matched these systems with themes from my data and presented the results in this chapter. I found that parents' microsystems, the closest set of influences, contained emotional factors that were emotional reactions to primary experiences. The second set of influences, the mesosystem, consisted of social factors mostly made up of interactions with social networks. The third level of influence, the exosystem, indirectly affected parents with its material factors, which are concrete elements like infrastructure and geographical location. The outermost level of influence, the macrosystem, are cultural factors that have a broad impact such as curriculum and policies. In the following chapter, I will discuss these findings.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

My research was guided by these questions:

1. What information do parents obtain about school choice?

2. From where and from whom do parents derive information about school choice?

3. How do parents use this information in making school choice decisions for their children?

In this chapter, I discuss findings in relation to these research questions. I also review the findings in light of the literature. Before concluding this thesis, I explore the implications of my interpretations and suggest directions for future study.

Parents as Decision Makers

Parental information seeking generally contained several steps of information gathering (Nutt & Wilson, 2010), such as determining the family's catchment area, reading the school districts' and schools' websites, and talking to others. Social networks were important sources of information and were extremely influential in decision making, which supports the existing research literature (Altenhofen et. al, 2016; Beaubot & Cambre, 2013; Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Crocco et al., 2017).

Crocco et al. (2017) discussed seven types of information used in decision making and, although not every parent in this study used every type, across the group all seven types were represented. Parents accessed statistical data in the form of class size numbers and standardized test results. Personal experience with schooling was an important source of information, complemented by anecdotes and examples from family members, friends, and other peers. Expert judgements from people associated with the education systems were well regarded. Some

parents sought out information about specific policies; the overarching policy of choice affected all aspects of school choice.

The interplay of micro-level and macro-level factors on decision making was discussed by Nutt and Wilson (2010). Their area of study is in organizational decision making, but if a family can be considered an organization, then similar principles can apply. The existence of school choice in Alberta is a macro-level factor that affects a family. At the micro-level, individual decision makers choose in which type of schooling their children will enroll. By engaging in choosing, the existence of choice is affected; for example, parents continue to choose charter schools which keeps this unique choice available within Alberta's education system.

Some parents in my study disagreed with the notion of having so much choice. Even if they thought choice was unnecessary, they all were active choosers. They had the resources, such as time and social contacts, to engage in information seeking (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Reay, 2004; Seghers et al., 2019; Smrekar, 2009; Swift, 2003).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) proposed that four systems of influence act on an individual: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Orders (2012) used Bronfenbrenner's work to interpret the experience of mothers making educational decisions for their gifted children; my study was also concerned with educational decisions, but for a broader group of children who lived in a choice-rich province. I adapted Ecological Systems Theory to explain which factors belong to which system and how those factors affected parental decision making, contributing to existing literature (Kiley & Robinson, 2016; Marquis, 2004; Ravindran & Myers, 2012).

The Microsystem/Emotional Factors

The strongest theme in my findings was emotional factors. Emotional factors included parents' awareness of their children's needs, and information about the academic expectations or support for disabilities that a school might have that matched their children's needs. How the administration and teachers treated students and parents were important pieces of information. The most powerful information that parents encountered was how they felt when they entered a particular school building. Information sources that I considered emotional factors were prominent firsthand experiences. These included working in the field of education, visiting schools, and reflecting on personal school experiences.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory proposed the microsystem as containing the influences most closely surrounding the person at the center. The microsystem is particular to the individual at the center and corresponds with emotional factors. Parents' thoughts and memories of their own school experiences significantly affected their information seeking and decision making. Parents deliberately looked for or avoided schooling choices that were similar to their own, which was also found by Bell (2009). That parents are influenced by their childhood schooling made sense in the context of adult learning, where personal experience is an important way of knowing (MacKeracher, 2004).

