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“THOUSANDS OF MILES FRESHER”:
DECONSTRUCTING THE LOCAL IN FARM-TO-SCHOOL

A Thesis in
Geography

by
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ABSTRACT

In the United States, opposition to the current food system has inspired several movements, including sustainability, community food security and reducing the loss of small family farms. At the same time, an increased awareness of chronic food-related illness in children has resulted in a focus on nutrition education and childhood obesity prevention. Emerging farm-to-school (FTS) programs, which connect “local” farmers to nearby schools, are at the convergence of these issues. An important feature of the FTS program is that it represents the move to “re-localize” and create more sustainable, small-scale food systems that promote regional economies by buying local food for cafeterias while providing fresher, healthier meals for children. While these goals are significant to many FTS programs in the country, there is not a consensus on how to define “local” and, thus, why buying local food is important for schools and farming economies. This thesis draws on empirical research from the Appalachian region of North Carolina to examine how key actors within FTS programs define local food, along with perceived benefits and barriers of buying local food for schools. It addresses the spatiality of food systems, including the reification of local as an alternative to the globalized food system. I argue that tensions exist in defining local, which reflects the nature of local as a flexible concept and a practice. This has implications for the realities of being able to buy locally and how these realities are challenged by the ways in which local is imagined within these programs.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAFN – Alternative agrifood network

AFI – Agrifood initiative

ASAP – Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project

CND – Child Nutrition Director

CSA – Community Supported Agriculture

DoD – Department of Defense

DoD F2SP – Department of Defense Farm to School Program

FTS – Farm to School

GAP – Good Agricultural Practices

GMO – Genetically Modified Organism

HAACP – Hazard Analysis & Critical Control Points

LFS – Local Food System

NCDA-CS – North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

NC DoD F2SP – North Carolina Department of Defense Farm to School Program

NCDA F2SP – North Carolina Department of Agriculture Farm to School Program

NGO – Non-governmental Organization

SMI – School Meal Initiative

USDA – United States Department of Agriculture
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Chapter 1

Introduction

It is a sweltering June day in Madison County, North Carolina. The humidity is unforgiving as I step out of my car and shield my eyes from the sun, gazing out onto the gently sloping pastureland before me. Just down the gravel road, the manager of East Fork Farm, a married 40-something working on her second career as a farmer, waits to begin a tour as a crowd gathers. I take a quick glance inside a small barn structure to the right of the road, where elementary school-age children advise visitors that they can touch a brood of ducklings with a “two-finger touch.” I can hear the unmistakable bleating of sheep from an enclosure just off the pastureland, and the summer’s heat turns the sweet scent of their manure into a slightly cloying odor. After a tour of the 20 acre farm led by the husband and wife team, I attempt to reach the goat farm and creamery less than half a mile away. This, however, becomes a challenge as the narrow gravel road proves to be too treacherous for my station wagon and I’m forced to turn around as my GPS unit loses satellite reception and head back toward the small vegetable farms and flower nurseries of Buncombe County.

I am able to manage the roads in Buncombe County much better. As ominous storm clouds that threaten the day’s tour roll in overhead, I pull up to Flying Cloud Farm, which is nestled in a scenic valley. This farm is also managed by a husband and wife team. The wife, a tanned, earthy-looking women collects the gathering crowd for a tour
of their farm. She proudly describes their practices of crop rotation and soil amending, noting that they only use organic pesticides as a last resort. While this farm is not certified as organic, I am not able to pick up on any conventional farming practices that they might use. After a walk around a vegetable patch that includes brightly colored peppers, cabbage, kale, sorghum, flowers, and much more, fat rain drops begin to fall, effectively ending the tour.

These are members of the Appalachian Family Farms of western North Carolina: a designated group of small farms managed by small families, many of whom work second jobs to be able to make a living. The farms are typically less than sixty acres in size, specializing in produce like peppers, tomatoes, and cucumbers or in livestock and animal products, like rabbit meat or goat cheese. They are situated in the rugged topography of the Appalachian Mountains, where an unpredictable climate can, at times, be devastating to the season’s harvest. At the same time, the challenges of farming, finding appropriate markets, and making a living while doing so in this area are met with solidarity from other farmers and non-farming residents. Farmers’ market patrons and community-supported agriculture (CSA) members often rave about the freshness and quality of Appalachian grown products.

For these reasons, this area has had a keen interest in local food and keeping farmers in business through innovative strategies. From the bustling and vibrant farmers’ markets of Asheville to the “Buy Local” signs in tiny Bryson City diners, the farmers and consumers in this area have whole-heartedly joined in the growing local food movement (Figure 1-1). Strategic marketing, consumer demand, numerous cooperatives, CSAs, and a local non-governmental organization’s (NGO) creative work have helped the area’s
farmers to simultaneously keep their products in the region and make a decent living while doing so.

![Figure 1-1. T-shirt worn by resident of Asheville promoting buying local](image)

One of the newer trends emerging in the Appalachian region of North Carolina is purchasing more locally grown foods for schools, a component of farm-to-school (FTS) programs. Ideally, FTS gives children a novel experience with food and connects them back to their environment and to the farmers that are important to their communities, counties, and state. The Appalachian region of North Carolina has heavy participation in FTS programs, with involvement from the state as well as a local NGO. At the same time, however, FTS success has been challenged by the difficulty of finding farms to participate, especially in the Appalachian region where farmers can get premium price for their produce at farmers’ markets. The managers of Flying Cloud Farm, for example,
offer to host school field trips, yet they have not entered the FTS market. Instead, they choose to participate in CSAs and farmers’ markets, where their niche products make top dollar.

