

10-25-2024

## School Safety in Rural Communities: A Qualitative Phenomenological Research Study

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SCHOOL SAFETY IN RURAL COMMUNITIES:  
A QUALITATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
RESEARCH STUDY

by

Tamara D. Nance-Bethea

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of Coastal Carolina University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education  
with a specialization in Educational Leadership.

Education Sciences and Organizations

Coastal Carolina University

May 2024

Doctoral Committee:

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Dr. Erin Burt  
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## ABSTRACT

Many students in rural schools have negative school safety perceptions. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to investigate the school safety perceptions of students in rural elementary, middle, and high schools in a public school district in South Carolina. The school safety perceptions of students in grades three through twelve were investigated and examined.

The setting for this study took place in a rural school district in the Pee Dee region of South Carolina. Three schools in this district were utilized. Forty-three students participated in a short school safety interest survey. The survey provided basic information such as age, race, gender, grade, household, how long they have been in Daisy County, how safe they feel at school, whether they would be willing to participate in an interview about school safety at their school and ask for an email address for communication. Only students who presented a signed parent consent form were provided with an email with the survey. Parents could consent for their child to participate in the survey and interview or the survey only. They were also provided with the opportunity to be present during the interview. The survey was anonymous. A sample of nine students were invited from the school safety interest survey to be interviewed. The interviews consisted of nine structured questions in a specific order for consistency. Interview questions from the perspective of qualitative research provide an open-ended, thorough investigation of experiences from the point of view of the interviewee (Roberts, 2020). The participants presented their perceptions of school safety by answering the questions using their prior knowledge and points of view.

The nine participants concluded that the adults in the school help create a safe school climate, the outside environment could make them feel unsafe, and there is a need for more

security in their schools. This study was designed to investigate the school safety perceptions of students in rural elementary, middle, and high schools. This research has the potential to impact schools in rural communities by investigating the perceptions of students. Students are the individuals who are most impacted by school safety. This research will also present information concerning what has occurred and what could possibly occur from the points of view of the students. This information will provide support and aid to schools in rural communities. This study has the potential to add to school safety research literature and identify best practices for school safety in rural communities.

*Keywords:* perceptions, rural schools, safe schools, school climate, school crime, school crisis, school safety, school violence

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to all my Lake View Elementary School WWG Kiddos (Wee Wild Gators), young and old. It has been a pleasure to be a part of their lives. I have been an educator for 28 years, and 19 years of my career has been spent serving my own community. It is my duty and honor to be a beacon of light for young people. They are truly our future and I want to be a positive influence in their lives. I hope I leave the space I am in better than what I found it. My WWG Kiddos deserve and will always receive the best of me.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To God be the Glory, He has been my rock all my life. I live by two scriptures. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Philippians 4:11 and “To whom much is given, much will be required.” Luke 12:48.

To my husband Derrick Leon Bethea, Sr., who has loved me since 1993. He has encouraged me to fulfill my dreams, gives me space to be me, and loves my crazy, non-stop, always-on-the-go lifestyle. Thank you, Buddy, for everything. You are my favorite person!

To my children, Taylor, DJ, and Trinity, you are my gifts from God. You have brought me so much joy. Everything I do is for you. I am so thankful to have three triple threats, good looking, intelligent, and so individually talented. Thank you for your understanding and love.

To the three women who made me who I am today: My Grandma Pat, My Mother Mertis, and my sister Tywana “Rici.” Thank you, Grandma Pat, for making me feel pretty when the world told me I wasn’t. She gave me confidence. Thank you, Momma, for demanding and encouraging me not to be afraid—get up and try again. She gave me courage. Thank you, Rici, for teaching me how to love and be responsible for others. She gave me commitment.

To my dad, Winford, thank you for showing me strength and endurance. You are so strong, and you never complain. You always say it is up to God. I appreciate the talks and wisdom you shared with me.

To my girls, Janel and LaKeisha, Thank you both for all the love and support. Janel, my ride-or-die, thank you so much for the constant encouragement. You were always there when I needed you. LaKeisha, my day one, thank you so much for the consistent motivation. You always told me what I needed to hear.

To my brother from another mother, Starlian Lee – The Mayor, thank you so much for being my sounding board. I appreciate all the long discussions about our purpose. It is our purpose to be a positive influence in our community. Lake View is better because of you!

To my mentor, Edison Arnette, thank you so much for showing me great leadership. You allowed me to learn by doing. You gave me opportunities to impact the lives of many students. I was able to lead in many capacities, which other assistant principals were not. You trusted my decisions and gave me space to grow. It was my pleasure to serve as your assistant principal.

To my committee members, Dr. Alexander Herring, Dr. Erin Burt, and Dr. Lee Hunter, thank you so much for your continued support. This would not have been possible without your assistance, guidance, and leadership. Dr. Herring, I enjoyed the journey! I have grown so much because of it.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vi
LIST OF TABLES.....	xi
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Background of the Study.....	3
Definition of Terms.....	4
Nature of the Study.....	5
Theoretical Framework.....	6
Assumptions and Limitations.....	7
Significance of the Study.....	8
Conclusion.....	8
CHAPTER 2: THE REVIEW OF RESEARCH AND LITERATURE.....	9
Theoretical Framework.....	9
Historical Proponents of Constructivism.....	11
Modern-Day Proponents of Constructivism.....	12
Opponents of Constructivism.....	12
Research Design and Methodology.....	13
The Review of Research and Literature.....	14
History School Shootings.....	14
What is School Safety?.....	15
Schools in Rural Communities.....	17
Rural School Building and Facilities.....	20
Perceptions and Reflections.....	20
School Climate and Culture: School Environment.....	22
Diverse Backgrounds.....	23
Student Academic Performance.....	25
Social/Emotional Learning.....	25
World View of School Safety.....	26
School Safety Tactics and Features.....	26
Conclusion.....	28
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY.....	29
Introduction.....	29

Research Design .....	29
Setting and Participants .....	30
Data Collection .....	31
Research Question 1 .....	34
Research Question 2 .....	34
Research Question 3 .....	34
Data Analysis .....	35
Positionality .....	36
Ethical Considerations .....	36
Limitations of the Study .....	38
Summary of Methods .....	38
The Significance and Potential Impact .....	39
 CHAPTER 4: RESULTS .....	 40
Introduction .....	40
Theoretical Alignment .....	40
Research Tools .....	41
Study Participants .....	42
Data Analysis .....	48
Themes .....	48
Theme 1: Feeling Safe (Inside Environment, Adults in the building, and Resource Officer) .....	49
Theme 2: Environment, Adults in the Building, and Resource Officer .....	50
Theme 3: Student Incidents, Weapons, and Bullying .....	51
Theme 4: Additional Security, Random Checks, and SEL .....	55
Findings .....	59
Research Question 1 .....	59
Research Question 2 .....	60
Research Question 3 .....	60
Evidence of Trustworthiness .....	61
Summary .....	61
 CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION .....	 64
Introduction .....	64
Discussion .....	64
Implications of Results .....	65
Research Question 1 .....	66
Research Question 2 .....	67
Research Question 3 .....	68
Conclusion .....	70
Limitations .....	73
Recommendations and Suggestions for Future Research .....	74
Researcher's Reflection .....	76
 APPENDICES .....	 78

Appendix A: Sample Survey and Interview Questions for Parents ..... 78  
Appendix B: Letter of Invitation to Parents ..... 79  
Appendix C: Parent Consent Form ..... 80  
Appendix D: Letter of Support from the Superintendent..... 82  
Appendix E: Letter of Support from the Elementary School..... 83  
Appendix F: Letter of Support from the Intermediate School ..... 85  
Appendix G: Letter of Support from the Middle/High School ..... 86  
  
REFERENCES ..... 87

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Demographic Information of Sample Size Participants .....	47
Table 2. Theme 1 - RQ1 Interview Question 1: “How Safe Do You Feel at School and Why?” .....	49
Table 3. Theme 1 - RQ1 Interview Question 2: “What Makes You Feel Safe at School?” .....	50
Table 4. Theme 2 - RQ1 Interview Question 3: “What Makes You Feel Unsafe?” .....	51
Table 5. Theme 3 – RQ2 Interview Question 4: “What Type of School Safety Incidents Occur at Your School?” .....	52
Table 6. Theme 3 – RQ2 Interview Question 5: “What Type of Behavioral Incidents Occur at School That Make You Feel Unsafe?” .....	53
Table 7. Theme 3 – RQ 2 Interview Question 6: “What Do You Think Your School Needs to Do to Create a Safe School?” .....	54
Table 8. Theme 3 – RQ2 Interview Question 7: “What Type of Measures Does Your School Have in Place to Keep the School Safe?” .....	55
Table 9. Theme 4 – RQ3 Interview Question 8: “Explain the Location and Facilities of Your School.” .....	56
Table 10. Theme 4 – RQ3 Interview Question 9: “What Type of School Safety Incidents Have You Been Involved in (Discipline)?” .....	57
Table 11. Theme 4 – RQ3 Interview Question 10: “What is Your School Doing to Make You Feel Safe?” .....	58
Table 12. Theme 4 – RQ3 Interview Question 11: “What Does Your School Do to Help Prevent School Safety Violations?” .....	59

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1. Responses to “What is Your Age Range?” .....	42
Figure 2. Responses to “What is Your Racial Background?” .....	43
Figure 3. Responses to “What is Your Gender?” .....	43
Figure 4. Responses to “What is Your Grade?” .....	44
Figure 5. Responses to “What is Your Household Makeup?” .....	44
Figure 6. Responses to “How Long Have You Been in Daisy County?” .....	45
Figure 7. Responses to “How Safe Do You Feel at Your School?” .....	45
Figure 8. Responses to “Would You Be Willing to Participate in an Interview About School Safety at Your School?” .....	46
Figure 9. Responses to “Would You Please Provide Your School Email Address So That We Can Contact You For Future Questions and/or Concerns?” .....	47

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In America, in the last 5 years, school safety concerns have been on the rise (Kurtz, 2022). During the 2019-2020 school year, an average of 1.4 million incidents of crime were committed at school (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). In 2019, high school students alone reported that in school, one out of every five were bullied, 8% had been in a fight, 7% were endangered or hurt with a weapon of some kind, and almost 9% were absent at least once during a 30-day period because they felt unsafe (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). Presently, 44% of school leaders receive more reports of school safety dangers from students as compared to the 2019 school year (Kurtz, 2022). Such crimes or dangers include alcohol and drug availability, robbery, sexual assault, bullying and cyberbullying, fights, weapons, and so on (Frederique, 2020). The news also reported the following school incidents: suicide, mental crises, threats of bodily harm with a weapon, and physical violence (Eadens et al., 2020). Schools are microcosms of society; they are exposed to many different types of dangers, for example, illegal drugs, property crimes, bomb threats, and violence (Soliman et al., 2018). During this school year, 47% of schools reported at least one incident of crime that resulted in contacting the police (NCES, 2023).

Schools in rural communities have reported fewer school safety concerns as compared to schools in urban settings (Eadens et al., 2020). However, students who attend school in rural communities are just as likely to be victims or commit school safety violations as students in urban schools (Eadens et al., 2020). Also, schools in rural communities have unique and complex challenges because of the lack of resources to address school safety concerns (Eadens et al., 2020). According to Flynn et al. (2018), there are limited violence prevention services, mental health support, and other resources to assist schools in rural communities. Rural schools with a

negative school climate can create opportunities for bullying, suicide, violence, and other school safety concerns (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments [NCSSLE], 2024). Many rural school districts are underfunded, which directly impacts the budgets for resources for school safety (Stanford, 2023). Thus, it is imperative that school safety in rural communities be examined and investigated. Throughout this research, school safety concerns, suggestions, and recommendations will be provided.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The objective of the research problem for this qualitative phenomenological research study is to investigate the school safety perceptions of students in elementary, middle, and high school students in rural Daisy County. Investigating, identifying, describing, and understanding the school safety perceptions of students will better explain and acknowledge what steps need to be taken by school officials and policymakers to improve school safety in rural communities. Students are the individuals that are most impacted by school safety. It is the researcher's plan to investigate, identify, analyze, and examine what makes students in rural communities feel safe or unsafe. The students who attend school in rural communities have exceptional challenges that are unique to the rural community. Schools in rural communities are geographically isolated, which limits access to transportation. This limitation hinders access to health care, emergency services, and diverse educational resources.

Many students in schools in rural communities have negative school safety perceptions (South Carolina Department of Education [SC DOE], 2022). According to the SC DOE's Report Card for rural Daisy County 2022, 23.8% of the student population felt unsafe at their school. To address the problem of the negative perception of school safety in rural communities it is

imperative the students' point of view be investigated, identified, and analyzed to help create safer schools in rural communities.

### **Background of Study**

School safety is a nationwide concern (Ascione, 2023). School security has become a focus for school administrators because of the rise of school shootings (Hanover Research, 2018). The first documented school shooting in the United States happened in 1764 in a rural community in Pennsylvania (Eadens et al., 2020). On April 7, 1999, the Columbine High School massacre occurred in Columbine, Colorado, which brought the issue to the top of the concerns for students, parents, teachers, and school officials (Ray, 2023). Since the horrific incident at Columbine High School, it has been reported as many as 240,000 students have been exposed to some form of gun violence at schools (Eadens et al., 2020). The most recent school shooting occurred on January 4, 2024, in Des Moines, Iowa, where a 17-year-old boy killed one sixth-grade student, wounded five other students, and then killed himself (Morgan & Ax, 2024).

Gun violence is not the only safety concern in a school. Dangerous and violent acts occur in communities, which flow into the schools (Eadens et al., 2020). These incidents of violence occur in schools and disrupt the learning environment, which affects students' perceptions of school safety (CDC, 2021). School leaders are forced to focus on these concerns by addressing youth crime and violence while promoting positive youth mental and social health (National Center for School Safety, 2024). According to the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (2021), all students are affected by school safety, and their feelings or perceptions impact the school's performance and climate.

Students' perceptions of school safety are major concerns for researchers, school leaders, and policymakers (Mowen & Freng, 2019). In a positive school environment where students feel



safe, students are able to focus on learning (Zullig et al., 2015). According to McDermott (2024), students' positive perceptions of school safety promote a positive learning environment. Students who feel safe at school perform better in school (Mowen & Freng, 2019). According to the most recent poll done by Panorama Education 2024, U. S. students have different school safety perceptions than their parents. Students in rural communities have different challenges than students in other locations (Mowen & Freng, 2019). These challenges influence and impact their school safety perceptions. School safety in rural communities has an overall negative perception, which impacts negatively on student performance, student behavior, and student outcomes (McDermott, 2024). To improve school safety and students' perceptions of school safety, it is important to listen to what students have to say (McDermott, 2024).

### **Definition of Terms**

1. Perceptions are how someone feels about something, and research how students feel about school safety.
2. Rural schools are identified by schools which include the distance from the nearby towns, access to major highways and interstates, access to technology and internet services, conditions of bridges and roads to school, and other common characteristics that separate them from urban communities (Plessis, 2014).
3. Safe schools are where students are safe from violence, bullying, harassment, and the influence of substance use (NCSSLE, 2021).
4. School climate refers to the quality and character of school life or the school environment (Schweig et al., 2020).
5. School crime can range from considering any threat or theft as a crime to considering only violent attacks that are reported to police as crimes (Adams & Mrug, 2018).

6. A school crisis is an event that is perceived as extremely negative, uncontrollable, sudden, and unpredictable (Adams & Mrug, 2018).
7. School safety is defined as how safe students are from violent actions occurring in the schools (NCSSLE, 2021).
8. School violence includes victims of bullying, sexual assault, robbery, nonfatal violent crimes, and rape (Adams & Mrug, 2018).

