A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF PARENTS WHOSE CHILD HAS A DISABILITY AND ATTENDS AN ONLINE SCHOOL

by

Michelle Kathryn Shires

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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Abstract

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. The theory that guided this study is Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory. This theory posits three universal psychological needs that promote or erode individual growth and well-being. The satisfaction or frustration of parents' psychological needs and their impact on their parenting have guided this study's research questions, interview questions, and data analysis. In-depth interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups were conducted with 12 parents whose child has a disability and attends a full-time online K-12 charter school. Experiential data were used to answer the central research question, "What is the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school?" and its sub-questions. Data collected from this study were transcribed and analyzed, and themes were generated manually to describe what it means to parent a child who has a disability and attends an online school. Qualitative analysis indicated that it takes an adjustment; parents appreciated the choice in scheduling and tailoring the learning environment to set their child up for success, and the online school was better than a traditional school. Findings indicated that parents whose child has a disability and attends an online school experience greater autonomy, do not consider their experience isolating, and do consider themselves partners in their child's special education.

Keywords: parents, students with disabilities, online school, K-12, self-determination theory, phenomenology

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, who taught me to be curious about life and confident in myself. To my husband, who has never held back my ambition to do more. To my son, whom I hope to inspire to be curious in life and make good choices. To Kal girl who was a comfort to me for most of this journey and is always in my heart.

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I want to acknowledge two brilliant educators and leaders who inspired me to do this work and stay true to my mission and myself. Brazilia Baliel Adams and Richard Savage, sincere thanks to you both for helping me steer and stay the course. I hope this brings value to the pedagogy of virtual learning.

I would also like to acknowledge and celebrate Dr. Barbara White for being a constant support to me through this experience.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Abbreviations

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Center for Self-Determination theory (CSDT)

Cognitive-Evaluation Theory (CET)

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

National Education Association (NEA)

National Education Policy Center (NEPC)

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)

Self-determination theory (SDT)

Students with disabilities (SWD)

United States of America Online Public School (USA OPS)

U.S. Department of Education (USDOE)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Parents whose child has a disability experience more stress than parents of a child without disabilities (Asbury et al., 2021). The satisfaction of parents' needs can impact their parenting behaviors, affecting their ability to facilitate the satisfaction of their child's needs (Costa, Gugliandolo et al., 2019; Costa, Sireno et al., 2019; Grolnick et al., 2021; Slobodin et al., 2020). More research is needed to understand the complex reality of this unique parenting experience and to examine the role of parenting a child with a disability to support the psychological well-being of parents and the children with disabilities (De Clercq et al., 2022; Dieleman et al., 2019; Yotyodying et al., 2021). Being the parent of a student attending an online school where parents are stewards of the student's home-based learning, supporting time management, teacher and peer communication, progress monitoring, and student motivation can be challenging (Wen et al., 2021). When parents attempt to achieve the balance of working, being an informal educator, and providing childcare simultaneously, it can cause stress as well as parental burnout (Nyanamba et al., 2021). Chapter One of this qualitative study describes the complex experience of being a parent whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. Background information on parenting a child with a disability and a student in an online school is presented from a historical and social perspective. Self-determination theory (SDT) is presented as the theory that guides this interpretive phenomenology. The problem statement, the purpose statement, and the significance of the study from a theoretical, empirical, and practical perspective are presented, concluding the first chapter with the central research question “What is the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school?” and its sub-questions.

Background

Relevant literature on parenting a child who has a disability and the evolution of families who have a child attending an online school is provided as a historical context, as is the social context of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. Research on the stress and well-being of parents whose child has a disability is elaborated. Ryan and Deci's SDT frames the principles underpinning the study's hybrid interpretive phenomenological framework, concluding the Background section.

Historical Context

The Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities (2022) called the period between 1950 and 1980 the reawakening of parental rights because, during this period, parents of children with disabilities organized themselves and began a national advocacy movement. These parents were frustrated over poor living conditions and scarce community services for their children. They desired improved conditions for their children in education and employment, claiming that children with disabilities could be helped (Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2022). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2022), only one in five students with disabilities (SWD) was served by U.S. Schools in 1970. The U.S. Department of Education explained that in 1975, President Gerald Ford signed Public Law 94-142, known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, a landmark civil rights action providing public school availability to children with disabilities. This act laid the foundation for the current law known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which makes available free and appropriate public education (FAPE), plus special education services, to eligible students with disabilities in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Before this legislation, parents of SWD were entirely responsible for their child's education and care, with very few public resources available for support or assistance. In the past two decades, researchers have sought to understand parenting styles and the relationship between parenting styles and the behavioral outcomes of children and adolescents (De Clercq et al., 2019). Still, there is a paucity of research evaluating the relationship between parenting styles and their link to the behavioral outcomes of children with disabilities (De Clercq et al., 2019). Parents of SWD face many systemic barriers (Burke et al., 2019). Parenting is a complex role, a continuous set of choices and acts that can affect the parent's emotional and physical well-being (De Clercq et al., 2022).

Parents are not typically the principal stewards of their children’s formal education, but in online schools, they are (Hinderliter et al., 2021). Distance education for K-12 students in the United States has existed for over 100 years. Barbour (2019) explained that the first documented use of distance learning was in 1910, when K-12 instructional films were introduced to the classroom. Barbour shared that distance education was used to provide access to education for various reasons, including access for families in rural areas, to cope with pandemics, to overcome political unrest, or to recover from environmental disasters. Barbour highlighted that distance education for K-12 learners has evolved. The first online school leveraging the internet and home computing technology was a private school called Laurel Springs, which began operating in 1991 (Barbour, 2019). Hundreds of students enrolled in thousands of courses at the onset of the 21st century compared to today, where hundreds of thousands enroll in over a million courses (Mann et al., 2021). In 2021, it was reported that 332,379 students had enrolled in 477 full-time online schools in the 2019-2020 school year (NEPC, 2021). Online schooling has expanded in the last 20 years due to flexibility, convenience, or flight from negative environments (Tonks et al., 2021). Families choose an online school because it works better for them (German, 2020).

Social Context

In the 2021-2022 academic year, the number of students aged 3 to 21 receiving special education services in the United States was 7.3 million, the equivalent of 15% of all public school students (NCES, 2023a). Since the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020, 1.5 billion students in 188 countries have found alternative educational solutions that were predominantly online (OECD, 2021). There are significantly more SWD attending an online school, with significantly more parents of SWD playing the roles of caregiver and learning coach. Being the parent of an SWD is challenging. Parents of SWD experience more stress than parents of students without disabilities (De Clercq et al., 2022). Parents of SWD struggle with interpreting their students' needs, especially if they are nonverbal (Muddle et al., 2022). Parents of SWD experience both psychosocial challenges and positive experiences (Dieleman et al., 2018). Being the parent of a student attending an online school where parents are stewards of the student's home-based learning has its challenges. These parents support time management, teacher and peer communication, progress monitoring, and student motivation (Wen et al., 2021). Parents attempt to achieve the balance of working, being an informal educator, and providing childcare simultaneously, which can cause stress and parental burnout (Nyanamba et al., 2021). There is substantial research regarding parents of SWD experiencing negative psychosocial outcomes, yet some parents of SWD have thrived and experienced positive outcomes (Dieleman et al., 2018; Kim & Dababnah, 2020). Some parents of children with autism spectrum disorder reported feeling more empowered and becoming closer as a family (DePape & Lindsay, 2014).

Lindo et al. (2016) explained that the entire family unit is affected by living with a child with a disability, and parents specifically experience psychological and physiological impacts from adapting to the demands of parenting. Lindo et al. asserted that improvements to the parents’ well-being would equate to improvements to the entire family's well-being, including the child with a disability. Quantitative research on parenting and SWD has been growing, but qualitative research is still needed to understand the complexity of this parent experience (De Clercq et al., 2022). Lalvani and Douglas (2013) asserted that historically, research on families of children with disabilities had only taken a medical stance, not recognizing the sociocultural contexts of these families. Lalvani and Douglas claimed that when disabilities were medicalized, meaning thought to be a medical problem and therefore legitimate, this would bring about a period of social change for this population. Despite the massive changes seen in the past century regarding treatment, education, intervention, and deinstitutionalization of children with disabilities, the poor quality of life and negative outcomes for these children and their families have remained relatively the same (Lalvani & Douglas, 2013).

Parents are a primary agent of socialization in their children’s lives (Boyle & Benner, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Parents’ beliefs about education influence parenting behaviors in a way that influences children’s achievement (Boyle & Benner, 2020). Parents of SWD often elect to employ homeschooling and, more recently, online schools that offer a form of home-based learning to accommodate their SWD and family better (Tonks et al., 2021). Wen et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review of the literature regarding formal learning at home supported by technology. Wen et al. found that parents struggle with employing technology in the structured learning environment needed to support early childhood education. Wen et al. expressed a need for parents to be equipped with materials, resources, and training to effectively support and engage their children and establish two-way communication practices with teachers to support learning at home. Parents are not normally the principal stewards of children’s formal education;

therefore, when parents do fulfill this role with online education, their expectations and satisfaction concern school administrators and instructional designers (Hinderliter et al., 2021).

Theoretical Context

The theory that guided this study is Ryan and Deci's Self Determination Theory (SDT). SDT asserts that three basic psychological needs are essential to growth and well-being; the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Humans have long been thought to possess an innate and active tendency toward experiences that, when synthesized, provide the basis for a vital sense of self and integrity (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This classical view has existed in both Western thought (Aristotle) and Eastern thought (Taoism and Confucianism) and continues today (Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT was born from the study of motivation. Ryan and Deci (1985) believed that humans were not just passive organisms being pushed around by physiological drives and the environment, as most mechanistic theories of the early 1900s portrayed. Freud's drive theory, also known as the instinct theory, was the beginning of motivation theory, which asserted that sex and aggression were the two most important drivers of behavior (Ryan & Deci, 1985). In 1959 Robert White began the shift in thinking that primary drives did not account for playful and exploratory behavior and that a motivation to be competent and the satisfaction of feeling efficacious demonstrated an intrinsic need for interacting with the environment (White, 1959). Ryan and Deci built upon this shift in thinking from human motivation being a passive physiological drive to human motivation being active and volitional with the ability to initiate behavior (Ryan & Deci, 1985). Ryan and Deci's theory is a motivational theory, rather than a cognitive one, because it tackles the energization and direction of behavior and the perceived locus of causality (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Parents as caregivers, teachers, and agents of socialization have great accountability for the facilitation or hindrance of the three basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017). There is substantial research on SDT and parenting related to need-satisfaction and need-frustration (De Clercq et al., 2019; De Clercq et al., 2022; Dieleman et al., 2019; Teuber et al., 2021; van Esch et al., 2018). SDT is a relevant lens to describe the experiences of parenting an SWD, both good and bad, as it relates to parents of SWD describing more need-frustrating but more autonomy-satisfying experiences when compared to parents of students without a disability (De Clercq et al., 2022). SDT as a parenting theory can be used to underpin and understand the detrimental role in children's psychological well-being that comes from certain parenting behaviors (Yotyodying et al., 2021). There is a need for more research examining the role of parenting SWD to support the psychological well-being of both parents and SWD and to understand the complex reality of this unique parenting experience (De Clercq et al., 2022; Dieleman et al., 2019; Yotyodying et al., 2021). These seminal works are calls to action to add to the body of existing literature, specifically from a qualitative research perspective, to understand the experience of being a parent whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. This study uncovered new information describing the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school from the lens of SDT, extending the research to date and providing a rich account of the experience for parents, educators, service providers, and government bodies to support these families.

Problem Statement

The problem is that being a parent whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school presents a greater risk of psychological and psychosocial difficulties that may impact the well-being of the parent, their parenting practices, and subsequently the well-being of their child. Little is understood about the complex experience of being the parent of a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. Public-school students receiving special education services under the IDEA act in the 2021-2022 academic year equaled 15% of all public-school students in the United States (NCES, 2023a). Online learning solutions were leveraged by 1.5 billion students in 188 countries during the onset of COVID-19 (OECD, 2021). This equates to more parents of SWD attending an online school, converging two complex parenting roles that individually result in greater stress and burnout and, when combined, can impact the wellness of both the parent and the SWD. Parents whose child has a disability experience greater rates of stress, anxiety, isolation, financial impact, and marital risk (De Clercq et al., 2019; De Clercq et al., 2022; Dieleman et al., 2018; Dieleman et al., 2019; Kim & Dababnah, 2020; Lindo et al., 2016; van Esch et al., 2018). Due to increased stress and frustration, parents whose child has a disability might rely more on need-thwarting than need-supporting parenting (De Clercq et al., 2021). Parents are not traditionally accountable for their children's formal learning environment. Parent training, engagement, and satisfaction are important problems to solve (Hinderliter et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2021). Programs to improve the parenting skills of parents whose child has a disability could lead to improved parenting behavior, parent self-efficacy, and informed school leadership (Yotyodying et al., 2021). This self-determination-theory-hermeneutic phenomenology has gathered in-depth interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups describing the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. Interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups provided richer insights into this population's complex experiences, making a phenomenological study a good fit to explore and identify these parents' needs, frustration, and satisfaction. Describing the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school will assist other parents, teachers, school administrators, and government bodies through better understanding these parents' experiences to support them and their SWD.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to describe the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. At this stage in the research, the phenomenon of parenting a child who has a disability and attends a full-time online K-12 school has been defined as parents of K-12 students who have an active IEP and are receiving special education services through a full-time U.S. public charter online school that operates completely online without physical facilities or instruction~~.~~

Significance of the Study

This study has contributed to the knowledge base by describing the experience of the complex role of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school from a theoretical, empirical, and practical perspective. From a theoretical significance, this study contributes to the theoretical underpinnings of the problem through the lens of SDT as a macro theory. Empirically, this study responds to calls to action from similar research to produce studies like this to expand the knowledge base. From a practical perspective, this study contributes to a better understanding of the experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school, benefiting other parents of SWD, teachers, school administrators, and government bodies looking to shape relevant support and policy.

Theoretical Significance

Considering others' thoughts is important to qualitative research; it increases objectivity and broadens a researcher's understanding (Peoples, 2021). According to SDT, parents facilitate the environment for psychological needs satisfaction through autonomy support, structure, and environment (Grolnick et al., 2021). Studies of SDT as a parenting theory have shown that parental autonomy support is a need-supportive social context, while parental psychological control is a form of a need-thwarting social context (Costa, Gugliandolo et al., 2019). The frustration of parents' own psychological needs may be considered an antecedent of controlling parenting, making basic parental needs a possible predictor of their parenting behavior (Slobodin et al., 2020). The complex experience of being a parent of a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school combines two intense roles that put the satisfaction of the parent’s psychological needs at risk and, by extension, put the child’s psychological needs at risk. This study provides a richer understanding of parenting a child that requires a higher parental investment through the framework of SDT’s three psychological needs. By providing insight into the experience of playing these simultaneous, complex roles through the lens of SDT, this study contributes to understanding the theoretical underpinnings of the problem in a new way.

Empirical Significance

Evidence about what shapes the psychological well-being of children with disabilities is still limited (Nyanamba et al., 2021). There are ample quantitative studies researching parents raising SWD being more likely to experience stress, but there is a need for more qualitative studies to understand the complex reality of these parents’ experiences (De Clercq et al., 2022). Parents of SWD may rely more on need-thwarting parenting over need-supporting parenting because of the satisfaction or frustration of their own needs, which in turn may result in the need frustration of the SWD (De Clercq et al., 2022). Beyond the parent and SWD, families with an SWD also experience challenges that materialize in marital pressure, financial pressure, sibling adjustment, and decreased parent efficiency (Lindo et al., 2016). The evidence base around parents whose child has a disability and attends an online school is sparse (Sublett & Chang, 2019). Few studies that involve formal online learning at home as a phenomenon exist, and of them, few investigate strategies that include parental involvement (Wen et al., 2021). Parents, students, and teachers face challenges with online learning (Chiu, 2021). Despite significant evidence about the negative impacts of parenting an SWD, some parents have thrived by finding psychological coping mechanisms (Kim & Dababnah, 2020). These findings suggest a gap in the research regarding the complex reality of the unique experience of parenting a child with a disability who attends an online school. This study addresses this empirical gap by describing how parents portray their experience parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school through hermeneutic phenomenology and the lens of SDT as a macro theory.

Practical Significance

The most valuable significance of this study is from a practical perspective, where the lived experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school is portrayed through the lens of hermeneutic phenomenology and SDT to raise awareness among involved stakeholders. Stakeholders may include parents whose child has a disability, teachers working with parents of SWD attending an online school, online school administrators, community support groups, and government bodies looking to craft policy and legislation. Increased awareness through a better understanding of the described experience of these parents may lead to better parent support systems, better parental education programs, and improved partnerships between parents whose child has a disability and the online schools their children attend. There is a strong relationship between engagement and disengagement that could lead to success or failure in school (Bergdahl & Bond, 2022). Understanding a student’s circumstances and traits and providing support at home for online learning is critical to minimize struggles and maximize success (Mann et al., 2021). Parents' self-efficacy and perceptions of their abilities and the abilities of their child who has a disability influence treatment and programs for support; therefore, information awareness and access to information are critical for parents' and SWD growth (Kim & Dababnah, 2020). Increased awareness through a better understanding of the described experience of these parents has potential implications for positive social and educational change. It should inspire further future research on this underserved population and phenomenon.

Research Questions

The central research question is a representation of the traditional phenomenological question. Phenomenological research is to question something, to understand what something is really like; it seeks to understand the nature of the lived experience (van Manen, 2016). The sub-questions are oriented around the three basic psychological needs of SDT.

Central Research Question

What is the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school?

Sub-Question One

What is the parents’ experience with autonomy when parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school?

Sub-Question Two

What is the parents’ experience with relatedness when parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school?

Sub-Question Three

What is the parents’ experience with competence when parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school?

Definitions

1. *Autonomy* – the need to self-regulate one's experiences and actions (Ryan & Deci, 2017).
2. *Competence* – the need to feel effective and mastery (Ryan & Deci, 2017).
3. *Engagement* – the active (energy and effort) involvement of the student in their educational practices, commitment to educational goals, and learning (Chiu, 2021).
4. *Involvement* – entails investing time, resources, and attention to the child so that they feel connected and emotionally supported for healthy development. It also refers to warmth and affection (Ryan & Deci, 2017).
5. *Online school* – full-time online K-12 schools that provide all instruction online, receiving full public funding for delivering a school experience. They include public charter school programs (NEPC, 2021).
6. *Relatedness* – the need to feel socially connected (Ryan & Deci, 2017).
7. *Structure* – entails the transmission of information and direction to scaffold support of the child for their development (Ryan & Deci, 2017).
8. *Students with disabilities (SWD)* – students ages 3-21 identified by a team of professionals as having a disability that adversely affects academic performance and needing special education and related services articulated through an IEP (NCES, 2023a).
9. *Warmth* – refers to affection, love, sweetness, and positive regard, which includes emotional availability and support (Costa, Sireno et al., 2019).

Summary

This chapter has provided the historical and social background of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school, and how that experience can be newly understood through the lens of SDT, which describes humans' three psychological needs and, by extension, those needs through parenting dimensions. The study's problem statement, purpose statement, and significance from a theoretical, empirical, and practical perspective have been outlined and concluded with definitions relevant to this study. The central research question, “What is the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school”, was derived from the general problem: that parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school presents a greater risk of psychological and psychosocial difficulties for the parent that may impact their well-being, their parenting practices, and the well-being of their child. The specific problem, that more children who have a disability are attending online school, equates to a greater number of parents whose child has a disability and attends online school. This phenomenon is a unique parenting experience that combines two complex parenting roles that may be more impactful to the wellness of both the parent and the child with a disability. This hermeneutic phenomenological study investigated the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. The study seeks to raise awareness and increase access to information for other parents whose child has a disability, teachers, school administrators, and government bodies so they may better understand the frustration and satisfaction of these parents and their children with a disability. Additionally, this study has extended the current research on SDT regarding parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the literature is presented to inform and ground the exploration of the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. The theoretical framework section discusses the primary theory guiding this research, Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (SDT), as a macro theory. Following the theoretical framework is a review of literature related to research on parenting attachment, the typology of parenting, autonomy versus controlling parenting, and mindful parenting. Current literature on parenting a student with disability (SWD), the evolution of online schools, parenting online school students, and SWD attending online schools is synthesized. SDT grounds the exploration of the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school, setting the stage for the central research question and sub-questions and illustrating the gap in the literature requiring the need for this research. The summary concludes with how this research will add theoretical and practical value.

Theoretical Framework

The primary theory that guided this research is Ryan and Deci's Self Determination Theory (SDT). SDT is an organismic theory of human behavior and development that seeks to understand the real-life domains that influence motivations and basic need satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2002, 2017, 2019). Ryan and Deci compare these psychological needs to the physiological needs of water or oxygen, which are necessary for human survival. These human nutrients are essential for growth and well-being. When these needs are satisfied, they form the foundation for motivation and optimal human development (Ahn et al., 2022). SDT is explanatory as it relates to social and environmental contexts that support or thwart these basic needs and nutrients

(Ryan, Deci et al., 2019). Since SDT was founded, it has become one of the most widely researched and applied theories of psychology, used as a broad framework applicable to many fields of study to help bring phenomena into focus (Ryan & Deci, 2019). The three basic psychological needs that SDT considers as human nutrients are autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2002, 2017, 2019, 2020).

Autonomy

Autonomy is the need to self-regulate one's experiences and actions, which is one's self-organized and volitional behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ryan, Deci et al., 2021). Autonomy is a concept that reflects the origin of one's behavior (Arden et al., 2022). When a person acts with a sense of volition and their behavior is of their free choice, consistent with their values, and experienced with a sense of satisfaction, their need for autonomy is likely satisfied (Costa, Gugliandolo, et al., 2019).