The recent trend of FTS

FTS programs are the product of the convergence between many food-related movements, including re-localization, sustainability, social justice, community food security, and childhood obesity prevention. Academics have begun to unpack several of the goals and issues surrounding FTS, including what makes a FTS program successful (Joshi et al. 2008; Izumi et al. 2006), how FTS can contribute to urban health and planning (Vallianatos et al. 2004), how FTS stakeholders affect the framing of program goals (Bagdonis et al.), whether or not FTS programs echo neoliberal values seen in the current food system (Sonnino 2010; Allen and Guthman 2006; Kloppenburg and Hassanein 2006), and how food distributors are the key to FTS program implementation and success (Izumi et al. 2010). With the rapidly increasing number of programs nationally and the diversity of operations and strategies to implement and maintain FTS programs around the country, more critical research is needed to understand this fast-growing trend in food, education, and health.

The number of FTS programs has increased dramatically in recent years. In 1997, there were fewer than ten FTS programs operating in the United States as compared to 2008, when the estimated number was well over 1,000, involving over 1,100 school districts in 34 states (Joshi and Azuma 2008). As of April 2011, the National Farm to
School Network estimated that there were about 2,257 existing FTS programs in the country in 48 states with just shy of 10,000 participating schools (farmtoschool.org 2006). However, few of these programs have been evaluated, critically or otherwise (Joshi and Azuma 2008). Academics are beginning to take a serious research interest in national FTS programs, yet Joshi et al. (2008) note that “research and evaluation of programs is limited, with only a few studies published in refereed journals” (229).

It is important to note that FTS programs exist within an institutionalized context. Child nutrition directors (CNDs), who are responsible for procuring food for their school districts, must follow relatively strict state and federal regulations when making their purchasing decisions. They work with a restricted budget, are reimbursed specific amounts for free, reduced, and full priced lunches, and can only purchase food that can be prepared in an approved way. Each meal must have a specific amount of certain elements, such as protein and vegetables, in order to be eligible for reimbursement. As far as buying goes, CNDs must guarantee that food being purchased for school meets specific health safety standards. There are also nuanced restrictions on the purchasing of milk (USDA Food and Nutrition Service 2011). Because CNDs have to follow strict guidelines, starting up a FTS program can add an extra burden to an already complex job.

This thesis takes these factors into account and adds to an expanding body of research by identifying gaps in the literature concerning local food and FTS programs. Much of the current research concerning FTS is applied, and so this thesis will be a departure by employing a theoretical framework in addition to empirics. I use a “local trap” framework to explore a subject that has not yet been broached concerning FTS: the significance of how stakeholders conceptualize what “local” actually means within the
program. While academics have critiqued the use of “local” as a solution to problems caused by unsustainable food systems, the globalized food system, and the lack of social and environmental justice in the food system, very few define what “local” might actually mean. In the context of FTS, which is highly constrained by the structure of school food procurement regulations, I argue that local is both a concept and a practice, and that the ways in which it is defined in FTS programs can have an impact on buying decisions. This thesis shows that key actors within certain FTS programs conceptualize local in five specific ways: as spatial, temporal, cultural, quality, and as economic. It also shows that local is understood as something that is flexible and continuous, as opposed to a strict binary between “local” and “not local.” While I critique the contradictions found in the way that participants conceptualize and practice buying local, I do not wish to discount the potential benefits that FTS programs can yield, which include increasing access to fresh produce in low-income populations and creating awareness about the buying options that CNDs and their distributors possess.

**Purpose**

This thesis examines school districts at the convergence of two major FTS programs in the Appalachian region of North Carolina. This area is rich with small farms and consumers dedicated to supporting them. At the heart of this thesis is the question of what local means within the context of these programs, which in turn affects program operations, including buying and bidding decisions. Because a significant portion of current research on FTS critiques how localism does not necessarily yield the results that
its proponents purport that it does, such as sustainability and justice, it is important to be able to first understand how stakeholders within FTS programs are defining local. It addresses the spatiality of this particular type of food system and surrounding networks, including who is able to participate, how defining local can include or exclude people in certain areas, and the reification of local as an alternative to the hegemonic global food system.

Chapter Two begins with an explanation of the origins of the School Lunch Program followed by the emergence of FTS in the United States. This will be followed by a brief history of changes in the American food system in the last century including globalization of food, the push to move toward more localized food systems, and how the benefits of local food has recently been called into question. It will be followed by an examination of critical literature on local food and FTS, including critiques of parallels between FTS, the traditional school lunch program, and how FTS potentially reflects current neoliberal structures as opposed to the sustainability and justice that local food systems are expected to yield. Chapter Three contains a brief explanation of the case study, including the selection of the Appalachian region of North Carolina as the study site, followed by an overview of the qualitative methods and data analysis used. A history of the influence of FTS in this particular region along with introductions of each of the participants in the study will be presented in Chapter Four. Chapter Five proceeds with a summary of data findings and emergent themes of how local produce is conceptualized within this space. Chapter Six will have a discussion of results to tie them back into the literature and will use the framework of the “local trap” to understand how FTS stakeholders in this area negotiate local as both a concept and a practice. In Chapter
Seven, the conclusion of this thesis, I will constructively engage with the benefits of FTS as well as suggest potential improvements to FTS in my particular case study area.