Family values acted as a filter through which parents processed information for decision making. Parents made decisions that aligned with those values. This is similar to the research conducted by Crocco et al. (2017) that noted that regardless of the source, people tended to filter information through their belief system before deciding whether to accept or reject it. Family values influenced the choices parents made and sometimes compromises had to be made (Mann et al.). Sometimes family values conflicted (Swift, 2003). For example, a parent in my study was

very community-minded, but discovered that the class size in her local school would likely mean that her child would not have the opportunity to connect emotionally with the teacher. She decided to place her child in a school outside of the community because the value of that connection for her daughter took priority. The emotional attachment parents feel for their children drives their desire to make the best possible choice for their children, superseding all other family values.

The needs of their children were primary drivers for parental information seeking and decision making (Bhatt, 2014; Glenn-Applegate et al., 2016; Pricharda & Swezey, 2016). Parents compared the information they obtained about a school, or type of schooling, with their perception of what would be best for their child. This corresponded to Swift's (2003) findings that parents want to optimize their children's potential and supported assertations by other researchers that parents feel worried about preparing their children to participate in the future world of work (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Reay, 2004).

Personal interactions with staff and teachers were incredibly important, as Ellison and Aloe (2019), and Smrekar (2009) also found. Parents had an emotional reaction to how they felt they were treated by others in a school. These interactions either drew the parent more favourably toward a choice, or deterred them.

Parents' first impressions of schools were a prevailing influence. This is supported by Mandinach et al. (2018) who found that even when parents' impressions conflicted with a schools' quantitative "rating", they favoured their feelings. Almost all parents in my study went with a school that "felt right," and were happy with their choices as the school year progressed.

The Mesosystem/Social Factors

Social factors were other settings with which the parents engaged. These are the next closest level of influence on a parent, Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem. Information that parents obtained through the mesosystem had to do with the reputation of a school or perceptions about a schooling type (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007; Davies, 2015; Donnelly, 2012; Holmes, 2008; Smrekar, 2009; Stein et al., 2011). Advice, defined as supportive communication by Carlson (2016), from a trusted friend or family member was an incredibly important information source, particularly if the advice-giver was part of the education system (Mann et al., 2015). Another important source was talking to other parents whose children already attended a school, or who were also information seeking and decision making about school choice (Smrekar, 2009).

Researchers have shown that social networks influence decision making (Altenhofen et al., 2016; Beaubot & Cambre, 2013; Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007; Joshi, 2014; Wanat, 2012). The microsystems of the advice-givers, particularly the participants' partners, became part of the participants' mesosystems. The mesosystems of other individuals interacted with the participants' own microsystems when parents would compare advice against their own family values and either accept or reject the advice.

Almost all parents sourced information through digital means. The internet is often the most convenient and relied upon source of information (Grant & Hoffman, 2016; Sharpe et al., 2016; Tracey et al., 2018; Walsh et al., 2015). Researchers claim that parents without access to the internet, and those who lack computer skills, are disadvantaged (Dougherty et al., 2013; Stein et al., 2011); however, this was not applicable in my study. All the parents in my study looked at school authority websites and individual school websites.

The news media was a passive information source, but through its presentation of an educational issue, it could either positively or negatively affect opinions (Smrekar, 2009). Some parents used social media to ask their networks about logistical matters such as registration dates or for opinions on choices. Instead of their social media networks, parents usually spoke with their "in real life" networks—other parents, peers, and family members—who were also accessing and using information, or had in the past, to make school choice decisions.

The idea of community was powerful. Many parents expressed that they wanted their children to have friends nearby and that supporting the community school was important for community-building. Some parents limited their information seeking to their home communities. What parents perceived as the demographics of a particular school and/or area influenced their decision in that it either encouraged or discouraged them from that choice.

A supportive school community was desirable to most parents, especially a school community that welcomed participation of the family (Holmes, 2008). How a parent perceived the school environment and how their family would fit into the school community influenced their decision of where to attend (Belifield, 2009; Boschee & Boschee, 2011; Smrekar, 2009). Like Reay (2004) found, parents tended to seek out social relationships with a schooling community that was made up of families who seemed to be similar to their families. Several of the parents in my study expressed interest in volunteering and were drawn to school choices that showed how current parents were involved.