Competency

The need for competence is the need to feel mastery; it is a feeling of effectiveness in dealing with daily challenges, making one productive and performant (Costa, Gugliandolo, et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Competency is a feeling of achievement from desired outcomes (Arden et al., 2022). Competency is easily thwarted when the sense of mastery is diminished through pervasive negative feedback or undermined by interpersonal factors like criticism, comparison, or rejection (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Relatedness

The need for relatedness is the need to feel connected or cared for; it is a feeling of being integral to social organizations beyond oneself (Costa, Gugliandolo et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Relatedness is the concept of being close to others from being part of a social group where you belong and are not alone (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When a person's needs for relatedness are satisfied, they are a community member where they are cared for and care for others, providing a sense of being secure, united, and understood (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

Self-Determination Theory as an Organizing Framework

Parenting is one of the real-life domains that SDT seeks to understand. Parents provide one of the child's earliest and most impactful social and emotional contexts (Costa, Sireno et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT as a macro theory guided this study as it provides an ideal framework to explore the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. SDT establishes a theoretical framework that posits that parents' own psychological needs satisfaction influences their parenting, which in turn impacts the psychological needs satisfaction of the child (Costa, Gugliandolo et al., 2019; Costa, Sireno et al., 2019; Grolnick et al., 2021; Slobodin et al., 2020).

Stressors influence parenting. One of the stressors can be the child's temperament (Andreadakis et al., 2020). Another stressor of parenting is guilt which can be a positive force for change but equally a negative force of distress (Slobodin et al., 2020). Parents of SWD experience more stress than parents of students without disabilities (Asbury et al., 2021). Parents of SWD face many systemic barriers (Burke et al., 2019).

Ryan and Deci (2002, 2017) suggested through SDT that children are intrinsically motivated to learn and that caregiving environments strongly affect their intrinsic propensities to learn. Schools are contexts for development, more than just learning factories, where identities are established and affected by whether the school context supports or thwarts basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The traditional school context and environment and the traditional home context and environment are different, influencing students' motivation and how they learn in schools (Chiu, 2021). Parents are not normally the stewards of their children's formal education, and being stewards may result in additional parental anxiety and dissatisfaction (Hinderliter et al., 2021).

The stress of being the parent of a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school may hinder parents' own psychological needs, creating a cycle that threatens the growth and well-being of both the parent and child. Situating this study within the theoretical framework of SDT is ideal for understanding the phenomenon of being the parent of a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. This study utilized SDT to frame the intersection of the two real-life domains of parenting and school as it explored the lived experience of parents of SWD attending an online school.

Stemming from the central research question, "What is the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school?" are three research sub-questions. This first sub-question, "What is the parents' experience with autonomy when parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school?" is underpinned by the first basic psychological need of SDT. Sub-research question two, "What is the parents' experience with relatedness when parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school?" is underpinned by the second basic psychological need of SDT. Sub-research question three, "What is the parents' experience with competence when parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school?" is underpinned by the third basic psychological need of SDT. This study extended the empirical literature on SDT as it sought to understand the lived experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school, expressing through their personal stories how they experience the domains of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Related Literature

The related literature section synthesizes the literature on parenting, parenting an SWD, and parenting students who attend an online school. The literature related to parenting included the early concept of attachment, the typology of parenting patterns, and the evolution from attachment to autonomy in parenting theory. Literature on autonomy-supportive versus controlling parenting behaviors covers the research illustrating that parents' psychological needs are antecedents of their parenting practice. Existing literature on parenting an SWD examined the role, its stressors, and parental involvement with the school. Current literature on the evolution of online schools, parents of students attending an online school, and SWD attending online school have been examined. The synthesis of related literature on parenting, parenting an SWD, and parenting a student attending an online school has been linked to this study exploring the lived experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. SDT and why it was an appropriate lens to ground and explore the lived experience of parenting an SWD who also attends an online K-12 school is presented, setting the stage for the central research question and sub-questions, illustrating the gap in the literature that required the need for this research.

Parenting

A parent's role is critical to a child's development and well-being (Ahn et al., 2022; Arden et al., 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Parents are the primary socializers of their children (Baumrind et al., 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Over the years, parenting practices have evolved from attachment to the assertion of authority and, more recently, to the provision of autonomy. This section synthesizes research on attachment theory related to parenting, establishing a secure home based on parent types as they exercise parental authority, and the evolution from attachment to autonomy in parenting research. Literature on the provision of autonomy-supportive environments over-controlling parenting for positive child outcomes is provided. Lastly, parental psychological needs as antecedents of parenting practice is summarized.

Attachment

John Bowlby, in collaboration with Mary Ainsworth, established attachment theory to express the bond between parent and child that is both relational and emotional in its ability to attune to a child's needs, critical to establishing a secure internal base for the child, which is meaningful for all developmental stages of the child (Bowlby et al., 2019; Bretherton, 1992; Holmes, 2014). Attachment theory was an early and influential work on nurturing children (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Holmes (2014) recognized that a child has a strong hunger for a mother's love and presence, which was equal to the hunger for food, making attachment a primary motivation system. Bowlby et al. (2019) recognized the importance of a warm and continuous relationship between mother and child if the two should be separated. Stroebe (2021)noted the result to the child could be damaging.

Conversely, when a parent is available repeatedly and responsively, a child can learn from that caregiver and expect from others that it should be dependent (Bowlby et al., 2019). If the attachment figure (parent) has acknowledged the child’s needs for comfort and protection while respecting their need for independent exploration, according to attachment theory, the child is likely to develop a valued model of self (Bretherton, 1992). Interactions such as sensitivity and responsiveness are essential, as is the parents' subjective representation of these experiences (Rosenblum et al., 2018). If the attachment figure rejects the child’s need for comfort or exploration, the child is likely to develop an unworthy model of self (Bretherton, 1992). Mothers who have experienced trauma or are suffering from a mental illness have an impaired ability to recognize and respond to signals of a child's distress, resulting in a disengaged parent typology that is less sensitive in caregiving, forming an insecure attachment in the child (Rosenblum et al., 2018). Ainsworth co-founded attachment theory and advanced the concept of the attachment figure as the secure base, which provides a sense of security that encourages curiosity and exploration (Holmes, 2014). As children age, their attachment and dependency change and mature, but their relationship with their parents remains an anchor (Holmes, 2014). On the other end of attachment is nonattachment. Nonattached individuals do not place unreasonable expectations on themselves; they interact with their experiences without fixation, and they live with a greater sense of autonomy and agency in their choices (Whitehead et al., 2020). The sense of security that grows from attachment is an early indicator of the need for relatedness, which encourages curiosity and exploration as a leading indicator of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Bowlby's work was unique in that it attempted to understand the nurturing of children instead of managing a child's behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Other parenting theories focus on managing children's behavior and performance.

Typology of Parenting

Baumrind (1991) established a view that challenged other theorists' beliefs that adolescents transitioned from being attached to their parents to becoming detached from their parents by situating the role of security of attachment in promoting family interdependence and adolescent self-regulation and exploration. Baumrind believed that parents' behavior could facilitate the security of attachment, family interdependence, and the adolescent's self-regulation through the two dimensions of demandingness and responsiveness. Baumrind believed these two dimensions classify four parenting behavior types: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and rejecting-neglecting parenting. Baumrind et al. (2010) found that the parenting a child is exposed to before adolescence would influence the type of adolescent the child would be. Baumrind et al. found that the effects of an authoritarian upbringing are more harmful than an authoritative upbringing, producing competent and agentic adolescents, with children from rejecting-neglecting homes being the least competent of all. Baumrind et al. later recognized this as the exercise of parental authority. Interpersonal power was found to be a critical part of exerting parental control (Baumrind, 1991). Interpersonal power is the ability of one person in a social relationship to be able to influence another person in a social relationship to do something they would not otherwise do (Baumrind et al., 2010). The variable of coercion can be a differentiator between authoritative and authoritarian practices, and identified power coercive practices, including psychological control, can be the antithesis of autonomy support (Baumrind et al., 2010). Historically, parents' right to assert their interpersonal control over children was affirmed by societal standards, but a shift toward unconditional love and respect for children's freedom had occurred in the 1990s (Baumrind et al., 2010).

Unconditional love is different, however, than doing the best for one's child (Blustein, 2012). Blustein (2012) offered counterpoints to doing the absolute best for one's child. Blustein highlighted one drawback to this concept, the investment of a disproportionate amount of resources in one child, which often happens at the disadvantage of another, and called for society to encourage a more collective attitude toward equal support of all children. Blustein provided another drawback to the concept of doing the best for one's child: there are times when what is best for the child can be at the sacrifice of what is best for the parent or the family. Blustein advocated for good enough parenting, where parents have fulfilled their obligations to enable a child to function independently in society while respecting the parent's needs and identity (Blustein, 2012).

Partain et al. (2022) researched parenting beliefs and behaviors that children's characteristics could elicit. Partain et al. researched an association between child externalizing behaviors and parenting practices and found that parenting practices were more child-driven than parent-driven. Partain et al. found that high parent anxiety was associated with authoritarian parenting. Parents must be aware of their own emotions and actions to self-regulate and modulate their behavior to be attuned to the needs of their children (Sanders et al., 2019). These researchers highlighted that parental self-regulation is essential to positive and nurturing parenting practices that promote the health and well-being of children and families. The growing research on parenting practices and self-regulation represents a shift from attachment to autonomy in parenting theory.

Autonomy Versus Controlling Parenting

Parenting is a social behavior that plays a critical role in the development and growth of children (Costa, Sireno et al., 2019). SDT posits that the facilitation of children's development and growth happens when their intrinsic motivations are ignited and their three basic psychological needs are satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Parents seek to leverage intrinsic motivation for children to gain satisfaction from learning versus resorting to parenting behaviors like control and pressure, which can hinder intrinsic motivation (Banerjee & Halder, 2021). When children's needs are satisfied, they are more likely to use adaptive strategies, make appropriate decisions, and exhibit strength in understanding self-standards and goals (Arden et al., 2022). Parenting plays a profound role in children's growth (Li et al., 2020).

Baumrind's work is acknowledged as providing a dominant perspective that there are two classic parenting dimensions, parental responsiveness and demandingness (Teuber et al., 2021). Teuber et al. (2021) compared SDT to Baumrind's theory in that they both value parental warmth as a core aspect of involvement closely related to autonomy support. The opposite of parental autonomy is parental psychological control, which frustrates children’s need for autonomy (Teuber et al., 2021). Autonomy-supportive parenting is when parents offer meaningful rationales, provide choices for their children to make decisions, set clear rules and expectations for behavior, attempt to understand and acknowledge children’s perspectives, and encourage their interests (Ahn et al., 2022; Arden et al., 2022; , Costa, Sireno et al., 2019; Li et al., 2020). Autonomy-supportive parenting takes the child's frame of reference and encourages them to self-initiate (Costa, Sireno et al., 2019). Controlling parenting is when parents prioritize their preferences, inducing internal and external pressures, and are manipulative and inconsistent in emotions and limits (Ahn et al., 2022; Arden et al., 2022; Costa, Sireno et al., 2019). Parental control includes coercion and a failure on the part of parents to consider issues from the perspective of the child (Li et al., 2020). Autonomy-supportive parenting and controlling parenting are two styles that offer proximal context for adolescents’ need satisfaction (Ahn et al., 2022). Autonomy-supportive parenting is associated with positive academic, psychological, and social outcomes, while controlling parenting is associated with negative outcomes like underachievement, underemployment, and behavioral problems (Arden et al., 2022; Costa, Sireno et al., 2019).

Robichaud et al. (2020) posited that autonomy-supportive parenting supports basic needs satisfaction, whereas controlling parenting thwarts children's basic needs. Robichaud et al. connect the quality of motivation as a function of self-determination, where someone highly self-determined acts out of autonomous motivation and someone not self-determined acts out of controlled motivation. Robichaud et al. express that controlling parenting practices harm children’s development while autonomy-supportive parenting practices are positive. Children who exist in unstable environments pursue short-term rewards with aggressive, impulsive, and adventurous behaviors while children who exist in a stable environment pursue long-term goals with prosocial, self-controlled, and responsible behavior (Li et al., 2020). Autonomy is a primary development task for adolescents, and support from both parents and teachers is found to encourage adolescents to act on their personal interests and values (Xu et al., 2023). Parenting practices like autonomy support and psychological control can predict adolescent behavior and well-being across different groups and genders (Li et al., 2020). When parents practice cognitive reappraisal to regulate their emotions, it can reduce the effects of parental burnout on autonomy-supportive parenting (Yang et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding the sources of autonomy-supportive and psychologically controlling parenting is critical (Mabbe et al., 2018).

The satisfaction of parents' basic psychological needs is an antecedent of their parenting practice (Mabbe et al., 2018). The satisfaction of parents' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are important sources for their parenting (Dieleman et al., 2019). Parents are likely to behave controllingly when their psychological needs are unmet (Costa, Sireno et al., 2019). Parental burnout may have a detrimental impact on adolescent development and mental health (Yang et al., 2021). The relationship between children's needs satisfaction and their development is well established, but the importance of need satisfaction for parents' well-being is less established (Arden et al., 2022). Some evidence exists that links parental needs satisfaction to the provision of autonomy-support or psychological control (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2019). Parental burnout negatively affects autonomy-supportive parenting (Yang et al., 2021). Parental perception of psychological need frustration can predict parental psychological control, while the perception of need satisfaction can predict parental autonomy support (Costa, Sireno et al., 2019). Mabbe et al. (2018) posited that autonomy-supportive parenting requires psychological availability from parents. Mabbe et al. express that if parents’ basic psychological needs are unmet, they will not have the nutrients and mental space necessary for autonomy-supporting practices. Mabbe et al. stated that frustration with psychological needs would increase the probability that parents may be more self-centered and rely on psychologically controlling practices. Mabbe et al. noted that parental behavior is generally not constant and varies daily. Daily variation in parents’ well-being may be the result of daily variation in parents’ psychological needs satisfaction (Brenning et al., 2019).

Parenting behaviors can be affected by the parent's psychological needs and influenced by their partners' psychological needs (Costa, Sireno et al., 2019). Child characteristics like temperament are also likely to influence the psychological needs of the parents (Brenning et al., 2019). Parents of children with special needs face unique challenges in satisfying their psychological needs, which jeopardize their capacity to facilitate autonomy-supportive practices for the child (Dieleman et al., 2018). Parents of children with special needs might practice more psychologically controlling and less autonomy-supportive parenting behaviors due to the increased levels of parenting stress (De Clercq et al., 2022). Parents with negative beliefs about adolescence may experience higher parental burnout (Zimmermann et al., 2022). Prosocial behavior in children, like helping and sharing, is an important precursor of need-supportive parenting (Dieleman et al., 2019).

Mindful Parenting

Mindfulness is the open attention to the present moment, a receptive state of observing what is happening without judgment, putting people in a mental place to be more reflective (Ryan, Donald et al., 2021). When a parent gives full attention to their parenting process, this concept is known as mindful parenting, and it is a quality of consciousness and awareness of every interaction with the child (Kakhki et al., 2022). Zhang et al. (2022) found several studies indicating that mindful parenting yields more impact on children’s development outcomes than the general disposition of parents. There are five operational aspects to mindful parenting, including listening attentively, nonjudgmental acceptance, emotional awareness, self-regulation, and compassion (Zhang et al., 2022). Self-forgiveness, self-benevolence, self-compassion, and self-growth are associated with greater self-control and better general health (Finardi et al., 2022). Mindful parenting is found to be positively associated with reducing parent depression and anxiety and improving the overall well-being of the parents (Zhang et al., 2022). Mindfulness is conducive to autonomous forms of motivation, by providing for an open and non-defensive awareness of the current state, allowing an individual to engage in reflective choices and actions (Ryan, Donald et al., 2021).

Parents of SWD

The role of parents of SWD has evolved, responding to the most critical needs of their children. The Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities (2022) explains that in the early 1900s, parents of children with developmental disabilities grew frustrated about their children's less-than-desirable living conditions and lack of community support. Parents began to organize locally and nationally to advocate for their children (Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2022). In more modern times, the role of an SWD parent has had to evolve to that of an advocate for services and equity (Bacon & Lalvani, 2019). In the context of being an advocate, parents of SWD are at risk for personal, interpersonal, and political disempowerment and face multiple systemic barriers (Burke et al., 2019). Being the parent of a SWD has adverse impacts on the parents’ well-being, including psychological health struggles, economic difficulties, and the lack of social support (Sadiki, 2023; Sowmida et al., 2023).

Parents of SWD play multiple roles, including being caregivers at home, stewards for medical treatment, and stakeholders and advocates for education (Wen et al., 2021). Balancing these roles can be challenging and impactful for parents, putting their health, as well as the health of their children, at risk (Dieleman et al., 2018).

Parent Movement

When considering the evolution of developmental disabilities, the period between the 1940s and the 1980s is known as the Parent Movement because this was a time when parents began to organize nationally and demand services to improve the quality of life for students with disabilities (Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2022). In 1970, only one in five students with disabilities was served by U.S. schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) (2022) explained that in 1975, President Gerald Ford signed Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, a landmark civil rights action providing public school availability to children with disabilities. The USDOE shared that this act provided the foundation for what is currently recognized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which makes available free and appropriate public education (FAPE) with special education services to eligible students with disabilities. Parents of SWD were responsible for their child's education and care before Public Law 94-142, with very few public resources available for support.

Parents as Advocates

Decades later, parents of SWD still struggle to connect their children with meaningful support. Throughout history, parents of SWD have tirelessly advocated for their children's civil and educational rights and were major contributors to the IDEA (Trainor, 2010). The IDEA requires parent participation and sets the implicit expectation of parent advocacy (Burke et al., 2019). Advocacy, as it relates to early disability rights, is described as speaking and acting on behalf of another person or group (Trainor, 2010). Parents need to advocate for their children to overcome barriers to accessing and obtaining services (Taylor et al., 2019). Parent involvement in a student's education has shown positive outcomes for the student's education and experience (Trainor, 2010). Advocacy is not only good for the outcomes of the student but is also known to help parents of SWD cope with their circumstances (Sowmida et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2019). Getting connected to social supports can both increase a parent's self-image and confidence while also equipping them with knowledge and skills to advocate for their children (Sadiki, 2023). When parents feel empowered, they are more likely to be optimistic about facing challenges (Burke et al., 2019).

Taylor et al. (2019) showed that parents of SWD must engage in advocacy throughout their child's lifespan, with a greater need for advocacy being at times of significant transition, like the transition between early childhood to school-based services or from secondary school to post-secondary life. Taylor et al. outline common advocacy settings, such as educational institutions, medical centers or providers, social services, and social media. Advocacy activities include raising awareness about a child's disability, educating oneself, understanding rights, educating others, and working to access educational, social, and medical services (Taylor et al., 2019).

Bacon and Causton-Theoharis (2013) explained that positive relationships between parents and schools are not adequately forged, communication between parents of SWD and schools is often dissatisfying, and parents do not feel they have a voice or can influence decision-making about their SWD education. Bacon and Causton-Theoharis expressed that special education is bureaucratic and that the bureaucratic structures of schools impact the individualized education plan (IEP) process, requiring parents to be advocates so that their voices can be heard throughout the special education process. Kauffman et al. (2020) explained that SWD are meant to be placed in the least restrictive environment, resulting in some SWD being placed in general education settings while others are not. Kauffman et al. expressed that some IEP teams consider the general education curriculum and instruction and, based on the needs of the individual, make decisions about how best to serve some students with severe disabilities. Kauffman et al. emphasized that special education is a service, not a place, and while some SWD may learn from a general education classroom, others may not. Parents may struggle with how best to maintain the dignity of their learners (Kauffman et al., 2020). Parents seek opportunities for advocacy of more inclusive placements for their SWD (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). Bacon and Lalvani (2019) summarized the historical and current state of SWD and their parents, expressing that the word disability refers to the political, economic, social, and cultural oppression that people experience. Disability is a complex word that has a complex history in a complex society.

Stressors

When a parent experiences aversive feelings associated with their parenting role, this can be understood as parenting stress (Finardi et al., 2022). When there is a discrepancy between the resources needed for parenting tasks and the ability to cope with them, it creates the psychological reaction of parenting stress (Kakhki et al., 2022). When parents experience an overwhelming exhaustion in their parental role, this is known as parental burnout (Yang et al., 2021). Parents of SWD experience higher amounts of stress than parents of students without disabilities (Kim & Dababnah, 2020; Lindo et al., 2016; Pihlainen et al., 2022; Sowmida et al., 2023; van Esch et al., 2018). Perceived stress is another variable and includes having an awareness of and feeling the level of stress that is being experienced (Sowmida et al., 2023).

Sustained stress**,** such as that experienced by parents of SWD**,** results in physiological impacts on the body, causing negative effects and poorer health outcomes (Lindo et al., 2016). These parents experience psychological problems like depression, anxiety, despair, and distress that impact their well-being (Finardi et al., 2022; Sadiki, 2023; Tümlü & Akdogan, 2022). Parents from different cultures have different experiences. The well-being of the parent of a child who has a disability can be influenced by environmental, cultural, and educational factors (Tümlü & Akdogan, 2022). Parent involvement is a key component of school success, yet parents of a child who has a disability are often intimidated by the educational system (Brandon et al., 2021).

One in six children in the U.S. has one or more developmental disabilities or developmental delays (Centers for Disease Control, 2022). Parents of SWD experience higher levels of stress than parents of students without disabilities (Lindo et al., 2016). These stressors influence the quality of family relationships and can make patient and positive parenting behaviors a real challenge (Asbury et al., 2021). Parenting stress has been associated with lower levels of positive parenting and behavior problems in the child, creating a cycle of influence (van Esch et al., 2018). Experiencing adversity can have an intergenerational impact; recent research on the gut microbiome of 2 year old children found that preconception, prenatal, and postnatal exposure to adversity had a distinct impact on socioemotional development (Querdasi et al., 2023). Being the parent of an SWD means unique stressors and demands that lead to depression, anxiety, marital problems, and physiological impacts such as insufficient sleep, impaired cognitive function, and increased blood pressure (Kim & Dababnah, 2020; Lindo et al., 2016). Beyond the individual level, there are environmental, cultural, and societal factors (Tümlü & Akdogan, 2022). Parents do not raise children in a vacuum and experience pressures from all around them (Ryan & Deci, 2002). A recursive cycle of stress, alienation, and criticism is magnified when a parent has an SWD (Brandon et al., 2021). There are challenges in caring for SWD, making it difficult for parents to understand and be sensitive to their needs (Muddle et al., 2022). Parents of SWD like autism spectrum disorder (ASD) experience the highest stress levels, even among other parents of SWD (De Clercq et al., 2022). Factors associated with parents' social environments stimulate worries (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Parents of SWD reported that during COVID-19 the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs predicted both positive and negative indicators of their mental health and well-being as well as their ability to care for others (Pihlainen et al., 2022). Over one-third of parents have described negative reactions toward their children from others as a significant source of stress (Kim & Dababnah, 2020).