Finally, I will propose future FTS research topics that will advance our understanding of FTS and its relationship to buying local and the local food movement.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

The following section will briefly summarize recent literature regarding the FTS movement as well as developments in the American food system from the last century, including its move toward globalization followed by the push for more localized food systems. It will consider some of the academic literature analyzing local food systems, as well as critical theory regarding the FTS movement and its implications for local food in the United States.

FTS emerging

The first school lunch programs emerged during the Great Depression in the 1930s with two goals: to manage farm surpluses and to prevent hunger and malnutrition in children (Roberts 2002). The 1946 School Lunch Act was enacted into law after WWII to ensure that the American population would be well-nourished, the logic being that undernourished schoolchildren would turn into hungry workers and soldiers, which would be ineffective (Allen and Guthman 2006). It is worth noting that the Act is still in effect today. Schools receive reimbursements and free commodities from the USDA in order to provide daily affordable lunches to students. This Act also serves as an entitlement program because school reimbursements are determined by the family income of students buying lunch *(ibid)*.
While the School Lunch Program was originally intended to move commodities and keep children nourished, schools have struggled in the last few decades to keep lunches healthy. Because one of the goals of the program is to help farmers sell certain commodities, farmers tend to overproduce these commodities in order to receive government subsidies (Allen and Guthman 2006; Gottlieb 2001). For example, processed meats and cheeses are subsidized commodities, so school cafeterias are flooded with them (Roberts 2002). This has contributed to excessive amounts of fat, saturated fat, and sodium in school lunches, which contribute to childhood obesity, type 2 diabetes, and other preventable illnesses (ibid). Gottlieb (2001) argues that school food programs are not based on nutrition but economics, which has led to poor health outcomes in children. This is especially noteworthy because the populations that have the most potential to benefit from school lunch programs are those that are food insecure, or those with “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (Anderson 1990; 1560). Low-income children of American Indian, Latino, and African American descent are some of the most likely to suffer from poor nutrition and obesity (Slocum 2006). These children often qualify for reduced lunches at school, yet the current system may actually promote food insecurity by not providing nutritious, fresh foods, due to the fact that children typically get anywhere from 19-50% of their daily caloric intake from school lunches (Gleason and Suitor 2003).

The mixed success of school lunch programs and the School Lunch Act have left much to be desired, and have paved the way for district-wide FTS programs. FTS emphasizes that food comes from a local source and that children become engaged with
the complexities of the food that they eat and the processes used to grow it. While students potentially benefit from having fresher food, FTS is also meant to help local economies by providing an extra source of income for farmers and distributors. The original FTS programs, which began in Florida and California in the 1990s, were meant to help low income, minority farmers broaden their markets. That these programs provided healthier lunches to students was seen as an added bonus (Vallianatos et al. 2004).

Ideally, the FTS program has two classroom elements, specifically teaching students how to be healthy eaters and teaching them about food production. This is viewed by advocates as especially important in urban settings, where students may not have ample opportunity to visit farms and learn about growing food otherwise (Vallianatos et al. 2004). However, not every program contains hands-on learning experience and farm field trips; some programs arguably focus on consumer aspects of food systems as opposed to the entire process of production, distribution, and consumption (Allen and Guthman 2006), and some may simply be farm-to-cafeteria programs meant to reduce the incidence of preventable childhood illnesses and support local food economies. FTS programs tend to be quite expensive for schools to implement, since many schools do not currently have the equipment to prepare raw foods (Story et al. 2009). Regardless of these critiques of FTS, it is often touted by its proponents and planners as a method to help local farmers move their produce and promote health in schoolchildren (Izumi et al. 2006).
A globalized food system

FTS emerged, in part, due to criticism of the current industrial, globalized food system. Prior to the twentieth century, a great majority of the food consumed in the United States and around the world was from local sources. Most foods were not processed or packaged, and items ranging from produce to livestock often did not travel more than one day to get to the community market. Consumption followed a seasonal pattern; certain foods were only available at particular times of the year and in particular geographic locations (Giovannucci et al. 2010). Since the turn of the twentieth century, American agriculture has been shaped through three major periods of technological innovation, specifically the introduction of tractor and farm machinery in the 1900s, the increased use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers following WWII and the more recent growth in biotechnology, including use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

The use of technology has allowed the contemporary American agricultural system to become heavily industrialized, and has maximized production while minimizing land use and labor. In a globalizing world, many people assume that this maximization of production and minimization of labor and land is the only way for agriculture to operate (Lyson 2004). Coupled with the use of farming technology has been the increase in faster and cheaper transportation, improved storage and cooling facilities and a rise in food processing, making all types of food available globally and year round (Giovannucci et al. 2010; Lacy 2000).