The Exosystem/Material Factors

Bronfenbrenner's third level of influence is the exosystem. The exosystem consisted of factors that affect an individual, but which the individual cannot affect in turn. In my study,

material factors coincided with the exosystem. Material factors included the costs of schooling, location of schools, school infrastructure, and transportation systems.

Location of schooling choices in relation to the home was information that all parents considered (Bell, 2009; Joshi, 2014; Neal, 2009). Bosetti and Pyryt (2007) discussed "selecting by mortgage", which is buying a home in a specific area in order to attend a specific school, but no parents in my study mentioned doing this. Parents were usually aware of the physical boundaries of which schools were in their catchment area through the school authority websites or by exploring the neighbourhood. These physical boundaries often acted as a framing factor for information seeking, with many participants choosing to first consider only schools located within the catchment area (Bell, 2009). This corresponded to what Bosetti and Pyryt (2007) discovered when they surveyed parents about school choice and responses indicated that more than 80% chose their neighbourhood school; about half of those parents only looked at choices in their designated area.

Related to location of schooling choices was the availability of bus transportation and the logistics of driving children to school as search-limiting criteria (Bell, 2009; Ellison & Aloe, 2019). In my study, most parents expressed that they wanted their child to attend a school within the local community. This led them to focus their information seeking on the nearby choices. Most of the parents ended up sending their children to schools within walking distance, with available busing, or within what they considered a reasonable driving distance.

Infrastructure features such as windows, stairs, playgrounds, and art displays were information sources that affected parental decision making. These types of information were not explicitly mentioned in the school choice decision making research literature. The number of children physically present in a classroom was information that some parents specifically

wanted, and it affected whether they considered a particular school. Parents worried that class size would reduce the individual attention their children would receive, which Boschee and Boschee (2011), as well as Ellison and Aloe (2019), also found to be a major consideration.

Tuition and fees deterred parents from seeking information about private or charter schools. One parent was aware of the costs, and willing to pay, but ultimately favoured the community school. She realized that sending her child to the community school would increase the amount of government funding the school received. For parents who chose outside of the publicly funded system (in this study, private and homeschooling) finances were not mentioned.

The Macrosystem/Cultural Factors

Cultural factors in this study corresponded to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) macrosystem, which contains the cultural, political, and economic systems within which the individual lives. The macrosystem is the outermost sphere of influence. Cultural factors are concepts that permeate the exo-, meso-, and microsystems. Sources and types of information sought by parents that were cultural factors included curriculum, policies, and test outcomes; these factors reflect the educational values of the Alberta school system. Information in the macrosystem came from a variety of sources already mentioned like educationally situated advice-givers or digital sources.

Some parents made themselves familiar with official curriculum documents to assure themselves that their child would be fine no matter which type of schooling they attended. However, for one parent, concerns regarding the sexual education curriculum drove her to look at Catholic and private schooling instead of public, thinking those school authorities would address sexual education in ways more aligned with her family's beliefs. Programming within a school, such as religion, language, or learning philosophy either pulled a parent toward the

choice or pushed them away, a typical finding in school choice research (Belifield, 2009; Bhatt, 2014; Boschee & Boschee, 2011; Donnelly, 2012; Holmes, 2008; Pricharda & Swezey, 2016; Smrekar, 2009).

Government is an overarching influence on the other systems. A few parents specifically mentioned the influence of government, such as funding cuts and the recent curriculum review. Locally governed policies, such as catchment area, affected the information seeking of most parents. One parent investigated specific policies having to do with sexual orientation and gender identity, and she also sought information about responses to the *Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action* (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012).

Along the line of government influence, Bosetti et al. (2017), Baez and Talburt (2008), and Joshi (2014) found that some parents make choices for schooling that seem to have less government oversight, which was one reason participants in this study sought information about private schools. Private schools in Alberta were perceived as being less beholden to government control. With school choice positioned as a positive force in the Alberta school system, it follows that some parents might view that their personal values in exercising that choice should take precedence over what they consider government ideology.