Kim and Dababnah (2020) illustrated the cultural differences parents of SWD experience when examining Korean American parents of children with developmental disabilities. Kim and Dababnah explained how there are negative attitudes toward individuals with disabilities in the Korean community, who can often be pitied or avoided altogether. Kim and Dababnah offered that Korean American families seek support and services through Korean churches because of challenges communicating with professionals and navigating service systems. The Korean notion of losing face is a possible motivator in parents' reluctance to disclose their child's disability to their community (Kim & Dababnah, 2020). Lee et al. (2023) illustrated another cultural difference, in that Korean parents reported a relatively high level of parental self-efficacy when compared to many Western studies. Still, they found consistency in coercive parenting practices (Lee et al., 2023).

Brandon et al. (2021) explained that African American parents of SWD reported reservations about interacting with special education educators. Brandon et al. summarized that the literature suggests that educators must develop ways to include parents of SWD, especially from diverse cultures and backgrounds. Brandon et al. suggested soliciting reflections from African American parents of SWD about their individualized circumstances to build a bridge of understanding and equitable partnership. Teachers and schools could use these reflections to strengthen relationships, interactions, and communications with parents to increase African American parental involvement and student outcomes (Brandon et al., 2021).

Tümlü and Akdogan (2022) posited that parents of SWD face social prejudice and exclusion, creating obstacles for children to receive an appropriate education. Tümlü and Akdogan share that disability is not a temporary circumstance; it is often long-term or for life, and support to parents needs to be continuous. Tümlü and Akdogan highlight that educators can be prejudiced, making parents view special education and the school environment as potentially threatening their children. These prejudices may fail children to benefit from the educational environment (Tümlü & Akdogan, 2022).

Resilience

Most of the literature around parenting a SWD portrays an experience that includes more stress and challenges, yet some research begins to illustrate a more balanced view (De Clercq et al., 2021). Resilience has been found in recent literature investigating parents of SWD (Sowmida et al., 2023). Many parents of SWD have thrived in their circumstances by developing coping responses that have allowed them to experience positive outcomes (Kim & Dababnah, 2020). Parents of SWD who have social support, quality family time, and a sense of togetherness experience a sense of resilience (Sowmida et al., 2023). Parents of SWD experience autonomy satisfaction witnessing their child's development and having their philosophy of life shaped by their child (De Clercq et al., 2021). Some parents of SWD report undergoing positive personal transformations because of their experience, including being more patient, having increased persistence and relationship cohesion, and a greater commitment to family life (Kim & Dababnah, 2020). There is a need to move beyond traditional stress models (deficit models) to understand this population to acknowledge the positives of raising a SWD (Farkas et al., 2019). Being the parent of a SWD can be a joyful and enriching experience, resulting in important benefits (Finardi et al., 2022).

School Involvement

Epstein (2013) advanced that while it is well-known that family and community involvement is important for school success, there is a gap between knowing and doing. Epstein asserts that teachers, counselors, administrators, and other school personnel must understand and know how to engage positively with diverse families to build trust, respect, and mutual appreciation. Epstein pointed out that only when all these stakeholders are working together will a student have multiple sources of support to succeed in school and life as an adult. The reciprocal engagement between parents and teachers forms a powerful dynamic social context known as the parent-teacher relationship that can influence and impact the student (Xu et al., 2023). Epstein (2013) proposed that future teachers must learn how to incorporate four aspects of school involvement: 1) teamwork for program development, 2) goal-linked partnership activities, 3) equity in outreach to families, and 4) evaluation of program quality and results. Teacher educators reported that preservice teachers hold stereotypes about parents of marginalized groups and question their influence on their children’s education (Epstein, 2013). Teachers’ skills and attitudes toward working with parents as partners may either facilitate or inhibit parental involvement (Al-Dababneh, 2018). When the parent-teacher relationship is collaborative, the result of a harmonious relationship is a frequent exchange of information, including attitudes, the adolescents’ sense of autonomy, and skills for the adolescent to practice self-advocacy with one another (Xu et al., 2023).

The relationship between families of SWD and the school is not only a best practice but a necessity (Aouad & Bento, 2019; Luke et al., 2021). Luke et al. (2021) expressed that when their SWD have limited communication skills, the family depends on the school for information about what happens during the school day because they cannot hear it from their child directly. Luke et al. suggested that this requires great trust between parents and the school, with interactions between teachers and parents of SWD contributing to that trust. Parents of SWD articulated that they expected teachers to engage with their students as balanced experts, perceptive communicators, and patient believers (Luke et al., 2021).

IDEA mandates that parents be included in the decision-making process in partnership with schools (USDOE, 2022). Special education and schools, in general, are bureaucratic, relying on standardization and hierarchy (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). Education policy can dictate engagement with families, but it does not specify how to meet the requirements and improve the quality of family partnerships (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016). Parents who do not feel as knowledgeable about school policies, procedures, and vocabulary are less likely to be involved (Farley et al., 2020). Farley et al. share that parents’ motivation for school involvement is important. Parents that feel pressured to be involved may demonstrate less autonomy support and more psychological control in that interaction versus parents that want to be involved with school (Lerner et al., 2022). By law, parents are required to participate in the IEP process but experience barriers to it, feeling they have very few opportunities to provide real input into the IEP process (Azad et al., 2021). Parents of SWD reported barriers to productive participation in IEP meetings due to a perceived lack of opportunity to provide input, communication challenges with the school, and disconnects regarding the negative perspectives of their children by the team of professionals (Cavendish & Connor, 2018).

Brandon et al. (2021) share that African American parents of SWD indicate wanting to be involved in their children’s education. Still, they are intimidated by the educational system and do not feel welcomed by teachers into the education system (Brandon et al., 2021). Tümlü and Akdogan (2022) explained that educators might exclude SWD from classrooms because school authorities, teachers, and classmates' parents may complain about these children's inappropriate or unsafe behaviors in the classroom. Korean American parents of SWD indicated that perceptions of their child’s abilities impacted their perceptions of their child’s future (Kim & Dababnah, 2020). Farley et al. (2020) positioned the importance of parent engagement in the special education process and identified it as key and critical for student success. Farley et al. recognized parents of SWD as the primary advocates for their children, who will likely have the most knowledge regarding their child, their skills, and longitudinal data. Parents are likelier to engage with schools when they know and understand the processes and services to advocate for their SWD effectively (Farley et al., 2020). Families need support to help them proactively advocate for their SWD so they may participate in the special education process meaningfully and feel empowered to exercise their rights as a parent (Bruns & LaRocco, 2019).

Parenting behaviors are influenced by several factors, both internal and external, and the well-being of the parent is important to the child's well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Parenting an SWD is complex, with a continuous set of choices, which can affect the parent's emotional and physical well-being (De Clercq et al., 2022). The parent's and child’s health are not independent or mutually exclusive. Practitioners in the school should consider identifying families’ strengths, valuing diversity in the classroom, respecting parents’ knowledge, and incorporating parents’ ideas to establish a trusting relationship with the family (Luke et al., 2021).

Autonomy and Parents of SWD

When parents experience stress, it can negatively affect their SWD development directly and indirectly (Fu et al., 2023). Parenting stress is related to parenting self-efficacy (Finardi et al., 2022). Parents demonstrating autonomy-supportive behaviors enhance children's well-being, and parents demonstrating controlling parenting diminish children's development (Dieleman et al., 2019). Parenting practices and whether they are autonomy-supportive versus a controlling style of interacting with their children make a difference in the child's academics (Lerner et al., 2022). Parenting behaviors have been researched extensively, but parents of SWD are significantly less understood (De Clercq et al., 2019). Parenting SWD risks the frustration of parents' need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, but there are also opportunities for need satisfying experiences with the right circumstances and support (Billen et al., 2023; De Clercq et al., 2021). For example, increased parenting efficacy can improve the development of SWD (Fu et al., 2023).

SDT is an organismic perspective and a motivational theory on human socialization, making it relevant for researching parents of SWD (De Clercq et al., 2022). Evidence is associated with instruction that promotes self-determination, producing positive outcomes for students with and without disabilities. However, there are few supports for teachers (and parents) of SWD (Raley et al., 2020). De Clercq et al. (2021) suggested further research into parents of SWD through the lens of SDT because of its emphasis on individual processes that account for both micro- and meso-levels. More research is needed to examine how expressed emotion relates to other constructs for assessing parent and child dynamics because most of the literature regarding parents of SWD and expressed emotion has to do with associations between the parents' expressed emotion and the child’s adjustment outcomes (De Clercq et al., 2022). De Clercq et al. found SDT a well-validated framework that consistently demonstrates that positive parent and child interactions relate to parental satisfaction, which feeds into more need-supportive parenting. De Clercq et al. noted that the current body of research regarding special needs populations is quite limited, and further research on parents of children with special needs is required to understand need-thwarting parenting over need-supporting parenting better. Yotyodying et al. (2021) suggested that future research further understand the detrimental role punitive parenting has on the well-being of children with disabilities because the current body of research is still limited. Yotyodying et al. further suggested research leveraging SDT and the parental use of the structure as it is meaningful to the academic domain.

Parents of Online School Students

Parental involvement is an important factor in a child’s academic outcomes, either school-based or home-based, and requires the allocation of time and resources (Nyanamba et al., 2021). Parents are essential to the success of virtual learning for younger learners (Siko & Barbour, 2022). The parent is a local facilitator, critical to student success in online learning (Barbour, 2019). Parents are the on-site facilitator, as learning coaches and technical support (Barbour, 2022). This section will cover the evolution of U.S. K-12 online schools, what it means to be a parent of a student attending an online school, and literature related to SWD attending an online school.

Evolution of Online Schools

Instructional film in 1910 was the first documented use of K-12 distance learning in the United States, followed by correspondence education, educational radio, television, and the use of the internet for online learning (Barbour, 2019). K-12 virtual learning started in the early

1990s, with the first academic article published on the subject in 1996, and by 2006 the number of journal articles reflecting research on this was growing (Hu et al., 2019). Virtual learning has existed for many years, especially for adult learners, but has not been as widely adopted in K-12 schools (Barbour, 2019). There has been a steady expansion of K-12 virtual learning in the last decade. The best practices and benefits of this instructional strategy are starting to be discussed more broadly (Hsu et al., 2019). Increased usage of virtual learning has not yet fueled credible research on the impact virtual learning has on student achievement, which is still scarce (Hart et al., 2019). Effective virtual learning requires thoughtful instructional design, planning, and development to achieve high-quality virtual instruction (Barbour, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic shut down schools in 2020, switching to virtual learning from home, which impacted how students engaged with their learning as the home and school environments are so different (Chiu, 2021). Virtual learning has been perceived as a lower-quality learning experience as observers confuse the emergency remote learning brought about in response to the pandemic with established virtual learning with a strong and positive research base (Barbour et al., 2024). Advocates of virtual learning highlighted the possibility of higher quality education with improved learning outcomes, and critics of virtual learning underscored the possibility that it might be more challenging for students who are not as skilled in self-directed learning (Hart et al., 2019).

Despite the conflicting narratives around online schools, “The rise of K-12 virtual schools over the past 20 years is a well-documented phenomenon in the American educational system” (Gustafson & Haque, 2020, p. 1). Mann et al. (2021) share that online schools have experienced significant growth in enrollments since the onset of the 21st century and accelerated growth since the COVID-19 pandemic. Mann et al. explain initial research indicated the efficacy of virtual learning was unequal to traditional schools, with a particular focus on cyber charter schools compared to traditional schools, which show lower learning initially but improve over time with student persistence. Mann et al. (2021) shared that most research conducted on online schools has focused on a comparison to traditional schools but suggested that a different way to look at online schools is through the lens of student traits and profiles. Student background, support at home for virtual learning, diversity of student needs and exceptionalities, marginalized backgrounds, diversity, equity, and inclusion were considered important factors for answering the question of who gains most from online schools (Mann et al., 2021). Important to this notion of online school value through the lens of student traits and profiles is the principle of differentiation. Differentiation is used by teachers to make instructional decisions that are responsive to the wide range of needs of students (Beck & Beasley, 2021). There are few studies on the use of differentiation in online schools despite the great potential it has to offer in this learning context. One study found that a majority of online school teachers had novice level experience with differentiation, and that online teachers reported the need to differentiate using learner profiles to inform instruction but that their practice in doing so contradicts their beliefs (Beck & Beasley, 2021).

Standards and conventions about virtual learning terminology are lacking. The terms virtual learning, online learning, remote learning, eLearning, blended learning, or distance learning are all used to represent learning that takes place using technology outside a traditional classroom (Crompton et al., 2021). Wen et al. (2021) undertook a systematic literature review to try and understand the main applications of virtual learning in a K-12 setting. Wen et al. found two categories, including designing and implementing virtual learning and understanding the virtual learning phenomena and needs. Wen et al. shared that understanding the phenomena and needs of virtual learning involved investigating students,' teachers,' and parents' behavior and interaction with virtual learning, highlighting the main stakeholders involved (Wen et al., 2021).

Parents of Students Attending Online School

Hinderliter et al. (2021) found that most stakeholders (teachers, parents, and students) were not ready for virtual learning in the K-12 space because it had been adopted by such a small (but growing) portion of the population. Hinderliter et al. sought to understand parent satisfaction with virtual learning, as it was a relatively different accountability to be stewards of a student's formal education in a virtual setting. Hinderliter et al. found that parent anxiety had a strong relationship with parent satisfaction, perceived learning outcomes were correlated with parental anxiety, and learning style barriers significantly correlated to both parent anxiety and parent satisfaction. Therefore, learning style barriers and parent anxiety were crucial obstacles to parent satisfaction and perceived learning outcomes of virtual learning (Hinderliter et al., 2021).

Wen et al. (2021) shared that younger students are even more dependent upon parents to engage in online schooling. Wen et al. express two critical factors for a parent to be successful in parenting a student attending an online school: getting trained by schools to use home-based learning tools effectively and having a strong collaboration with teachers to facilitate learning progress, partnership, and performance. Kong (2018) also stressed the importance of communication between parents and the school, conveying the bi-directional benefits of collaboration and its importance for student success. Kong indicated that parents had positive perceptions of their child's experience with virtual learning but had concerns about excessive use of technology, physical well-being (strained eyesight, lack of exercise, and back pain), risk of exposure to unsuitable content, plagiarism, and equity of access. Hinderliter et al. (2021) recognized parental expectations and satisfaction concerns from school administrators and instructional designers since parents may not be equipped to be stewards of their children’s formal education. Hinderliter et al. examined the current literature on online schools. They found that for the K-12 context, the research base on the phenomenon was still inadequate and that studies examining parents’ perceptions were rare, calling out an unprecedented opportunity for researchers to examine this phenomenon more closely.

SWD Attending Online School

Rice (2022) explained that many SWD received full online instruction through charter schools in the U.S. long before the COVID-19 pandemic. Rice expressed that online charter schools in the U.S., like other publicly funded schools in the U.S., must comply with IDEA requirements. She emphasized the potential for positive outcomes for SWD in online schools, including a sense of belonging and increased opportunities for parental control, with some SWD having chosen because of traumatic events or family crises. Sublett and Chang (2019) found that SWD dropped out of school at higher rates than the general education population resulting in underemployment, unemployment, greater dependence on parents and social services, depression, and higher incarceration rates.

Technology accessibility is another factor of consideration. Not having equal access to learning because the experience is not accessible to SWD is another form of oppression (Shaheen, 2022). Admitting students into general education does not equate to an equitable education for SWD attending an online school. If the learning environment is exclusionary because it is not accessible, virtual learning experiences need to be accessible in the same way buildings need to be accessible (Shaheen, 2022). The empirical literature regarding virtual learning has not focused on SWD (Sublett & Chang, 2019).

Parents of SWD Who Attend an Online School

The Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 guarantees SWD and their families a free appropriate public education (FAPE) regardless of the education setting, which has been challenging for SWD leveraging virtual learning (Ortiz et al., 2020). Satherley and Norwich (2021) reported on three factors that influenced parents of SWD in choosing a special school for their child: the school atmosphere, the school's caring approach to its pupils, and the size of the classes. Parents of SWD that didn't choose a mainstream school did so because they did not believe that the mainstream school was appropriate due to the level of support required, class size, and environment (Satherley & Norwich, 2021). Asbury et al. (2021) contextualized the stressors of parents of SWD whose student attends an online K-12 school, citing the normal stressors these parents face but adding a role they have not been trained on (formal education of an SWD). Expecting them to do well with it, especially when even qualified and trained professionals struggle, could certainly affect the mental health and well-being of the parent (Asbury et al., 2021). Parents of SWD feel uncertain about how to connect with the school and work together to support the child, which can lead to a sense of isolation in the online school context (Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014). The access parents have to support their roles as parents of SWD who also attend an online K-12 school is uneven despite an acknowledgment of greater demands on their time and skills (Rice & Ortiz, 2021).

Parents of SWD attending an online school vocalized six themes 1) worry, 2) loss, 3) moods, 4) knowing what is going on, 5) being overwhelmed, and 6) having a minimal or positive impact (Asbury et al., 2021). Alba et al. (2022) summarized themes of how parents of SWD experienced virtual learning during the pandemic, which included managing challenges with their child's behavior, feeling burdened at having to be a parent, teacher, and therapist, having services for their child interrupted, as well as worries over socialization and the lack of a routine. Tonks et al. (2021) found two major themes from their research on SWD and their parents: prior school experiences and affordances of the learning environment, both of which significantly affected SWD and their parents' satisfaction with navigating school. Parents of SWD reported two additional minor themes: lack of support and self-determination, both of which reduced the parents’ confidence in being parent educators (Tonks et al., 2021). Parents of SWD have often had prior negative interactions with their child’s school so online school teachers and administrators need to be mindful of that and proactive (Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014). It is important to understand the very specific needs of this community to take concrete steps to support them (Asbury et al., 2021).

Sonnenschein et al. (2022) sought to understand how parents of SWD felt about having the relevant skills to assist their children at home with virtual learning. Sonnenschein et al. noted that parents of SWD whose children attended online schools needed to know what teachers expected of them to feel willing and equipped to support their child’s education. Teachers of SWD do recognize that parents are critical and that their role is changing in the online school education paradigm (Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014). Alba et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of effective communication and collaboration between the school and home regarding the child’s academic success. Parents feel pressure to assume new roles, like being accountable for their student's IEP, as the transition from a traditional school to an online K-12 school led to inconsistent services and quality (Rice & Ortiz, 2021).

Tonks et al. (2021) reinforced that research on the experiences of special education students and their families attending online school is scant even while enrollments of this population and mode of learning are growing. Tonks et al. focused on families of SWD who chose online schools over families that were required to leverage online schools and why that choice was best for their family. Tonks et al. share that with the recent expansion of online schools, which includes a variety of benefits as well as the changing dynamics of modern educational offerings, an online school may be a better fit for SWD than a traditional school. There is a caution that for that fit to be better, three things need to be prioritized: teachers being prepared to offer effective online instruction to SWD, accessible instruction, and strong support at home to provide or facilitate instruction (Tonks et al., 2021). Parents of an SWD accept the variety of roles they must play when they enroll their child in an online school, which includes using basic technological literacies, evaluating information to supplement existing instructional materials, and staying in close communication with the school about their child's needs (Rice & Ortiz, 2021).

Pihlainen et al. (2022) studied parents of SWD during the COVID-19 pandemic to see how their basic psychological needs were being met. Pihlainen et al. discovered that parents felt a strong sense of autonomy when working and schooling from home, though they had some insecurities about time management. Pihlainen et al. also found that parents felt competent in both caring for and facilitating their SWD learning. Relatedness was the one basic psychological need that parents of SWD felt insecure about, not for themselves but for their children's well-being and peer relationships (Pihlainen et al., 2022).

Autonomy and Virtual Learning

Autonomy-motivated students thrive in educational settings, and when there is a lack of autonomy, student motivation declines (Ryan & Deci, 2002). SDT has a rich set of tools for understanding when and why factors like rewards, feedback, competition, and social comparison either support or undermine basic need satisfaction, which is important in a learning environment

(Ryan & Deci, 2020). There is substantial evidence that more autonomous motivation enhances learning outcomes. Therefore, further research to understand methods to assess motivations and perceived need for support will have many practical implications (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Schooling from home provides a unique opportunity to develop achievement motivation; therefore, theories like SDT that characterize motivating learning environments are useful (Bell et al., 2016). Continued expansion of studies to better understand the role of SDT in virtual learning contexts, with a consideration of the various roles played in virtual learning environments, is still needed (Hsu et al., 2019). The home and school learning contexts are very different, and understanding how autonomy, competence, and relatedness may foster or suppress engagement in that learning context may provide practical implications for preparing and implementing virtual learning (Chiu, 2021). The motivational climate of the home, when it is the primary environment for learning, is important to understand, especially as it relates to parenting style and how it influences the child's motivation and achievement (Bell et al., 2016). Online schools will continue to appeal to families of SWD, which has real implications for how online schools provide opportunities to these families, including a better understanding of student and parent motivation and support (Tonks et al., 2021). This study can bridge the gaps identified here through the current literature on parents of SWD attending online schools and extend the current body of literature on SDT from the vantage point of this underrepresented population.

Summary

The systematic review of the literature presented here informed and grounded the exploration of the lived experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school through the lens of SDT. SDT explains that individuals have a natural propensity for intrinsic motivation and satisfying the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to support or undermine that natural propensity (Ryan & Deci, 2002, 2017, 2019). These psychological needs are like the physiological needs of water or oxygen, which are necessary for human survival, growth, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Parents facilitate children's first and most impactful social and psychological contexts (Costa, Gugliandolo et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT as a theoretical framework for parenting posits that parents' own psychological needs satisfaction influences their parenting which in turn impacts the psychological needs satisfaction of the child (Costa, Gugliandolo et al., 2019; Costa, Sireno et al., 2019; Grolnick et al., 2021; Slobodin et al., 2020). The three basic needs of SDT can be expressed as a continuum and elaborated into six parenting dimensions: autonomy support vs psychological control, structure vs chaos, and warmth vs rejection (Costa, Sireno et al., 2019). SDT as a parenting theory has provided an ideal framework to explore the lived experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school.