### **Nature of Study**

The nature of this qualitative phenomenological research study is to investigate the school safety perceptions of students in rural elementary, middle, and high schools in Daisy County. The setting of this study will be completed in Daisy County, a small rural school district in South Carolina. This school district was one of the many schools displayed in the Corridor of Shame documentary. The Corridor of Shame is a documentary explaining the inadequate school funding for rural school districts in the Lowcountry of South Carolina (Bowers, 2021). These schools are housed in old, outdated, and unpleasant facilities that lack up-to-date resources (Bowers, 2021).

The researcher will use a short survey and structured interview questions as the methods of data collection. The survey was used to gather demographic data, and the interview questions were used to ask specific questions in a prearranged series. It was written this way for consistency. Chapter 3 presents the plans for collecting data.

The research questions below give structure to the study:

RQ1: What do students perceive to be safety issues in Daisy County rural schools?

RQ2: What do students believe are future issues in rural Daisy County schools?

RQ3: What are student perceptions of the need for improvement in school safety in rural Daisy County schools?

This qualitative phenomenological research study expected to gather information from a sample size of at least 9-15 students within three schools (Elementary School, Intermediate School, and Middle-High School). Students will be recruited from an e-mail invitation from the researcher after parents' signed consent. The researcher will also use data from the South Carolina Department of Education website to support the information received from the students. Students in grades three through 12 take a school safety survey through the South Carolina Department of Education every year.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This qualitative phenomenological research study will be approached from the constructivist/constructivist point of view. Social constructionism is the paradigm interpretative framework that asserts individuals seeking an understanding of the world in which they work and live through the meanings of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Constructivism argues individuals use their experiences to energetically create, build, and construct knowledge. There are different meanings to everyone's experiences. The goal of this perspective is to present the point of view of the individuals using their experiences and perceptions. According to Zajda (2021), the constructivist learning theory is an effective and popular teaching method because it offers students an opportunity to have more cognitive and social engagement in a team atmosphere. According to Olusegun 2015, education works best when it concentrates on thinking and understanding rather than on rote memorization. Children learn more and enjoy learning better when they are actively involved rather than passive listeners (Olusegun, 2015). Current researchers argue schools, companies, and policymakers need and want students who can use

their experiences and perceptions to learn, work, and grow (Almulla, 2022). Students use skills such as analysis, reasoning, and cooperativity to solve problems which are created through their experiences and perceptions (Almulla, 2022). This is the foundation of the constructivism/constructivist point of view.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

In any research study, there are assumptions and limitations. Some people assume that small rural schools are not in danger of serious school safety violations. According to Lenzi et al. (2017), rural communities have the false perception that school violence is low. Another common assumption about rural schools is that they are a small portion of schools in the United States (Stanford, 2023). They truly make up one third of schools in America, 15% of students in grades kindergarten through 12th grade, and a total of 7 million students attend rural schools (Stanford, 2023). Rural schools are normally 15 to 20 minutes away from police stations. Police response times are longer, and there are fewer threat assessment teams (Eadens et al., 2020). Schools in rural communities lack funding to improve facilities and/or add up-to-date safety measures. Rural school districts are extremely underfunded and rely on outside grants to fund school safety programs (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). School safety personnel, for example Resource Officers, are limited. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), only 56,540 of 83,600 public schools have a school resource officer on campus. Small rural schools should share School Resource Officers between two schools, for example, middle and high school. Rural schools do not need metal detectors. Rural high schools fail to report incidents or contact law enforcement when school crimes occur.

### **Significance of Study**

This qualitative phenomenological research study will provide useful information that investigates, identifies, and examines school safety perceptions of elementary, middle, and high school students in rural communities. School safety is vital for all students to grow, learn, and experience a positive developmental path to graduation (Mayer et al., 2021). Positive school safety perceptions have been associated with improved student and school performance (NCSSLE, 2021). Negative school safety perceptions, with students feeling unsafe, student outcomes suffer (NCSSLE, 2021). Positive school safety perceptions are important conditions for students to progress academically, emotionally, and socially (Williams et al., 2018). Information attained in this research study will provide policymakers and educational leaders insight into school safety concerns, strategies, and benefits to improve school safety in rural schools. The goals of school safety are to ensure that students receive a healthy education and protect them from safety violations (Aydogdu & Bozkus, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

School safety issues are happening everywhere. The area code in which children live does not exempt them from issues that can have lasting effects on their lives. Schools everywhere must become proactive in their efforts to keep students safe. It is important to listen to the perceptions of the students. These school safety concerns have a huge impact on their school's academic and social success. Students have different school safety perspectives and perceptions than parents, teachers, and school officials. School officials can gain important information by gathering data from students. This information can help improve school safety in rural communities. Regardless of whether it is inner-city or rural, rich or poor, all students have the right to feel safe in their schools.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE REVIEW OF RESEARCH AND LITERATURE**

School safety is a major concern for all students, parents, teachers, educational leaders, and community members. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a child's need for safety and security is just as important as his or her needs for food, water, and shelter (Guy-Evans, 2024). The basic needs of students must be met before they can maximize their full potential, and safety and security are basic needs (Guy-Evans, 2024). School leaders and state officials have spent a large amount of time and money to address the concerns of school climate and safety (Cobbina et al., 2020).

The United States began collecting and analyzing data associated with school safety in 1989 (Ames, 2019). Since then, school safety concerns of parents, students, and teachers have elevated (Brenan, 2022). In 2002, Netshitahame and Van Vollenhoven reported that as the local community becomes more violent, the schools will be indirectly or directly impacted (as cited in Eadens et al., 2020). Schools must be prepared for present societal dangers, hazards, and threats while taking into consideration the impact they have on students' perceptions. School shootings publicized in the media have also yielded school safety concerns (Mayer et al., 2021). These incidents of violence occur in schools and disrupt the learning environment, which impacts students' perception of school (CDC, 2021). It is clear that schools, district leaders, and community leaders must take action to ensure the safety of children, teachers, and faculty (Ames, 2019).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Educators use constructivism learning theory to teach students. It is an approach to teaching and learning based on the premise that learning is the result of students' mental construction (Olusegun, 2015). The constructivist learning theory argues students energetically

construct knowledge and create meaning based on their individual or social experiences (Irby et al., 2013). This theory also highlights how students play an active role in creating their own knowledge and understanding (Mcleod, 2023a). Students use their prior experiences and knowledge as a base and construct new ideas as they learn (Kurt, 2021). The constructivist learning theory involves discussions on human understanding of serious and intense issues (Irby et al., 2013). Students learn through a process of knowledge acquisition while they are active participants in the process (Olusegun, 2015).

Constructivism has roots in epistemology. Epistemology is the study of learning and how individuals retain information (Ultanir, 2012). The constructivist approach to learning explains how students learn by doing or experiencing events individually (Lane, 2022). Students' background knowledge and past experiences are used as a method to learn new ideas (Ultanir, 2012). Just like epistemology, constructivism allows the student to create or generate new knowledge by the interaction of their past experiences, events, and ideas (Lane, 2022). The teacher is the facilitator in the learning while encouraging the student to problem solve, think critically, and challenge their ideas and solutions (Ultanir, 2012). Olssen 2020, argued constructivism's history was based on epistemology. He defined constructivism's epistemology focus. Epistemology is constructivism, it is a learning theory that explains how students learn (Olseen, 2020).

The social constructionist theory explains people acquire knowledge of the world in a social context. What people perceive as reality is determined by their shared assumptions. This perspective claims that many things are socially constructed and can adjust and change as society changes (Irby et al., 2013). Constructivist pedagogy allows students more social interaction with their peers while learning. Research suggests there is a relationship between student academic

achievement and constructivist pedagogy (Zajda, 2021). School safety, climate, and well-being of learners are vital factors or constructs of academic achievement. Students do not necessarily experience school safety, climate, and well-being the same. Instead, the students' subjective perceptions of the environment and personal experiences influence individual outcomes and behaviors (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015).

### **Historical Proponents of Constructivism**

John Dewey (1859–1952) believed in the constructivist approach to learning. He argued education depended on the actions of the students and the places of their experiences (Irby et al., 2013). He also believed children needed to be involved in their learning by using their hands and minds while having the chance to think and express their thoughts (Irby et al., 2013). According to Ultanir (2012), John Dewey claimed reality is not a representation of knowledge. He believed knowledge and reality depend on student's individual social experiences (Ultanir, 2012).

Jean Piaget (1896–1980) is considered the father of constructivism. He was well-known for his theory which focused on the thought process of individuals and how they learn from their interactions with the environment. Jean Piaget's constructivist view is committed to a requirement of detailed description of qualitative changes which he introduces the stage theory (Carey et al., 2015). The constructivist point of view is identified and explored through conceptual change and how the evidence is brought through a hypothesis confirmation (Carey et al., 2015).

Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) developed the social constructivism theory. He argued that social and cultural factors have an impact on cognitive development in students (McLeod, 2023a). Vygotsky also believed language plays an important role in individuals' intellectual development and how they view the world.



Jerome Bruner (1915–2016) viewed the student as an active participant in the discovery of knowledge. Students used existing schemata or prior knowledge to guide their learning (McLeod, 2023b). Bruner also developed the discovery learning theory. This theory explained how students would be presented with examples of organized experiences to discover essential characteristics, ideas, and concepts before being presented with the final form of the topic (Johnson, 2017).

### **Modern-Day Proponents of Constructivism**

Jonassen (1991) believed constructivism claimed reality was more in the mind of the knower, that the knower constructs a reality, or at least interprets it, based upon his or her perception (Macklin, 2003). Ackermann (2001), like Piaget, argued that constructivism offered a window into what interests children and what they can achieve at different stages of their development (Valente & Blikstein, 2019). Olusegun (2015) presented that children learn more and enjoy learning better when they are actively involved, rather than passive listeners. Education works best when it concentrates on thinking and understanding rather than on rote memorization (Olusegun, 2015). Constructivism concentrates on learning how to think and understand. Zaida (2021) was a proponent for constructivism. He considered it to be a very powerful model for explaining how knowledge is produced in the world as well as how students learn (Zaida, 2021). Cooperative and collaborative groups were offered to students for much more social and cognitive interaction and engagement (Zaida, 2021).

### **Opponents of Constructivism**

In 1996, Wolf and McCullen argued that constructivism was a theory of learning, not a theory of teaching (Hobbiss, 2018). Davis and Sumara (2002) argued that constructivism was not an educational discourse (dialog), but rather, the vocabularies were often used to perpetuate or

institutionalize practices that the theories themselves critique (Hobbiss, 2018). Kirschner et al. (2006) believed that constructivism promoted an unguided teaching style. In 2009 Gordon claimed that in this theory, teachers would have an anything approach to teaching and learning (Wrenn & Wren, 2009).

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The qualitative phenomenological research design is used to investigate school safety in rural communities. In this design, students' perceptions are used to identify and examine school safety. Qualitative research explores human concerns while revealing their points of view and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Also, in qualitative research, phenomenology is used to describe and analyze a specific phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019). Together, qualitative and phenomenological methods are used to describe students' lived experiences to provide a better understanding of school safety in rural communities (Harrison et al., 2020). This research design is very detailed, which allows the researcher to extract conclusions found in the outcomes (Bhar, 2024). Qualitative research uses one-on-one interviews, focus groups, or case studies to ask questions to collect data (Bhar, 2024). Surveys are used in qualitative research to reveal experiences, narrative accounts on specific topics, and opinions (Farrell, 2016). In qualitative research, surveys can be the first step in data collection, which leads to structured interviews (Farrell, 2016). Surveys used in qualitative research can include questions that identify groups such as nationality, gender, age, grade, and school (Farrell, 2016).

Surveys are usually used in quantitative research to collect data. Quantitative research is used to gather and analyze mathematical data, such as patterns in numerical data (Bhandari, 2023). Quantitative research is also used to survey human behavior by requiring the participants to choose from certain close-ended responses (Ponto, 2015). In this process, surveys are used to

gather information about a group of individuals by asking questions and examining the results in person or online (Bhandari, 2023). The quantitative research method is the complete opposite of the qualitative method, but surveys can be used in both methods (Bhar, 2024). Qualitative surveys are used to gather data to narrow a specific sample size of participants (Bhandari, 2023).

In the data analysis phase of qualitative research, coding is essential. Coding allows the researcher to identify, organize, assign, and label patterns or themes in the research (Bodine, 2021). Hand coding compels the researcher to manually read through the data to find the themes and create the codes (Bodine, 2021). In qualitative research, it is important to assign codes to capture responses and build themes to gain a thorough understanding of the data (Bodine, 2023).

### **The Review of Research and Literature**

It has been reported that 40% of K-12 parents are worried about their child's safety and 20% of these same parents report their child has expressed anxiety about feeling safe at school (Jones, 2023). According to the NCES (2023), 1.4 million school safety violations were committed at school, and 47% of schools reported at least one incident of crime that resulted in contacting the police. In South Carolina, high school students reported the following: 7.1% were threatened or injured with a weapon, 6.4% had been in a physical fight on school property, and were bullied on school property (NCSSLE, 2021). Past data has presented schools as a safe place, but in 2013-2014, 65% of US schools reported at least one violent occurrence, which included 78% of high schools, 88% of middle schools, and 53% of elementary schools (Cobbina et al., 2020).

### **History School Shootings**

Gun violence is the primary reason for fatality among American adolescents (Shady Hook, 2024). The first documented school shooting in the United States happened in 1764 in a

rural community in Pennsylvania (Eadens et al., 2020). On July 26, 1764, the Pontiac's Rebellion school massacre involved four assailants who shot and killed the head of the school and nine to ten students (K12 Academics, 2023). There have been many school shootings since then, but on April 20, 1999, Columbine High School brought the issue to the forefront (Avery, 2023). Two Columbine High School students entered the school armed with semi-automatic weapons, killing 15 people and injuring several more (Avery, 2023). In December 2012, Sandy Hook Elementary School, located in Newtown, Connecticut, was another highly publicized school shooting (Shultz et al., 2013). An armed gunman killed 20 first-grade students and six school employees (Shultz et al., 2013).

Recently, on January 4, 2024, in Iowa's Perry High School, a 17-year-old student shot a sixth grader and wounded four other students and a school administrator before taking his own life (Matthews, 2024). As of March 2024, there have been two school shootings that have resulted in death or injuries (Matthews, 2024). School shootings continue to horrify students, parents, educators, and policymakers (Matthews, 2024). When looking back, since 1999, there have been 389 school shootings in the United States (Cox et al., 2023). Presently, there have been over 357,000 children exposed to gun violence in schools since Columbine (Cox et al., 2023).

### **What is School Safety?**

School safety has many characteristics. It can be defined as how safe students are from violent actions happening in the schools (NCSSLE, 2021). School safety also means creating a positive environment that will protect students from school safety violations (Aydogdu & Bozkus, 2023). These violations include school violence, school crime, school crisis, and the precautions in place to deter violations of school safety (Cobbina et al., 2020). School violence

includes victims of bullying, sexual assault, robbery, nonfatal violent crimes, and rape (Adams & Mrug, 2018). School violence also includes incidents where students suffer violent acts by other students on school property or various incidents of behaviors that result in physical or emotional harm (Cuellar, 2018). School violence creates academic, emotional, and social problems for students (Adams & Mrug, 2018). Victims of school violence are more likely to struggle academically, have a negative perception of school, or leave school without graduating (Lenzi et al., 2017). Disciplinary referrals, expulsions, suspensions, and police reports are used to measure school safety (Cobbina et al., 2020). Public schools have reported violent incidents that occur in 53% of elementary schools, 88% of middle schools, and 78% of high schools (NCES, 2023). These violent incidents occur in schools and disrupt the learning environment, which affects academic achievement (CDC, 2021).