Standardized testing is embedded within Alberta's education system. Most parents looked at published standardized test scores and school rankings. However, all parents believed that these results were more related to socioeconomic factors than to the teaching and learning in the school. Although they almost all looked at the information, test outcomes did not appear to consciously affect their decision making. This contrasts with American research that shows parents often choose schools based on student achievement (Data Quality Campaign, 2016; Dougherty et al. 2013; Stein et al., 2011). This may reflect a difference in cultural values held by

these participants and by the American parents studied, as well as a difference in educational values held by these participants and other Albertans.

Seeing parents at the center of spheres of swirling information was a visualization that persisted in my mind from the very beginning of my research. The themes I created through data analysis worked well with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) four systems that surround an individual: emotional factors and the microsystem; social factors and the mesosystem; material factors and the exosystem; and cultural factors and the macrosystem. This allowed me to organize the information parents used in making school choice decisions and relate it to the existing literature. In the next section, I expand on how parents used information for decision making.

Implications for Practice

Parents in my study were committed to making the best choice possible for their children. They learned about the different schooling options available, acquiring information that would help them make school choice decisions. I found that parents did not usually compare and choose between schooling types; instead, their information seeking and decision making centered on which particular school their children would attend. Teasing out the how of parental information seeking and decision making revealed some unique findings which may be of interest to educational stakeholders who want to better inform parents about school choice.

Parents were active choosers, and their decisions often came down to the emotional reaction parents had when they entered a school building. The emotional impact of design elements is an established area of study, but its influence on school choice is not explored in the literature. School administrators might want to take note of the importance of making the school space "feel homey."

How parents felt they were treated, and how they felt their children would be treated, were major determining factors in school choice decision making. This was a good reminder that first impressions matter and it calls attention to enhanced training for the front-office person who is parents' first point of contact. More support for principals so that they have more time to meet with parents would have a positive impact on their schools' reputations. Knowing that parents often get information from their social networks should prompt schools to consider using parents as volunteer advocates who help promote the school by communicating with potential parents.

The perception of being unwelcome in the school is a barrier to parental engagement (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). It is well established that parental engagement is positively related to good academic and social outcomes for children (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Goodall, 2013; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). The group of parents in my study were motivated to actively seek information to make school choice decisions, and often mentioned volunteering with the school. When parents feel welcome in a school, they may perceive an implicit invitation to become engaged.

My case study provided some considerations for educational practice. Emotional information played a large part in information seeking and decision making for this group of parents. Educational stakeholders, such as school administrators and government, should take heed that how a school is presented, the first impression by office staff, and how parents feel while in the school all affect their information seeking and decision making. Stakeholders could use my findings to help evaluate how they are meeting the information needs of parents.

Implications for Policy

Parents filtered information through their family values and their priorities for their children's learning to find alignment. This was most obvious in the case of the homeschooling

parent who examined her family's educational philosophy in making the choice to leave the dominant institutional system. This information-filtering also played a part in how other parents sought information and made their decisions by either encouraging or discouraging certain directions. As Bosetti and Gereluk (2016, p.100) pointed out:

> How parents negotiate this choice is entwined in how they access and manage relevant information within the constraints of their own limited time and resources, what they deem to be quality education, and what sort of educational experience they desire for their child.

Desired educational experiences could be polarizing. Parents felt strongly that programmatic elements such as religion or language immersion should, or should not, exist. On one hand, providing choice for religion or language satisfies perceived parental demand, but on the other hand schools may try to use marketing strategies to capitalize on "brand power". Brand power occurs when parents believe a specific type of schooling, such as one that is religiously based, is better than another type, but this belief is generally unfounded (Beaubot & Cambre, 2013). If educational stakeholders are going to stand by the belief that choice is a positive aspect in Alberta, they should also ensure that it does not become a system of "good" vs "bad" educational choices based on marketing budgets.