Attachment theory frames the bond between parent and child that is both relational and emotional, critical to establishing a secure internal base for the child, supporting all developmental stages of the child (Bowlby et al., 2019; Bretherton, 1992; Holmes, 2014). The sense of security that grows from attachment is a form of relatedness, and the secure base that encourages curiosity and exploration is a form of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Parents' behavior could facilitate the security of attachment, family interdependence, and the adolescent's self-regulation through the two dimensions of demandingness and responsiveness (Baumrind, 1991). Parental self-regulation is essential to positive and nurturing parenting practices that promote the health and well-being of children (Sanders et al., 2019). This represents a shift in parenting theory from attachment to autonomy.

Parents of SWD experience higher amounts of stress than parents of students without disabilities (Kim & Dababnah, 2020; Lindo et al., 2016***;*** van Esch et al., 2018). There has been a steady expansion of K-12 virtual learning in the last decade (Hsu et al., 2019). Parents of SWD attending an online school face the normal stressors of being an SWD parent plus the stress of an educator role that even trained professionals struggle with, which could affect the mental health and well-being of the parent (Asbury et al., 2021). Research to understand the role of parenting in children with disabilities, particularly qualitative research, is needed (De Clercq et al., 2019; Dieleman et al., 2018). Understanding the psychological needs will illustrate the positive and negative sides of parents' SWD functioning, which is currently unknown (Dieleman et al., 2018). Parents are essential to the success of virtual learning for younger learners (Siko & Barbour, 2022). The empirical literature regarding virtual learning has not focused on SWD (Sublett & Chang, 2019).

The general problem is that parents whose child has a disability and attends an online school are at greater risk of psychological and psychosocial difficulties, which may impact the growth and well-being of the entire family. The problem is that more families with children who have a disability choose online schools; therefore, more parents whose child has a disability support them. SDT as a theoretical framework provided a unique and productive lens for this study as a macro theory rooted in the life science of individual growth and development. The gap in current literature as it relates to parenting children who have a disability and attend an online K-12 school is clear, reinforcing the need for this study to better understand the lived experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school, which extends the current research on SDT. The practical value of this study is to help parents, teachers, schools, and government-sponsored services to better understand the experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends online K-12 school. This qualitative study has extended the current research on SDT from a parenting, disability, and virtual learning domain using a qualitative lens.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to describe the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. At this stage in the research, the lived experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school is generally defined as parents of K-12 students with an active Individualized Education Plan (IEP) receiving special education services whose child is also attending a full-time US Online School that operates completely online without physical facilities or instruction. This chapter presents the research method design, rationale, and my role and position as the researcher. It also explains the selection of participants, instruments, and research procedures, as well as the self-determination theory-hermeneutic phenomenology methodology for this study. This methodology is well suited for the intended outcome as it allows for deep and rich descriptions and meanings of lived experiences relating to parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school. The researcher's position will be covered through the expression of the interpretive framework, philosophical assumptions, and the researcher's role. The procedures of this study included obtaining permission, creating a recruitment plan, data collection, and an individual interview analysis plan. In conclusion, the chapter ends by relating the study's trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and the ethical considerations relevant to the study.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research method, a phenomenological research design, and a hermeneutic approach. A qualitative method allowed for more understanding of context and circumstance. As a qualitative method, phenomenology allows for deep and rich descriptions and meanings of lived experiences rooted in philosophy and depicted through data analysis (Peoples, 2021). This research method, design, and type were appropriate for this study because this population and phenomenon were poorly understood. A quantitative method looks to test something or seek patterns from data about what is already known, which does not make it a good fit for this population and phenomenon.

A phenomenology design was a good fit for this study over other designs, like a case study or ethnography, because it aims to have a deeper understanding through interpretation of this population, which is neither social nor cultural. Narrative inquiry is the most traditional and natural form of making sense of experiences and how we communicate with others to make sense of our world, yet lacks the interpretive nature of hermeneutic phenomenology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The transcendental phenomenology method was considered but did not fully meet the requirement to be interpretive rather than entirely descriptive, recognizing my role and experience to contribute to the creation of meaning. Thus, for this study, the specific research design type was hermeneutic phenomenology.

Phenomenology, historically, has had the purpose of investigating the meaning of lived experiences to determine the essence of a common human experience that is universal (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Peoples, 2021). Phenomenology originates in philosophy and credits Husserl (1859-1938) and Heidegger (1889-1976) for their philosophical perspectives (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Phenomenology is the study of the lifeworld as it is experienced to gain a deeper understanding of everyday experiences, and hermeneutic phenomenology specifically is interested in the lifeworld as we find it (van Manen, 2016). The challenges of a phenomenology design and approach include bracketing the researcher's experience, quality, and rigor; this study addresses those challenges by embracing the hermeneutic approach with thoughtful data trustworthiness.

Research Questions

Ryan, Donald et al. (2021) explain that SDT research explores human behavior and motivation as it pertains to people's willing engagement in an activity, which places a focus on social and environmental contexts. Children are more likely to thrive when parents support the three basic needs in social and environmental contexts. Conversely, when parents thwart the three basic needs, children are more likely to struggle, which challenges their development (Arden et al., 2022; van der Kaap-Deeder, 2021). Parents are the most significant influence on the development of children as they are the primary providers of resources and the most critical agents of socialization (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Parents have a significant role in providing human nutrients that satisfy or frustrate growth and development (Costa, Sireno et al., 2019). The same pressures (from without, within, and below) that undermine children's development can potentially undermine the parents’ well-being, limiting their abilities to provide autonomy-supportive parenting (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Central Research Question

What is the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school?

Sub-Question One

What is the parents’ experience with autonomy when parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school?

Sub-Question Two

What is the parents’ experience with relatedness when parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school?

Sub-Question Three

What is the parents' experience with competence when parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school?

Setting and Participants

This section describes the setting profile, leadership, and organizational structure. A narrative form of the site's demographics is provided with the rationale for the participant criteria and setting. This description of the setting and participants is presented for context and clarity in understanding the other aspects of procedures, recruitment plan, data collection plan, and data analysis.

Setting

The setting for this study was an online public charter school in a single state on the west coast of the United States. The setting is geographically bound for consistent shared experiences using a single public charter online K-12 school educational management organization. This type of setting offered the greatest possibility to recruit participants for the shared experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. This study uses the name USA Online Public School (USA OPS) to describe the site. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicated USA OPS had ~5,000 students in grades K-12, representing nine student group populations (NCES, 2023b). NCES reported that the USA OPS student population was 17.7% Hispanic, 11.9% White, 6.4% students with disabilities (SWD), 5.9% Multi-racial, 4.3% English Learners, 4.1% African American, 2.1% Asian, and .9% Filipino. NCES reported that a large population of socio-economically disadvantaged students represented 45.5% of the USA OPS population. The last reported 5-year graduation rate for the general population was 86.3%, and for SWD, the 5-year graduation rate was 74.5%. At the time the study, the USA Online Public School (2023) leadership team had a superintendent, a deputy superintendent, and an administration team, including principals, assistant principals, and teachers. The USA OPS also had a set of enabling functions, which included Counseling, Finance, Student Achievement, Business Services, and Student Services, with director level leaders in each of those functions. The USA OPS leadership reported up into the Superintendent, and the Superintendent reported to a School Board that is the governing body of the USA OPS that oversees the school's operations and ensures its mission (USA Online Public School, 2023).

Participants

Participants in this study were parents of children who had a disability, where the children attended USA OPS. Parents met the criteria of having a child with a disability enrolled at USA OPS full-time for credit in the current and previous academic year. SWD was defined as a student determined to have a condition that adversely affects their academic performance, which can be supported through special education services and presented through an IEP (NCES, 2023a). For this study, the SWD had an active IEP created or revised within the last 12 months. The study did not include parents of students without disabilities, parents of students attending online courses part-time, for credit recovery, or in supplement to a traditional face-to-face school. In this study, parents were aged ~22 to ~70, residents of the state where USA OPS operates, representing a variety of ethnicities and native languages, but having a child with a disability attending USA OPS in common. Parents of children who had a disability attending USA OPS were qualified from a questionnaire (see Appendix F). The target number of parent participants was estimated to be between 12 and 15 or until the point of saturation had been reached.

Recruitment Plan

This study recruited parents of a child who has a disability and attends USA OPS. In the 2022-2023 academic year, ~310 SWD were enrolled in USA OPS (NCES, 2023b). Assuming two parents are available per student, the rough total study sample pool was 620 parents. This study sought to secure approximately 12 parents, or until it reached the point of saturation, as a sample size with no more than 15 parents of children who have a disability and attend USA OPS. The 12 to 15 desired parent participants represented ~2% of the sample pool.

van Manen (2016) addressed sample size for hermeneutic phenomenology and positioned that an answer does not depend on a formula or statistical criteria. He asserted that data saturation is achieved when the analysis no longer reveals anything new and that a researcher should seek enough experiential accounts to help contact life as it is lived. Typically, a sample size of 8-15 participants is needed, with the intent to ensure saturation of the experience rather than a focus on the number of participants (Peoples, 2021). Saturation generally occurs when continued data collection produces no new information or insights into the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The estimated sample size to reach saturation for this study was 12 to 15.

As a qualitative study, this research used purposeful sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). When USA OPS indicated its willingness to participate and the appropriate site permissions were acquired, a questionnaire enabled criteria sampling of parents at the site. Criteria sampling helped ensure that participants all experienced the same phenomenon defined by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The rationale for using this type of sampling strategy was that purposeful sampling was required to ensure parents of students attending an online school and that criteria sampling was required to ensure that parents reported meeting the criteria of having a child with a disability as indicated by an active IEP (see Appendix G for the qualifying questionnaire). Once parents whose child has a disability and attends an online school confirmed that they met the criteria and were interested in participating, they were informed about the study so they could knowingly consent or withdraw (see Appendix E for the informed consent template).

Researcher Positionality

As the researcher for this study, my motivation was inspired by being the parent of a child with special needs, where a private or traditional public school did not adequately meet our needs. My family chose an online school for my child during middle school. This is a bias that I bring to this research, and I intended to use this motivation and bias to interpret the described experiences of the participants for whom I shared an experience with. This position and motivation have been expressed through my philosophical assumptions, including ontological, epistemological, and axiological. In conclusion, I have summarized my interpretive framework, my beliefs on the nature of reality and how knowledge is justified, and the extent to which my values and experience exist in the pursuit of understanding.

Interpretive Framework

Social constructivism is the interpretive framework used as the human instrument to approach this study. Meaning is developed through experiences, both individual and shared. Those experiences can be varied and multiply formed through interactions with other people and objects, giving the experience a social construction (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Individuals describe their experiences, and from that, meaning is interpreted. Little is known about the complex reality of the unique parenting role and experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. Seeking to understand the world we live and work in is the core of social constructivism (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By exploring what parents experienced when parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school, this study has inductively developed a pattern of meaning starting broadly through open-ended interview questions. From there, this study has moved through the data collection and analysis, where significant statements and themes culminate in interpreting the meaning that these parents have experienced.

Philosophical Assumptions

This section expresses my values and belief systems related to my philosophical assumptions. Peoples (2021) explained that the hermeneutic phenomenological research approach allows the researcher to use the hermeneutic circle, being explicit about personal biases and judgments by writing about them before data analysis. Therefore, with this research approach, I did not need to set aside my background and experiences concerning my position in conducting this research. Here, I portray my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions as context to my position for interpretation.

Ontological Assumption

An ontological assumption has everything to do with one’s beliefs about the nature of reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My personal belief is that there is a singular nature of reality and truth. As a researcher, I recognize that human nature includes a variety of understanding. Some individuals have different beliefs, which may include a belief in multiple realities. In recognition of this, the approach I have taken for this study is that individuals construct their reality through their lived experiences and interactions with others (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research will originate from my belief in a singular reality and truth. However, leveraging the hermeneutic circle has made explicit my personal experience while also seeking to understand the lived experiences of the research participants, which may or may not include multiple realities.

Epistemological Assumption

An epistemological assumption has to do with the nature of knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a researcher, I have approached this study from a subjective perspective, in that reality and knowledge have been co-developed between myself and the participants who have been researched who shared their experiences. In this sense, I as the researcher and the individuals who participated in the research have co-created the knowledge and interpretation of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the research participants and I focused on our perspectives and interpretations of the experiences. This research was inspired because I am the parent of a child with special needs who chose an online school. There were aspects of the experience that were challenging, some that were rewarding, and in between, it was always overwhelming. This is a bias that I bring to this research, and I intended to use this motivation and bias to interpret the described experiences of the participants with whom I shared an experience. In this way, my interpretive analysis can be thought of as moving through the landscape of the topic, in that perspectives change with the various points of view gathered (Moules et al., 2015).

Axiological Assumption

An axiological assumption has everything to do with my role and values as the researcher and those of the research participants who have co-developed the research. As the researcher, and from an axiological perspective, it is important to know that I have domain expertise in designing and creating virtual learning experiences, and therefore believe this learning format can be advantageous and effective given certain conditions. I previously worked for the educational management organization that provides services to USA OPS. As mentioned, I have been the parent of a student with special needs who attended an online school. Both of these experiences portray my values and position regarding the context and setting of this research and my experience from which to interpret. Critical research aims to research with the participants and not on the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reflexivity is an awareness of the researcher's influence on what is being studied and how the research process reflects the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell).

Researcher’s Role

My role in this was as a human instrument used as a tool to perform this research. I am the instrument that designed, implemented, collected, analyzed, interpreted, and reported on the research problem and purpose. As the research instrument, my role was integral to the data collection (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). My relationship with the participants was only as a co-creator of knowledge. My role in the setting was as a researcher who shared their experience. There was and will be no other relationship with the participants. The maximum possible connection between my historical non-research relationship and this research setting was that my prior employer was a service provider to the USA OPS. This limited relationship posed no bias or conflict to the research purpose regarding the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. The bias I brought to this research was as a parent of a special needs student who saw online school as a solution. I believe that with the right support, it could be a viable choice for families. Therefore, there was no risk to data collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting. My role in this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study was as the human instrument searching for and being as open as possible to the lived experiences and shared meaning of parents of SWD attending a full-time online school.

Procedures

The steps to complete this study included securing the site, school permissions, and the Liberty University IRB permission. The steps to recruit the participants, including the estimated sample pool and target sample size, are provided below, followed by details of the sample type. The steps to collect the data from participant interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups, along with the steps to analyze those data sources, are provided. This section concludes with the approach used for triangulation of the data sources.

Data Collection Plan

The data collection plan for this study included three sources of data. The first and primary data source was phenomenological interviews, which explored and gathered experiential material through narratives, stories, or anecdotes that provided a source for phenomenological reflection (van Manen, 2016). The interviews produced a collection of concrete stories of situations and events describing experiences with the phenomenon.

The second data source was journal prompts completed by the participants after the initial phenomenological interview. Four journal prompts were collected through email. Journal writing encouraged reflective accounts of human experiences with phenomenological value (van Manen, 2016). The journal prompts validated and reframed the meaning themes that emerged from the phenomenological interviews.

The third and final source of data was a round of focus groups where participants came together in groups of four and five to discuss their interpretation of the themes that came from their shared experiences of being parents of children who have a disability and attend an online school. The focus group in this study was the hermeneutic interview, intended to be the data-interpreting interview. The hermeneutic interview, particularly the data-interpretive kind, seeks assistance interpreting the empirical data from the phenomenological interviews and other data collection methods (van Manen, 2016). The focus groups provided the opportunity to validate the interpretation of the interviews and journal prompts through the focus group participants' interpretive insights. A combination of instruments is ideal, so the findings are rich (Peoples, 2021). This section discusses the data analysis approach for the data collected in this study.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

This study's first data collection method was a semi-structured phenomenological interview with participants who experienced the phenomenon in this study. Moustakas (1994) defined the phenomenological interview as one that “involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (p. 114). The data collection is simply an interaction through a conversation between a study participant, in this case, parents whose child has a disability and attends an online school, and the researcher. The researcher asked the participants to describe their experiences. This type of data collection was most appropriate for this study because it allowed for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material and was a way to build a relationship with the participant around the meaning of their experience. After receiving their written consent, the individual interviews were scheduled with participants and conducted virtually through Zoom. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. The central research question and all the sub-questions were framed in an interview guide, starting with demographic questions and icebreakers to build rapport with the participants. SDT has several questionnaires available through the Center for Self-Determination Theory (CSDT) to assess different constructs within the theory (CSDT, 2023). The semi-structured phenomenological interview questions are outlined here for transparency, followed by a detailed description of the questions' rationale.

Individual Interview Questions

1. Tell me your age, how many children you have, and what state you live in. Demographics
2. Tell me about your family. Ice Breaker
3. What do you love about being a parent? Ice Breaker.
4. What three words would you choose to describe being a parent? Ice Breaker
5. How would you describe your experience with parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school? CRQ
6. Tell me about a specific instance, situation, or event that comes to mind when you think about parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school. CRQ
7. How did this event make you feel? CRQ
8. Describe your experience with making choices and decisions. SQ1

   Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (BPNSFS) questions 1, 2, 7, and 8 (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2020).
9. Describe a specific instance or situation where you felt a sense of choice and freedom to do something you wanted. SQ1

   BPNSFS questions 1 and 7 (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2020).
10. How did you feel about that? SQ1
11. Describe a specific instance or situation where you felt like you had to do something or were forced to do things you would not choose to do. SQ1

    BPNSFS questions 2 and 8 (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2020).
12. How did you feel about that? SQ1
13. Describe your experience with being connected to the people you care for or about. SQ2

    BPNSFS questions 3, 4, 9, and 10 (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2020).

14. Describe a specific instance or situation where you felt like the people you care for also cared for you, where you felt connected to those people. SQ2

    BPNSFS questions 3 and 9 (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2020).

15. How did you feel about that? SQ2
16. Describe a specific instance or situation where you felt excluded from the group you want to belong to or that people you cared about were cold or distant. SQ2

    BPNSFS questions 4 and 10 (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2020).

17. How did you feel about that? SQ2
18. Describe your experience with confidence and feeling capable. SQ3

    BPNSFS questions 5, 6, 11, and 12 (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2020).

19. Describe a specific instance or situation where you felt confident you were doing things well and were capable of what you do. SQ3

    BPNSFS questions 5 and 11 (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2020).

20. How did you feel about that? SQ3
21. Describe a specific instance or situation where you doubted doing something well or were disappointed with your performance. SQ3

    BPNSFS questions 6 and 12 (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2020).

22. How did you feel about that? SQ3
23. Describe your experience with your child and their decision-making. CRQ

    Perceived Parental Autonomy Support Scale (P-PAS) questions 1, 2, 4, and 9 (Mageau et al., 2015).

24. Describe a specific instance or situation where you gave your child an opportunity to make their own decision and consider their point of view. CRQ

P-PASS questions 2 & 9 (Mageau et al., 2015).

25. When you ask your child to do something, do you explain why? CRQ

    P-PASS questions 2 & 9 (Mageau et al., 2015).

26. Describe your experience explaining the reasons behind requests, rules, and limits. CRQ

    P-PASS questions 19 and 23 (Mageau et al., 2015).

27. Describe a specific instance or situation where you made sure your child understood why you were limiting certain things. CRQ

    P-PASS question 19 (Mageau et al., 2015).

28. Describe a specific instance or situation where you gave your child good reasons why you asked them to do or not do something. CRQ

    P-PASS question 23 (Mageau et al., 2015).

29. Describe your experience with being aware of, accepting, and recognizing your child’s feelings. CRQ

    P-PASS questions 13 and 16 (Mageau et al., 2015).

30. Describe a specific instance or situation where you put yourself in your child’s shoes and understood their feelings. CRQ

    P-PASS question 13 (Mageau et al., 2015).

31. Describe a specific instance or situation where you were open to your child's thoughts and feelings even when they differed from yours. CRQ

    P-PASS question 16 (Mageau et al., 2015).

32. Thinking about your experience as a parent of a child who has a disability and attends an online school… what thoughts or feelings stand out? CRQ

33. What else would you like to add about your experience as a parent of a child who has a

disability and attends an online school? CRQ

The questions included here followed an intentional pattern and were targeted for the study’s purpose and SDT as the theoretical framework. The first question collected basic demographics. The next three were icebreakers. From there, the questions sought the participant's substantive description of the lived experience. Questions 5 through 7 were primers to the central research question. The BPNSF questionnaire captures the satisfaction and frustration of the three psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence (CSDT, 2023). The three sub-questions of this study sought to understand the lived experience of the participants through the lens of their basic psychological needs, satisfaction, or frustration, making the BPNSF questionnaire an appropriate guide. Specifically, questions 8 through 12 were inspired by the BPNSFS questionnaire seeking to understand autonomy satisfaction and frustration supporting SQ1. Questions 13 through 17 were inspired by the BPNSFS questionnaire seeking to understand relatedness, satisfaction, and frustration supporting SQ2. Questions 18 through 22 were inspired by the BPNSFS questionnaire seeking to understand competence satisfaction and frustration supporting SQ3. The P-PASS questionnaire captures children’s perception of autonomy support and psychological control (Mageau et al., 2015). The remaining interview questions of this study sought to understand the lived experience of the participants through the lens of their parenting behaviors and the provision of autonomy, structure, and warmth, making the autonomy support portion of the P-PASS questionnaire an appropriate guide. Specifically, questions 23 through 31 were inspired by the P-PASS questionnaire seeking to understand offering choices to make decisions supporting the CRQ. The final two interview questions, 32 and 33, were closing questions aimed at capturing any other aspects of the lived experience of the participants not previously covered, which supports the CRQ. Experts reviewed these questions to ensure they were clear and easily understood for relevant and meaningful responses. While minor changes were made after the first interview, these questions and this protocol was directionally executed.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis for the phenomenological interview data had three stages: preparing and organizing data, reducing the data into significant statements from coding strategies, and then representing the data through quotations, figures, and/or tables (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Complete transcriptions were created to prepare and organize the data. Transcriptions were coded into significant statements, then significant statements were transformed to meaningful themes, which were interpreted for the phenomenon's essence (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). There were two rounds of coding, the first leveraging in vivo and the second using the Focused coding method. Saldana (2021) explained in vivo coding as using words or phrases from the participants' language and categorizing coded data based on thematic or conceptual similarity.

van Manen (2016) explained that phenomenological themes might be understood as structures of the experience. He expressed these themes are the stars that make up the universe of meaning and are powerful as a structure of a lived experience. Peoples (2021) explained that the data analysis process concerning a phenomenological study is misleading because analysis means to break into parts, and phenomenology seeks to understand the whole. Peoples explained that in hermeneutic phenomenology, the hermeneutic circle uses parts to inform the whole and the whole to inform the parts. Analyzing the data is more emergent and shifts (Peoples, 2021).