The maximization of production has had an effect not only on how crops are grown and consumed, but which crops are grown and where. Mass production has
resulted in a narrow range of standardized products that are easy to ship and have a long shelf life (Lyson 2004). The most common crops grown in the United States are commodities that can be produced in bulk, such as corn, soybeans and wheat. Diverse strains of produce have been replaced with “cost-effective homogeneity” (Giovannucci et al. 2010: 97), resulting in a loss of about 93% of the variety of food products from the last century. Presently, 50% of American farms only grow corn and soybeans (ibid).

Perhaps one of the most significant changes is that the number of small-scale, family farms has declined sharply while growth in major agrifood businesses, such as Cargill/Monsanto and Conagra, have increased dramatically. As Lyson (2004:31) notes, “In 1910 there were nearly 6.4 million farms in the United States. Today, there are fewer than 2 million.” This is not simply a national phenomenon; instead, the control of the global food system is “shifting from local production and regional and national processing to large-scale, global firms” (Lyson 2004: 42). The control of the global supply chain of food is largely in the hands of these giant, multinational corporations (MNCs). While farms used to be prevalent in many regions of the country, the majority of large, commercial farms are now located close together, clustered within the same regions, such as California, the Pacific Northwest, Wisconsin, Florida, and Georgia (Lyson 2004). Lyson (2004) attributes this to the fact that as the number of farms has decreased dramatically in the last 100 years, the average farm size has increased. Food production is guided by the same set of principles as mass production, and that “production should be concentrated into fewer units to capture economies of scale, machinery should be substituted for labor whenever possible, and an advanced division
of labor should replace the multiple and diverse tasks performed by the ‘typical’ family farmer” (Lyson 2004; 34).

Additionally, the face of food processing has changed in the recent past; the local food processing and retail sectors have declined, giving way instead to large processing plants, national and international supermarket chains, and wholesale buyers (Lyson 2004). These processors and retailers have enough economic power to centralize where farm production takes place by making strategic buying decisions, and because they “seek mass quantities of standardized and uniform products, they have considerable power in dictating how and where agricultural production takes place” (Lyson 2004; 50). Small, independent farms often do not have the ability to produce large quantities of food, and are thus frequently neglected by large processors and retail chains. This highlights the importance of buyers in determining production. In a way, this is beneficial to FTS; if enough stakeholders are interested in local food, they may be able to encourage a market outlet for it.

Together, all of these changes to the global food system have resulted in human consumption patterns that differ greatly from just one century ago. It is no longer necessary to keep a seasonal diet, because speedy shipping means that all kinds of food are available year round. Agricultural products in the United States accumulate hundreds and thousands of “food miles” as they are shipped across the country and all over the world (Kloppenburg et al. 1996). Growth in the processing sector means that food no longer has to be consumed quickly after purchase, nor does it have to be particularly fresh to be edible. Processed sugars, starches, fats and sodium have led to an increase in obesity and chronic illness such as type 2 diabetes. At the same time, the price of food
has been kept relatively inexpensive, and the extended shelf life of produce and processed foods have arguably benefitted the chronically food insecure (Lyson 2004).

The industrial globalized agricultural system has been heavily critiqued for several reasons. First, the dominant control of the food system has severe implications for small-scale and/or regional producers. More often than not, small farmers simply cannot compete with multinational agribusiness firms, and tend to cease operation or go out of business (Lyson 2004). Additionally, while the dominant food regime produces a surplus of relatively inexpensive foods, consumers do not necessarily benefit. Standardized agriculture arguably decreases consumer “choice,” and food-processing concentration has actually raised prices in many sectors (ibid). Concerns about food safety have surfaced recently due to outbreaks of food-related illnesses, such as Mad Cow Disease and salmonella (Allen 2004). Current conventional practices coupled with food transportation across the globe have been rapidly depleting natural resources and soil quality, degrading the environment to the point that food will not be able to be produced in this manner for future generations. There is growing concern about the use of agrichemicals and their effect on the environment and human health, and groundwater is being rapidly depleted in order to maintain production in drier areas like those of California (ibid). As Allen (2004:16) notes, “Conventional agriculture has been largely self-negating, depleting the natural resources upon which agricultural processes depend and thus producing barriers to long-term environmental sustainability and food security.”

Finally, the development of the current dominant agricultural system has led to a distancing between consumers and food (Lyson 2004; Kloppenburg et al. 1996). As the number of farms around the country decrease, they become less visible to consumers
(Lyson 2004). Food is processed so it can last longer, and changing technological practices allow it to quickly travel across the country and the world. As space and time are compressed, the links between people and the food they are eating are diminished (Allen 2004; Lacy 2000). With the rise of supermarkets and grocery stores, most consumers have little to no interaction with where their food comes from (Hinrichs 2000). Kloppenburg et al. (1996; 34) characterizes this distancing in stating that:

> What is eaten by the great majority of North Americans comes from a global everywhere, yet from nowhere that they know in particular. The distance from which their food comes represents their separation from the knowledge of how and by whom what they consume is produced, processed, and transported. If the production, processing, and transport of what they eat is destructive of the land and of human community – as it very often is – how can they understand the implications of their own participation in the global food system when those processes are located elsewhere and so are obscured from them?

Because consumers tend to have little knowledge about where their food is coming from and how it is produced, processed, and transported, it separates them from the unsustainable and destructive mechanisms present in the global food system.