In asking parents how they used the information they gleaned about school choice to make their decisions, I learned that some parents wished there was no choice. They felt that choosing was stressful and that everyone should simply attend the schools in their neighbourhoods. Government might be interested in this notion, as it is quite provocative in a province that offers the most types of choices of schooling. Some theorize that choice is designed to improve the quality of education by increasing competition (Altenhofen et al., 2016), while

others see choice as a way to increase equity (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016). Clearly some parents are comparing schools and schooling choices and the government may view their policy of choice as meeting the needs of their constituents; however, some parents see choice as unnecessary.

The government is operating under the assumption that more choice is better, but my study shows that there are some parents who challenge this assumption. Surely my study of 10 did not contain the only parents in Alberta who do not agree with the importance of school choice. Perhaps, as our society becomes more complex and parents worry about their children being educated for a world that might be completely different by the time they are adults, there would be value in stopping the proliferation of choice. There could be a number of parents who agree that children should simply attend the school in their neighbourhood. Instead of monies being spent to create specialized programs scattered across urban areas, the focus should be on funding a good education in each community. Not only could this simplify the education system, but also it could strengthen connections within local communities.

As this thesis was being drafted, the Government of Alberta conducted a public survey titled "What does choice in education mean to you?" (Government of Alberta, n.d.-b). Feedback will apparently be used to help the Government develop the *Choice in Education Act*, originally slated to be introduced in spring 2020, which will "affirm that parents are the primary decision-makers in their child's education and support the range of choice within the current education system" (Government of Alberta, n.d.-b, para. 3). The government considers parental information seeking and decision making for school choice to be an important topic. They are implying, right within the *Choice in Education Act*, that parents must consider the school choice options available and must make a choice. The government is again pushing the idea that more choice is better, without asking parents if they actually want choice.

By posting an online survey, the government took it for granted that parents had the time, resources, skills, and motivation to give their feedback. The existing literature, as well as my research, showed that parents in a higher socioeconomic status actively participate in school choice (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Reay, 2004; Smrekar, 2009; Swift, 2003). This casts doubt on how representative of Albertan parents will be the survey results, which further begs the question about how serious the government is about parent consultation.

The findings from my study are not generalizable to the entire population of Albertan parents. However, in thinking about government engagement of parents, it is intriguing to consider what I found out about how parents use information for decision making. There is a major emotional component to parental school choice decision making. If the primary source of information parents use for school choice decision making is the "feeling" they get from being onsite at the school, it will be difficult for that to be captured on electronic, text-based surveys. With public education dollars constantly being scrutinized, are parent consultations being used most effectively? Or are these online surveys simply a parent consultation box the government can check?

Limitations of the Findings

It is well established that qualitative case study research is not generalizable to whole populations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My study focused on parents, and my findings showed how some parents engaged in information seeking and decision making for school choice. This particular group of participants had social capital; that is, they had the resources such as the time to seek information and access to networks that contained professionals who are "information connected individuals" (Smrekar, 2009). This further limited my findings because parents in

different socioeconomic strata may require different types of support for information seeking and decision making for school choice.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) was a valuable theoretical framework for my research. Ecological Systems Theory is broad and inclusive, which was attractive to me as a novice researcher. However, the framework could potentially contain every possible thing that could affect a person, which meant I had to subjectively decide which factors were included in which system. This was a daunting task for a novice researcher.

In addition, I found that Ecological Systems Theory did not allow for individual differences in strength of influence of different factors. For example, stating that the mesosystem was the second layer of influence on parental information seeking and decision making was generally true, but the framework did not allow me to note that for one participant familial advice was an extremely influential social factor, but was less important for another participant. The generalization of factors within each system might have made data analysis and interpretation easier, but more nuance could be quite interesting.

Future Research Directions

I was surprised to find that most parents limited their information seeking to schools in their home neighbourhoods. I thought more parents would be invested in looking for a certain program and would be willing to transport their child if necessary. The field could benefit from a study that investigates the information seeking of parents who choose to travel a significant distance. Most of the parents in my study chose schools within a short drive of their home, so looking at the information seeking and decision making experiences of parents who choose to travel further might broaden the understanding of what information sources affect parental decision making for school choice.