Violence experienced by students on school property or while students are on the way to or from school can include various behaviors that result in physical or emotional harm to students or school personnel (Cuellar, 2018). School violence can range from smoking vape cigarettes to as major as a mass school shooting (Frederique, 2020). It can present itself in several forms, ranging from verbal or emotional abuse to targeted acts of domestic violence (Frederique, 2020). School violence can be random physical attacks or assaults with or without a weapon to incidents involving the use of firearms or explosive devices with deadly intent (Cuellar, 2018).

School crime can range from considering any threat or theft as a crime to considering only violent attacks that are reported to police as crimes (NCES, 2023). Victims of nonfatal violent crimes such as bullying, rape, sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault are more likely to be students ages 12 through 18 (NCES, 2023). It is more likely a middle/high school

student will be a victim of a crime in school rather than perform a school-related activity (Soliman et al., 2018). These crimes occur in elementary, middle, and high schools, where students' safety is in jeopardy. Students want to be actively engaged in school, but they feel unsafe to participate (NCES, 2023). School crimes can cause a school crisis. A school crisis is any sudden, unexpected, and distressing occurrence that interrupts a student's ability to cope and problem-solve during school (NEA, 2018). An event that can be observed as extremely negative, uncontrollable, and sudden is also known as a school crisis (Cuellar, 2018). Regardless, school crime, violence, and crisis are occurring in schools where children should feel safe (Cuellar, 2018).

In the last 20 years, education has placed school safety at the top of the list of urgency (Lacoe, 2014). The coverage of school shootings, gang violence, and bullying (school and online) by the media highlights the increasing need to understand how safe students feel at school and how school safety affects student outcomes (Lacoe, 2014). Before the school shootings in the mid-1990s and before 911, school safety issues were only something that happened in urban or inner-city areas (Milam et al., 2011). Suburban and rural area school districts are now trying to be proactive rather than reactive in their efforts to reduce the chances a school safety issue occurs (Côté-Lussier et al., 2015).

### **Schools in Rural Communities**

Rural communities are classified as populations outside of towns with 2,500 or more residents (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Schools in rural communities were normally positioned outside of town near open land (Lebron, 2019). Schools in rural areas are located significantly miles away from urban cities and are normally geographically secluded (Zinger, 2016). The definition of rural schools includes the distance from towns, access to technology and internet

services, access to major highways, conditions of bridges and roads to school, and other common identifiers that isolate them from urban schools (Plessis, 2014).

The rural environment is very relaxed and is a major part of the community (Lenzi et al., 2017). Almost one-third of public schools are in rural communities, and 9.3 million children attend these same schools (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Schools in rural communities had a positive perception, which displayed a family atmosphere and a welcoming environment, and everyone knew each other's point of view (Lebron, 2019). These rural schools are responsible for educating the students but also provide major employment to community members and support the local businesses in the nearby towns (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). The school is a major part of the rural community.

There are so many disparities in rural locations that affect the school setting. Schools in rural communities are challenged with limited access to educational resources, infrastructure, high poverty rates, low teacher recruitment and retention, and the list goes on (Klocko & Justis, 2019). These same schools lack modern facilities, access to high-power Internet, preschool education, and medical care, encounter child homelessness in low-income families, and other factors (Bailey, 2021). Schools in rural areas are underfunded, have low property values, depend on state and federal finances, and are home to 17% of Title I schools (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Title I schools are schools that receive federal government funds to support low-income children to improve their academic achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Many of these schools are in rural, low-income areas where the poverty rate is high (Cote-Lussier et al., 2015). Students face many challenges in rural communities. School safety should not be one of them.

There was a false perception that school violence was low in rural communities (Lenzi et al., 2017). School safety data is scarce for school violence and crime because of the large amount of underreporting by schools trying to protect students from law enforcement or to protect the community's reputation (Lebron, 2019). Students who live in other communities besides rural locations are exposed to violence through community violence, school violence, and media (Milam et al., 2011). Students who live in rural communities are exposed to the same media platforms and have some of the same community issues (Milam et al., 2011). The same school safety issues occurring in urban/inner city schools were happening in schools in rural communities (Adams & Mrug, 2018).

Schools in rural communities must begin reporting information to local law enforcement when criminal incidents occur. Students in rural and urban communities are social constructs of society. All students need and want to feel safe. Schools in rural communities have been reactive in their approach to school safety rather than proactive (Lebron, 2019). It is time that schools in rural communities take an active role in improving school safety concerns. More research needs to be done in rural areas concerning school safety. Schools must address safety concerns by developing a comprehensive review of school culture and climate, primary prevention, an evaluation of antibullying programs, the inclusion of more mental health resources, and the assessment of weapon carrying in the school (Cowell & McDonald, 2018). Schools in these areas need to assess the administration, teachers, staff, parents, and students on their perceptions of school safety in their schools. A thorough investigation and assessment of school facilities must be conducted in the process.



## **Rural School Building and Facilities**

School safety concerns also involve the school's physical facilities. School safety can be comprehensive for the facilities of schools in rural communities (Aydogudu & Bozkus, 2023). The following can impact school safety: out-of-school situations, location, structure size, and age (Aydogudu & Bozkus, 2023). The characteristics of a school's physical setting, also known as school facilities, can be defined by the size, location, capacity, and state of each building on its campus (Figueroa et al., 2016). School facilities are an important component of school safety (Figueroa et al., 2016). The rural school building is more than a place that educates the students; it is also the center of the community (NUNN Construction, 2023).

In many rural communities, it is not uncommon for students to attend the same school their parents, grandparents, and other family members attended (NUNN Construction, 2023). According to the survey by the National Center for Education Statistics the average age of American school buildings is 49 years old. Because of the age and distance, many rural schools lack Internet access, which means rural households lack the Internet connection to access virtual classrooms and streaming educational resources compared to other locations (Sellery, 2024). Also, students who attend rural schools live farther from the school facility and ride the school bus for longer periods of time to and from school (Gottfried et al., 2021).

## **Perceptions and Reflections**

A person's perception is the ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses. Perceptions are how you feel about something and, in this case, how students feel about school safety. Elementary, middle, and high schools in rural communities had a positive school safety perception prior to 1990 (Lebron, 2019). When students are asked their perceptions of school safety, the answers could be, "I feel safe at school," "I have never been involved in any

school safety issues or crimes,” and/or “School is my home away from home.” Williams et al. (2018) reported when students feel a sense of connection, belonging, and engagement, there is a decrease in fear, a reduction in school avoidance, and an increase in academic performance. Today, students face more issues in school than they do at a grocery store (Adams & Mrug, 2018). Instead, students feel scared, afraid, and uncomfortable, which causes students not to want to go to school (Lebron, 2019). Students have expressed their feelings of fear of being exposed to physical violence, bullying, drinking, drugs, and sexual abuse (Aydogdu & Bozkus, 2023). Students who are victims of school violence are reported to underperform academically, have more social-emotional problems, dislike school, and sometimes drop out of school (Lenzi et al., 2017). More students dislike school because of the ongoing safety issues. For example, bullying has become one of the issues that have students feeling unsafe at school (Adams & Mrug, 2018). Bullying in school, in a virtual setting, or on social media is now a major school safety violation in schools today (Adams & Mrug, 2018).

The perception that school is not a safe place can develop from various places, such as students’ fear of being bullied, getting into a fight, or becoming a victim of a violent crime (Lenzi et al., 2017). Students are more likely to avoid specific campus locations, skip school altogether, or carry weapons to protect themselves when the school environment is perceived as unsafe (Adams & Mrug, 2018). The negative perceptions of school safety can create negative reactions toward school (Lebron, 2019). Students’ grades drop, they have no emotional connection to school, and/or students could possibly withdraw from school (Lebron, 2019). These same perceptions happen in schools in rural communities (Adams & Mrug, 2018).

### **School Climate and Culture: School Environment**

A school's culture and climate are considered the school's environment. It can be defined by the quality and character of the students, teachers, and school leaders (Schweig et al., 2019). School culture and climate are the perceptions of school safety (Bliesner, 2022). It expresses the feelings and perceptions of the students, teachers, and school leaders as they experience the school's classroom and school environment, functions and activities, and policies and procedures (Schweig et al., 2019). A positive school climate and culture free from negative perceptions of school safety has been associated with academic improvements, positive social-emotional health, low absenteeism, and high graduation rates (NCSSLE, 2021). The term "school climate" describes the extent to which a school community creates and maintains a safe school campus; a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community (U. S. Department of Education, 2018). The school culture and climate are important characteristics of the school experience (Shweig et al., 2019). Williams et al. (2018) argued students had positive school safety perceptions when a school climate had firm, consistent, clear expectations and prearranged consequences.

A negative school culture and climate filled with many school safety concerns can be overwhelming (Cuellar, 2018). A school climate and culture with school discipline infractions, school violence, and school crimes impact the educational environment and create negative social and emotional health in students (Cuellar, 2018). Williams et al. (2018) explained schools with students who had low proportions of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions felt safer than students who attended schools with high proportions of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. This could impact students into adulthood, which causes them to have negative perceptions of school (Schweig et al., 2019). A negative school climate and culture can cause a

lack of community support, teacher shortages, and poor academic performance (Adams & Mrug, 2018).

Some schools' climate and culture hurt educators' ability to connect with and oversee students (Adams & Mrug, 2018). This leads to a disorganized and messy learning environment where students feel less safe and vulnerable to more violence (Adams & Mrug, 2018). These school characteristics include students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, poverty, a greater proportion of minority students, high absenteeism, low achievement, large size, and high student-teacher ratios (Cuellar, 2018). Schools in rural communities are neither immune nor exempt from these situations.

The effects of school safety issues can be devastating, can cause long-term issues for students, and can impact their lives forever (Cuellar, 2018). School-based violence has a negative effect on the educational environment as well as a negative psychological effect on students (Adams & Mrug, 2018). These effects compromise students' feelings of safety and connectedness and obstruct the nurturing environment schools traditionally aim to establish (Cuellar, 2018). The entire school climate can be affected to the point that the school loses students, teachers, and community (Adams & Mrug, 2018).

### **Diverse Backgrounds**

Rural schools have diverse populations. They bring their culture, experiences, socioeconomic status, and beliefs to school (Côté-Lussier et al., 2015). There is sufficient quantitative school safety research based on gender, race, and socio-economic status (Cobbina et al., 2020). It has been found that female students are less likely than male students to feel safe at school (Cobbina et al., 2020). The research also found that male students felt safer at school because they were both victims and perpetrators of school violence incidents more than female

students (Cobbina et al., 2020). White and Asian students tend to feel more safe and more connected in school, while Black and Hispanic students feel less safe and less connected (Cobbina et al., 2020).

Students attending schools in rural communities and who are characterized as high poverty or disadvantaged are more at risk of being involved in a school safety incident (Côté-Lussier et al., 2015). Regrettably, more school safety issues are occurring in rural schools with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Côté-Lussier & Fitzpatrick, 2016). These students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be victims of school violence, which partly explains their decreased feelings of safety at school (Côté-Lussier & Fitzpatrick, 2016). These same students already experience the lack of everyday necessities such as food, shelter, and parental support, feeling safe at home in their neighborhood, and now feeling unsafe at school (Harmon, 2019). Students from low socioeconomic and high-poverty backgrounds are already struggling, and school safety has now become another strike against them (Harmon, 2019).

The socio-ecological approach considers the interplay between individuals and their environment (Côté-Lussier et al., 2015). This approach also explains the health and well-being of an individual may expect negative community environments to act as a prime factor connecting disadvantaged youth's socioeconomic background to decreased feelings of safety at school (Côté-Lussier et al., 2015). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to live in disadvantaged neighborhoods where they may also have decreased feelings of safety at school (Harmon, 2019).

## **Student Academic Performance**

Many factors influence student academic performance. School safety can have a positive or negative influence. Students who experience school violence can struggle academically (Adams & Mrug, 2018). Student academic performance is strongly influenced by their exposure to violence (Adams & Mrug, 2018). Students who attend schools where there are safety concerns will have a hard time focusing on classroom instruction, which will result in underperforming in school (Lenzi et al., 2017). Crimes experienced at school have a direct impact on graduation rates, attendance rates, and school-wide assessment data (Adams & Mrug, 2018). It has been reported that in schools that endure school safety issues such as fighting, gang violence, and bullying, student reading performance suffers (NCSSLE, 2021).

Good grades are associated with students' positive perceptions of school safety (NCSSLE, 2021). Students who do not feel safe at school have intensified levels of depression and are less involved in school (Côté-Lussier & Fitzpatrick, 2016). Students need to feel safe in school to have a successful academic career (NCSSLE, 2021). School safety is vital to the social-emotional health as well as the academic achievement of all students (Côté-Lussier & Fitzpatrick, 2016).

## **Social/Emotional Learning**

The development of the whole child is the core of social-emotional learning (McCormick et al., 2015). It is crucial for academic and social success (McCormick et al., 2015). Regarding his hierarchy of needs, Maslow argued that for a student to reach self-actualization, they must first have their basic needs met. This includes physiological needs (food, water, shelter, etc.) and feelings of safety and security (McLeod, 2024). School safety, which includes a school crisis, can influence students' perceptions of school safety as well as impact their social-emotional

learning (McCormick et al., 2015). Research suggests that students need more than academic skills to be successful in life (Brush et al., 2022). There is an abundance of research that argues that social-emotional behaviors, along with academic skills, are needed for the development of the whole child (Brush et al., 2022).

The research specifically states that middle school students who are exposed to community violence have more social/emotional needs, have lower academic achievement, and have negative school safety perceptions (Cobbina et al., 2020). Students who do not feel safe in their communities are more likely to feel unsafe at school (Hong et al., 2016). The classroom setting, size, and disorder have a direct impact on students' social-emotional learning as well as school safety point of view; children in large classes with classroom management issues are less likely to feel safe at school (Perumean-Chaney & Sutton, 2013).

### **World View of School Safety**

School safety is a worldwide concern (Dorn, 2016). In Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, South America, and Trinidad, safety issues occur, ranging from gang violence, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters to spiders, centipedes, and poisonous snakes (Dorn, 2016). School shootings in the United States were usually done by one or two troubled students, while in the Middle East and Africa, school shootings were executed at the hands of terrorists (World Population Review, 2024). Mexico, South Africa, Pakistan, and Nigeria all have documented school shootings, but the United States has the most (World Population Review, 2024).

### **School Safety Tactics and Features**

School safety tactics include many features. These features include the circumstances of the community adjacent to the school and school safety protection features, for example, school resource officers, metal detectors, security guards, security cameras, and policies and procedures

that are in place to help keep schools safe (Cobbina et al., 2020). More and more schools have hired school resource officers (SRO) to protect schools (Gottfredson et al., 2020). The school resource officer, along with the school administration, leads the charge for school safety in rural schools. The role of the school resource officer is to offer police presence in schools and assist with school safety training for all students and school employees (Stateler, 2021).

School resource officers can have a positive or negative impact on school safety in rural communities. When the school resource officer builds positive relationships with students and school personnel, it fosters trust, minimizes fear, and encourages students to share information (Gottfredson et al., 2020). The creation of a positive role for the school resource officer allows for a positive school safety perception and educational climate (Stateler, 2021). When the school resource officer's primary goal is punishment, including arrests, student school safety perception is low and negatively affects the school climate (Stateler, 2021).

Due to recent high-profile acts of violence at schools, school safety programs have been implemented (Cuellar, 2018). These programs aim to prevent violence with the use of technological advances and federal, state, and local initiatives to keep schools safe (Cuellar, 2018). Schools create and implement school safety strategies as a part of the school safety programs or plans (Cuellar, 2018). These strategies would include but are not limited to the following: physical strategies would assess the campus facilities of the schools, for example, locked doors, alarm systems, security cameras, metal detectors, and gates (Cuellar, 2018). School security measures also include the following safety measures: locker and book bag checks, hallway supervision, and controlled building access (Ames, 2019).