**Toward a re-localization of food**

The local food movement has emerged in part as a protest against the injustice, including labor and access inequality, and unsustainable practices within the current food system. It has spurred many new trends in food production and consumption. The growing distance between the production of food and its consumption has led some consumers and communities toward a “re-localization” of agriculture, which includes the emergence of new markets such as farmers’ markets, CSAs, and U Pick operations.
Localism is seen as antithetical to the dominant market due to the perceived reduction of food miles, the increased visibility of farms, and relationships between producer and consumer that ultimately make both farmer and buyer feel responsible for their economic transactions. It theoretically addresses the “anonymity” of globalized food. This movement accompanies a number of others that have “converged around the idea that a ‘local’ food system can address the interrelated concerns with environmental sustainability, agricultural sustainability, food quality and safety and economic health” (Starr et al. 2003; 302) through alternative practices and more sustainable agricultural economics. Local food, then, is often seen as opposition to a globalized food system and the unsustainability and injustice of industrial agriculture (King 2010; Allen 2004; Lyson 2004; Lyson and Guptill 2004; Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002; Kloppenburg et al. 1996).

The United States government has recently shown an interest in local food initiatives by creating policies and programs that support the growth of local food markets, such as Department of Defense (DoD) hospital and school buying programs, the 1999 Community Food Security Initiative, and the Community Food Project Grants Program (ERS 2009). The U.S. Congress decided upon an official definition of local in the 2008 Food, Conservation, and Energy Act (2008 Farm Act) with a clause stating that the “total distance that a product can be transported and still be considered a ‘locally or regionally produced agricultural food product’ is less than 400 miles from its origin, or within the State in which it is produced” (ERS 2009; iii; original emphasis). While this definition is helpful in that it offers geographical proximity as a way to understand local, there are other characteristics that consumers use to define what local food means to
them, such as production methods, personal ethics of growers and farm size (ERS 2009). The 2008 Farm Act leaves the definition of local relatively ambiguous by not engaging with anything other than proximity to production. This is particularly relevant to this thesis; by constructing a vague definition of local that can encompass a rather large area, it leaves organizations that are concerned with local food to decide whether or not they want to adhere to the Farm Act’s definition. In very large states, such as North Carolina which is over 500 miles from east to west, the federal definition of local spans various types of terrain, climates, and farming practices.

Increasingly, scholars seek to understand how local food and food systems fit within global-scale food production, including how alternative movements try to rebuild material and discursive links between production and consumption (Pratt 2007), relationships between “local,” “community” and “place” (Feagan 2007), the embeddedness of direct food markets in social relations (Winter 2003; Hinrichs 2000), and how the local has potentially been conflated with other outcomes, such as sustainability (Sonnino 2010; Born and Purcell 2006). Kloppenburg et al. (1996) expand Getz’s (1991) “foodshed” metaphor as a unit of analysis and a method to think critically about where our food comes from. Kloppenburg et al. (1996; 34) view the foodshed as “the posing of particular kinds of questions and the gathering of particular types of information” in addition to a tool that could be used to “foster change.” The foodshed, understood as a “socio-geographic space” (39), becomes a way of understanding the global food system and how efforts to “re-localize” fit in as a form of resistance to the current hegemonic system. With the foodshed, we are encouraged to engage in activity that goes beyond market relations, including building social relationships around food
and placing ourselves within a community and an environment. The foodshed creates and reinforces a sense of place. The local is viewed as a scale in which resistance could take place opposite the dominant globalized food system.

Feagan (2007) highlights the kinds of potential benefits and issues that scholars have been considering in relation to local food system (LFS) research and the shortening of global food chains. In addition to the foodshed, a second is the concept of “terroir,” or tying particular foods to places of origin, usually done officially through labeling used to influence customers and hold them “accountable for their actions in that place” (Barham 2003; 130, original emphasis). Similarly, Feagan points out the frequent use of “community” in relation to LFS, using Lacy (2000) to show how community is depicted as a “socially and geographically bound place” (27) in which there are assumptions about social relations, responsibility, health and the environment. Lacy (2000) views a turn to local food as a means to empower and strengthen communities. Communities, especially as they are related to community food security are supposed spaces of democracy and grassroots activism, which is why they are often considered ideal places to inspire change from the bottom up.

Finally, Feagan discusses the “quality turn” and embeddedness. The “quality turn,” as discussed by Ilbery and Kneafsey (2000) and Ilbery and Maye (2005), comes from the visibility of farming practices and production of a shortened food chain, which creates trust between producer and consumer. Feagan describes embeddedness as “sociocultural processes associated with relationships between producer and consumer such that food transactions are re-embedded in community and place” (2007; 28, original emphasis). This means that the consumption of food becomes more than a mere
economic act, and that buying it has social implications and creates particular sets of
relationships in particular places.