One of the most interesting results from my study was that the "feeling" that parents experienced when inside a school building was one of the most powerful influences. Bridging the psychological study of design with school choice would be an interesting new direction. This sort of research is already done with classroom design and learning (see McAllister & Maguire, 2012; Stern & Etheridge, 2008; Tanner, 2013) but looking into the effect school building elements have on parents and their decision to send their child to a particular school could be very useful to school authorities as they develop new schools and redevelop existing spaces.

Researcher Reflections

My interest in parental information seeking and decision making became more intense during this thesis research because I became a parent myself. I was able to more fully appreciate the anxiety felt by my participants. I engaged in much information seeking about pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting.

My experience mirrored the findings from this research study in that I filtered all of the information I gathered through my own values and beliefs when making a decision. However, where I differed was the influence of social networks. I found that some of the information from my social networks contradicted recommendations made by the Canadian Paediatric Society or Alberta Health Services. I preferred advice from experts.

This research prompted me to reflect on my own beliefs about education and schooling, and wonder what choice I will make for my child. Even though I am wary of information garnered from social networks, I am sure I will still ask other parents for advice. My own schooling experience in public and Catholic schools was unremarkable, and I do not feel pushed or pulled in either direction. The idea of the "feeling" of a school being so important resonated

with me and I definitely see that particular piece of emotional information being a key part of my own information seeking and decision making for school choice.

Conclusion

Professor Emerita of Adult Education Dorothy MacKeracher (2004, p.34) stated "we each invest a vast amount of emotional energy in the development of our personal model of reality, and we place ourselves at the core of the model, since we perceive reality from the center of our own existence." This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory which places a developing person at the center of concentric circles of influence. Parents, as decision makers, were surrounded by information. Information was obtained primarily through firsthand experiences and social networks, and then was filtered through the family's set of values before being used in decision making.

Understanding how parents make school decisions is important for educational stakeholders and policymakers. If the Government of Alberta maintains that having the most choices of types of schooling in Canada creates advantages for families, then it has a responsibility to ensure all parents have access to information that will allow them to make the best choice for their family. My findings indicated that parents rely mostly on emotional information. Government should increase funding to allow school authorities more opportunities for in-person experiences such as school open houses. Rather than spending resources to create reports outlining their results, school administrators should consider how to utilize art, plants, and other elements that make a school feel cozy. Parents can devote an enormous amount of time and energy to information seeking, but at the end of it all, they are really looking for a school that feels right for their child.

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**Appendix A: Recruitment Material**

Leanne Garon Thompson's Research

Parental information seeking and use in school choice decision making

I am looking for parents with children who are kindergarten- or elementary school-aged. I would like to conduct an hour-long interview with you to find out in which type of schooling (public, separate, private, charter or home school) you have decided to enroll your child. During the interview, I will be most interested in how you sought information about the choices and how you used that information to make your decision.

If you are potentially interested in participating and would like more information, please email me at lgaron@ualberta.ca

Please note that if you agree to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time up until data analysis has begun. Your participation will be kept confidential and you will be assigned a pseudonym in any reports using the data. More details about confidentiality are outlined in the participant consent form you will be asked to sign. This study has been approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (Pro00083122).
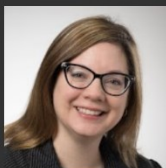
My name is Leanne Garon Thompson. I am a current graduate student in the Master of Education program at the University of Alberta. My research interest is how parents use information in making school choice decisions. My thesis supervisor is Dr. Bonnie Stelmach.