Interactionist strategies involve the school climate, for example, conflict resolution, student mentoring, group counseling, encouraging anonymous student reporting, and promoting



a sense of school community (Cuellar, 2018). Preparedness strategies include documented plans to have in case of any emergency and a school safety issue is an emergency (Adams & Mrug, 2018). Legal strategies that include open communication with law enforcement are important to school safety measures (Cuellar, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

School safety is much more than fire, earthquake, and tornado drills. It includes school violence, school crime, and any other incident that could cause hurt, harm, or danger to students. Students need to feel safe at school so they can perform their academic responsibilities. Schools in rural communities are not immune to societal issues. DePaoli & McCombs 2023 recommend the following as best practices and policies to support and create a safe school environment.

1. Adopt structures and practices that foster strong relationships.
2. Adopt structures and practices that foster strong relationships.
3. Increase student access to mental health and counseling resources.
4. Prepare all school staff to better support student well-being.
5. Invest in restorative practices and social and emotional learning.
6. Invest in integrated student support systems and community schools to connect students and families to needed support.
7. Conduct equity reviews of school safety measures and their impact on discipline outcomes.

All schools need proper policies and procedures in place to prevent school safety incidents. They also need current methods and measures to help and support students when a school safety incident occurs. It is up to the school leaders to provide a school culture and climate that promotes academic and social success while keeping everyone safe.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

There is extensive research on school safety in urban communities, but the research on school safety in rural communities is limited. This qualitative phenomenological research study helps close the gap in the research. The main intention of this study was to gain data related to elementary, middle, and high school students in rural communities' school safety perceptions. This information can be used to improve school safety in rural communities.

### **Research Design**

The qualitative phenomenological research method was used to identify, describe, and understand the students' perceptions of school safety in schools in rural Daisy County in South Carolina. The qualitative research model explores social or human problems which reveals a picture, analyzes words, and presents a detailed point of view of the participants in the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This model was used to identify, describe, and understand the lived experiences of students to provide a better understanding of students' perceptions of school safety (Harrison et al., 2020). This research method is used to analyze what participants think by asking questions in one-on-one interviews, focus groups, process of observation, or case studies (Bhar, 2024). The qualitative research method is very descriptive, which allows the researcher to draw conclusions from the suggestions and inferences found in the results (Bhar, 2024). In this research, the researcher conducted interviews to identify, describe, and understand the school safety perceptions of students in rural elementary, middle, and high schools in Daisy County.

Phenomenology is a domain of viewpoint in qualitative research devoted to the analysis and description of phenomena (Neubauer et al., 2019). It describes the common meaning of experiences of a phenomenon for several individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It intends to

interpret and describe the lived experiences of people. This design describes the lived experiences, events, and situations from different points of view of people. This design also considers how participants feel or their perceptions of lived experiences or events.

### **Setting and Participants**

This qualitative phenomenological research study took place in a rural school district with over 3,880 students in the Pee Dee region of South Carolina. This rural school district has two 4k through third-grade elementary schools, one 4k through fifth-grade elementary school, one fourth- and fifth-grade elementary school, one sixth- through eighth-grade middle school, one sixth- through 12th-grade high school, and one ninth- through 12th-grade high school. According to the South Carolina State Department of Education, the demographic student population of Daisy County School District includes 60.1% Black, 26.1% White, 5.9% two or more races, 5.3% Hispanic, 2.3% American Indian/Alaska Native, and 0.2% Asian/Asian Pacific Islander. All the schools in the Daisy County School District are Title I schools. The federal government provides additional funding to schools that serve students from low incomes through the Title I. Federal Program (Bouchrika, 2024). These schools must have a population of at least 40% of students who receive free and/or reduced lunch (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

This qualitative phenomenological research surveyed and interviewed students in grades three through twelve. This student population is administered at the end-of-year school climate survey required by the state of South Carolina. The school climate survey requires students to provide their perceptions of school safety. According to the SC DOE's (2022) School Report Card for rural Daisy County, 23.8% of the student population felt unsafe at their school.

### **Data Collection**

Data for this qualitative phenomenological research study was collected from surveys and interviews with students in elementary, middle, and high schools in rural Daisy County. The survey only provided basic information such as age, race, gender, grade, household, how long they have lived in Daisy County, how safe they felt at school, whether they would be willing to participate in an interview about school safety at their school and asked for an email address for communication. This information was needed to solicit participation and interest. The school safety interest survey only asked for short answer responses. This information was needed to provide background information about individual students. This survey was anonymous. It did not ask for students' names. Only students who presented signed parent consent forms received the email with the survey.

The bulk of the data came from individual interviews. In qualitative research, interviews present questions from two or more people. The interviews consisted of structured questions in a specific order for consistency. Interview questions from the perspective of qualitative research provide an open-ended, thorough investigation of experiences from the point of view of the interviewee (Roberts, 2020). These types of questions will save time. It will be easy to determine patterns or themes in the responses from the students.

After receiving approval from the superintendent of Daisy School District and the Coastal Carolina University IRB process, the researcher sent out invitation letters, which included parent consent forms. A parent consent form was sent home with students so parents would have informed consent to allow their child to participate in this qualitative phenomenological research study. The parent consent form asked parents if they would allow their child to participate in the survey and interview or survey only. The parent consent form also included a sample of the

survey and interview questions. Each principal, on behalf of the researcher, sent a letter of invitation along with the parent consent forms home with third- through 12th-grade students from three schools in rural Daisy County School District for school safety interests. The consent form also requested students' school email addresses and parents' email addresses for communication. The following schools received the information: School 1 – Elementary School 4k through fifth grade, School 2 – Elementary School fourth and fifth grade, and School 3 – Middle/High School sixth – 12th grade. Students who are interested returned the signed consent forms to their school principal. The researcher collected all signed consent forms from the principals of the schools. Students who brought the consent form signed by their parents were provided with the school safety interest survey via email. Students were selected for interviews based on their school safety interest survey. After that was completed, the researcher scheduled and conducted interviews. Next, the researcher transcribed the information gathered from interviews and notes. Then, the researcher analyzed the information. The information is reflected in this dissertation. The findings were presented to the committee in April 2024.

The researcher used Microsoft Forms to create the school safety interest survey. Microsoft Forms is a computer software program that creates online surveys. This computer software collects and organizes important information in a survey form. It automatically creates surveys and quizzes and exports the data into Microsoft Excel. Microsoft Excel is a spreadsheet software that organizes, analyzes, and presents information for educators and businesses. Educators and businesses have been using Microsoft Forms and Excel for decades to organize and present important information. The researcher created a survey that asked questions regarding student background information and their school safety perceptions. The survey was

administered to the identified students in their first block classes. A sample size of nine to 15 students was randomly selected for an interview based on their responses to the survey questions.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom so the researcher could record them (audio and video). Zoom is an online platform that allows individuals to present, conduct, participate in, and record meetings virtually. It has also allowed businesses and schools to communicate virtually and has become the video conference software of choice for schools, businesses, and individual conferences (Antonelli, 2020).

The participants were students, so the researcher had to take into consideration the special circumstances while interviewing children. According to the National Children's Advocacy Center (2019), the researcher needed to do the following:

1. Select a safe and neutral location that is private, informal, and free from unnecessary distractions, such as a workroom, library conference room, or vacant classroom.
2. Begin with introductions from the researcher and participants.
3. State and explain the purpose of the interview in child-friendly dialog.
4. Set a specific amount of time (10 to 15) minutes, but set a pace that is comfortable for the child.
5. Ask questions and allow the participant time to think and respond.
6. Thank the participants and remind them of the importance of their input.

The researcher used a semi-structured interview format. This data collection method depended on asking questions within a determined thematic outline (see George, 2023). This allowed all participants in the research study to receive the same questions in the same order but also allowed the researcher the ability to investigate individual responses further. This form of data collection allowed the researcher to ask questions based on the constructivist point of view.

Students create meaning and construct knowledge through their experiences (Olusegun, 2015). The participants were students, and they discussed their perceptions of school safety in their schools. The researcher asked open-ended questions. This type of questioning allowed participants to use their own thought processes. These questions encouraged students to answer from their prior knowledge, feelings, and points of view. Students' perceptions of school safety helped answer the following research questions.

### **Research Question 1**

What do students perceive to be safety issues in Daisy County rural schools?

1. How safe do you feel at school and why?
2. What makes you feel safe at school?
3. What makes you feel unsafe?

### **Research Question 2**

What do students believe are future issues in rural Daisy County schools?

1. What type of school safety incidents occur at your school?
2. What type of behavioral incidents occur at school that make you feel unsafe?
3. What do you think your school needs to do to create a safe school?
4. What type of measures does your school have in place to keep the school safe?

### **Research Question 3**

What are student perceptions of improving school safety in rural Daisy County schools?

1. Explain the location and facilities of your school.
2. What type of school safety incidents have you been involved in (discipline)?
3. What is your school doing to make you feel safe?
4. What does your school do to help prevent school safety violations?

## Data Analysis

After all the interviews were conducted, the researcher organized and analyzed the data gathered. It was important for the researcher to familiarize herself with the data by listening and re-listening to the audio recordings of the interviews and reading through the notes taken during the interviews. The interviews were transcribed after they had been completed. This means converting the speech to a Word document. Zoom was used to record the interviews. Microsoft Word was used to transcribe the interviews after it imported the data from the Zoom audio recording. Microsoft Word, a word-processing software program, was developed in 1983. It is used to organize texts to create documents. This software has many features, such as different styles, pictures, drawings, chart creation, and so on. It also has a transcription feature. This function was used to transcribe speech to text.

After the transcription was completed, the researcher read over (proofread) the transcripts for accuracy. This is considered hand-coding. Hand-coding is the process of categorizing and evaluating items by hand. Hand-coding is also considered manual coding. Manual coding in qualitative research is the procedure of sorting, organizing, and categorizing authentic data and designating codes to suitable classifications without assistance from a software program (Mishra & Dey, 2022). Hand-coding allowed the researcher to examine the data. The researcher examined the data for patterns or themes. This is considered a thematic analysis. This identifies and interprets themes and patterns in qualitative data (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Themes are important terms or expressions presented by the participants during the interview (Mishra & Dey, 2022). For this research study, student perceptions were terms, expressions, or ideas expounded by the participants.



The researcher developed a data coding system based on the themes found in the research. The researcher used codes to organize and categorize the patterns and themes. The researcher then assigned color codes to the data, such as blue for safe, red for unsafe, orange for school violence, green for alarms, yellow for bullying, and purple for drills. Color codes identified the repeated themes. The researcher linked the codes together. For example, the codes blue, green, and purple could join to form school safety procedures, and red, orange, and yellow could join together to form school crime. After the researcher named the themes and linked the codes, the researcher ensured the themes were useful and an accurate representation of the data. The researcher then compared the themes to the data. After completing the comparisons, the researcher prepared the data for presentation in organized charts and graphs in Chapter 4.

### **Positionality**

Positionality in qualitative research explains the researcher's point of view (Holmes, 2020). The researcher's worldview of school safety in rural communities is personal. The researcher attended a school in rural South Carolina. She also works in a school in a rural community. She understands the needs and concerns for school safety. Her current school is over 50 years old. It has been updated to include technology, metal doors, and a full-time resource officer. The principal administers monthly safety drills to practice for extreme weather and intruders. There are still some concerns; for example, the school lacks a fence to protect it from outsiders. Also, the school is 13 miles away from a hospital or law enforcement in case of an emergency circumstance.

### **Ethical Considerations**

There were many ethical considerations the researcher had to follow to complete this qualitative phenomenological research study. These included guidelines, procedures, and

principles the researcher had to follow to ensure the research study was performed responsibly, accountably, and ethically. These safeguards were in place to protect the safety, well-being, and rights of the participants of the research study. These same safety measures were in place to protect the researcher's credibility and integrity. The process began with the Coastal Carolina IRB (Institutional Review Board) process. This administrative board was created to protect the well-being and rights of human subjects involved or recruited to take part in research studies. Students who are conducting the research must complete research, ethics, compliance, and safety training. The CITI (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Program) provides training for researchers. According to CITI 2024, it provides research, compliance, professional development, and ethics training needs for educational institutions, governmental agencies, healthcare establishments, technology companies, and research organizations. The researcher completed the initial CITI training in the spring of 2021. She also had to take the CITI refresher course to apply for the IRB to begin the qualitative phenomenological research study on school safety in rural communities.

On February 26, 2024, the researcher submitted the IRB Review Application. The researcher was required to answer detailed questions about the research she planned to conduct. The CITI Refresher training certificate is included in the appendices. Also included in the appendices is the parent consent for minor participation in human subject research authorization documentation. This form was required for parents to sign to provide the researcher consent to use their child in the research study. It presented the introduction and explained the purpose, procedures, duration, rights, risks, benefits, confidentiality, sharing of the results, and contact information. Also included in the parent consent form was photography, video, or audio recording authorization. This provided the researcher consent to photograph, video, or record the

interview session. The school safety interest survey, interview questions, invitation letter to parents, letter from the superintendent, elementary school principal support letter, high school principal support letter, and the researcher's home school letter are also included in the appendices. This process is in place for the ethical safety of the participants used in qualitative phenomenological research study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of any research study involve what is out of the control of the researcher (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). There will be three limitations in this research study. The first limitation presents the participants' lack of training and knowledge. They will not receive any training or information about school safety concerns or measures prior to the survey or interview. Their responses may not result in knowledgeable answers about school safety. Their terminology may not match the research. The researcher of this qualitative phenomenological research study must take into consideration the participants' feelings towards the researcher. Some of these participants are currently enrolled at the school where she serves as the principal. Also, some of the participants attend the school she formally served. This could possibly yield potential bias in their responses to the questions. The last limitation will involve the lack of time. The survey and the interview process will span over 2 weeks. The researcher foresees at least twenty responses from the survey. She plans to interview at least nine participants, one student per grade level in grades three through twelve. This will only allow for one perspective per grade level.

### **Summary of Methods**

The methods for school safety in rural communities focused on qualitative research. These methods describe the lived experiences, events, and situations from different points of view of elementary, middle, and high school students from rural schools. Their perceptions were

obtained from a survey and interviews. Participants were selected from elementary, middle, and high schools in Daisy County to participate in interviews based on their answers to the survey questions. Only the participants who returned the signed consent form were allowed to take a school safety interest survey. The signed consent form included student school email addresses. The survey was sent to the students' email addresses.

### **The Significance and Potential Impact**

School safety is just as important as classroom instruction. It is on the second step of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs pyramid. Does a child feel safe to learn? Fire, earthquake, and tornado drills are no longer just for practice. School leaders must be prepared for anything that might occur during the day. Drills and procedures must be taught and practiced so students and teachers can be prepared. This study has the potential to impact schools in rural communities by examining the perceptions of students. It investigates, identifies, describes, and promotes understanding of the school safety perceptions of students in rural elementary, middle, and high schools in Daisy County. It presents information concerning what has occurred and what could possibly occur from the point of view of the students. It could present information that will provide support and aid to schools in rural communities. This study has the potential to add to school safety research in rural communities. Most current existing research involves schools in urban and suburban areas.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESULTS**

### **Introduction**

This qualitative phenomenological research study aimed to investigate the school safety perceptions of students in elementary, middle, and high school students in rural Daisy County. It uniquely identified and determined these perceptions to provide a comprehensive understanding of the steps school officials and policymakers can take to enhance school safety in rural communities. This chapter presents the results of data collection, providing a brief overview of the research study, a narrative description of the data analysis, an explanation of the tools and techniques used to ensure data integrity and validity, descriptive data figures and tables, emerging themes, and evidence of data used to identify these themes.