On a similar thread, Lyson (2004) develops the idea of “civic agriculture” to
describe the “embedding of local agricultural and food production in the community” (62). Civic agriculture is contrasted against “commodity agriculture,” which is driven by
maximizing food production and efficiency (Lyson 2004; Lyson and Guptill 2004). The
theory behind civic agriculture stems back to a study conducted after WWII by Mills and
Ulmer (1946) on the effect of business size on community welfare that concluded:

…Communities in which the economic base was composed of many small, locally owned firms manifested higher levels of well-being than communities where the economic base was dominated by large, absentee-owned firms. In particular, they found that the small-business communities provided their residents with a considerably more balanced economic life than did the big-business communities. They also reported that the general level of economic opportunity was considerably higher in the small-business communities. They attributed the differences in well-being and opportunity to differences in industrial organization – that is, specifically to the dominance of big business on the one hand and the prevalence of small business on the other (Lyson 2004; 65).

Lyson (2004;63) argues that the “enterprises that make up and support civic agriculture,”
including underlying structures such as local producer and marketing cooperatives,
regional trade associations, and community-based farm and food organizations, are a
component of a community’s “problem-solving capacity.” He posits that civic agriculture
contributes to community health by creating a more visible agricultural sector and linking
production and consumption as well as keeping dollars spent on local food circulating
within the community as opposed to going to MNCs after being spent in a supermarket.
Ideas similar to those of civic agriculture have been a driving force behind FTS, due to
the fact that proponents of FTS often advocate for shortened commodity chains and
producer-consumer interaction.

DeLind (2002) expresses concern that civic agriculture is too dependent upon
“traditional market relations” (218) and that it reflects certain capitalist values, such as
private ownership and accumulation. DeLind extends the concept of civic agriculture,
arguing that it also should be grounded in place and work to inspire a sense of
accountability, responsibility, and commitment to community and the environment. As
opposed to civic agriculture revolving mainly around economic transactions, DeLind
urges that civic agriculture also contain “the collective spirit, the non-voluntary
responsibility and grace, the hospitality and sacredness of the enterprise [of farming]”
(223). To this end, DeLind encourages that citizens engage in “public work” for the
common good that creates and sustain relationships with others. She exemplifies public
work with activities such as barn raising, urban gardening, and conducting a town hall
meeting. In some ways, this reflects some of the classroom elements of FTS, such as
school gardens and farm field trips.

In recent years, however, the attention on local food has shifted to whether or not
local food networks actually serve as a space of resistance or as an alternative agrifood
movement (AAFN). The celebration of LFS as a solution to issues of sustainability,
justice, and health has spurred other academics to reconsider and critique re-localization
(Feagan 2007; Hinrichs 2003), scale and localism (Born and Purcell 2006), sustainability
(Bellows and Hamm 2001; Feenstra 1997) and local food as opposing or alternative to
global hegemonic food systems (Allen et al. 2003). At the heart of many of these
critiques is the concern that local is conflated with several other concepts, such as
“community” and “sustainability,” and inherently assumed to be good (Born and Purcell 2006). Hinrichs (2000), for example, argues that the spatial relationships inherent to local are all too often conflated with social relationships. Proximity does not necessarily result in different relationships; visibility may not necessarily affect decision-making processes and evoke feelings of responsibility. Many assume that the face-to-face interactions of direct, local food markets (e.g. CSAs and farmers’ markets) exemplify the benefits of social embeddedness, but she argues that these markets can be exclusive and mired in economic transactions. Using Block’s (1990) concepts of “marketness” (the continuum along which economic activities take place) and “instrumentalism” (the level of prioritizing of economic activities over social ties, morality, and spirituality), Hinrichs critiques the sole use of embeddedness to understand transactions that take place at local, direct markets, saying:

> Together, they offer important corrective to simplistic of overly sanguine readings of social embeddedness. In most market settings, whatever the level of embeddedness, price may be relevant in some way and self-interest may be at work. Indeed, state and global level processes of restructuring, as well as demographic and cultural change, make this all the more likely. Local-level ties and connections do not, after all, occur in some social vacuum, untouched by the larger workings of the world (301).

No matter how close the social relationships are between people, the fact remains that food is most often viewed as a commodity and farmers need to make a living. As much as they may want to give “friend prices” to customers with which they have close social ties, farmers are still subject to agricultural economics at large and the shifting global market, and must adjust prices accordingly.

Allen et al. (2003) show how local is often constructed (or reconstructed) as oppositional to the globalized, capitalistic food system, but at the same time point out that
“local” has different meanings in various contexts. They characterize the local as both a “link” and a “site.” In terms of local as a link, it is assumed that local markets create trust between producers and consumers through their shorter commodity chains. Additionally, the local is “assumed to encourage both producers and consumers to internalize the externalities of conventional agriculture, paying the full costs of food production directly, rather than indirectly through environmental harm” (64). As a site, local represents the “particular characteristics of a terrain or territory [that] are attached to a commodity, imbuing it with environmental and/or social qualities” (64). Allen et al. take a historical and present look at agrifood initiatives (AFIs) in California, many of which are centered around linking producers and consumers to create new types of relationships around food and to shorten the time-space distancing between people and their food. While these initiatives were originally meant to protect laborers and the environment, they now address these problems differently, if at all, leading to differences in outcomes. They characterize these differences with:

We suggest that this is likely to be different things in different places, given the heterogeneity of agricultural and rural social forms that we can see, from our own and others’ observations. There are, as Harvey points out, ‘a plurality of theories of justice’ (1996, p. 398), just as there are a plurality of localities from which justice can be claimed. These differences may be obscured by the universalization of the local as a site of resistance.