This interview data analysis plan followed six stages in the spirit of the hermeneutic circle, starting with my reading and coding of the superset of transcripts, generating preliminary meaning units through in vivo coding, generating final meaning units per interview using the

Focused coding method, synthesizing final meaning units into narratives, generalizing the narratives from all participants, and then generating the general descriptions. The first stage, reading and coding the superset of transcripts, involved printing the transcripts to read while circling keywords and phrases with a pen. The second stage, the in vivo coding approach, involved a second read of the transcripts and the previously circled keywords and phrases, which I then decided to keep or abandon. The circled words were transferred to an Excel document as a list. The third stage, the second cycle, focused on coding, and involved organizing keywords and phrases into clusters that looked and felt similar. The cluster organization allowed the coding to start to portray meaning units. The fourth stage, synthesizing meaning units into narratives, involved rearranging the code clusters from major clusters to minor clusters in a hierarchical way. I then reflected on the major categories and explored what they symbolized through my interpretation. From the reflection, I then synthesized the categories into a narrative using excepts from interviews to punctuate the meaning units. The fifth stage, generalizing the narrative, then became the storytelling I aligned with my final interpretation of the major and minor categorization. The sixth and final stage, generating descriptions, I portrayed in the categories as meaning units through general descriptions.

Journal Prompts Data Collection Approach

The second data collection method for this study was journal prompts. Journal prompts are a form of personal documents, a primary source of information, and good for eliciting a person’s attitudes, beliefs, and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants completed four journal prompts (see Appendix F). Participants received journal prompts via email directly following their individual interviews, and participants had two weeks to complete the four prompts. Each prompt took an estimated >15 minutes to complete. The journal prompts followed the study’s sub-questions asking for the participant to describe personal examples of the three needs of SDT (autonomy, competence, and relatedness), as well as one additional journal prompt asking participants to describe their experience with the three parenting dimensions of SDT.

Journal Prompts

1. Describe in your own words your personal experience with autonomy. What is your experience with feeling able to act on your own interests and values? Provide a few examples to support your personal experience.
2. Describe in your own words your personal experience with competence. What is your experience with feeling able to do things successfully, efficiently, and effectively? Provide a few examples to support your personal experience.
3. Describe in your own words your personal experience with relatedness. What is your experience with feeling connected to others, loved by others, and involved with a community? Provide a few examples to support your personal experience.
4. Describe in your own words your personal experience with providing an environment for your child to experience feeling autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Provide a few examples to support your personal experience.

The journal prompts followed an intentional pattern targeted at the study’s purpose and SDT framework. The first journal prompt sought to explore the lived experience of the parent as they related to their sense of autonomy. The second journal prompt sought to explore the lived experience of the parent as they related to their sense of competence. The third journal prompt sought to explore the lived experience of the parent as they relate to their sense of relatedness. The fourth journal prompt sought to explore the lived experience of the parent as it related to their parenting and how they provided or facilitated an environment where their child could experience the feeling of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

All the journal prompts were an opportunity to collect rich, detailed descriptions of parent experiences, which further validated themes previously discovered through the interview, or to provide new insights and themes.

Journal Prompts Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis for the journal prompts had three stages: organizing the data, reducing the data into significant statements from coding strategies, and then representing the data through figures and tables (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data collected through the journal prompts were used to validate the themes already established in the phenomenological interview, setting the stage for data triangulation when all three data sources were collected. Like the phenomenological interviews, coding of the journal prompts involved aggregating the textual data into categories using the in vivo coding method, then a second round using the focused coding method. At that stage of the data collection and analysis, with two data sources having been collected and analyzed, I began to identify themes as objects of reflection to include in the focus groups, the third and final data source, which functioned as a hermeneutic interview

Focus Groups Data Collection Approach

Focus groups offer distinctive benefits in addition to in-depth one-on-one interviews, in that people behave differently in groups, causing participants to validate each other or reconsider responses in a different context (Peoples, 2021). In this study, the focus group round acted as the hermeneutic interview to be the data-interpreting interview. The hermeneutic interview, emphasizing the data-interpretive kind, looks to study participants to assist in interpreting the empirical data gained from the phenomenological interviews and other data collection methods (van Manen, 2016). The focus groups provided the opportunity to validate the interpretation of the interviews and journal prompts through the focus group participants' interpretive insights. This was the third piece of data to enable the triangulation of the study.

Multiple data-gathering techniques are a deliberate strategy for qualitative studies to enhance the quality of data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The exact focus group questions depended on the data collected in the actual study of participants. The focus group questions are outlined below.

Focus Group Questions

1. What are your thoughts about the themes captured here? Is there anything about the experience of parenting a student with a disability who also attends an online school that is not captured here? CRQ
2. What are your thoughts about the themes that involve your autonomy, relatedness, and competence support? SQ1, SQ2, SQ3
3. What are your thoughts about the themes captured that involve your provision of autonomy, competence, and relatedness with your student? CRQ
4. How have these themes captured the essence of parenting a student with a disability who also attends an online school? What may be missing that you would have expected to see? CRQ

The questions included here in the focus group also followed an intentional pattern that specifically targeted the study’s preliminary findings, for which the focus groups were used to validate interpretations. Having the participants together allowed for synergy and momentum to build around the preliminary themes, offering yet another opportunity for rich details about the shared experience to emerge. The focus group were used to create triangulation as the third data set.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis for the focus groups also occurred in three stages, including preparing and organizing data, classifying data into themes, and then representing data through figures and tables (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary difference was that the data analyzed for the individual phenomenological interviews and journal prompts were the initial source of theme classifications from which the focus group data was used to validate initial interpretations. Focus group data was recorded and transcribed. Memoing was used to capture new emergent ideas and to contextualize the ‘essence’ descriptions. Noteworthy passages and quotes were highlighted in the in vivo style, and quotations, figures, and tables that emerged from the prior two data sets were updated to reflect the data analysis from the focus groups.

Data Analysis

van Manen (2014) reported that the data collected will be lived experience descriptions, which provide textual data that then becomes material to be worked on. Van Manen posited that all experiences and recollections about experiences are already transformations of those experiences, and the data synthesis is meant to bring the meaning of those experiences to the surface. Each of the three data sets of this study were intended to establish, elaborate, and validate the interpretation of the “essence” description that was portrayed through a narrative. The “essence” description was presented through narrative, figures, and tables that describe what it means to be a parent of a child who has a disability and attends an online school. The first data set that emerged from the individual phenomenological interviews provided rich accounts from participants but needed to be coded and reduced to establish the initial set of significant statements and meaning units. The interpretations of the participant's narratives contribute to meaning-making (Saldana, 2021). The journal prompts provided another rich data source to code and reduce. The coding and reduction were anchored to the first data set to elaborate on existing significant statements and correct the meaning units that emerged from the first-round phenomenological interviews. The final round focus group played back for the participants my interpretation and served as the hermeneutic interview to validate the interpretation of the lived experience. The research problem, purpose, theoretical framework, and central research questions were a constant reminder through all coding decisions to keep the coding focused (Saldana, 2021). The first and second round coding strategy was how the three data sets began to converge into a single data set portraying the "essence" of the experience. Data that is grouped into patterns becomes information and, when applied or used, becomes knowledge, and this deeper meaning comes from the interpretation of the study's findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The process of writing and rewriting, revising, editing, and identifying the pattern of meaningful relations to be condensed is the goal of the synthesis (van Manen, 2014). This study did not leverage a qualitative data management software application; instead, I manually analyzed the data through the steps named in the Interview Question Data Analysis Plan section.

Trustworthiness

This section describes the steps this study employed to ensure a robust qualitative study leveraging credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical considerations. These terms are the qualitative naturalist equivalents of internal and external validation, which are used in quantitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Trustworthiness in qualitative research is valid if the research reflects the world it seeks to describe, and it is reliable if multiple researchers have compatible observations of the same phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

This section illustrates the careful planning and precautions taken in this study to have trust in its execution and its findings.

Credibility

The credibility of this study was reflected in its accurate description of the participants' lived and expressed experiences. Credibility is established through journaling, thick description, triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). This study engaged in member-checking the study participants, peer debriefing with other scholars in the field, and triangulation. Member-checking involved having the study participants review and either endorse or offer improvement suggestions to the in-progress data analysis and coding strategies. Peer debriefing involved having research peers with similar domain expertise review the data collection, analysis, and research findings to endorse or offer improvement suggestions. Triangulation was achieved using three independent but connected data sets from individual phenomenological interviews, participant journal prompts, and the focus groups that served as the hermeneutic interview. The additional and different findings create a broader and deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Peoples, 2021). Negative cases found in the data are presented. Additionally, my personal experience as the researcher was called out transparently.

Member-checking

Member checks, or respondent validation, are a common strategy for ensuring credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After the initial first and second rounds of coding on the phenomenological interviews, feedback from 3 study participants was solicited to rule out any misinterpretation or misleading information from the participants' perspective. The focus groups served as an additional member check, where the “essence” descriptions were shared with participants to share in the interpretation. Participants validated and course-corrected the interpretation from their vantage points and experiences. A final version of the study report was provided to all study participants, with the opportunity for participants to provide comments and improvement suggestions.

Peer-debriefing

Peer debriefing is a process that involves asking colleagues and thought partners to review a researcher's field notes, data, and findings and seeks their insight to assist in examining the data and assumptions and offer alternative ways of analyzing the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). This study employed peer debriefing to share emerging findings after the phenomenological interview, journal prompt, and focus group analysis. These peers have experience working with parents of children who have a disability and attend an online school. They were able to offer critical and meaningful perspectives to ensure good credibility in the study findings.

Triangulation

There are a few different forms of triangulation that can be employed for qualitative research, which include multiple methods, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, or multiple theories, which all are associated with increasing the credibility of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, the triangulation method was multiple data collection methods. The phenomenological interview, the journal prompts, and the hermeneutic interview focus groups provided three data collection methods. They allowed for increased credibility that the study's findings were not the artifact of a single method or source. This study employed the comparison of data and cross-checking of data across a continuum of time throughout the study with participants of the study.

Transferability

Transferability is a form of external validity. Qualitative research can be demonstrated through a purposeful sampling strategy, deep and rich data, and detailed information provided by the researcher regarding context and background (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The transferability of this study was established through its detailed purposeful sampling strategy, which included convenience and criterion sampling, as well as through the rich and detailed descriptions expressing the essence of the experience, highlighted by narrative examples. The detailed information provided for this study's context, background, data, setting, participants, and findings offer an element of transferability, as they could be compared with other research with similar contexts.

Dependability

A research process is thought to be dependable when it is clear, well-documented, logical, and traceable (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). This study provided a detailed rationale for the research design, process, and methods, including detailed explanations of how data was collected and analyzed. This study also provided detailed steps for credibility and a transparent account of the researcher's positionality in the study. Therefore, this study was clear, well-documented, logical, and traceable, lending to its dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a form of objectivity that establishes that the findings and interpretations of a study are derived from the data, providing a clear lineage between the data and the interpretation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). While qualitative researchers, especially those using hermeneutic phenomenology, don't claim to be objective, it is important to demonstrate that the research is not the result of the researcher's own experience. The confirmability of this study was demonstrated through the traceability of the essence of the lived experiences to the origin data provided by participants and contextualized by narrative examples, which served as an audit trail. The aspects of triangulation outlined previously also lend themselves to confirmability. Lastly, critical reflection demonstrated by researcher journaling offered an aspect of confirmability.

Ethical Considerations

Researchers are morally bound to conduct research in a way that does not harm those involved (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Ethical considerations include the data's validity, reliability, and trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The ethical considerations in this study included careful measures to obtain the appropriate permissions from the participating site, Liberty University’s IRB, and the informed consent of the participants, expressing the voluntary nature of their participation. All data collected was kept confidential using pseudonyms combined with a single physical data source, which was password protected. Participants had no risk beyond that of everyday life. Proper citations and references to published works have been made throughout this study.

Permissions

The permissions for this study began with the preliminary participant site location permissions and moved on to the Liberty University IRB. Once the Liberty IRB approval was secured, the final site permissions with a direction of travel to be sufficiently documented were provided so that another researcher could easily replicate these steps. Informal conversations with the gatekeeper for this study included contacting the USA OPS superintendent to validate their intent to approve. With the preliminary support of the USA OPS superintendent, the next step was to seek conditional Liberty University IRB approval since the USA OPS review board required the researcher’s IRB approval to secure the final site permission.

The IRB approval letter is in Appendix A. The Center for Self-Determination Theory approval letter for survey instruments as a question guide can be found in Appendix B. The site permission template can be found in Appendix C. A recruitment letter can be found in Appendix D, and a recruitment social media post can be found in Appendix E. The information form can be found in Appendix F, and the qualifying questionnaire can be found in Appendix G.

With the Liberty University IRB conditional approval, the next step was to follow the site-specific procedures to obtain site-specific permission from the USA OPS Superintendent. When site-specific permissions were given, a successful proposal defense was completed, and the final IRB approval was obtained before any study recruitment or data collection began. At that time, the recruitment plan began to identify participants and co-creators for the study

Summary

In summary, this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study described the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. This study used a hybrid self-determination theory-hermeneutic phenomenology methodology, which allowed for deep and rich descriptions and meanings of lived experiences depicted through data analysis. The researcher’s positionality and role were transparent and clear. This study obtained the appropriate site, participant, and institutional permissions. Data collection included in-depth phenomenological interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups with a hermeneutic interview purpose in addition to the researcher’s journaling. Data analysis for this study had three stages: data organization, reducing the data into significant statements and meaning units, and then representing the data synthesis and interpretation through a narrative that portrayed the “essence” of the experience with tables and figures. Data was handled in a trustworthy and transparent way, offering confidence in its findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to describe the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. The central research question is: What is the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school? The sub-questions are: Sub-Question 1: What is the parents' experience with autonomy when parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school? Sub-Question 2: What is the parents' experience with relatedness when parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school? Sub-Question 3: What is the parents' experience with competence when parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school? This chapter briefly describes each of the study's 12 participants. It presents the interview, journal prompt, and focus group data in the synthesized form of narrative themes and subthemes, visualized through thematic maps per theme. Outlier data and research question responses are provided, followed by a summary concluding the chapter.

Participants

This study's participants were all women who had a child with an active Individualized Education Plan (IEP) who also attended an online K-12 school full time. The participants ranged in age from 30 to 68 years. A total of twelve participants were involved in the study. Ten of the twelve participants were Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and two were White. All families resided in the same western state in the United States of America and had their child with a disability enrolled at the same United States of America Online Public School (USA OPS). The study's participants were recruited through email and social media, with verbal advertisement by USA OPS case managers during daily homeroom spaces. Both purposeful and criterion sampling were employed in the acquisition of study participants, as was designed and discussed in Chapter 3. Refer to Table 1 for a detailed Participant Table.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Parent Participant	Age	Marital Status	# of Children in Household	SWD IEP Focus	SWD Level
Mary	49	Married	3	Sensory Processing Disorder	Elementary School
Maria	34	Married	8	Learning Disability	Elementary School
Kate	32	Married	1	Autism	Middle School
Brenda	68	Domestic Partnership	1	Autism	High School
Jennifer	37	Married	1	Learning Disability	Middle School
Ariel	49	Married	3	Learning Disability	High School
Michelle	44	Single	4	Learning Disability	Middle School
Jackie	30	Single	1	Autism and ADHD	Elementary School
Layla	51	Married	4	Autism	Elementary School
Elizabeth	48	Married	2	Learning Disability	Middle School
Marta	40	Domestic Partnership	4	Autism	Elementary School
Nina	46	Married	3	Autism	Elementary School

Mary

Mary is a 49-year-old mother of three whose youngest child attends USA OPS and has an IEP for sensory processing disorder. When Mary was asked what she loves about being a parent, she responded, “Just being able to watch your kids grow up and become adults in society.” The three words that Mary chose to describe being a parent included love, commitment, and strength. Mary is married and benefits from having the support of a mother who shared the experience of having a child with an IEP and an older daughter who supports the family as a secondary learning coach.

Maria

Maria is a 39-year-old mother of eight children. All of Maria’s school age children attend USA OPS, and three of them have an IEP for a learning disabilities. When Maria was asked what she loves about being a parent, she responded “Happy and very outgoing, which is like very lovable, like we’re constantly together.” The three words that Maria chose to describe being a parent included happy, outgoing, and lovable. Maria is married and benefits from having a family for support and friendship.

Kate

Kate is a 32-year-old mother of one child who attends USA OPS and has an IEP for autism. When Kate was asked what she loves about being a parent, she responded with, “We’re a very flexible family, we are pretty supportive of each other. You know we work like our own little world.” Kate's three words to describe being a parent included flexible, supportive, and her own little world. Kate is married and benefits from the choice that online school offers her family.

Brenda

Brenda is a 68-year-old chosen mother of two children, with one living in the household and attending the USA OPS, where he has an IEP for autism. When asked what she loves about being a chosen parent, Brenda responded, “I’d always wanted children, and I never had any. I was never with the right person or the right time." The three words that Brenda chose to describe being a parent included happy, puzzling, and patience. Brenda benefits from a domestic partnership and the opportunity to live in a farmhouse where their environment is safe to explore outdoors.

Jennifer

Jennifer is a 37-year-old mother of one child who attends USA OPS and has an IEP for a learning disability. When asked what she loves about being a parent, Jennifer responded with, "Honestly, it's watching my son grow and learn" and "It's just it's nice to see your own child kind of pick up on things that you're instilling in them and you're trying to educate them on." The three words that Jennifer chose to describe being a parent included challenging, rewarding, and loving. Jennifer is married and benefits from having family close by, which she appreciates, while she is also taking care of her husband, who was the victim of a bad car accident and requires 100% support.

Ariel

Ariel is a 49-year-old mother of three sons, one of whom attends USA OPS and has an IEP for a learning disability. When asked what she loves about being a parent, Ariel responded:

> It's never the same day twice for my kids. They're completely different. I enjoy them in different ways. They all have their strength and things they need help with. And so I love to, you know, make memories with them and feed their bellies, they love to eat and we are all foodies here.

The three words that Ariel chose to describe being a parent included fulfillment, perseverance, and multitasking. Ariel is married and appreciates the environment that USA OPS offers her son, which is perfect for him and sets him up for success.

Michelle

Michelle is a 44-year-old mother of four children, one of whom attends USA OPS and has an IEP for autism. When asked what she loves about being a parent, Michelle responded, “I love developing, you know, from birth until basically adulthood because my kids range in ages from nine all the way to 27.” The three words that Michelle chose to describe being a parent included challenging, rewarding, and fun. Michelle is a single mother who appreciated the opportunity that an online school gave her to hone in on her son's struggles.

Jackie

Jackie is a 30-year-old mother of one child who attends USA OPS and has an IEP for Autism and ADHD. When asked what she loves about being a parent, Jackie responded:

> One of the things that I probably love the most about being a parent is … the challenge of having to always adapt, especially having a child with special needs, like some things are not going to work with other children and advice that other people give. So you kind of have to adapt in your own way.

Jackie's three words to describe being a parent included inspiring, difficult, and self-sacrificing. Jackie is a single mother who benefits from having the support of her mother, who was an educator.

Layla

Layla is a 51-year-old mother of four children, one of whom attends USA OPS and has an IEP for Autism. When asked what she loves about being a parent, Layla responded, “I love about, you know, knowing about their day, just knowing about what’s going on in their lives. Helping them through their lives, being there for them as much as I can.” The three words that Layla chose to describe being a parent included loving, patient, and understanding. Layla is married and benefits from having another daughter who helps with being a learning coach as well.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a 48-year-old mother of two children, one of whom attends USA OPS and has an IEP for a learning disability. When asked what she loves about being a parent, Elizabeth responded, “my kids have given me a lot of purpose in life,” and “I love helping them be successful and helping them find themselves and not forcing them into anything. They’re finding themselves by themselves.” Elizabeth's three words to describe being a parent included awesome, challenging, and “I can only be as happy as my saddest child.” Elizabeth is married and benefits from having prior experience with raising a child with an IEP and knowing there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Marta

Marta is a 40-year-old mother of four children, one of whom attends USA OPS and has an IEP for autism. When asked what she loves about being a parent, Marta responded with, “Oh I love my kids. I enjoy always the time with them. Like either it’s going to the park, just go play or walk” and “We all go as a family, and we try to spend our time, most of the time, like, we have free, me and my partner, to give that time for them.” Marta’s three words to describe being a parent included always learning, challenges, and communication. Marta is in a domestic partnership and benefits from pursuing lifelong learning, building her confidence, and passing that confidence to her son.