### **Theoretical Alignment**

The constructivism/constructivist point of view was the theoretical framework used to direct this qualitative research study. This theoretical approach, which utilizes participants' lived experiences to create and construct knowledge, was an effective and popular teaching method (Almulla, 2022). The research questions, aligned with this theoretical perspective, are crucial in understanding how students perceive and construct knowledge in the context of school safety in rural Daisy County. Each question on the survey and interview aligned with the research questions. The participants answered questions during the interview phase based on their lived experiences and perceptions.

RQ1: What do students perceive to be safety issues in Daisy County rural schools?

RQ2: What do students believe are future issues in rural Daisy County schools?

RQ3: What are student perceptions of improving school safety in rural Daisy County schools?

## Research Tools

This research study employed a comprehensive approach, surveying students in grades three through twelve to gather demographic data and gauge their interest in school safety participation. Additionally, interviews were conducted to collect students' school safety perceptions. The following questions were used to investigate and examine these perceptions in rural Daisy County, ensuring a thorough understanding of the students' perspectives on school safety.

RQ1: What do students perceive to be safety issues in Daisy County rural schools?

RQ2: What do students believe are future issues in rural Daisy County schools?

RQ3: What are student perceptions of improving school safety in rural Daisy County schools?

This chapter presents an overview of the study participants and an analysis of the data. The researcher traveled to each school (one elementary school, one intermediate school, and one middle/high school). The researcher discussed and presented the research information to the first block's third- through 12th-grade classes. She also provided all students in grades three through 12 with a parent consent form. Students were invited to be participants in the research study if parents consented. The consent form discussed the research. It allowed parents the option to consent to the survey and the interview or interview only. Only students who returned the parent consent form received the email with the link to the survey.

A survey was presented to determine the demographic and school safety interests. This survey was used to gather student background information and their school safety perceptions interest. Students received the survey through their school email addresses. The email presented the link to the survey. Students completed the survey using Microsoft Forms. Next, a random

sample size of nine students was selected to participate in an interview. For equality and fairness, the first three students who agreed to an interview from the survey from elementary (Grades 3–5), middle (Grades 6–8), and high (Grades 9–12) schools were selected to participate in the interview process.

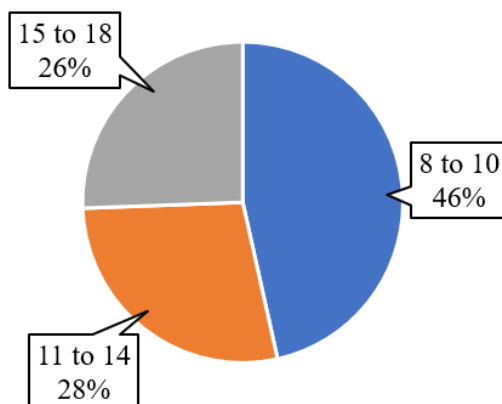
### Study Participants

The school safety interest survey was used to collect demographic data and school safety interest. This survey allowed the researcher to obtain participants' background information. The questions provided in the survey allowed the researcher to describe and explain the participants. Students had to present a signed copy of the parent consent form before they could become participants. The researcher received 112 signed parent consent forms. The researcher sent 112 elementary, middle, and high school students an email with the Microsoft Forms survey link. The survey provided results from 43 participants.

Forty-three participants completed the survey. They answered the survey questions which rendered the following responses. In response to “What is your age range?”  $n=19$  participants (46%) answered 8-10,  $n=12$  participants (28%) answered 11-14, and  $n=11$  participants (26%) answered 15-18. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

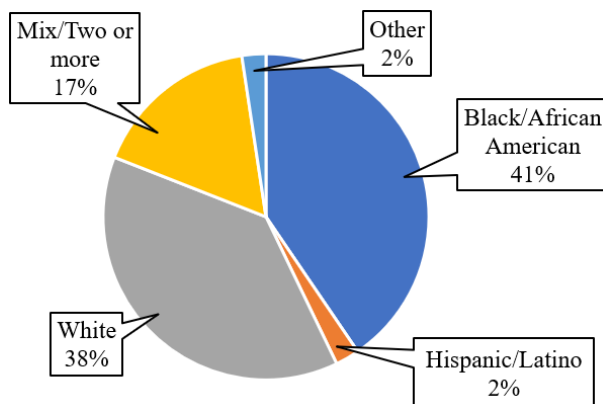
*Responses to “What is Your Age Range?”*



In response to “What is your racial background?”  $n=17$  participants (40%) answered Black/African American,  $n=1$  participant (2%) answered Hispanic/Latino,  $n=16$  participants (38%) answered White,  $n=7$  participants (17%) answered Mix/Two or More, and  $n=1$  participant (2%) answered Other. See Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

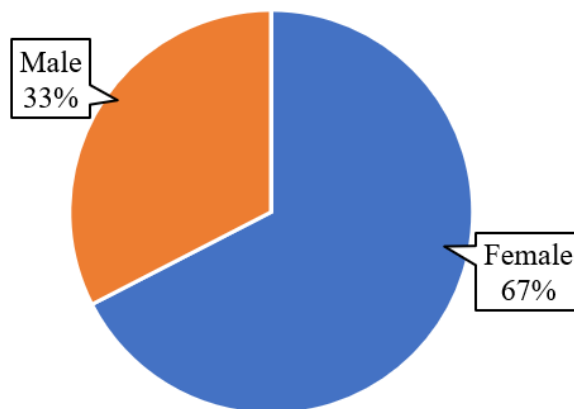
*Responses to “What is Your Racial Background?”*



In response to “What is your gender?”  $n=29$  participants (67%) answered female,  $n=14$  participants (33%) answered male, and no participants (0%) answered Other. See Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Responses to “What is Your Gender?”*

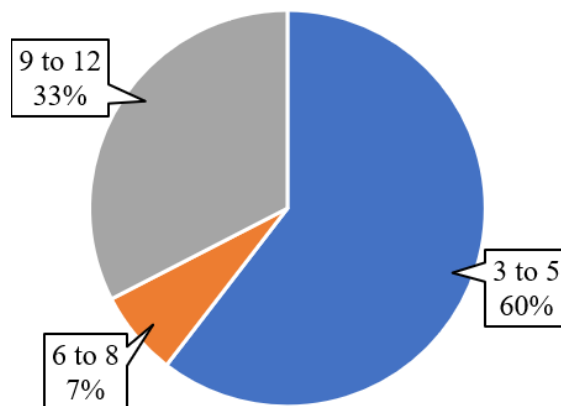




In response to “What is your grade?”  $n=26$  participants (60%) answered Grades 3-5,  $n=3$  participants (7%) answered Grades 6-8, and  $n=14$  participants (33%) answered Grades 9-12. See Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

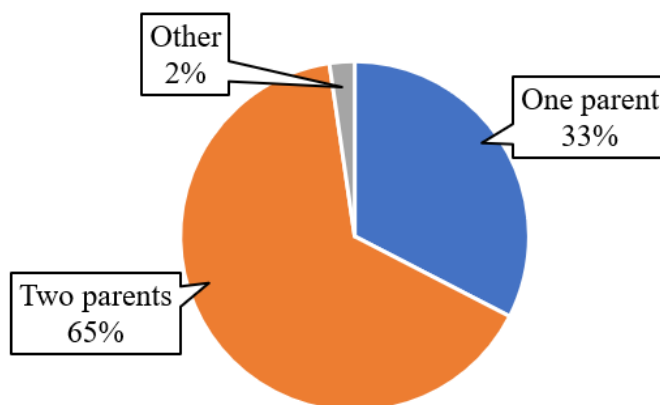
*Responses to “What is Your Grade?”*



In response to “What is your household makeup?”  $n=14$  participants (33%) answered one-parent household,  $n=28$  participants (65%) answered two-parent household, and  $n=1$  participant (2%) answered Other for their household. See Figure 5.

**Figure 5**

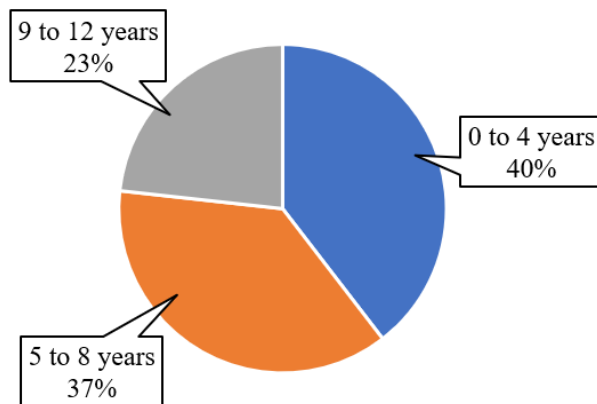
*Responses to “What is Your Household Makeup?”*



In response to “How long have you been in Daisy County?”  $n=17$  participants (40%) answered 0-4 years,  $n=16$  participants (37%) answered 5-8 years, and  $n=10$  participants (23%) answered 9-12 years. See Figure 6.

**Figure 6**

*Responses to “How Long Have You Been in Daisy County?”*

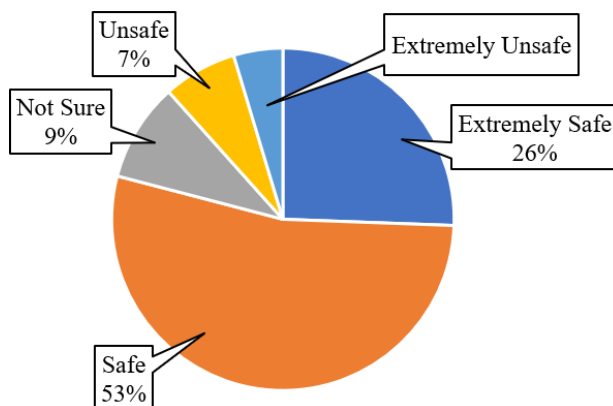


Responses to “How safe do you feel at your school?”  $n=11$  participants (26%) answered extremely safe,  $n=23$  participants (53%) answered safe,  $n=4$  participants (9%) answered not sure,  $n=3$  participants (7%) answered unsafe, and  $n=2$  participants (5%) answered extremely unsafe.

See Figure 7.

**Figure 7**

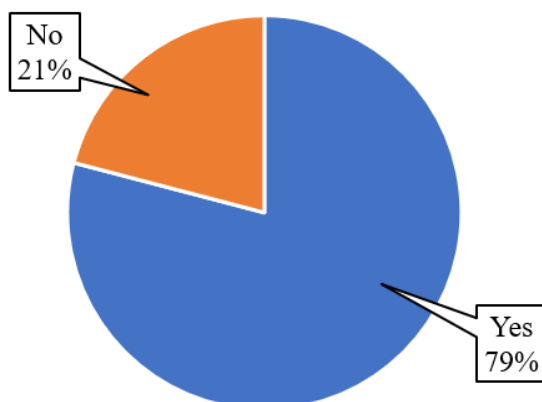
*Responses to “How Safe Do You Feel at Your School?”*



In response to “Would you be willing to participate in an interview about school safety at your school?”  $n=34$  participants (79%) answered yes, they would like to participate, and  $n=9$  participants (21%) answered no, they would not like to participate. See Figure 8.

**Figure 8**

*Responses to “Would You Be Willing to Participate in an Interview About School Safety at Your School?”*

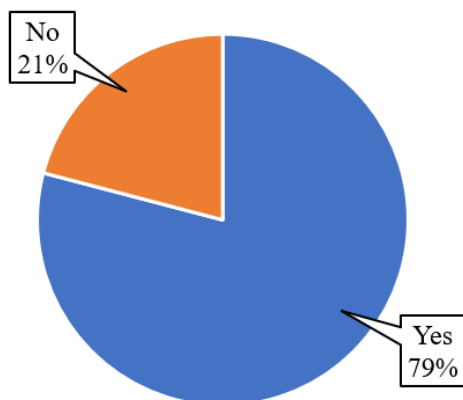


In response to “Would you please provide your school email address so that we can contact you for future questions and/or concerns?”  $n=38$  participants (88%) provided their school email addresses as contact information, and  $n=5$  participants (12%) did not provide an email address. See Figure 9.

A sample size of nine students was selected to be individually interviewed. The sample size of participants was selected according to their email responses for the interview process. To ensure the lack of bias and impartiality, the first three students who completed the survey and agreed to participate in the interview process in Grades 3-5 were selected. Only three students from Grades 6-8 completed the survey, and they all agreed to participate in the interview. The first three students from Grades 9-12 who agreed to participate in the interview process were also selected.

**Figure 9**

*Responses to “Would You Please Provide Your School Email Address So That We Can Contact You For Future Questions and/or Concerns?”*



Before the participants were interviewed, the researcher made sure their parents consented to the interview. The interview contained 11 questions that addressed the research questions. This allowed the participants to give their perceptions of school safety in their schools. The participants were reminded of their volunteer status and that they were not obligated to participate. They were also prompted to answer questions in their own words and their answers were their perceptions. The participants were identified by pseudonyms to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of each participant. Table 1 consists of the demographic information gathered from each participant who completed the survey.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Information of Sample Size Participants*

Participants	Age	Race	Gender	Grade	Household	Years in District	Safety Feeling
HS1: Jax	15-18	White	Male	9-12	2 parents	0-4	Safe
HS2: Nina	15-18	Black	Female	9-12	2 parents	9-12	Safe
HS3: Lynn	15-18	Black	Female	9-12	1 parent	9-12	Extremely Safe
MS1: Greg	11-14	Black	Male	6-8	2 parents	5-8	Safe

Participants	Age	Race	Gender	Grade	Household	Years in District	Safety Feeling
MS2: Logan	11-14	White	Female	6-8	2 parents	0-4	Extremely Safe
MS1: Ethan	11-14	White	Male	6-8	2 parents	5-8	Safe
ES1: Rose	8-10	Black	Female	3-5	1 parent	5-8	Extremely Safe
ES2: Tim	8-10	Black	Male	3-5	2 parents	5-8	Safe
ES3: Andrea	8-10	Black	Female	3-5	2 parents	0-4	Safe

### Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed and examined the responses from the interviews. The researcher determined the themes and patterns by hand coding. Common themes and patterns were first determined by the individual research questions. A table was created for each interview question within the three research questions. Nine participants were involved. Each table had two columns that included the participants' pseudonyms and their responses. Several themes were determined after hand and coloring-coding the data.

### Themes

The following themes were determined using the research questions. The interview questions that represented the research questions were also presented.

**Theme 1:** Feeling Safe (Inside Environment, Adults in the Building, and Resource Officer)

**Theme 2:** Feeling Unsafe (Outside Environment, Adults in the Building Not Visible, and Doors Left Unlocked)

**Theme 3:** Future Concerns (Student Incidents, Weapons, and Bullying)

**Theme 4:** School Safety Measures (Additional Security, Random Checks, and SEL)

**RQ 1:** *“What do students perceive to be safety issues in Daisy County rural schools?”*

***Theme 1: Feeling Safe (Inside Environment, Adults in the building, and Resource Officer)***

The first theme explained the school safety perceptions of the participants in rural Daisy County. The administration, staff, and resource officers make students feel safe. Tables 2 and 3 provide participant quotes about their feeling safe in their schools.

**Table 2**

*Theme 1 - RQ1 Interview Question 1: "How Safe Do You Feel at School and Why?"*

Participant	Quote
HS1: Jax	I feel pretty safe moving from a very large school to a smaller school. I feel very much safer in this small school. There is definitely a lot of companionship and fellowship among the students and staff. I feel like any time there's any alert or anything, the adults make sure that we are alarmed. The staff, especially the teachers who are in our classrooms, are always involved in our lives.
HS2: Nina	I feel pretty safe, the majority of the time, because of how close we are to the police station, like it's very, very close. So, I feel like if anything were to happen, it wouldn't take like 10 minutes for something.
HS3: Lynn	I feel safe, extremely safe. It makes me feel safe that we have a resource officer at school.
MS1: Greg	Pretty safe. We have a good resource officer at school.
MS2: Logan	I feel extremely safe because there are a lot of cameras. The resource officer walks around the school.
MS1: Ethan	Safe. We have a resource officer. Having the resource officer and the principals makes me feel safe at school. They can contact the authorities when necessary.
ES1: Rose	I feel extremely safe.
ES2: Tim	I feel safe.
ES3: Andrea	I feel pretty safe. I rank it on a scale of 9.5.