Leanne Garon Thompson
9 August 2018 ·

https://sites.google.com/ualberta.ca/leannesresearch/home

SITES.GOOGLE.COM

Leanne Garon Thompson's Research

Please note that if you agree to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time up until data analysis has begun. Your participation will be kept confidential and you will be assigned a

and 2 others   25 comments 8 shares

Like   Comment   Share

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

INFORMATION LETTER and CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Parental information seeking and use in school choice decision making

Research Investigator:	**Supervisor:**
Leanne Garon	Professor Bonnie Stelmach
University of Alberta	7-145 Education N
Edmonton AB T6G 2G5	University of Alberta
lgaron@ualberta.ca	Edmonton AB T6G 2G5
780-982-2945	bonnies@ualberta.ca
	780-492-9890

Background

You are invited to take part in a research study. This study explores how parents get and use information in making school choice decisions for their children. You are being asked because you let me know that you might be interested in being a participant. If you participate, the data you give me during your interview will used toward requirements for my Master of Education degree from the University of Alberta. The data may also be used in published academic papers and conference presentations.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may stop participating at any time. You are able to pull your data out of the study up until the beginning of analysis. Data analysis will start two weeks after I have sent you a copy of the interview transcript. You may decline to answer any questions asked during the interview or request that audio recording be stopped at any time. You will be able to review your interview transcript. All information collected will be kept confidential and your real name will not be used in reporting. The data will be stored securely for five years and then destroyed.

Purpose

This study aims to understand where parents get information and how they use that information in making school choice decisions for their child/children. Data from this study will be used toward requirements for my Master of Education degree. Publications or presentations of this data will contribute to scholarly literature about school choice and/or parental decision making.

Study Procedures

For this research study you will participate in one interview of about one hour. We will meet face-to-face at a location of your choice, or will talk via telephone or Skype/FaceTime. You will be asked some personal information such as your name, address, where you attended school and where your children will attend school. Then you will be asked to tell me what information you got about the choices of schooling for your children. I will also ask where you got the information and how you used that information to make your school choice decision. The interview will be audio-recorded and you may decline answering any of the questions without penalty. You may stop the interview at any point and choose to stop participating in the study.

After the interview, I will send you a copy of the interview transcript for your review and I will ask for any feedback within two weeks. Data analysis will be begin two weeks after I send you this transcript. You may pull your data out of this study until data analysis begins.

Benefits

There is no direct benefit to you by participating in this research. There is no cost to participate, nor is there any payment.

I hope that the information I get from doing this research will help me better understand what information parents use, where they get this information, and how they use this information in making school choice decisions. It may also help policymakers, educational organizations, homeschooling associations, schools and other interested stakeholders understand parents' school choice decisions.

Risk

There are no foreseeable risks to you by participating in this study. If anything should come up during the research that might affect your willingness to continue participating, I will tell you as soon as possible.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may stop participating and pull out your data at any time until data analysis begins. Data analysis will begin two weeks after I send you a copy of the interview transcript. During the interview, you may decline to answer any of the questions and may stop the interview at any time. There is no penalty for stopping participation or pulling out your data from the study. If you choose to stop participating before data analysis begins, all audio files will be erased, all electronic files will be deleted and all written notes will be shredded. After data analysis begins, your data will have been made anonymous and included in analysis.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

This research will be used toward requirements for my Master of Education degree. This research may be published in research articles or used in academic presentations. Your identity will be kept confidential. I may use quotes from interview transcripts in published materials, but your real name or the real name of any school will not be used. A final written report of research findings will be shared with you upon request.

All data will be confidential and only accessed by me or my supervisor Dr. Bonnie Stelmach. Data will be kept securely for five years after completion of this research project, after which it will be destroyed. Electronic data will be kept in password protected and encrypted computers. Written information will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. I may use this data in future research, in which case it will be approved by the Research Ethics Board.

Further Information

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The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

Consent Statement

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

_____   _____

Participant's Name (printed) and Signature   Date

_____   _____

Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent   Date

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Leanne Garon Thompson
Interview Script
June 14, 2018

☐ Review Consent Form and Opt-out ability.
☐ Review interview format and confirm permission to audio record.
☐ Review purpose: *The purpose of this research study is to explore how parents obtain and use information in making school choice decisions for their children. I am carrying out this research in partial fulfillment of the requirements to complete a Master of Education degree at the University of Alberta.*

Name of parent participant:

Address:

Date:

Interview Start Time:

Interview End Time:

LGT: Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research study. I am going to start with a few basic questions about you and your family. These questions are used to look for commonalities among participants but your answers will not be shared with other participants. Then we will move into exploring your school choice decisions and the information you used to make those decisions.