Allen et al. find that many of these AFIs are alternative instead of oppositional to the current global food system, and that their abilities to create more just and sustainable outcome will be affected by place and circumstance.

In addition to this critique, Allen et al. (2003) are concerned that some of these AFIs create defensive localism because they exclusively prioritize knowledge at a smaller
scale. Without linking the local to other scales, it erases important differences, exclusions, and injustices within the food system. From Harvey (1996; 303), they quote, localism is “insufficient to understand broader socio-ecological processes occurring at scales that cannot be directly experienced.” Localism does not include power differentiation between race, class and gender across spaces (Feldman and Welsh 1995).

Winter (2003) also considers Harvey (1996) in his study of local embeddedness of food purchases in England and Wales, finding that the localism that is so celebrated within his studies are more of an example of defensive localism than social embeddedness in the market. Winter quotes Holloway and Kneafsey (2000; 294) with:

Valorization of the ‘local’... may be less about the radical affirmation of an ethic of community or care, and more to do with the production of less positive parochialism and nationalism, a conservative celebration of the local as the supposed repository of specific meanings and values.

Winter concludes that defensive localism is often the product of local versus national politics as opposed to personal politics.

Similarly, Born and Purcell (2006) build upon work by Brown and Purcell (2005) and Purcell and Brown (2005). They use the term “local trap” to describe “the tendency of food activists and researchers to assume something inherent about local scale. The local is assumed to be desirable; it is preferred a priori to larger scales” (195). Too often, they argue, the local is constructed as a site of resistance against the hegemonic globalized food system, when in fact it may not be to the most efficient way to promote sustainable outcomes. While they are cautious to denounce the benefits of developing LFS, they argue that local is a scale, and because it is constructed and only exists related to other scales, should not be conflated with outcomes.
Finally, Selfa and Qazi (2005) conducted a case study in Washington state concerning how producers and consumers in local food systems, specifically CSAs and farmers’ markets, defined local. They found that across groups it was defined as place, quality, and social interactions between producers and consumers. For many, local markets were defined in miles traveled it would take to get to the market, while for others, activities such as bartering and giving to friends was considered to be local. Here, the “face-to-face” interaction was the defining factor for LFS. This article highlights the constructedness of local and the idea that what defines local is contestable, especially within the context of linking rural farmers to urban markets and consumers. The meaning of local and quality is based on place, as well as producers and consumers.

Overall, the shift in the academic literature is toward a desire to understand the nuances local instead of simply touting the potential benefits of buying locally. Local as a place where interactions occur around food does not necessarily lead to sustainable farming, and proximity to place does not automatically create relationships and “responsible” consumerism. While buying food locally may produce these outcomes, they are not inherent in the action, which is still often based at least partially on economic transaction. Local as a scale is still interrelated and only exists within the context of other scales. Finally, local can have different meanings; from the USDA to farmers and consumers within a particular place, there are plenty of different ways to conceptualize the local. The construction of local varies, and in some cases is defined in ways other than a space.

The move to increase buying from regional farmers has been an impetus for the growing national FTS project that has been adopted by many school districts around the
country. The ways in which goals are constructed within FTS programs and how FTS fits into the move to create more localized, small-scale food systems is beginning to spark interest, especially with the explosion of new FTS programs in the country.

**FTS and local food**

The cornerstone of FTS, getting local food in schools, has been a subject of great interest to scholars in the last decade. Analysis of FTS parallels many of the current debates about local foods, including civic agriculture, embeddedness, and the local trap. Bagdonis et al. (2009) use Lyson’s (2000, 2004, 2005) concept of civic agriculture to frame the comparison of two FTS programs. Specifically, they focus on FTS as a strategy for what Lyson calls “problem-solving” in the agricultural system. They employ a frame analysis (Goffman 1974; Benford and Snow 2000) to understand the role of “champions” in influencing FTS initiatives in a rural and an urban school district in Pennsylvania. Program champions are those “who initiate, inspire and direct these FTS activities play crucial roles not only on an operational level, but in setting the stage for ensuing forms of civic engagement” (111). Bagdonis et al. conclude that program stakeholders frame three different problems and potential goals that FTS can solve, and that while the main component of civic agriculture is the creation of local food systems, “local agriculture represents a secondary framing in both [the] case studies” (117). This means that although creating relationships from purchasing local foods is at the heart of civic agriculture, the program champions in their case study were more concerned with other facets of FTS programs, such as offering access in poor food environments,
influencing students’ nutritional behavior and choices, and supporting livelihoods to slow the decline in rural communities.

An article from Allen and Guthman (2006) sparked debate about the values of FTS programs and underlies some of the current literature on FTS. They argue that current FTS programs “reflect an overarching reorientation (perhaps inadvertent) from public to private and national to local” (406). FTS programs encourage a devolution of responsibilities from the federal government to individual school districts, perhaps creating more inequality between school districts and participating farms than there had previously been, especially since they are often built from the ground up. This way, they argue, FTS programs reflect the shift from the welfare state of the 1940s to the neoliberal state we see today. Allen and Guthman critique the Kloppenburg et al. (1996) assumption that proximal or local governance leads to more justice and sustainability, saying that their support of populist localism devolves previously national responsibilities to the local. In the context of FTS, they find this:

…particularly troubling, because school food programs are public entitlement programs designed to ameliorate the effects of poverty, while devolution has serious consequences for equity. Devolution also abdicates responsibility on the part of the federal government and places it in the hands of those who happen to reside in a community, regardless of whether they have the will or wherewithal to act (409).