Nina

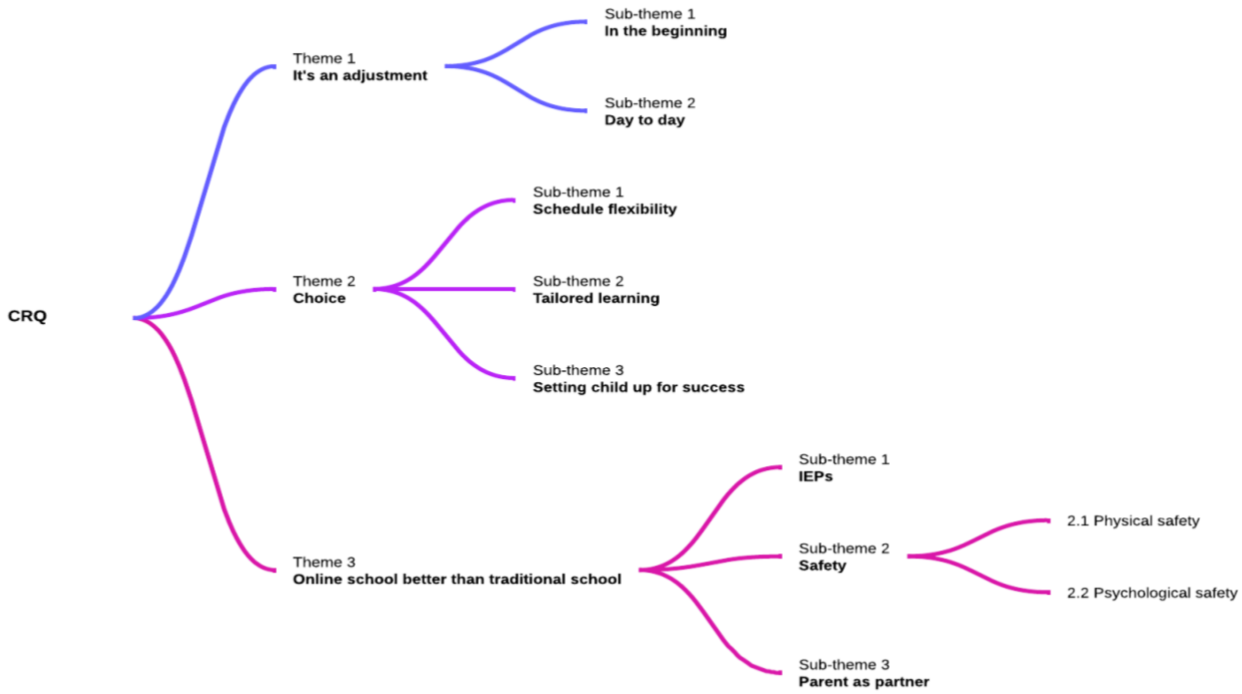
Nina is a 46-year-old mother of three children, one of which attends USA OPS and has an IEP for autism. When asked what she loves about being a parent Nina responded with “I just love being a parent. I love my daughters and I love my son. And I'm a grandmother to three granddaughters" and "they're on our minds and in our hearts." Nina's three words to describe being a parent included love, support, and guidance. Nina is married and benefits from the flexibility that online school offers her family "being a special needs online student is so much, it's so much easier to fit into our schedule."

Results

This study sought to describe the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. The study was guided by one central research question and three sub-questions to describe that lived experience. Participants joined semi-structured one-on-one interviews, completed four journal prompts, and joined a focus group. The questions that guided the semistructured one-on-one interviews were adjusted after the first two interviews to eliminate the questions aimed at eliciting examples and feelings about the lived experience. This was because participants were very forthcoming about that information as a part of the initial questions, and I did not want to appear insensitive by asking for redundant information. The salient themes of the shared experiences generated from all three data sources and organized by research questions are as follows.

Figure 1

Flowchart of Central Research Question Themes and Sub-themes



It Takes an Adjustment

One of the most widely shared themes among the study participants, as they described their experience with parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school, was the concept of adjustment. Adjustment refers to alterations or changes required by the parent to achieve desired results. Ten of the twelve participants described their experience parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school as requiring an adjustment, as demonstrated in the interview questions, journal prompts, and focus groups. Mary shared that adding another hat beyond her parental hat required an adjustment: “It was rough at the beginning because I had two hats.” Nina shared, “It’s not perfect every day; there will be some meltdowns. There will be some frustrations, you know, which can last anywhere from five minutes to an hour.” These two sentiments illustrate the two sub-themes of adjustment that include adjustment in the beginning and adjustment needed daily.

In the Beginning

Parents encountered a transition period when switching from the prior schooling method to being a learning coach of a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. For many, this included establishing a working environment, schedule, routine, and the shift from being only a parent to being both parent and educator inside the family home. Of the ten participants who referenced their experience as requiring adjustment, seven specifically called out an adjustment at the beginning of their experience. Kate experienced an adjustment due to being unsure about what to expect. “When we started, I wasn’t sure what to expect.” Ariel expressed that not knowing what to expect was also a scary experience: “In the beginning, I was very scared of the whole situation; I didn’t know what to expect, what was expected of me.”

Day to Day

Many participants of this study gave voice across all three data sources to the need for adjustment on a regular day-to-day basis. This would be in response to triggers, stressors, meltdowns, illness, and other reasons. Of the ten study participants who referenced their experience as requiring adjustment, nine indicated the need for day-to-day adjustments to balance their child's needs on that day with getting their schoolwork and services done. Kate shared “I also know when to not push it, you know, like okay, you know what, today I’m gonna give him a pass because he looks stressed or whatever. It’s no point to stress him.” Kate also explained “So sometimes it’s like randomly five pm, I see that he is like receptive, and I will be like ‘oh, lets do some homework.’”

Choice

Another widely shared theme among the study participants was the concept of choice. Choice materialized in many different ways, with the most frequently cited choices including the choice of school, schedule, routine, duration of lessons, when to take breaks, and how to set their child up for success based on their needs. Eleven of the twelve participants described their appreciation for making their own choices when it came to the care and education of their child. Kate provided the reasoning for her choice by saying:

> One of the things that help us take the decision of changing from the traditional school system to homeschooling was the ability of make sure my son wasn't going to be exposed to certain mindsets the *[sic]* sadly are very present in the kids of his age, in bigger groups it's hard for teachers and personnel to make sure everyone is behaving according to school rules.

Three sub-themes were teased out of the choice theme, and they include schedule flexibility, tailored learning, and setting the child up for success.

Schedule and Routines

Eleven of the twelve participants in this study expressed their gratitude through all three data sources for having the choice and flexibility to manage their own schedules. Some study participants guided a schedule, some participants with older children gave the choice of schedule to their children, and some expressed the need to adapt and be flexible with the schedule depending on their child's needs. Nina felt grateful that the flexibility of having an SWD who attends an online school allowed them to fit all their schedule needs. Nina shared, "Better fits my schedule and his schedule, and it's, ... more helpful because … as well as going to school, and we fit everything into his schedule." Jackie valued being able to give the choice of schedule to her daughter. She said, “I let her have a choice whether she wants math or language arts. So choose whichever one she wants to do, and that’s what we’ll do for the first portion of her day.”

Tailored Learning

Another choice that study participants valued from their experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school was the ability to tailor their child’s learning experience. Seven of the eleven study participants who expressed choice as a major part of their experience gave examples illustrating choice in tailoring their child’s learning experience. Both the parent and the online school took action to ensure each child’s learning experience was tailored to their discrete learning needs. Ariel shared:

> I feel that we prepared an environment for my child to be able to be self-driven and self-sufficient using his own judgement. He has accomplished better grades during his homeschooling experience so that has helped him to feel competent. Also, with the help of his resource teacher, he can reach out for help if he needs some. He reviews his feedback from teachers on his assignments and it makes him knowledgeable on how he is doing.

Brenda expressed, “The teachers understand the situation, they’re very flexible with him.”

Setting Child Up for Success

Setting their child up for success was given as one of the primary reasons for the parent's choice to keep their child who has a disability and attends an online school. Ten out of the eleven participants who cited appreciation for their choice elaborated on their motivation to advocate for their child and ensure their child was getting what they needed. This sub-theme was illustrated in all three data sources, and often additionally punctuated with other themes. Ariel said it simply, "My biggest concern was setting him up for success instead of failure." Mary expressed in one of her journal responses:

> While schools and therapy services play crucial roles in supporting children with sensory processing disorder, your active involvement as a parent is invaluable. You're the expert on your child, and your insights can complement the efforts of professionals. By staying informed about sensory issues and learning how to adapt strategies to your child's unique needs, you're helping to create an environment where she can thrive.

Online School Better Than Traditional School

The general sentiment across the majority of study participants was that the online school was better for them, as parents of children who have a disability, than the alternative, which was the traditional public school. Ten out of twelve study participants expressed this belief through the interview questions, journal prompts, and focus groups. Parents of children who have a disability expressed their belief that the online school was better for them in the handling of IEPs, physical safety, psychological safety, and partnership with parents, all of which is reflected in this theme's sub-themes. Brenda was absolute in saying, "The online school is head and shoulders above traditional school" and that the result for her chosen son was "He is doing phenomenal." Jackie summarized her experience by saying:

> Switching to online school has given me the experience to provide my child with autonomy, competence, and relatedness. She can choose when she is ready to start work or when she may need a break, giving her control and independence. Online schooling has also given her space to be competent.

IEPs

Study participants often cited the handling of IEPs as one of the reasons they experienced online schools as better than traditional public schools. Eight of the ten study participants who expressed their belief that the online school was better than the traditional public school did so about the handling of their child's IEP. Getting their children evaluated for an IEP, reviewing and updating the accommodations of the IEP, getting services per the IEP, and teachers having an awareness of and acting on the information in the IEP were all characteristics of the online school that study participants valued over traditional school. Maria explained that at the traditional public school, she was getting the runaround between the school and the doctor over who was responsible for initiating the IEP. Regarding her experience at the online school, Maria said, "As soon as we got them into USA OPS, not even a week later I have appointments for all three of them to set up for the IEPs." Elizabeth had a similar experience: her son's IEP meetings were automatically scheduled when her son was enrolled, and the teacher had already read the IEP. Marta appreciated USA OPS when sharing, "I feel that I am able to do things effectively, efficiently and successfully because I am having the support I need for my special education student. We are a team and we have to our best effort for him to meet his goals and success."

Safety

The safety of their SWD was another dominant theme for study participants. Eight out of ten participants who expressed their experience with the online school being better than the traditional school shared safety as a reason. It is important to note that there were two aspects of safety for study participants, there was physical safety and psychological safety. Of the eight study participants who named safety as an important aspect of their experience, five of those eight called out physical safety and eight of the eight called out psychological safety in interviews, journal prompts, and the focus groups. Parents felt that children who have a disability were at even greater risk of being bullied or neglected in a traditional school. Maria expressed the general risk “Just being able to help your kids and know that they’re not getting bullied because of their disability.” Elizabeth had physical safety concerns when she said, “I love servicing my community that is challenged, but it’s not safe for him to be in the closest middle school near our home.” Marta had this to say about the psychological safety of her son, “First and important thing is a loveable environment where he feels he can do and learn things, motivation will keep him gaining more autonomy and never being underestimated.”

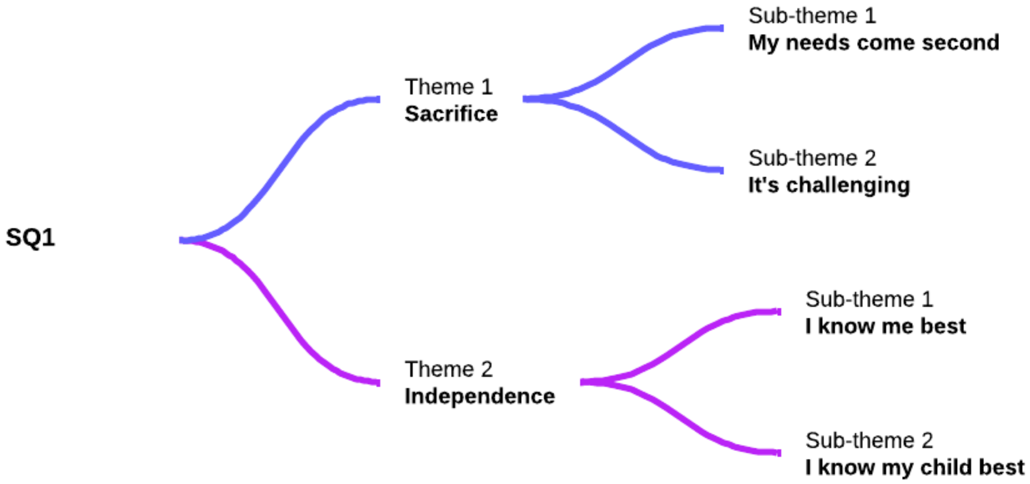
Parent as Partner

While not as dominant as some of the other themes, six of the ten study participants that shared their experience of the online school being better than the traditional public school cited being a partner with the school in their children’s education as their reason. Six of the ten study participants expressed through their interviews, journal prompts, and focus group that they valued having a seat at the table in decisions about their children’s education. Layla summarized it best when she shared:

> They are so hands on. We’re all making decisions together. They don’t leave me out and make me feel like I’m, like I’m less than. They put me up there with them to make decisions and that’s something I wasn’t getting in public school. Yes, I would go to the meetings but you know, there they were just basically making the decisions on their own without really, you know, seeing how I felt.

Figure 2

Flowchart of Sub-question 1 Themes and Sub-themes



Sacrifice

Shifting from the central research question of this study to the first sub-question, study participants shared their experiences with their autonomy. Regarding their experiences, sacrifice emerged as a theme from the interview questions, journal prompts, and focus groups. Seven out of ten study participants offered examples of their experiences of making sacrifices for their child, with study participants sharing that their needs came second to their child's needs and that their experience has been challenging for them and their sense of well-being. These two concepts will frame this theme's sub-themes. Nina explained her sacrifice as her world revolves around her son, "It has been a challenge with autonomy. My world revolves around my child with autism. So getting away and having some independence away for myself is hard when I am the only one he has to rely on."

My Needs Come Second

Under the theme of sacrifice, six of the seven study participants named explicitly that their needs came second to the needs of their child. This sacrifice was experienced as going without things or forfeiting their individual needs altogether. Elizabeth was very direct in her awareness that "As far as my needs, my needs were put on the backburner, that's just the way it is.” Other study participants attributed this more to being a parent in general and less to being the parent of a child who has a disability and attends an online school. Jennifer summarized it best, sharing, “I tend to put anything that I need behind my child, which I think is pretty typical of any parent.”

It's Challenging

Six of the seven study participants who expressed a form of sacrifice as a part of their experience being the parent of a child who has a disability and attends an online school, presented that sacrifice as having to live with ongoing challenges. This form of sacrifice was experienced as having to make regular tradeoffs, dealing with meltdowns, and experiencing moments of being overwhelmed. Four of the twelve study participants chose the word challenge as one of their three words to describe being a parent. Marta compared her experience with time for herself as having changed when her child transitioned from the traditional public school to online school when she shared:

> Yes, there are those challenges because basically when he was gone from in person school, it was kind of like me time. Yeah it was more like for me to relax, either to schedule appointments with doctors or either fill out forms that we need to do, you know. But now I have to figure it out to schedule that and fit that schedule into that everyday schedule that we have.

Marta also later said “It’s just like, no way I’m going nowhere” as she was speaking to having time to be connected with community outside the home.

Independence

The second theme that emerged from interview questions, journal prompts, and the focus groups concerning the study participants’ experience with their autonomy was the theme of independence. Eleven of twelve parents shared experiences with feeling independent. Independence, as participants expressed in this study, was about the freedom to make their own decisions without the constraints of traditional schooling. Specifically, the theme materialized through two concepts, which included parents knowing themselves and their children best. These framed the two sub-themes of independence. Jennifer expressed her personal independence through a journal prompt when she shared:

> My autonomy is what I believe makes me the person I am today. I am able to do the things that I am really interested in when I choose to do so, with some planning if needed. I also am able to do things that feel right for me and align with my values as a person.

I Know Me Best

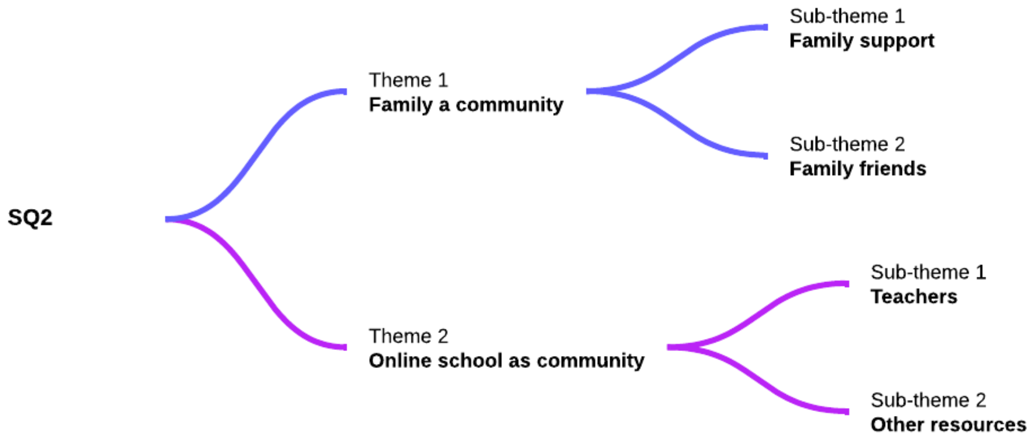
Ten of the eleven study participants who had shared experiences of independence did so in a way that indicated their independence came from knowing themselves best. Knowing themselves best, as participants expressed in this study, was about knowing how to take care of themselves or having confidence in their abilities to act on their decisions. Mary shared how important it was for her to take care of herself so that she could continue caring for her children. She shared, “I do Al-Anon and that’s taught me on how to take care of me, not everyone else, not to be codependent.” Brenda also expressed her belief that she could be an effective parent of an SWD attending an online school, sharing, “I’ve never not felt competent or capable” as well as “I just know I’m a very strong person.”

I Know My Child Best

All eleven of the study participants who shared experiences of independence did so in a way that indicated their independence and empowerment came from knowing what was best for their child. Knowing what was best for their child materialized in decisions to take them out of their traditional public school, knowing how best to educate their child, and knowing that they will do what is needed to set them up for success. Kate was talking about her choice to transition her child from the traditional public school when she said, “Who better knows what the kid needs? They don’t, parents do.” Elizabeth echoed this sentiment throughout her interview, which can be summarized by this statement: “I’m very confident in knowing what my kids need in order to be successful.”

Figure 3

Flowchart of Sub-Question 2 Themes and Sub-themes



Family as Community

The second sub-question of this study explored the participant’s sense of relatedness. From the interview questions, journal prompts, and focus groups, two themes emerged from the study participants’ responses to questions regarding relatedness. The first of those two themes expressed the concept of family as a community. Seven of the twelve study participants spoke of family as the main community they within which they felt and expressed care. Mary said:

> The support of your husband and family is invaluable. Having them stand by you as you dedicate time and effort to this endeavor not only reinforces your commitment but also

> strengthens the bonds of love and support within your family unit. Their encouragement serves as a constant reminder that you're not alone in this journey and that your efforts are valued and appreciated.

From the theme of family as a community, two sub-themes emerged. The first sub-theme is family as a support, and the second is family as friends.

Family as Support

Of the seven study participants who shared that family was the main community that they related with, five study participants specifically expressed that family was their main support system. Nina contextualized this when sharing, "We're in our safe space at home with our families. Our families have accepted it." Mary said that her mother was her primary support when she shared, "I have a really good support system, especially with my Mom because my Mom had an IEP student herself that went to public school."

Family as Friends

Five out of the seven study participants who shared that family was the main community that they related with also expressed that family members were often the primary source of friendship and socialization for themselves as well as their child with a disability. Maria shared that the friends her children most often socialized with were family, "They have a million different cousins that actually, most of them are actually homeschool also with online school." Marta shared that for her son, his brother was his best friend. "My other son is more like [a] supporter for him, they're just barely like, one year and nine months. I see them like, they're like partners."

Online School as Community

The other theme that emerged from the second sub-question regarding the study participants' sense of relatedness was that they considered the online school their community. Six of the twelve study participants described examples of their experience that portrayed the online school as a community for both themselves and their child with a disability. Maria spoke of her children's affinity for their online school teacher when she shared:

> The teacher, she is so good with them. Yeah, she, if they don't understand it, she will sit there and do one-on-one with them to help them understand it. They feel more comfortable that they're actually able to speak with the teacher about what they can't understand or what they're doing wrong.

Two sub-themes emerged from the interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups as it related to study participants and their experience with the online school as their community, and they related to the teachers and provision of other resources.

Teachers

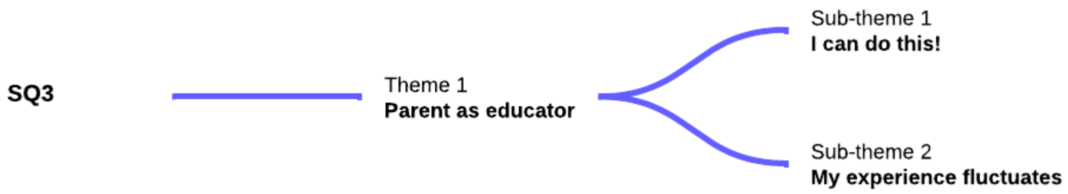
All six study participants who described the online school as their community did so with expressions of gratitude for the online school teachers. The role of teachers in establishing a connection with the school was clear across the majority of study participants, eleven out of twelve participants expressed this. Even the 12th participant, who did not consider the online school as part of their community, still named the importance of their child's teachers in feeling connected with the school. Of the six study participants who did express the online school as their community, the relationship between themselves, their child, and their child's teachers was something the parents valued. Ariel spoke of how her son had built a relationship with his teacher when she said, "I think he feels comfortable and confident that he can reach out to [his teacher], so she's a good resource in the community." Nina expressed that her child's teacher was an essential figure in their community of support when she shared, "My child's support and love from family, friends, teachers, and therapists is amazing."

Other Resources

Three of the six study participants who spoke of the online school as their community expressed the availability of other resources beyond teachers as contributing to their sense of support and connection with the online school. Ariel expressed appreciation for the other resources that the online school offered families like hers, "I mean, I get the emails all the time. The mental health emails, social emails, the outings." Michelle also appreciated the other support resources that the online school made available, "And there's a lot of resources if you need help, you know, and I was able to get help with tutoring or just talking to the teacher directly."

Figure 4

Flowchart of Sub Question 3 Theme and Sub-themes



Parent as Educator

The third sub-question of this study explored the participants' sense of competence. From the interview questions, journal prompts, and focus groups, one theme and two sub-themes emerged from the study participants' responses to questions regarding competence. Twelve study participants described their sense of competence as being tied to their role as parent educators. Study participants viewed their role as an educator as being fundamental to the experience of being a parent of a child who has a disability and attends an online school. Jackie approached that role with the mindset that everything was a learning opportunity. She had this to share:

> It definitely changes how I go about things and how I structure my life. I kind of structure everything around it being a learning opportunity for her because she might not get it during the courses that they give her. It's a lot of reading and she'll have a meltdown if it's too much reading.