**Table 3**

*Theme 1 - RQ1 Interview Question 2: "What Makes You Feel Safe at School?"*

Participant	Quote
HS1: Jax	The staff, especially the teachers who are in our classrooms, are always involved in our lives and always making sure that the school is involved. I feel like that's what makes us safe, makes us feel like we can know them personally.
HS2: Nina	It makes me feel safe that we have a resource officer here. It makes me feel safe that there is a camera by the door, and you have get buzzed into the building.
HS3: Lynn	Having the resource officer and the principals. They can contact the authorities when necessary.
MS1: Greg	The resource officer watches over the school. He walks around. The adults at my school make me feel safe.
MS2: Logan	The same thing, the administration and resource officer walks around and watch the cameras.
MS1: Ethan	The administration and resource officers make me feel safe.
ES1: Rose	I have my teachers that keep me safe. The faculty and Resource Officer. The doors are locked in our classroom.
ES2: Tim	The teachers keep the doors locked. We also have a resource officer.
ES3: Andrea	The environment makes me feel safe. It is quiet, most of the classes are quiet. We keep most doors locked so people won't be able to get into school.

***Theme 2: Environment, Adults in the Building, and Resource Officer***

The second theme was that students in rural Daisy County perceive the outside surroundings, students who bring weapons to school, unlocked doors, and the lack of resource officers and administration visibility create an unsafe environment. Table 4 presents participant quotes that support this theme.

**Table 4**

*Theme 2 - RQ1 Interview Question 3: "What Makes You Feel Unsafe?"*

Participant	Quote
HS1: Jax	The outside surroundings, not specifically the school, but the surrounding areas that surround it make me feel unsafe. I feel like the students sometimes bring in the negativity from the surrounding areas and the issues into the school.
HS2: Nina	The school doesn't really take anything really seriously like there was a whole gun. It might not have been used, but there was a gun in the school and just nobody would have known. Things being brought to school and we not knowing what happened.
HS3: Lynn	What makes me feel unsafe is when kids bring stuff from home to school, like knives, weapons, or like drugs.
MS1: Greg	I do not feel safe when I do not see the resource officer or the administration.
MS2: Logan	People in the office do not watch the camera to allow people to come in after they ring the bell. They just click the button, and they can just walk in.
MS1: Ethan	There is only one resource officer.
ES1: Rose	When the doors are unlocked. And if somebody's in school that's not supposed to be in the school. If somebody has illegal weapons.
ES2: Tim	When the doors are not locked, or I am not by the door.
ES3: Andrea	I feel unsafe when there is a lot of noise. It's pretty much how some of the classes are loud. I worry about if the doors are not locked.

**RQ 2:** *"What do students believe are future issues in rural Daisy County?"*

### ***Theme 3: Student Incidents, Weapons, and Bullying***

The third theme was that students in rural Daisy County believe student incidents of bullying, fighting, threats, arguments between students, and the lack of random checks are future safety concerns. Tables 5-8 support this theme by providing participant quotes.



**Table 5**

*Theme 3 – RQ2 Interview Question 4: “What Type of School Safety Incidents Occur at Your School?”*

Participant	Quote
HS1: Jax	I feel like a lot of mishaps that happen in our school are definitely misdemeanors from students who argue. They are gradually becoming less educated, and I believe that both the staff, parents and teachers are able to work together to help improve on that for future issues. And the problem because each generation is different, and I feel like our generation has not done that.
HS2: Nina	There were a couple of bomb threats, a couple school shooting threats online. A gun was brought to school.
HS3: Lynn	Somebody brought a gun to school a couple of times. Someone threatened to shoot up the school.
MS1: Greg	I have seen fights and arguments between other students.
MS2: Logan	Students bring inappropriate stuff to school, like vapes, knives, drugs, or guns. Students hide things.
MS1: Ethan	Students making threats towards the school.
ES1: Rose	Bullying. Students talk about you to other people. Just be mean to you.
ES2: Tim	I don't know.
ES3: Andrea	There was this one kid on the bus, threatened to bring a knife.

**Table 6**

*Theme 3 – RQ2 Interview Question 5: “What Type of Behavioral Incidents Occur at School That Make You Feel Unsafe?”*

Participant	Quote
HS1: Jax	Arguments or mishaps that happen between students and students, and students and staff make me feel unsafe. The staff have to get involved, and sometimes they can get out of hand, and I feel like that’s very unsafe both for the staff, students that’s around and students themselves.
HS2: Nina	Fights.
HS3: Lynn	Sometimes when students don't get their way, they act out, throw fits, and messing up the school.
MS1: Greg	We have had bomb threats, threats of shooting up the school, and fights. I heard about drugs, but never seen them.
MS2: Logan	People just walk in after they ring the bell. They are not checked.
MS1: Ethan	Students disrespect teachers. Students argue with other students.
ES1: Rose	Bringing things to school that's not supposed to be at school.
ES2: Tim	When students make threats at the school and student brought a gun to school.
ES3: Andrea	Students make a lot of noise, they get in arguments with other students, and have bad attitudes.

**Table 7**

*Theme 3 – RQ 2 Interview Question 6: “What Do You Think Your School Needs to Do to Create a Safe School?”*

Participant	Quote
HS1: Jax	I believe that our school definitely has a lot of room for improvement as well. It has improved a lot and I believe that some of the things that can improve as defining more resource officers and more educated programs such as programs that will help students calm down with mentally because I feel like mentality and mental health is important as well.
HS2: Nina	I think we need to have more checks, metal detector checks. I think we need to have another resource officer. I feel like the one we have is being pulled for everything.
HS3: Lynn	There should be more random checks, so students will not know when it will happen.
MS1: Greg	We need more security, like another Resource Officer. Drug dogs.
MS2: Logan	More random checks and check the cameras more
MS1: Ethan	We need another Resource officer.
ES1: Rose	Search kids. They might have illegal stuff.
ES2: Tim	We need another resource officer.
ES3: Andrea	Be nice to each other and watch what you say to people.

**Table 8**

*Theme 3 – RQ2 Interview Question 7: “What Type of Measures Does Your School Have in Place to Keep the School Safe?”*

Participant	Quote
HS1: Jax	The administrators and the resource officer observe and monitor the hallways. Administrators, always on the watch when there's any class changes. They have also added more cameras.
HS2: Nina	We do have some checks. Every once in a while, they have random checks. If there is a threat, they do handle it very quickly. We just don't know any information about it.
HS3: Lynn	We do have practice drills to keep the school safe in case anything happens. We have some check and we go through the metal detectors.
MS1: Greg	We have rules and procedures to follow. The administration and resource officers check on classes and students.
MS2: Logan	Every so often, the administration does random checks, maybe twice a semester. We have to wear our IDs so they can identify us.
MS1: Ethan	We have all kinds of drills, like bomb threat drills, intruder drills, and fire drills.
ES1: Rose	They use hand metal detectors sometimes and we have all kinds of drills.
ES2: Tim	We have a resource officer to protect us. We practice drills to help protect us too.
ES3: Andrea	We have drills. The principal and teacher monitor the halls.

**RQ 3:** *“What are students’ perceptions of improving school safety in rural Daisy County Schools?”*

***Theme 4: Additional Security, Random Checks, and SEL***

The fourth theme was that student perceptions of needs for improvement in rural Daisy County include more random searches/checks, additional resource officers on the school campus, and programs that will help students de-escalate arguments. Tables 9-12 provide participant quotes supporting this theme.

**Table 9**

*Theme 4 – RQ3 Interview Question 8: “Explain the Location and Facilities of Your School.”*

Participant	Quote
HS1: Jax	We are in a small community, and our school is small. We need more funding to upgrade our school.
HS2: Nina	It is near the police station in a small town. There are several places, middle school hall, high school hall, and gym.
HS3: Lynn	The school seems very secluded away from everything, and we got new security cameras. Everyone has to check in the school.
MS1: Greg	We have a middle school section and a high school section. We are in a rural town. It is very diverse.
MS2: Logan	The building is very big in a very safe town. There are a lot of cameras.
MS1: Ethan	There is a middle school part and a high school part. We are in a small town. There are a lot of exits.
ES1: Rose	It looks like a regular school. It is small school.
ES2: Tim	The school is near my grandma’s house. We have three buildings.
ES3: Andrea	We are an Elementary school in a small town. It's in a good environment.

**Table 10**

*Theme 4 – RQ3 Interview Question 9: “What Type of School Safety Incidents Have You Been Involved in (Discipline)?”*

Participant	Quote
HS1: Jax	None, but I have seen fights.
HS2: Nina	None
HS3: Lynn	None. I have seen other students get in trouble; they get escorted for discipline issues.
MS1: Greg	One incident. Someone threatened to fight my cousin and me. I did not want to get in trouble, so I told the Resource Officer, and she helped me.
MS2: Logan	None
MS1: Ethan	None
ES1: Rose	None
ES2: Tim	None
ES3: Andrea	None. I’ve seen people bullying and fighting.

**Table 11**

*Theme 4 – RQ3 Interview Question 10: “What is Your School Doing to Make You Feel Safe?”*

Participant	Quote
HS1: Jax	Our principal and our administrators are definitely great. They always make sure that we are OK. They always have a one-on-one conversation if they could tell something’s wrong upset and I feel very comfortable telling my principal as last year I did have an incident where my students start saying slurs to me. And I was able to feel comfortable telling my principal and he was able to help me.
HS2: Nina	When there was a threat to the school the principal did a good job getting the Police Department involved, getting dogs, and just making sure that the students were safe in the morning.
HS3: Lynn	They discipline students so they know they can’t keep doing the same thing they’ve been doing.
MS1: Greg	The administration asked us how we feel. They listen to us. The older students help us too.
MS2: Logan	The administration monitors the hallways
MS1: Ethan	Our teachers and administration walk the halls.
ES1: Rose	When another resource officer in the school he walks around the school. He talks to us. He watches the cameras.
ES2: Tim	We have a resource officer. The teachers, the principal, and teachers watch the hallways.
ES3: Andrea	The teachers keep classes quiet. The resource officer monitors the halls and checks all the doors.

**Table 12**

*Theme 4 – RQ3 Interview Question 11: “What Does Your School Do to Help Prevent School Safety Violations?”*

Participant	Quote
HS1: Jax	The school principal is always very observant. There are always people making sure that the students are doing what they’re supposed to be doing, and I feel like that makes me feel safe.
HS2: Nina	The principal monitors the halls, he acts quickly to respond to threats, and the doors are always locked.
HS3: Lynn	They inform parents about incidents. They also tell us what we should and shouldn’t do. They model how we should behave.
MS1: Greg	They suspend students when they do bad things. They put students in ISS away from other students when they do small bad things. The administration demands respect, if the school does not do right, we lose our break.
MS2: Logan	The administration deals with students who threatened the schools.
MS1: Ethan	The school talks about bullying and jumps on drama early.
ES1: Rose	The resource officer walks around the school watching. He watches the cameras.
ES2: Tim	The resource officer walks around the school all day. He watches the cameras and helps with drills.
ES3: Andrea	We have emergency drills a lot. The resources officer watches us.

### **Findings**

The participants were students enrolled in rural Daisy County elementary, middle, and high schools. They answered and responded to the interview questions using their perceptions, points of view, and opinions.

### **Research Question 1**

Theme 1 determined students’ safety levels. The participants responded with positive affirmations. They felt safe at their school. Their relationships with the teachers, administration,



and resource officers made them feel safe. The participants felt that the adults in the school made them feel safe and there was trust between them.

Theme 2 identified the factors the students perceived to make an unsafe school environment. The participants uncovered several components that made them feel unsafe. The school's outside surroundings made students feel unsafe. The outside surroundings sometimes enter the school with students bringing weapons to school. The participants felt unsafe when the doors were left unlocked. The participants also felt that the lack of resource officers and administration visibility created an unsafe environment at school. They expressed the need for more resource officers in the schools.

### **Research Question 2**

Theme 3 revealed what students perceived to be future safety concerns in their rural schools. The participants explained that student incidents of bullying were foreseen as future concerns. The participants expressed the issues of students arguing, treating each other meanly, and lacking respect for each other. The participants discussed fighting as another future safety concern. Threats from students verbally and online of school shootings were a serious concern for the participants. The participants also felt that the lack of random checks and/or metal detector use would cause future safety concerns.

### **Research Question 3**

Theme 4 uncovered what students perceived to be needs of improvement for school safety in their rural community. The participants expressed the need for more resource officers on their school staff. An additional resource officer on the staff would allow more security in the school. The participants discussed the need for more random safety checks. They felt this would deter students from bringing any weapons, illegal drugs, or something else inappropriate to

school. Students would not know when; they would just know it could happen anytime. The participants also expressed the need for programs, such as mental health counseling, to help students de-escalate from heated arguments, deal with bullying issues, and any other social-emotional concerns.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

During this research study the researcher recorded each interview via Zoom. This program recorded the interview visually as well as recorded the audio. The interview consisted of 11 questions created to understand what the participants perceived as school safety in rural elementary, middle, and high schools. The researcher transcribed the recordings to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. The participants were identified by pseudonyms as aliases. All participants' information and transcriptions of the interviews were kept on a password-protected flash drive. The researcher only had access to the information. The researcher watched and listened to the video and audio recordings several times for details, validity, and accuracy. The researcher also read the transcriptions and responses of the participants several times while highlighting and identifying patterns, themes, and recurring phrases. The researcher assigned codes according to the research questions. All precautions were taken to secure a non-biased point of view while allowing the participants' perceptions to be accurately presented.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study launched this chapter. The main focus of this study was to determine the school safety perceptions of students in elementary, middle, and high school students in Daisy County. It discussed constructivism as the point of view or theoretical framework used to direct and present the research. The participants'

perceptions, lived experiences, or points of view were presented and discussed. Trustworthiness, accuracy, and validity were discussed. A short school safety interest survey was used to gather demographic and school safety interest data. Interviews were conducted to collect participants' school safety perceptions. The themes were identified through the research questions and the responses made by the participants.

**Theme 1:** Feeling Safe (Inside Environment, Adults in the building, and Resource Officer)

**Theme 2:** Feeling Unsafe (Outside Environment, Adults in the Building Not Visible, and Doors are Left Unlocked)

**Theme 3:** Future Concerns (Student Incidents, Weapons, and Bullying)

**Theme 4:** School Safety Measures (Additional Security, Random Checks, and SEL)

Quotes from the participants were included as evidence to show the connection to the constructivism/constructivist point of view. Students were the participants. This theory expresses how students learn using prior knowledge, experiences, and perceptions.