Background Information

1. Tell me a bit about where you went to kindergarten and elementary school.
2. What is the highest level of schooling you have completed?
3. What do you do for work?
4. Tell me about your family – your partner and child/children.
   a. What elementary school did [parent 2 if applicable] attend?
   b. What is the highest level of schooling [parent 2 if applicable] has completed?
   c. What do they do for work?
   d. What is the age of your child/children?

5. Is/are your child/children currently attending school or pre-school?
6. Where will your child/children attend school in September (name of school will be generalized to type of school - i.e. home, charter, private, public, separate)?

<u>Obtaining and Using Information for School Choice</u>

1. Tell me how you came to the decision to send your child to _____. I am particularly interested in understanding what, if any, information you used in decision making.
   a. How did you find out about _____?
   b. What kind of information did you get about _____?
   c. Where did you get this information?
   d. If I understand correctly, you used _____ in making your decision. How did [information source] affect your decision?
   e. Did you seek out any other information about _____? (repeat as necessary)
      i. If so, what was this information?
      ii. Where did you obtain it?
      iii. How did it affect your decision?
   f. What do you consider to have had the greatest impact on your choice for your child to attend _____?
   g. Did you consider any other types of school?
      i. How did you obtain information about [the others]?
      ii. How did [information source] play into the decision to not choose that type of schooling?
   h. Did your child have input into the choice?
   i. Are there any other factors that influenced your choice?
   j. Are there any other information sources you considered when making your decision?
   k. What information was most useful? Least useful?
   l. Are there information sources you would recommend to other parents? Any advice you would give them as they consider school choice for their child?
   m. Is there any other information you would like to add?

Leanne Garon Thompson
Interview Script for Second Interview
February 21, 2019

☐ Review Consent Form and Opt-out ability.
☐ Review interview format and confirm permission to audio record.
☐ Review purpose: *The purpose of this research study is to explore how parents obtain and use information in making school choice decisions for their children. I am carrying out this research in partial fulfillment of the requirements to complete a Master of Education degree at the University of Alberta.*

Name of parent participant:

Address:

Date:

Interview Start Time:

Interview End Time:

LGT: Thank you again for agreeing to participate in a second interview for this research study. Qualitative research relies on deep, rather than broad, investigation, so I am conducting this second interview to delve deeper into your school choice decisions and the information you used to make those decisions.

Review of First Interview

1. Some of the things we talked about last time were:
    a. I will provide highlights particular to each participant based on their first interview.

Delving Deeper into Obtaining and Using Information for School Choice

2. We briefly touched on your schooling experience as more of a demographic question. Now I am wondering if you think it might have affected your school choice decision making?
3. You chose something similar to/different from your own schooling – could you tell me a little more about that?
4. How is school going this year?
    a. Is there any information you wished you had before starting this school year?

      b.   Is there any information you are especially glad you had?

5. Think about your first impression of the school – can you describe it to me?

      a.   Why do you think those particular things stood out?

      b.   Has your impression changed in the months since school began?

6. Tell me about your thoughts for the next school year?

      a.   Are you thinking of making a change?

      b.   If so, what sorts of information are you seeking to help you decide on the change?

7. In our previous conversation, it seemed like you were the person who did the majority of information seeking to help make the school choice decision. Could you tell me a bit about how your partner contributed?

8. Diploma exams were recently written across Alberta. Did you ever look at the schools' records of test scores for standardized tests like diplomas or provincial achievement tests.

      a.   Why or why not?

      b.   If so, how did this affect your school choice decision?

9. Do you recall reading any news articles about schooling when you were making your school choice decisions?

      a.   If so, how did that affect your thinking?

10. How would you answer my research questions?

      a.   From where and from whom do parents derive information about school choice?

      b.   How do parents use this information in making school choice decisions for their children?