Maria spoke of needing to boost one's confidence to persist in the role of educator. She shared:

> Be confident in yourself because it's you that is helping them get through what they have to do and you know yourself that you're helping them and somebody's not being mean to them like they do at the regular schools and they're not just pushed aside.

There were two sub-themes of the theme parent as educator, with about half of the parents experiencing competence that they could do this, and about half of the parents sharing that their experience as an educator fluctuated.

I Can Do This!

Six of the twelve study participants shared experiences of empowerment and confidence in their competency as an educator to their children. Three of these six participants expressed going through a process where they would first review and learn the materials themselves before starting the instruction with their children. Brenda coined this procedure the dual learning process. She shared:

> I work very closely with him. So for example, every day I preview all of his classes, I get up early and I look and I can look at everything tests and everything. And then research it

> all, and I do everything… and so it's a double learning process, but I don't know maybe that's just my technique but it's working very well.

The other three participants felt confident that if there was something they couldn't speak to confidently, they could call upon friends, family, and teachers to help. Michelle shared "My experience is empowering. I feel that I can make wise and informed decisions on behalf of myself and my family. For example, I chose to enroll my son in online school when I saw where he was struggling academically."

My Experience Fluctuates

Six of the twelve study participants shared that their experience fluctuates. For these parents, they experience moments of pride when their child is learning because of their involvement, and they experience moments when they feel overwhelmed and ineffective in helping their children if their children are experiencing frustration. Jackie articulated this when she shared, "You didn't know if you were doing the right thing. I feel that way almost all the time. Until I see her do something that she couldn't do before, and then I'm like, this is it, I'm doing it."

Outlier Data and Findings

One parent in the study did not have the same experience with parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school. This family did not feel supported by the online school and expressed that their experience building relationships, trust, and receiving services was better at their traditional school. This experience was not aligned with the other parents in the study. This family felt it was more difficult for their child to ask questions and seek support, because they were used to just walking up to the teacher at the traditional school. It is worth noting that this family had different reasons for choosing an online school. Jennifer said:

> It’s a bit of a challenge, honestly. I feel like when he was in school and he got regular services on campus, it was a little bit different than the way that it’s done now. And I think he felt more supported in that way because he had access to the teacher more readily than he does online because he can go up into that classroom.

Research Question Responses

This section answers this study’s research questions and frames the findings for discussion. Each theme generated by the interview questions, journal prompts, and focus groups are presented here to answer the central research question: What is the lived experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school? Participant quotes are supplied to illustrate the lived experience of these parents in rich detail.

Central Research Question

What is the lived experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school? The parents’ perspective were that their experience requires an adjustment at the beginning and day-to-day. Once the parents can get into a routine, they appreciate having the choice to schedule their days with flexibility, tailor their children’s learning experience, and set their children up for success. Overwhelmingly, the parents’ perspective was that having their SWD attend online school was better than a traditional school, especially as it related to managing IEPs, ensuring both the physical and psychological safety of their child, and being a partner in the special education process. Jackie said:

> The first, I want to say three months, I was like, I don’t think I made the right decision. But after those first three months, kind of getting used to the routine, and kind of like understanding what I needed to do, that really helped me get, like, organized and figure out okay, this is what I need to do for her, and then seeing her progress, and you know

doing what she needed to do.

Sub-Question One

What is the parents’ experience with autonomy when parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school? The parents’ perspectives were that experiences with autonomy were mixed. Some parents experienced significant sacrifice, either by putting their own needs second or having to trade off their needs to balance the challenge of their circumstances. Elizabeth said “I had to figure my way out to, you know, where I only had two pairs of shoes, two pairs of pants and five blouses but my kids had everything that they needed.” Some parents experienced a sense of greater independence, feeling empowered by the fact that they knew themselves and their children best. Jennifer said, "My autonomy is what I believe makes me the person I am today. I am able to do the things that I am really interested in when I choose to do so with some planning if needed. I also am able to do things that feel right for me and align with my values as a person."

Sub-Question Two

What is the parents’ experience with relatedness when parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school? The parent’s perspectives in this study were that relatedness experiences were generally limited to their family and the online school as their community. When the family was referenced as the community they belonged to, those family members were the main source of both support and friendship. Mary said:

> The support of your husband and family is invaluable. Having them stand by you as you dedicate time and effort to this endeavor not only reinforces your commitment but also strengthens the bonds of love and support within your family unit. Their encouragement

> serves as a constant reminder that you’re not alone in this journey and that your efforts are valued and appreciated.

When the online school was referenced as the community they belonged to, teachers were the primary source of support and partnership and the availability of other resources. Marta had this to share:

> I think the best part is like to have a really good communication with the support team teacher. I see everything. It’s like, yes, as I said to my family, we’re a team. Whatever we do, it’s gonna be all of us.

Sub-Question Three

What is the parents’ experience with competence when parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school? The parent’s perspective was that their experience with competence was associated with their role of parent-as-an-educator, with mixed experiences in feeling effective and occasionally ineffective. Half of the study participants experienced a strong sense of competence associated with seeing their child learn and knowing they contributed to it. Kate said, “Once we start, get like on, you know, start [to] get that new routine, it definitely make [sic] me feel much happier because I know that my son is getting the help and attention that he needs.” The other half of participants’ experiences with feeling competent fluctuated depending on the day or circumstance. Jennifer shared this: “There are some things I feel like I can do effectively, efficiently, and successfully, and there are others that I have to work harder at.”

Summary

This chapter provided a detailed description of the research results describing the lived experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends a full-time online K-12 school.

The study collected twelve parent participants’ interview responses, journal prompts, and focus group results, which were analyzed and presented visually and textually in response to the central research question and the sub-questions related to their personal experiences with autonomy, relatedness, and competence. These results bring a new understanding of what it means to be the parent of a child who has a disability and attends an online school.

Parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school requires the parent to adjust their life upon transition and day-to-day. The reward for that adjustment is that parents have the flexibility to choose their child’s schedule, how best to tailor their child’s learning experience, and what is needed to set their child up for success. This requires the parent to make sacrifices but also gives them the independence to act on what they know is best for them and their child. Family can be a community that offers these parents support and friendship, and the online school teachers can be a community for parents as well. Lastly, twelve of twelve parents identified themselves in the role of parent as an educator, which made them feel at times both effective and ineffective.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study is to describe the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. Prior research indicated that parents of children who have a disability have experienced adversity that has impacted the parents' well-being, including psychological health struggles, economic difficulties, and the lack of social support (Sadiki, 2023; Sowmida et al., 2023). Prior research also indicated that support for their roles as parents of children who have a disability and attend an online K-12 school is uneven despite acknowledging greater demands on their time and skills (Rice & Ortiz, 2021). However, this prior research did not examine how the fulfillment or frustration of parents' needs might impact their experience and, by extension, their parenting practices. There was a gap in the existing literature as it related to understanding the complex experience of parents of children who have a disability and attend an online school. This research study sought to fill that gap by exploring the lived experience of parents of children who have a disability and attend a full-time online K-12 school through the theoretical framework of self-determination theory. This chapter presents the researcher's interpretation of findings, the implications of those findings for both practice and policy, the theoretical and methodological implications, the limitations of this study, and the recommendations for future research into this complex parenting role.

Discussion

The discussion section of this study summarizes the thematic findings detailed in Chapter 4, context-sets those findings with both empirical and theoretical research, and offers the researchers' interpretation of those findings. This section discusses the implications of this study from a policy and practice perspective, as well as the theoretical and empirical implications of this study. It concludes with recommendations for further research into parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school.

Summary of Thematic Findings

This analysis of this study's data generated eight themes and eighteen sub-themes. There were three themes and eight subthemes associated with the central research question. In describing the lived experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school, participants describe three themes. The theme of adjustment, the theme of choice, and the theme that online school was a better alternative than the traditional public school. The adjustment theme was further broken out into adjustments in the beginning and adjustments day to day. The choice theme was further broken out into flexibility around scheduling, tailoring learning, and setting their child up for success. Lastly, a strong majority of the participants experienced online school as a better alternative to the traditional school as a theme. That theme was further broken down to include management of IEPs, physical and psychological safety, and being a partner in the special education process.

When parents of a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school expressed their experience with autonomy, participants described having to make sacrifices as well as having a unique sense of independence. These two themes were further broken into four subthemes. Sacrifice was further broken into the sub-themes of my needs coming second, and the experience is challenging. Independence was further broken out into two sub-themes, including I know me best and I know my child best.

When parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 schoolexpressed their experience with relatedness, participants described two themes. Family as a community and the online school as a community. While there is a societal perception that this kind of experience can be isolating, this study’s participants expressed that they did not feel alone when they were among family and the school community who accepted them and shared their values. The family as community theme had two sub-themes: family as support and as friends. The online school as the community had two sub-themes: teachers and other resources.

When parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 schoolexpressed their experience with competence, they universally articulated their sense of competence being tied to their role of parent as educator. In elaborating their sense of competence in this role, there were two sets of experiences that translated to two sub-themes. The first sub-theme described the experience of feeling like I can do this! The second sub-theme described a fluctuating experience.

Interpretation of Findings

As presented in Chapter 4, parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online school requires the parent to make adjustments in their life, both upon initial transition to online school and in subsequent daily life. If they can establish a routine, they are rewarded with the flexibility to choose their child’s schedule, tailor their learning experience, and set their child up for success. Sacrifices need to be made, but the independence to do what is best for them and their child is appreciated. The community they are grateful for includes family and online school teachers, who offer support and friendship. Parents in this situation see themselves as both parents and educators, and in playing that combined complex role, they can feel, at times, both effective and ineffective. This research study contributes to the body of literature by exploring the lived experience of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school.

Parents of a child who has a disability and attends online K-12 school have greater autonomy

Autonomy is the basic psychological need to self-regulate one’s experiences and actions. It is a form of functioning that is associated with feeling that one’s behaviors are self-endorsed and congruent with their own interests and values (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Parenting a child who has a disability is complex and can affect the parent's emotional and physical well-being (De Clercq et al., 2022). Parents of children who have a disability like autism spectrum disorder (ASD) experience the highest stress levels, even among other parents of students with disabilities (SWD) (De Clercq et al., 2022). Yet eleven out of twelve participants in this study indicated their experience included a strong sense of choice made possible to them by attending an online school, including six parents of children with ASD.

This was demonstrated in the central research question theme describing the flexibility of choice and in the sub-question one theme of independence. While autonomy is not synonymous with choice or independence, this researcher’s interpretation is that while the research participants used these words, the experience they were describing was the regulation of their own experience and actions aligned with their values. Ariel summarized this interpretation when she shared:

> The ability to create our own schedule, and not being tied down to a monotonous routine, is amazing. Being able to be home with my children and interact with them, bounce questions off of each other, anything during the day is great. If we want to go out for a walk at any time during the day, we are able to do that; if we all want to sit down for a meal or prep a meal together and spend some quality time together we are also able to do that. We make sure the work gets done but not in a burdensome way.

The majority of the literature on parenting a child who has a disability depicts an experience of stress and challenges. Yet, some recent research has begun to illustrate a more balanced view of the complex role (De Clercq et al., 2021). Resilience and a more positive view has been found in recent literature investigating parents of SWD (Sowmida et al., 2023). Parents of SWD who have social support, quality family time, and a sense of togetherness experience a sense of resilience (Sowmida et al., 2023). This study is another data point to indicate that with the right tools, support, and environment, parents of children who have a disability and attend an online school are having an experience that includes greater autonomy and needs satisfaction.

Parents of a child who has a disability and attends online K-12 school are not alone

Relatedness is the basic psychological need to feel socially connected and cared for by others and contribute to others (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Being the parent of a child who has a disability can have adverse impacts on the parent's well-being, including psychological health struggles, economic difficulties, and the lack of social support (Sadiki, 2023; Sowmida et al., 2023). When there is a gap between the resources needed for parenting tasks and the ability to cope, the response is the psychological reaction of parenting stress (Kakhki et al., 2022). A prior study indicated that relatedness was the one psychological need parents of SWD schooling from home felt insecure about (Pihlainen et al., 2022). Isolation is one of the most common criticisms of homeschooling, claiming that children are deprived of mainstream social skills, which may leave them ill equipped to be well adjusted adults (Hamlin & Cheng, 2022).

This study of parents whose child has a disability and attend an online K-12 school described not being alone in their experience. Over half of the study participants referenced having family as their community for support and friendship, and half referenced feeling cared for by the teachers at the online school. The participants in this study may not follow the mainstream standards for socialization, but they did experience the mainstream perception of isolation. Kate shared this:

> Enrolling the online system was a little scary because I'm not good with computers/technology, but to my surprise it is a very easy system to navigate and because the teacher's still present and helping, I don't feel like I am alone.

Nina summarized the sentiment best when she shared, "We're in our safe space at home with our families" and "Our families have accepted it." Having social support, whether that support is family, friends, community groups, or the school, makes a big difference in the experience of a parent of a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. Getting connected to social support can both increase a parent's self-image and confidence while also equipping them with knowledge and skills to advocate for their children (Sadiki, 2023). This study indicated that while not all study participants and their children experience socialization in the same way, and the nature of their circumstances can be isolating, most do not feel alone. Their experience with socialization and relatedness isn't the picture of societal standards for socialization, which includes getting out and about and sharing space with people outside of the home. However, participants of this study indicated they did not feel alone or without a community; they indicated feeling well connected to and supported by their family, and the online school accepted their experience and shared their value system.

Parents whose child has a disability and attends online K-12 school fluctuate with competence

Competence is the basic psychological need to feel effective and have mastered a concept or skill, and it is easily thwarted when challenged or too difficult (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Parents are critical to the success or failure of virtual learning for younger learners (Siko & Barbour, 2022). Understanding how parents whose child has a disability felt about having the relevant skills to assist their children at home with virtual learning revealed that parents whose child has a disability and attends an online school needed to know what teachers expected of them to feel willing and equipped to support their child's education (Sonnenschein et al., 2022).

These sentiments seen in the current literature were also seen in this study, with seven of twelve study participants speaking to the need for adjustment, which included knowing what was expected of them, and all twelve study participants expressing their experience with competence being connected to their role of parent as educator. For this study, the culmination of all psychological needs comes together as competence to be successful in the role of parent as educator. The satisfaction of parents' basic psychological needs is an antecedent of their parenting practice (Mabbe et al., 2018). This researcher believes that the satisfaction and/or frustration of psychological needs is an antecedent of the parenting practice and competence in the role of the parent as an educator for parents whose child has a disability and attends an online school. Michelle spoke to this when she shared, "I feel more comfort as far as being capable. It depends on the day. Some days I feel like I'm capable of handling it, and then some days it can be a little overwhelming." Jackie also spoke to this "You didn't know if you were doing the right thing. I feel that way almost all the time. Until I see her, do something that she couldn't do before and then I'm like this is it, I'm doing it."

Parents whose child has a disability and attends online K-12 school are partners in special education

The last interpretation of this study is that parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school are more active partners in special education. This finding is equal parts the online school involving parents in all special education decisions, and parents playing the role of advocate and educator. This is important as advocacy is not only good for the outcomes of the student, but is also known to help parents of SWD cope with their circumstances

(Sowmida et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2019). When parents feel empowered, they are more likely to be optimistic about facing challenges (Burke et al., 2019).

With the recent expansion of online schools, which includes a variety of benefits as well as the changing dynamics of modern educational offerings, an online school may be a better fit for parents of children with a disability than a traditional school (Tonks et al., 2021). Parents of children who have a disability accept the variety of roles they must play when they enroll their child in an online school, which includes using basic technological literacies, evaluating information to supplement existing instructional materials, and staying in close communication with the school about their child's needs (Rice & Ortiz, 2021). This study reinforces these data points in prior research. Ten of the twelve participants of this study indicated they felt the online school was a better fit for their children who have a disability than the traditional public school. Eight of those ten participants shared an improved experience with the management of IEPs, and six of those ten participants (half the total study participants) explicitly gave voice to their role as a partner in their child's special education. Layla best describes this when she shared:

> They are so hands on. We're all making decisions together. They don't leave me out and make me feel like I'm, like I'm less than. They put me up there with them to make decisions and that's something I wasn't getting in public school.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The findings from this current research study highlight several implications for current and prospective parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school, for online school administrators and teachers, and for state departments of education. Implications are also relevant for state lawmakers as they consider the creation of legislation. This section is organized by Implications for Policy and then Practice.

Implications for Policy

State lawmakers play an important role as they set the rules for how online charter schools (also referred to as cyber charter schools or virtual school programs) are created, regulated, and funded. The research findings of the current study suggest that parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school found flexibility and growth for themselves and their child when the traditional school was not meeting their needs. While it is clear that parents of a child who has a disability at this online school shared this empowering experience, it may also be a positive experience for other parents of children who have a disability at other schools in other states.

Both children who have a disability and their parents are an at-risk population with the potential to require significant social services throughout their lifetime. Thus, there are two implications of this research for lawmakers. First, in those states that don't allow for online charter schools, making this option available to parents of children with disabilities may prove a more meaningful and effective alternative to the traditional public school. Second, in states where online charter schools are available as a public school alternative, as lawmakers consider and/or overhaul requirements and funding for online K-12 schools, adding support for parents as partner educators in addition to the funding for student services may lead to better lifelong outcomes. Better lifelong outcomes for children who have a disability and their parents benefit both the family and society.

Implications for Practice

Parents of children who have a disability need to be informed, need to advocate, and need to exercise their parental rights. The research findings of this study suggest that this experience is more viable for parents whose child has a disability and attends an online school. One of the parents in this study summarized their experience when she shared:

> In order to maintain autonomy when it came to my childrens' education, I had to do my research. I had to become proficient in the special education laws, in my parental rights, and aware of the services available prior to any IEP meetings. I had to be aware that my voice as a parent was the most important, and I couldn't just "go with the flow" of what was recommended by others.

Again, while it is clear that parents whose child has a disability at this online school shared this empowering experience, it may also be a positive experience for other parents of a child who has a disability at other schools in other states.

The implication of this study's findings for current and/or prospective parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school is that they need to do their research, be prepared for it, and devise a plan for the adjustment and challenge of this experience. With that, parents and their children who have a disability may experience the benefits of a flexible, tailored learning experience where they are partners in the special education process and have the autonomy to act on what is best for them and their child.

Online K-12 school administrators, teachers, and state departments of education play an important role in the effectiveness of their special education programs. The research findings of the current study suggest that parents whose child has a disability and attends an online school may benefit from more upfront information and training to help them be better prepared for the adjustment this experience requires in the beginning and day-to-day. This study's participants shared an appreciation for being equal decision-makers in the special education process for their children at their school. Additionally, many teachers (in-service and pre-service) have not received adequate professional development on family engagement and relationship building related to children who have a disability and their parents. School administrators and districts can evaluate and implement programs and professional development to address this gap. This approach may also be appreciated at other online K-12 school sites and districts in other states.

Last, but perhaps most important, is the value of the teacher. This study's participants spoke of their children's resource teacher, special education teacher, and core subject teachers with sincere gratitude and appreciation. They shared experiences where the teachers had built relationships with them and their children, making them both feel supported and equipped to be successful with this experience, and, perhaps most importantly, they felt a friendship that established a trust to be vulnerable when they needed help. Again, while it is clear that parents whose child has a disability at this online school shared this empowering experience, it may also be a positive experience for other parents of a child who has a disability at other schools in other states. The implications of this study's findings for online K-12 school administrators and state departments of education are to prioritize and protect student-to-teacher ratios that encourage teachers serving children who have a disability to be familiar with students' IEPs, to build relationships with both children who have a disability and their parents, and to be available and accessible to support day to day adjustments that enable both children who have a disability and their parents to be successful. The satisfaction of parents' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are important sources for their parenting (Dieleman et al., 2019). Parents of children with special needs face unique challenges in satisfying their psychological needs, which jeopardize their capacity to facilitate autonomy-supportive practices for the child (Dieleman et al., 2018). This current study described the important role of the teacher and their impact on the day-to-day needs satisfaction (or frustration) of children who have a disability and their parents.

The more that can be done to support the parents of a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school, the better off the children who have a disability and our society as a whole.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

This study reinforced prior research findings regarding self-determination theory and parenting practices. It also corroborated and extended research regarding parenting a child who has a disability and attends online school. This section will cover both the theoretical and empirical implications.

Empirical Implications

Tonks et al. (2021) reinforced that research on the experiences of special education students and their families attending online school is scant even while enrollments of this population and mode of learning are growing. The research findings of this current study add to the evidence base on this small but growing phenomenon. The qualitative method used for this research allows for detailed descriptions of this experience, making inductive reasoning possible and contributing to the forming of general conclusions.

Pihlainen et al. (2022) studied parents of SWD during the COVID-19 pandemic to see how their basic psychological needs were being met and discovered that parents felt a strong sense of autonomy when working and schooling from home, as well as feeling competent in both caring for and facilitating their SWD learning. The research findings of this current study corroborated this prior research. Participants of this study strongly indicated their sense of autonomy, as expressed in this study’s implication section. Additionally, the participants in this study also shared their experience in the role of parent as an educator, forming the basis of their sense of competence, which is aligned with the findings of the Pihlainen et al. study.

Lastly, most of the literature around parenting a child who has a disability portrays an experience that includes more stress and challenges, with some research beginning to illustrate a more balanced view (De Clercq et al., 2021). Resilience has been found in recent literature investigating parents of SWD (Sowmida et al., 2023). Many parents of SWD have thrived in their circumstances and experienced positive outcomes (Kim & Dababnah, 2020). Parents of SWD who have social support, quality family time, and a sense of togetherness experience a sense of resilience (Sowmida et al., 2023). The research findings of this current study corroborate and extend the growing evidence base on this phenomenon. Participants in this study shared experiences that they viewed to be positive for both themselves and their child who has a disability, made possible by their choice, support, and community. These participants did experience challenges, they did experience feeling overwhelmed at times, and they did experience sacrifice. Ultimately, their perseverance and resilience resulted in their personal growth, autonomy-supported parenting practices, and a learning experience that will better set their children with disabilities up for success.