This qualitative phenomenological research study aimed to gain knowledge and information from the student's perspective on school safety in rural elementary, middle, and high schools. The participants feel very safe at school mainly because of the relationships with the adults in the buildings. They trust the adults. They are so thankful for a resource officer who is caring and willing to protect their school. They feel unsafe when doors are unlocked, and the adults are not visible throughout the school campus. They identified several safety and behavioral incidents that they feel are current and future issues. The participants are concerned that school incidents of threats towards the school, fights, bullying, and weapons brought to school by students are future school safety issues. They believe more random checks should be

conducted, metal detectors should be used, and more resource officers should be on school grounds for protection. The participants also would like to see more resources to help stop bullying, such as mental health programs to address social-emotional learning.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

### **Introduction**

This qualitative phenomenological research study aimed to investigate the safety perceptions of students in rural elementary, middle, and high schools in a public school district in South Carolina. The significance of school safety cannot be overstated, as it is a fundamental aspect of a positive and progressive youth experience in school (Mayer et al., 2021). Alarming, 20% of U.S. parents report that their child had expressed anxiety about feeling safe at school (Brenan, 2022). The impact of school safety on academic success is significant and profound; when students feel safe at school, there is a noticeable decrease in fear, a substantial reduction in school avoidance, and a marked increase in academic success (Williams et al., 2018). Conversely, students who are victims of school violence are more likely to have academic difficulties and negative school perceptions (Lenzi et al., 2017). Evidently, students' sense of safety significantly influences their academic performance (Guy-Evans, 2024).

### **Discussion**

Past research on school safety has been presented from the perspective of adults and students from urban or inner-city schools. Current research has brought attention to school safety regarding committing crimes in school, bullying, bringing illegal drugs, and bringing weapons, which create a school culture of fear (CDCP, 2021). This research presents a different perspective. The school safety perceptions of students from rural schools in grades three through twelve were investigated and examined. According to Olusegun (2015), students use their perceptions of the world to guide their learning. The constructivist point of view compels students to use their innate curiosity about society and how it works to learn, work, and grow (Olusegun, 2015). The researcher credits constructivism theory because it explains the safety

perceptions of students in rural elementary, middle, and high schools. This chapter provides a summary of the findings and recommendations for future investigation.

This qualitative phenomenological research study was conducted in a small rural school district in the Pee Dee area of South Carolina. The participants were elementary, middle, and high school students from three schools in the school district. All Grade 3-12 students received an invitation and the consent form for their parents to sign. These grade levels were selected because they were the same grade levels used in the South Carolina State Department of Education online school safety survey every school term. One hundred and twelve students returned a signed consent form to the principal of each school. The researcher retrieved the signed consent forms. Next, the researcher sent a school safety interest survey via students' school email addresses.

### **Implications of Results**

The survey's main purpose was to gather demographic and school safety interests from students in grades three through 12 in rural elementary, middle, and high schools. The researcher distributed 875 letters of invitation and consent forms to students in three schools in grades three through 12. Only 112 students returned the signed consent form, so the researcher sent these students an email with the link to the school safety interest survey. The school safety interest survey was created using Microsoft Forms. This information was used to create a random sample size to complete interviews. The researcher conducted nine interviews with three students from elementary, middle, and high schools. Three research questions and 11 interview questions guided this qualitative phenomenological study investigating students' perceptions in rural elementary, middle, and high schools. The interviews aimed to obtain responses to the participants' school safety perceptions. In Chapter 4, the researcher presented the findings and

offered a thorough analysis of the responses from the randomly selected sample size of participants encompassing the following research questions.

### **Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 asked, “What do students perceive as safety issues in Daisy County rural schools?” This research question had two themes. The first theme discussed the positive school safety perceptions of the participants. It was labeled as; “Feeling Safe.” The responses from the participants and the interpretation of the interviews established and revealed how safe students felt and why. All the participants felt safe at their schools. The administration, staff, and resource officers made them feel safe. Several participants also discussed the school environment as a reason for their positive school safety perceptions. The environment was small, with a family atmosphere. Lynn, a high school student, responded, “I feel safe because the resource officer and principals can contact the authorities when necessary.” The participants’ relationships and trust with the adults in their school made them feel safe. Rural schools have a close-knit school climate, creating a strong sense of belonging where the adults and students operate like a family (Bailey, 2021). Schools free from negative perceptions of safety have been correlated with high academic outcomes, positive social-emotional health, low absenteeism, and high graduation rates (Ascione, 2023). Positive relationships between the students, teachers, and the resource officer create a family atmosphere full of trust, mutual respect, and a strong community (Gottfredson et al., 2020).

The second theme of Research Question 1 was identified as; “Feeling Unsafe.” Participants who identified as feeling unsafe did not agree to an interview. Their perspective was not presented in the research. The interviewed participants answered questions about what could make them feel unsafe. The participants perceived the outside surroundings, students who

brought weapons to school, unlocked doors, and the lack of resource officers and administration visibility created an unsafe environment. Greg, a middle school student, stated, “I do not feel safe when I do not see the resource officer or the administration.” Many students acknowledged several locations that had limited visibility by adults to be places where they felt unsafe, such as in the lunchroom, on the bus traveling to and from school, near their lockers, in the halls during the change of classes, in the restrooms, and on the playground during recess (Jacobson et al., 2010). The NCSSE (2021) reported other factors contributing to students’ unsafe perceptions, such as a lack of positive school culture and climate, increased bullying, and a lack of adult responsibility and supervision.

### **Research Question 2**

This research question examined, “What do students believe are future issues in rural Daisy County schools?” The next theme of this research question was “Future Concerns,” which included student incidents, weapons, and bullying. It explained the future school safety issues that could occur. The participants believed that student incidents of bullying, fighting, threats, arguments between students, and the lack of random checks are future safety concerns. The participants also recognized student incidents such as students fighting, student arguments, students making threats, and students bringing illegal drugs to school as future school safety issues. Nina, a high school student, stated, “There were a couple of bomb threats, a couple of school shooting threats online. A gun was brought to school.” According to Frederique (2020), school violence can be as major as a mass school shooting or as minor as smoking vape cigarettes. School violence creates academic, emotional, and social problems for students (Adams & Mrug, 2018). The media highlights the increasing importance of why school leaders need to understand and acknowledge the incidents of school shootings, gang violence, and



bullying (school and online) and how it impacts the school safety perceptions of students (Lacoe, 2014).

### **Research Question 3**

This research question inquired, “What are student perceptions of the need for improvement in school safety in rural Daisy County schools? The last theme was identified as “School Safety Measures.” This theme discussed what the participants thought were school safety measures that could help improve school safety in their schools. The participants concluded the need for more random searches/checks, additional resource officers on the school campus, and programs that would help students de-escalate arguments. These measures could be implemented to help support school safety and deter school safety violations. The participants considered additional security as a safety measure that could provide and add more law enforcement presence in the school. Rose, an elementary school student, replied, “Search kids. They might have illegal stuff.”

The last theme also included SEL. This included resources for social-emotional learning to help with mental health and bullying. Andrea, an elementary school student, replied, “We need something like an activity to teach kids how to be nice to each other. We need to watch what we say to people.” Children who do not feel safe in their schools are more likely to feel unsafe in their communities, of which their schools are a part (Hong et al., 2016). Students require more than academic skills to be successful; they also need non-academic skills, which include character or general well-being skills (Brush et al., 2022). Social-emotional learning is the development of the whole student, which is important for academic and social success (McCormick et al., 2015).

The research questions produced several conclusions from the participants' responses. Research question one determined the school safety perceptions of the participants. All participants who participated in the interview process felt safe. The participants' school safety perceptions were positive. They believed the school's inside environment, adult visibility, and the resource officer caused them to feel safe. Olusegun (2015) argued that the premise of constructivism was that teaching and learning were based on the students' mental construction results. The participants perceived their school as a safe place, which could positively impact their learning. It was concluded in Research Question 1 that the outside environment, adults in the building not visible, and doors being left unlocked were factors that could create an unsafe feeling. The constructivist learning theory argues that students energetically construct knowledge and create meaning based on their individual or social experiences (Irby et al., 2013). The participants felt safe at school but acknowledged factors that could cause them to feel unsafe. These experiences could impact their school safety perception in the future.

Research Question 2 established what the participants believed were future issues of school safety in their schools. The participants considered student incidents, weapons, and bullying as future school safety concerns. According to Irby et al. (2013), what people perceive as reality is determined by their shared assumptions. The participants perceived students involved in student incidents such as arguments with other students, fights, and threats as future school safety concerns. The participants also recognized weapons being brought to school as a safety concern. The participants were very concerned about the bullying occurring in the schools. It was a school safety concern that they perceived could continue. Research Question 3 concluded what the participants perceived to be the need for improvement in school safety in their schools. The participants uncovered the need for additional security, random checks, and

social-emotional learning to help and support school safety improvements for their schools. The constructivist point of view believes the students' subjective perceptions of the environment and personal experiences influence individual outcomes and behaviors (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). The participants' personal experiences and perceptions of school safety facilitated their conclusion about school safety improvement needs.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative phenomenological research study was conducted to investigate the school safety perceptions of students in rural elementary, middle, and high schools in a public school district in South Carolina. It gathered information from surveys to gain demographic and school safety interest while petitioning students to be interviewed to discuss their school safety perceptions. A letter of invitation and parent consent form were sent home with students in Grades 3-12 for school safety interest and demographic information. Only students who returned the signed consent form were given an email with the school safety interest survey. One hundred and twelve students returned the consent form. They all received the school safety survey via their school email. Forty-three students responded to the email by completing the school safety survey. Participants were chosen for an interview using a random sample size of nine (three elementary, three middle, and three high school) students. The participants had to agree to an interview by the parent's signature on the consent form. To make sure it was a random sample, the time stamp of completing the survey was used to verify the first three students who agreed to an interview from elementary (Grades 3–5), middle (Grades 6–8), and high (Grades 9–12) school were selected to participant in the interview process.

The survey was created in Microsoft Forms. This computer software collects and organizes important information in a survey form. It collected the responses and created pie

charts to display the organized data. The survey used a Likert scale to ask about demographics and school safety interests. According to the survey, 26% of the participants answered extremely safe, 53% answered safe, 9% answered not sure, 7% answered unsafe, and 5% answered extremely unsafe. The survey also revealed that 79% of the participants agreed to an interview, while only 21% did not agree. The survey also revealed that only participants who felt safe or extremely safe agreed to an interview. The nine randomly selected participants were interviewed, and Zoom was used to record each session. During the interviews, the researcher used structured and scripted open-ended questions. These questions allowed and encouraged answers from the participants' knowledge, feelings, perceptions, and experiences. Each participant received the same questions.

The participants' responses were examined and analyzed by hand. Microsoft Word was used to transcribe the recorded Zoom interviews. Hand coding was used to categorize information. The researcher assigned a code or theme to organize the information. After all the information was analyzed, the researcher concluded the following themes.

**Theme 1:** Feeling Safe (Inside Environment, Adults in the building, and Resource Officer)

**Theme 2:** Feeling Unsafe (Outside Environment, Adults in the Building Not Visible, and Doors are Left Unlocked)

**Theme 3:** Future Concerns (Student Incidents, Weapons, and Bullying)

**Theme 4:** School Safety Measures (Additional Security, Random Checks, and SEL)

The intended outcome of this study was to investigate and identify the school safety perceptions in rural elementary, middle, and high schools in Daisy County. The outcome was supported and reinforced by the research. The participants identified the adults in the school,

such as principals, teachers, and especially the resource officer, as factors that made students feel safe. The relationships formed with adults created a safe perception for students. The schools outside surrounding could make students feel unsafe. Students bringing weapons and illegal drugs, doors being left unlocked, and not seeing the resource officer and administration could give students a negative school safety perception. Student incidents of bullying, fights, and threats of school shootings are safety concerns of the participants. The participants believed there is a need for more security at school, such as additional resource officers, random checks using metal detectors, and some form of counseling to support and assist with student negative behaviors.

School safety concerns remain important for students, parents, and school leaders in rural communities. Current research identifies building supportive school communities and increasing security as the most common approaches to improving school safety (Depaoli & McCombs, 2023). The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) currently examined school data on drug possession, violent incidents, bullying, the use of security staff, and restorative practices associated with school safety. This data was used to reveal the many challenges faced in public schools. Schools in rural communities face these same challenges.

This research journey investigated, identified, and explained the unique characteristics of student perceptions of school safety in rural communities. South Carolina State Superintendent Ellen Weaver has outlined enhancing school safety as one of her top five budget priorities for 2024 (SC Department of Education, 2023). This research study will continue as students evolve and society changes. It is up to school officials to follow the data, listen to the individuals who will be directly impacted by decisions made, and create policies and procedures to keep students safe in rural communities.

### **Limitations**

The researcher encountered several limitations. The first limitation was explaining the process design to parents and students. The letter of invitation included the parent consent form. When properly signed by a parent, the consent form allowed students to complete the survey only or complete the survey and participate in the interview process. Parents were allowed to sit in for the interview with their students. The researcher also included, with the letter of invitation and consent form, a copy of the survey and interview questions. This process was very time-consuming. It was a long but imperative process, considering the participants were students. Best practice suggests that researchers always explain the purpose of the research, survey, and interview to parents and students. It demands that the researcher receive permission from students' parents for all interviews or participation in any research study.

The next limitation the researcher encountered was that she was an employee of the school district where the research study was conducted. Several participants had been students in the school where the researcher serves as a principal. The researcher did not allow any bias to impact the information or the reporting of the findings. The researcher discussed the research with each participant. Rules and procedures were established before conducting the research, and the participants could leave the research at any time. The researcher reassured the parents and students by providing the researcher's committee chair's school information and phone number to be contacted if there were concerns.

Another limitation of this study was that not all participants agreed to an interview. Five participants identified themselves as feeling unsafe, and these same participants did not agree to an interview. Their perceptions and perspectives were neither identified nor explained in the

research results. Because of that, the interviewer was not afforded a more robust opportunity to gather the experiences and perspectives of those participants, which may have been different.

Finally, this qualitative phenomenological research study only presented the perspective of a small group of students identified from the same rural school district. Therefore, this research only presented the findings from their perspectives and lived experiences. Thus, the research results only present a picture of the participants' point of view. The perceptions and experiences may differ for other rural community participants.

### **Recommendations and Suggestions for Future Research**

This qualitative phenomenological research study focused on the school safety perceptions of students in a rural school district in South Carolina. Further research is needed to explain and explore the lived experiences of rural students in grades three through 12 in other areas of South Carolina or other states. This new qualitative research study could investigate the lived experiences of rural students in Grades 3-12 in other areas of South Carolina or other states. The new research study could focus on gathering different perspectives from the point of view of a diverse population, such as minority rural students, low-income rural students, or students with disabilities who attend rural schools. Diverse populations bring their unique culture, experiences, socioeconomic status, and beliefs to school (Côté-Lussier et al., 2015).

There is a need for more research to bring attention to specific issues or concerns which may cause students to feel unsafe. In a quantitative research study, a researcher could explore and examine the specific issues or concerns that may cause students to feel unsafe. What specific issues and concerns could be identified in an extensive survey, considering students who feel unsafe are reluctant to participate in an interview? During the survey, three participants (7%) answered unsafe, and two participants (5%) answered extremely unsafe. None of these

participants agreed to an interview. This grants further review. All nine participants who participated in the interview felt safe at their rural school. They did identify several student incidents that could make them feel unsafe. The participants reported bullying as a major student incident that could cause them to feel unsafe. Bullying is a major topic and concern for all students, teachers, and school officials. This topic, alone, could require individual research. The participants acknowledged the following as school safety student incidents concerns; weapons in the building, fighting, excessive noise, disrespect, and threats. The following are public schools' percentage reports of violent student incidents: 53% in elementary schools, 88% in middle schools, and 78% in high schools (NCES, 2024). School violence includes victims of bullying, sexual assault, robbery, nonfatal violent crimes, and rape (Adams & Mrug, 2018).

Finally, in a mixed method research study, a researcher could analyze the rural school climate and culture to explain what makes it positive and effective or negative and ineffective. Throughout this research study, the rural school climate and culture have been described as positive and family oriented. The participants identified the adults in the building (teachers, principals, resource officers, etc.) as the major motive for their positive safety perceptions. During the survey process eleven participants (26%) answered extremely safe, and 23 participants (53%) answered safe. Most participants felt safe in their rural schools. According to Lebron (2019), many schools in rural communities have a positive perception that displays a family atmosphere and welcoming environment in which everyone knows each other's point of view. A school climate that fosters trust, minimizes fear, and encourages students to share information is an example of positive relationships between the students, school officials, and the resource officer (Gottfredson et al., 2020). According to Depaoli and McCombs (2023), positive and supportive relationships between school staff and students can help prevent school violence,



create a school environment of connectedness, and establish a school community built around trust where students communicate possible threats to adults.