Theoretical Implications

This study suggests that parents engage in more autonomy-supportive parenting practices, position the needs satisfaction of their child who has a disability, when those parents experience autonomy, relatedness, and competence in their child's online school experience. Self-determination theory (Source), a psychological theory concerning behavior as a function of the conscious and nonconscious reasons for motivation, posits that every human has three psychological needs that are the essential nutrients for human growth and development and that when these needs are thwarted growth and development can be frustrated (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

A parent's role in particular is critical to a child's development and well-being (Ahn et al., 2022; Arden et al., 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Parenting plays a profound role in children's growth (Li et al., 2020). Autonomy-supportive parenting is when parents offer meaningful rationales, provide choices for their children to make decisions, set clear rules and expectations for behavior, attempt to understand, and acknowledge children's perspectives and encourage their interests (Ahn et al., 2022; Arden et al., 2022; Costa, Sireno et al., 2019; Li et al., 2020). When children's needs are satisfied, they are more likely to use adaptive strategies, make appropriate decisions, and exhibit strength in understanding self-standards and goals (Arden et al., 2022).

The participants of this study described experiences that reinforce the prior research on self-determination theory and parenting practices and add to that research base for the phenomena of parenting a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. Data points from this study showed that when parents' needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence were being met, those parents perceived that their children were learning and being set up for success. Two narrative data points in particular stood out to this researcher as emphasizing this implication, one from Maria when she spoke of her choice in enrolling her child in an online school and the empowerment she felt from that choice, and the other from Ariel, who shared how that extended to her parenting practices. Maria's experience was "Just being able to help your kids and know that they're not getting bullied because of their disability," and Ariel's experience was "I feel that we prepared an environment for my child to be able to be self-driven and self-sufficient using his own judgment. He has accomplished better grades during his homeschooling experience, so that has helped him to feel competent." It is clear that parents whose child has a disability at this online school shared this empowering experience; it may also be a positive experience for other parents whose child has a disability beyond this site and relevant for self-determination theory as it sheds new light to an existing theoretical base.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study had several limitations and delimitations. Most were intentional choices and decisions. Others resulted from the availability of the study's research participants. These limitations and delimitations will be detailed.

Limitations

This current study has a number of limitations. One major limitation of the study was that all twelve participants were women, and male parents of children who have a disability were not represented. The current study findings would have been more generalizable if there had been a balance of female and male participants to describe their experience. One limitation is that most of the women were able to have their child's school be their primary work, or had work that could be done from the home with flexible schedules. Another limitation is that this study did not research parents whose child has a 504 plan, which is another way that parents of students with special needs can have barriers removed from the education setting. A final limitation is that one participant did not complete their journal prompt responses, which could have possibly generated a theme or sub-theme that is not captured in this current study results. The delimitation of the single research site also limits the ability to generalize these findings to other geographic locations in the United States or internationally.

Lastly, one limitation of this study was the choice to employ a hermeneutic phenomenology over a transcendental phenomenology. This choice was made because the researcher had shared this particular experience and therefore approached this study in an interpretive way over a simply descriptive approach. Therefore, the themes and sub-themes generated result from this researcher’s interpretations. This choice of method was balanced through member checking and the focus groups, which were used as the hermeneutic interview, but it is a limitation nonetheless.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to parents whose child has a disability and attends the USA OPS and whose children with a disability had an IEP that was either created or updated in the last 12 months. This group was selected in response to a gap in the literature describing the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. The number of study participants and the single site location were also delimited to stay within the best practices for a qualitative phenomenology research method.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several recommendations for future research based on the findings of this research study. The first recommendation is that future studies focus on male parents to determine if they experience the same sense of autonomy, relatedness, and competence as it relates to being the parent of a child who has a disability and who attends an online K-12 school. While there is a growing body of research on parents of children who have a disability, a gap exists that portrays male parents may or may not have the same experience, depending on whether they are the primary learning coach for the child who has a disability or acting in more of a support role. Therefore, future research could also seek to understand if the experience portrayed in this research results from being the parent who is also the primary learning coach.

A second recommendation is that future studies focus on parents of students with 504 plans where the student attends an online K-12 school to see if they experience the same sense of being a partner in the special education process. According to the National Education

Association (NEA), there are differences in the special education process for students with IEPs and students with 504s, namely that a 504 plan does not require specialized instruction to have equal access to public education (NEA, 2024). However, both can result in accommodations and services. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a federal law designed to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities and requires a school district to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to qualified students in the district jurisdiction (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Therefore it would be important to understand if parents whose child has a disability that leverage both an IEP as well as 504 plan have the same experience with being partners in the special education process.

The third recommendation for future research is to understand the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school in other geographic regions of the United States of America to see if they share aspects of the experience described in this study. This study took place at USA OPS, a school on the West Coast of the United States of America. It would be important to understand if there was a regional influence on the findings of this study or whether the results could be further generalized across the nation.

Lastly, a recommendation for further research is to continue understanding this phenomenon and diversify the research design. Since there is still much to be understood about this phenomenon and underserved population, qualitative forms of inquiry are appropriate. A narrative inquiry research design offers value because it is one of the oldest and most natural forms of sense-making (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researching this phenomenon using a grounded theory methodology would also be appropriate and more actionable from an implications perspective. Grounded theory allows for theory to be inductively generated, providing an explanatory scheme of concepts related to each other through patterns of connectivity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

Conclusion

This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study described the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. Parenting a child who has a disability can be stressful. Being the principal steward of your child's learning experience can be overwhelming. Being the parent of a child who has a disability and attends an online K-12 school combines two individually complex parenting roles, increasing the likelihood that parents' own psychological needs are frustrated. When parent's own psychological needs aren't being met, it may impact their parenting practices and, by extension, the needs satisfaction of their children who have a disability. This study sought to understand whether parents' needs satisfaction was indeed an antecedent to their parenting practices and subsequently to the needs satisfaction of their children who have a disability. This study was conducted through interview questions, journal prompt responses, and focus groups that sought to understand their lived experience through the lens of SDT. Results of this study indicated that the online K-12 school, in comparison to the traditional public school, offered parents whose child has a disability more autonomy. Results of this study also indicated that family and teachers are a crucial community of support, and that parents whose childhas a disability and attends an online K-12 school felt they were equal partners in the special education process.

These results add to the empirical research in sharing the lived experience of parents whose childhas a disability and attends an online K-12 school, a growing phenomenon in the United States of America. The findings indicated that parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school should prepare themselves for an upfront adjustment and be prepared to make day-to-day adjustments to set themselves and their children up for success. The findings indicated that school districts should invest in equipping families for this upfront adjustment and empower their teachers to build the necessary relationships and insights to support these families daily to keep them on track to succeed. Lastly, the findings of this research suggest that parents whose child has a disability and attends an online school appreciate being equal partners in their child's special education process. This is a finding that is applicable to parents, school districts, and lawmakers when considering future policy, funding, programs, and priorities.

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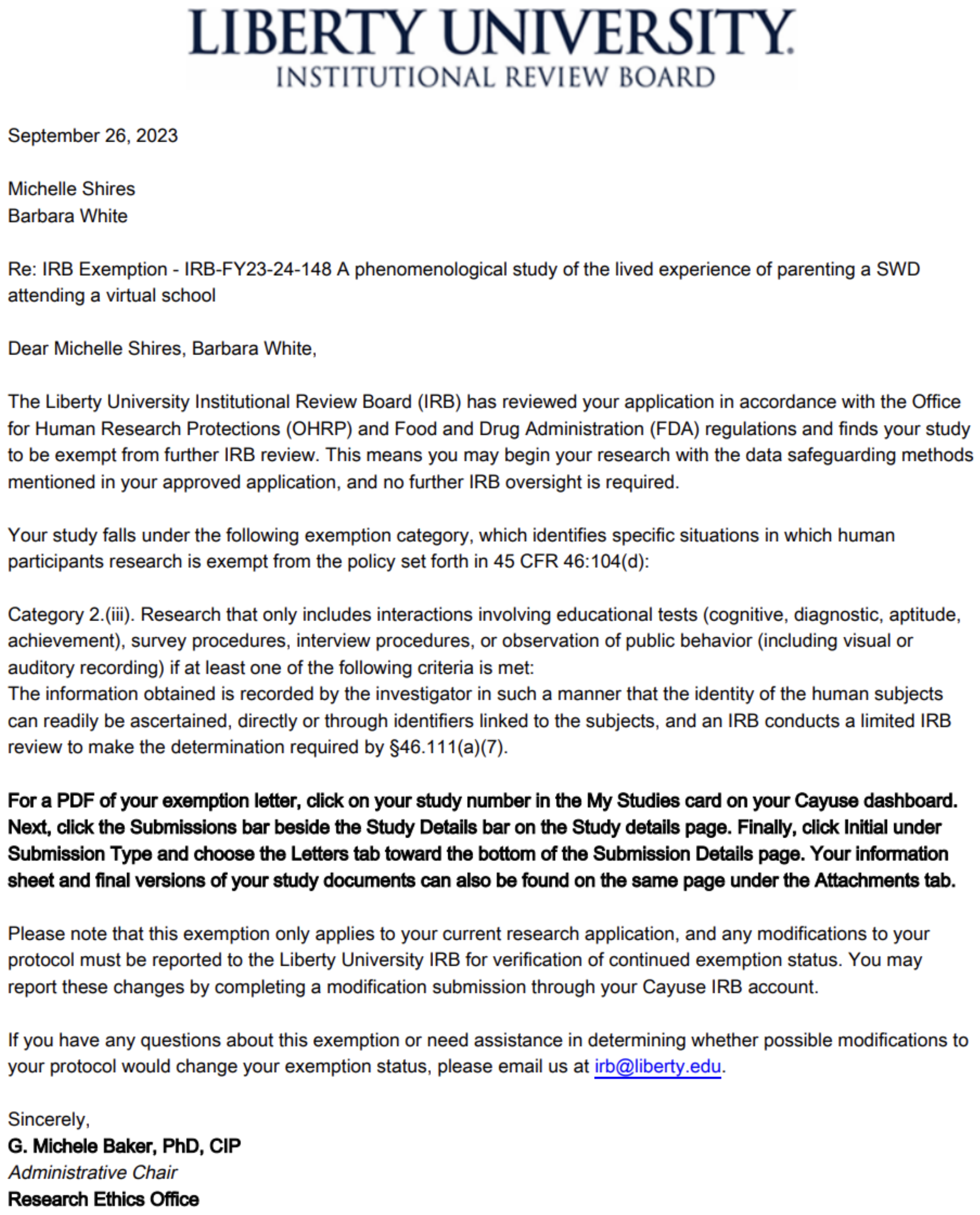
Appendix A



LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

September 26, 2023

Michelle Shires
Barbara White

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-148 A phenomenological study of the lived experience of parenting a SWD attending a virtual school

Dear Michelle Shires, Barbara White,

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

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

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

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

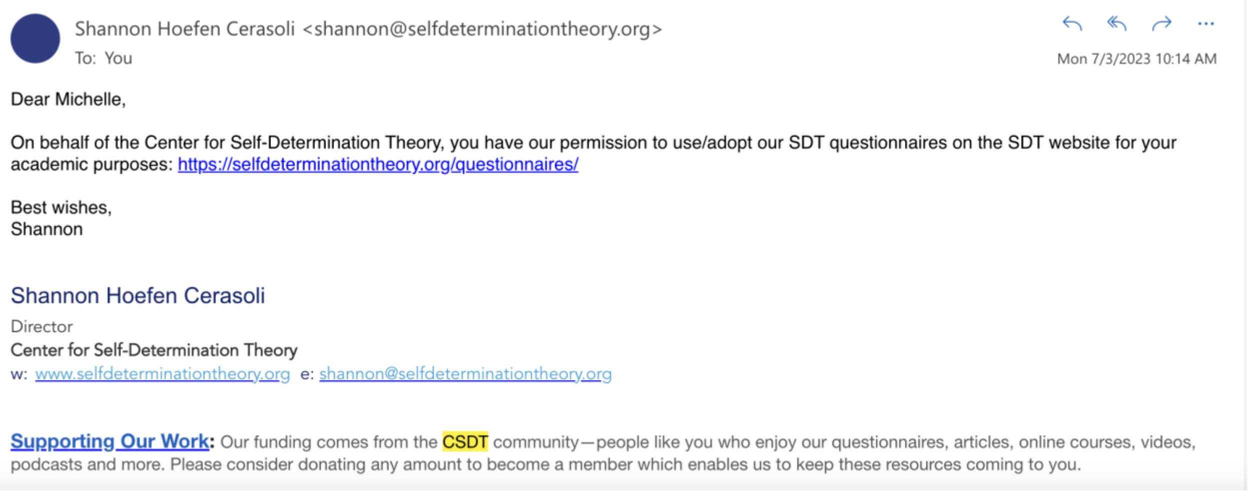
Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse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

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

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

Approval from the Center for Self Determination Theory with consent to use P-PASS and BPFNS as guides for Interview Questions.



Dear Michelle,

On behalf of the Center for Self-Determination Theory, you have our permission to use/adopt our SDT questionnaires on the SDT website for your academic purposes: https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/questionnaires/

Best wishes,
Shannon

Shannon Hoefen Cerasoli
Director
Center for Self-Determination Theory
w: www.selfdeterminationtheory.org e: shannon@selfdeterminationtheory.org

Supporting Our Work: Our funding comes from the CSDT community—people like you who enjoy our questionnaires, articles, online courses, videos, podcasts and more. Please consider donating any amount to become a member which enables us to keep these resources coming to you.

Appendix C

Shires Site Permission Template

June 5th, 2023

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Dear [redacted],

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. The title of my research project is “A phenomenological study of the lived experience of parenting a student with disability attending an online K-12 School.” Copied below is the research abstract.

> The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study is to describe the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. The theory guiding this study is Ryan and Deci’s self-determination theory, an organismic theory that posits three universal psychological needs that promote or erode individual growth and well-being. The satisfaction or frustration of parents’ psychological needs and the impact that has on their parenting will guide this study’s research questions, interview questions, and data analysis. In-depth interviews, journal prompts, and focus groups will

be conducted with parents of students with disabilities attending a full-time online K-12 charter school. Experiential data will be used to answer the central research question, "What is the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school?" and its sub-questions. Data collected from this study will be transcribed and analyzed, and the researcher will generate themes manually that will describe the essence of what it means to parent a student with disability attending an online school.

Keywords: parents, students with disabilities, online school, K-12, self-determination theory, phenomenology

I request your permission to conduct my research at your charter public school. This research will involve two recruitment postings, one every two weeks, to run over the course of four weeks on social media platforms. The recruitment postings will seek parents of online public school students to volunteer as a participant for my research. The social media postings will express the purpose of the research and will include a link to a questionnaire to identify parents that meet the criteria for having a student with disability. Parents who meet the criteria (attend your online K-12 school full-time and have an active IEP) and who express interest will be contacted directly. Participants will be asked to participate in one forty-five minute direct interview, complete four digital journal prompts, and participate in one forty-five minute focus group with between 4 & 5 other participating individuals. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval (through USPS mail or as a PDF digital attachment) to [redacted]

Sincerely,

Michelle K. Shires

Liberty University Student

[redacted]

Appendix D

Shires Recruitment Template

June 5th, 2023

Potential Participant Name

Potential Participant Title

[Address 1]

[Address 2]

[Address 3]

Dear Potential Participant #1:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my research is to explore the lived experience of parents whose child has a disability and attends an online K-12 school. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years or older, the parent or guardian of a public school student attending a full-time online school, with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that was created or reviewed in the last calendar year. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in one forty-five-minute interview with this researcher, complete four digital journal prompts within 1 month of the interview, participate in one focus group with between 4 & 5 other study participants, and optionally review the work in progress research findings as a member check.

Participation should take no more than four hours of time over a three-month period to complete the procedures listed.

- Individual interview through Zoom~ 45 minutes
- Completion of four digital journal prompts through Google Forms ~ 60 minutes
- Focus group through Zoom~ 45 minutes
- Optional member checking of Microsoft Word in progress research finding ~ 45 minutes

All records of participation will be confidential meaning no personal or identifying information will be reported. Your participation in the interview will be transcribed with a pseudonym, and your journal prompt and focus group participation will identified by the pseudonym. To participate, please click here and complete the attached questionnaire and submit it when complete. You can contact me at [redacted] for more information. You must sign and return the attached consent document participate in this study.

A consent document will be given to you one week before the interview is scheduled. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me prior to scheduling the time of the interview & focus group. After you have read the consent form and desire to participate, please take a picture of the signed consent form, attach the image and return it to mshires@liberty.edu. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information, signed the consent form, and would like to take part in the study.

Sincerely,

Michelle K. Shires

Student at Liberty University

[redacted]

[redacted]

Appendix E

Shires Social Media Post

ATTENTION parents of students with an active IEP who also attend a virtual school: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to explore the lived experience of parenting a student with an IEP who also attends a full-time virtual school. To participate, you must be 18 years or older, the parent or guardian of a public-school student attending a full-time virtual school, with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that was created or reviewed in the last calendar year. Participants will be asked to participate in one video-recorded interview with this researcher, complete four digital journal prompts within 1 month of the interview, participate in one video-recorded focus group with between 4 & 5 other study participants, and optionally review the work in progress research findings as a member check, which should take no more than four hours of time over a three-month period to complete the procedures listed. If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please click here and complete the attached questionnaire and submit it when complete. You can contact me at [redacted] [redacted] for more information. An information sheet will be given to you one week before the interview is scheduled.

Facebook Post

ATTENTION Facebook Friends: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to explore the lived experience of parenting a student with an IEP who also attends a full-time virtual school.

To participate, you must be 18 years or older, the parent or guardian of a public-school student attending a full-time virtual school, with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that was created or reviewed in the last calendar year. Participants will be asked to participate in one video-recorded interview with this researcher, complete four digital journal prompts within 1 month of the interview, participate in one video-recorded focus group with between 4 & 5 other study participants, and optionally review the work in progress research findings as a member check, which should take no more than four hours of time over a three-month period to complete the procedures listed.

If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please click here and complete the attached questionnaire and submit it when complete. You can text me at [redacted] [redacted] for more information. An information sheet will be given to you one week before the interview is scheduled.

Appendix F

Shires Information Sheet

Information Sheet

Title of the Project: A phenomenological study of the lived experience of parenting a student with disabilities attending a virtual K-12 school.

Principal Investigator: Michelle K. Shires, a student at the School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be at least 18 years of age, the parent or guardian of a full-time virtual public school student with a current Individualized Education Program that was created or reviewed in the last calendar year. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

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

The purpose of the study is to explore how parents describe their experience with parenting a student with an IEP attending a full-time virtual public school. The problem is that parents of students with disabilities attending a virtual school are at greater risk of psychological and psychosocial difficulties that may impact their own well-being, parenting practices, and the well-being of their child. This study seeks to understand the lived experiences of parenting of student with disabilities who also attends a virtual school.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Individual video-recorded interview through Microsoft Teams~ 45 minutes
2. Completion of four digital journal prompts through Google Forms ~ 60 minutes
3. Video-recorded focus group through Microsoft Teams~ 45 minutes
4. Optional member checking (participant review & feedback) of Microsoft Word preliminary research finding ~ 45 minutes

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

Benefits to society include information that leads to best practices for virtual school administrators and teachers to support these parents, best practices for virtual school students and parents (students with and without disabilities), and informed policymakers seeking to regulate and hold schools accountable for student growth and outcomes.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

How will personal information be protected?

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

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted using Microsoft Teams and held in a location where no other will be able to overhear the conversation.
- Interviews will be video-recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password protected computer for three years, only accessed by the researcher, and then erased. The interview recording will be transcribed with the use of a pseudonym.
- Journal prompt responses will be submitted using Google Forms and associated to the pseudonym. These responses will be stored on a password protected computer for three years, only accessed by the researcher, and then erased.
- Focus groups will be conducted using Microsoft Teams and held in a location where no other will be able to overhear the conversation.
- Focus groups will be video-recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password protected computer for three years, only accessed by the researcher, and then erased. The focus group recording will be transcribed with the use of a pseudonym.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

What are the costs to you to be part of the study?

Participants should not incur any costs, outside of their time, as a part of this study.

Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?

The researcher has an indirect financial interest in the outcome of this study. The researcher is a paid employee of an organization that is a service provider to schools (brick and mortar as well as virtual schools). This study is not funded by this organization and is not associated with this research. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate or not participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

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

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

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

The researcher conducting this study is Michelle K. Shires. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [redacted] [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Barbara White, at [redacted]

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

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

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

Appendix G

Shires Qualifying Questionnaire

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdvOaDiz52Cs47bTONCsD4n8ZLyLwBLhkVeRVXp8IVI442z4A/viewform

Top of Form

Shires Research- Parents of Virtual School Students

This form is a questionnaire intended to identify potential research participants through the validation of participant criteria.

[redacted] Switch account

* Indicates required question

Email*

Your email

Would you be willing to participate in a research study to describe the experience of parenting a student receiving special education services attending a full-time virtual public school?*

Yes
No

Are you 18 years of age or older?

Yes
No

Are you the parent or guardian of a student attending a full-time virtual public school?*

Yes
No
Unknown

Does your student have an Individualized Education Program (IEP)?*

Yes
No

Was your child's IEP program created or reviewed within the last calendar year?

Yes
No

Would you be willing to participate in a study that would spend four hours over a three-month period of time?*

Yes
No
Maybe

Would you be willing to participate in an interview, a focus group, and answer four journal questions?*

Yes

No
Maybe

If you have answered Yes or Maybe to the prior questions and would like to be a study participant please provide your email address and/or phone number to be contacted directly. The next step would be to inform your consent.*

Your answer

A copy of your responses will be emailed to the address you provided.

Submit

Clear form

Bottom of Form

Appendix H

Journal Prompts

Journal Prompt #1- Describe in your own words your personal experience with autonomy. What is your experience with feeling able to act on your own interests and values? Provide a few examples to support your personal experience.

Journal Prompt #2- Describe in your own words your personal experience with competence. What is your experience with feeling able to do things successfully, efficiently, and effectively? Provide a few examples to support your personal experience.

Journal Prompt #3- Describe in your own words your personal experience with relatedness. What is your experience with feeling connected to others, loved by others, and involved with a community? Provide a few examples to support your personal experience.

Journal Prompt #4- Describe in your own words your personal experience with providing an environment for your child to experience feeling autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Provide a few examples to support your personal experience.