### **Researcher's Reflection**

The final reflection of the researcher was eye-opening. The participants were very open and honest with their responses. It was surprising to hear how much supervision and security students wanted in the schools. It was also surprising that the participants did not mention the inclusion of their parents, the use of cell phones and social media, and the lack of fencing around their schools. They were more concerned with the relationships established with the teachers, principals, and resource officers. It was not surprising that the participants who identified as feeling unsafe did not agree to an interview. Recent research suggested that students who felt unsafe at school had low academic achievement because these students were exposed to more school violence (Mori et al., 2021). Current research also expressed that students who brought weapons to school for protection were more likely to feel unsafe at school (Mori et al., 2021). Students' perceptions of feeling unsafe at school were also correlated to many mental health concerns, such as emotional struggles and suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Mori et al., 2021).

The constructivist point of view argues that students use their perceptions to learn. Jerome Bruner believed learning is an active social process in which students construct new ideas or concepts based on their current knowledge. The findings from the data gathered from the surveys and interviews conclude the following. Students have valid school safety perceptions that need to be addressed by school leaders. A school safety curriculum or course could be designed specifically for students such as a school safety virtual course for students with a certificate of completion or a school safety quiz like a syllabus quiz. Students could also organize within their student organizations to develop and construct a student guide to school safety.

Schools could create student safety committees to meet, discuss, organize, and implement safety procedures and practices. School safety training for educational leaders could be developed based on students' perceptions.

In this qualitative phenomenological research study, the researcher determined the need for recommendations to help create safe rural elementary, middle, and high schools. Modern school safety measures would provide a safeguard for all students from violence, crime, exposure to weapons and threats, bullying and harassment, the sale or use of illegal substances on school grounds, and other safety violations (NCSSLE, 2021). School safety programs with strategies to assist schools include physical strategies that would assess the campus facilities of the schools, for example, locked doors, alarm systems, security cameras, metal detectors, and gates (NCSSLE, 2021). Also, policies and procedures would include locker and book bag checks, hallway supervision, and controlled building access (NCSSLE, 2021). A clear bag policy is another strategy to help control what items are brought into schools. Social-emotional learning strategies include student mentoring, group counseling, encouraging anonymous student reporting, and promoting a sense of school community (NCSSLE, 2021). All schools must create and implement policies and procedures to prepare for emergencies or safety violations.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Sample Survey and Interview Questions for Parents

School Safety Interest Survey				
Please put an X in the box beside your answer.				
1. What is your age range?				
7-10	11-14	15-18		
2. Racial Background				
Black	Hispanic	White	Mix Two or more	Other
3. Gender				
Female	Male	Other		
4. Grade				
3-5	6-8	9-12		
5. Household				
One Parent	Two Parent	Other		
6. How long have you been in Dillon School District Four?				
0-4 years	5-8 years	9-12 years		
7. How safe do you feel at your school?				
Extremely Safe	Safe	Not sure	Unsafe	Extremely Unsafe
8. Will you be willing to participate in an interview about school safety at your school?				
Yes	No			
9. Would you please provide your school e-mail address to be used to contact you for future questions and/or concerns.				
<input style="width: 100%; height: 20px;" type="text"/>				
<b>Interview Questions – Research Questions</b>				
Please answer the following questions about school safety at your school.				
The information will be used to improve and support the school safety policies and procedures.				
<b>What do students perceive to be safety issues in Daisy County rural schools?</b>				
1. How safe do you feel at school and why?				
2. What makes you feel safe at school?				
3. What makes you feel un-safe?				
<b>What do students believe are futures issues in rural Daisy County schools?</b>				
1. What type of school safety incidents occur at your school?				
2. What type of behavioral incidents occur at school that makes you feel unsafe?				
3. What do you think your school needs to do to create a safe school?				
4. What type of measures does your school have in place to keep the school safe?				
<b>What are student perceptions of the needs of improvement for school safety in rural Daisy County schools?</b>				
1. Explain the location and facilities of your school.				
2. What type of school safety incidents have you been involved in (discipline)?				
3. What is your school doing to make you feel safe?				
4. What does your school do to help prevent school safety violations?				

**Appendix B: Letter of Invitation to Parents****Lake View Elementary School**  
**Home of the Wee Wild Gators!** 

PO Box 685 – 1311 Scott Street – Lake View, SC 29563 (ph) 843-759-3003 (fx) 843-759-3013

Mrs. Tamara Nance-Bethea, Principal

Mrs. Brandy Ford, School Counselor

Mrs. Melissa Rowland, Reading Coach – Mrs. Kimberly Hyatt, Title One Facilitator

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March 25, 2024

Dear Parent or Guardian:

My name is Mrs. Tamara Nance-Bethea, principal at Lake View Elementary School. I am also currently a Coastal Carolina University student, enrolled in the Spadoni College of Education and Social Sciences PhD in education program specializing in Educational Leadership. This semester I am conducting a research study for my final dissertation. I am seeking information about how students feel about school safety at their school – “School Safety in Rural Communities.”

You are receiving this letter of invitation for your child to participate in my research study. Your child’s opinions, perceptions, and suggestions are very important. If you give consent which allows your child to participate, your child will receive a short school safety interest survey via your child’s school email address. The 9-question survey will be confidentially submitted to help gain information about your child’s demographic background and school safety interest. After your child submits the survey, he or she may be asked to participate in a short interview at school via ZOOM. The interviews will be recorded for research purposes only and will be destroyed after the research is completed. The school safety interest survey and interview questions are attached for you to preview.

I have also included an informed consent form that will answer some important questions you may have before completing the survey and the interview. Please return the signed informed consent form by Wednesday, March 27, 2024, to the principal of your school. I will collect them from the principal of your school.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration. If you have any other questions, the form includes both Dr. Alexander Herring, my dissertation committee chair, and my contact information. Please do not hesitate to contact either or both of us.

Yours Sincerely,

Mrs. Tamara Nance-Bethea  
[tdnanceb@coastal.edu](mailto:tdnanceb@coastal.edu)  
(843) 759-3003

## Appendix C: Parent Consent Form



### Parental Permission for Participation in Research

Your child is invited to participate in a research study, School Safety in Rural Communities, to be conducted by Tamara Nance-Bethea, a Coastal Carolina University student, enrolled in the Spadoni College of Education and Social Sciences PhD in education program specializing in Educational Leadership, under the supervision of Dr. Alexander Herring, committee chair. This study is designed to investigate students' perceptions or feelings about school safety in their schools.

Participation in this study will require about five minutes of their time to complete a nine-question survey designed to help gain information about your child's school safety interest. Students will be sent an email with a link to a school safety interest survey, which will be confidentially submitted. After your child submits the survey, they may be asked to participate in a 15-minute interview at school via ZOOM. You have the choice to allow your child to participate in the survey and interview or survey only. The interviews will be recorded for research purposes only and will be destroyed after the research is completed. As a participant in this research, your child will be asked questions about their feelings on school safety. Parents are invited to be present during the interview during the time allotted. Please submit your email address with your child's email address. The school safety interest survey and interview questions are attached for your preview.

Your child's information will be kept strictly confidential. All notes and documents will receive a code number and will be kept separate from your signed consent form. The list with your child's name and code number will be kept in a locked file in the Spadoni College of Education and Social Sciences at Coastal Carolina University and destroyed when the research is complete. At no time will you or your child's identity be used in any reports or publications which result from this research.

Your child's personal data collected for this research will be stored until June 1, 2024, when the research study is completed. If your child is selected for a ZOOM interview, the recording will be kept for four months at Coastal Carolina University for use in this research only.

Although it is not anticipated that your child will benefit directly through involvement in this study, this research is expected to benefit all students in Daisy County, by identifying, describing, and understanding the school safety perceptions of students in rural elementary, middle, and high schools in Daisy County.

The researcher knows of no risk or discomfort associated with participation in this study.

Your child's participation is completely voluntary, and your child may discontinue their participation at any time. Your permission may also be withdrawn at any time. Your decision to allow your child to participate or not, or to discontinue participating, will not result in any loss of benefits to which your child is entitled NOR will it have any effect on your child's grades in their class(es).

Tamara Nance-Bethea may be contacted by phone (843) 759-3003 or email [tdnanceb@coastal.edu](mailto:tdnanceb@coastal.edu). Her faculty advisor on this study is Dr. Alexander Herring and he can be contacted by phone (843) 349-6620 or email [aherring1@coastal.edu](mailto:aherring1@coastal.edu).

**The Institutional Review Board (IRB) under the Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Services is responsible for the oversight of all human subject research conducted at Coastal Carolina University. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant before, during or after the research study, you may contact this office by calling (843) 349-2978 or emailing [OSPRS@coastal.edu](mailto:OSPRS@coastal.edu).**

This research study has been approved by the IRB on March 25, 2024. This approval will expire on March 24, 2025, unless the IRB renews the approval prior to this date.

I have read this form and have been able to ask questions of the PI and/or discuss my child's participation with someone I trust. I understand that I, or my child, can ask additional questions at any time during this research study and that I am free to withdraw my child from participation in the study at any time.

I agree for my child to take part in this research study (Survey and Interview).

Please provide student's school email address \_\_\_\_\_

Please provide parent's email address \_\_\_\_\_

I agree for my child to take part in this research study (Survey Only).

Please provide student's school email address \_\_\_\_\_

Please provide parent's email address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Child

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Parent or Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent or Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

If you would you like to receive a copy of the results of this study, please provide your contact information.

**Appendix D: Letter of Support from the Superintendent****DILLON SCHOOL DISTRICT FOUR**

1738 HIGHWAY 301 NORTH  
DILLON, SOUTH CAROLINA 29536

D. RAY ROGERS  
SUPERINTENDENT

TELEPHONE (843) 774-1200  
FAX (843) 774-1203

February 20, 2024

Mrs. Tamara Nance-Bethea  
PO Box 946  
330 Bascus Street  
Lake View, SC 29563

Dear Mrs. Nance-Bethea:

This letter is to inform you that we have received your request to conduct research for your dissertation on School Safety in Rural Communities with a focus on elementary, middle, and high school students' perceptions within our school district. I am very pleased to inform you that you may proceed with your work as you have outlined.

I will remind you all information obtained for the purposes of your research must be dealt with in the strictest of confidentiality. Please adhere to the following conditions.

1. You are not to release, present, or publish any personally identifiable information concerning students, their parents, or district staff members,
2. You are not to identify Dillon District Four Schools or any school in our District in any publication, presentation, or release of information associated with your research without my written permission; and
3. The records and raw data associated with your research study are to be destroyed when they are no longer needed for the purposes set forth in your request.

I hope your research study goes well. I look forward to reading the results. If you have any questions or need further assistance, please contact me at (843) 774-1200.

Sincerely,

Mr. D. Ray Rogers  
Superintendent

## Appendix E: Letter of Support from the Elementary School

### Lake View Elementary School Home of the Wee Wild Gators!



PO Box 685 – 1311 Scott Street – Lake View, SC 29563 (ph) 843-759-3003 (fx) 843-759-3013  
Mrs. Tamara Nance-Bethea, Principal  
Mrs. Brandy Ford, Guidance Counselor  
Mrs. Melissa Rowland, Reading Coach – Mrs. Kimberly Hyatt, Title One Facilitator

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February 9, 2024

Mr. D. Ray Rogers, Superintendent  
Dillon School District Four  
1738 Highway 301 North  
Dillon, SC 29536

Dear Mr. Rogers:

**Subject:** School Safety in Rural Schools

I am so thankful for your leadership, and I appreciate your support. In the mist of the recent pandemic our students at Lake View Elementary School are making gains academically and socially. More and more students are performing on grade level in Reading and Math according to current iReady data. We have established new clubs and organizations that are based on student interest. Our school climate and culture has grown to a positive family feel, with everyone working together as a team. The community is embracing and loving the changes. Parents are invited to participate and are excited to see their children grow, glow, and recover from learning loss.

I am so proud of the progress of Lake View Elementary School, but I am still concerned with all the other students in the five other schools. As you know, crime in our community is on the rise. The safety of our children is a main concern. It is on the second step of the pyramid of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs. Does a child feel safe to learn?

According to the South Carolina Report Card for Dillon County 2022, 3% of teachers disagree that there are adequate safety measures in place at their school while students 23.8% disagree. In US high schools, teachers report that they feel safe in schools, while students and parents report that they feel unsafe (Mowen & Freng, 2019). The goals of school safety are to ensure that students receive a healthy education and protect them from safety violations (Aydogdu & Bozkus, 2023).

**Problem Statement:**

Many students in schools in rural communities have negative school safety perceptions (SC Department of Educ, 2022). According to the South Carolina Department of Education School Report Card for rural Daisy County 2022, 23.8% of the student population felt unsafe at their school.



**Policy Significance:**

1. School safety is vital for all students to grow, learn, and experience a positive developmental path to graduation (Mayer et al., 2021).
2. Positive school safety perceptions have been associated with improved student and school performance (NCSSLE, 2023).
3. Negative school safety perceptions, with students feeling unsafe, student outcomes suffer (NCSSLE, 2023).
4. The goals of school safety are to ensure that students receive a healthy education and protect them from safety violations (Aydogdu & Bozkus, 2023).

Dillon School District Four is a Title One school district in rural South Carolina. I want to examine the school safety perceptions from the point of view of the students.

Thank you again for your trust in me as the leader of Lake View Elementary School. As the instructional leader of the school, it is my responsibility to make sure that all students receive the appropriate individualized learning experiences based on their individual needs, gifts, talents, and interest. I truly want to see all the LVES students maximize their potential. But it is also my obligation and duty to keep all my students safe. I want to give them a home away from home where they feel safe. We must continue to update and improve our school safety measures to keep all our Dillon School District Four students safe.

Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_  
Mrs. Tamara Nance-Bethea, Principal

Enclosure: References

Please sign and date to consent to research:

C: Mr. D. Ray Rogers, DD4 Superintendent  
Mrs. Lynn Liebenrood, Director of Human Resources

2-9-24

**Appendix F: Letter of Support from the Intermediate School****Gordon Elementary School**

926 Perry Avenue  
Dillon, S.C. 29536  
Phone (843) 774-1227  
Fax (843) 841-3607

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February 20, 2024

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing this letter in support of the research study by my colleague, Mrs. Tamara Nance-Betha. I understand that this research study will involve research for her dissertation on School Safety in Rural Communities with a focus on elementary, middle, and high school students' perceptions within our school district.

I am very pleased to inform you that I am in full support of this research study. I am also in full support of this research study occurring at our school site. Please do not hesitate to contact me if there are any questions regarding our cooperation with this project. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Dr. Michael McRae  
Principal

**Appendix G: Letter of Support from the Middle/High School****Lake View High School**

401 East 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue  
Lake View, South Carolina 29563

Fax:  
(843) 759-3016

Telephone:  
(843) 759-3009

Christopher S. Ray, Principal

Angie Gordon, Assl. Principal

February 20, 2024

To Whom It May Concern:

It gives me great pleasure to write this letter of support for Mrs. Tamara Nance-Bethea. Together we serve as principals in Dillon School District Four. I understand that this research study will involve research for her dissertation on School Safety in Rural Communities with a focus on elementary, middle, and high school students' perceptions within our school district.

I fully support this research study occurring on our site. Please do not hesitate to contact me using the information in the letterhead above if there are any questions regarding our cooperation with this project. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Christopher Ray

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