They also offer critique of some underlying objectives of FTS programs, such as punishing children for poor health and constructing students as consumers, which reinforces choice as a value of neoliberalism. They are wary of the idea that changing taste preferences can lead to change in the food system, and point out that the change is coming from the supply side in an attempt to alter demand. In a later piece, Guthman
(2008:431) also warns that FTS programs may reinforce inequality through their spatial distribution, since the most successful programs are typically found in affluent, heavily white school districts, unless they are “heavily subsidized by private foundations or the public sector.”

In a commentary, Kloppenburg and Hassanein (2006) respond to Allen and Guthman’s (2006) critique of FTS, saying that they take somewhat of a universalist approach to studying FTS programs. Kloppenburg and Hassanein argue that FTS programs are diverse and each one could be evaluated individually, an extremely valid claim considering the number of FTS programs in the country has exploded in the last decade and they span all sorts of geographies. Allen and Guthman (2006) conduct their research in California, the most populous state in the country with an abundance of industrial and large-scale organic agriculture. In response to the critique of local governance and devolved accountability, Kloppenburg and Hassanein posit that “the turn to locality is motivated not by some perceived virtue inherent to a particular location but by the prospect of fostering the engagement of citizens in an active process of change in which proximity literally grounds thought and action” (418; original emphasis).

Additionally, they critique Allen and Guthman’s arguments that FTS programs reinforce current neoliberal values, but instead argue that school decisions are made through public policy as opposed to market processes, and that grants and funding for projects are not meant to create inequalities but to keep programs in operation. Instead of constructing consumers and creating governance through consumer choice, they argue, FTS programs restrict student food choices in order to limit their intake of low nutrient, high calorie foods.
Izumi et al. (2010) take a different approach by situating FTS within an embeddedness framework to explore how regionally based food distributors can institutionalize local food in schools, as well as how they are limited by the structural context of school food. While embeddedness may be considered a “hallmark” (338) of FTS programs, Izumi et al. draw on previous work from Goodman (2004), Ilbery and Maye (2005) and Watts et al. (2005) to question the degree to which traditional alternative agrifood systems mesh into the conventional versus alternative binary. Izumi et al. argue that the work of Sonnino and Marsden (2006) depicts the fluid nature of the boundary between alternative and conventional systems due to individual and corporate linkages between scales, and that:

This holistic approach to embeddedness is particularly useful for analyzing the role of regionally-based food distributors in farm to school programs because it places these efforts within their publicly funded context. In addition, it exposes the powerful disembedding forces – such as budget constraints, that shape their development and the degree to which they are territorially embedded. (339)

Izumi et al. find that structural constraints, particularly school food budgets and limited federal reimbursements, are likely to disembed FTS programs by creating an environment where cost, as opposed to territorial embeddedness and relationships between farmers and food distributors, is the main factor in determining who and where to buy from.

Stemming from these articles and theoretical frameworks, Sonnino (2010) recognizes that while FTS programs perhaps resonate with neoliberal values on the surface, this does not discount the potential for change and sustainability as it has to do with school food. Sonnino engages with current critiques of local, including the local trap (Born and Purcell 2006), protectionism and defensive localism (DuPuis and Goodman
2005; Allen et al. 2003; Hinrichs 2003) and the blurring of boundaries between global and local scales (Feagan 2007; Sonnino and Marsden 2006). Working to understand FTS in the context of sustainable development, she emphasizes the local trap literature, saying:

By emphasizing the economic, environmental and social tensions and contradictions that food re-localization may bring about, the local trap literature is dismantling the assumption that local food systems unequivocally contribute to sustainable development (24).

Sonnino lists three major issues of LFS that may conflict with democratic goals of sustainable development: that the interests of key powerful players in LFS can result in particularism and defensive localism (from DuPuis and Goodman 2005), that only places with a particularly well-known “terroir” will benefit from re-localization (from Feagan 2007), and that proximity does not necessarily lead to a more socially just food system (from Born and Purcell 2006). Sonnino summarizes the problem with, “the argument is that Farm-to-School programs have to work within the constraints of the current political and economic system, with its general push towards neo-liberal values and forms of governance” (36).

Using two case studies from the United Kingdom, however, Sonnino works to show that while FTS initiatives may, in fact, promote the same neoliberal values as the traditional school lunch program, they still tend to promote values of sustainability and equitable community development. In addition, because producers and consumers are both involved in the case studies, Sonnino feels that FTS transcends the “instrumentalism” of the market and starts to create more of a commitment to sustainable food. She finds that in this case, the public is not constructing food as a binary between
local and global or conventional, but alternative as a way that promotes organic, local, and fair trade products. Sonnino encourages empirical study to address questions of sustainability within FTS programs instead of the sole use of “abstract debates about the interplay between neo-liberalism and localism” (36).

**Contributions of this thesis**

While previous studies acknowledge the numerous concepts that are conflated with local and, in some cases, the potential outcomes (both positive and negative) of devolving federal responsibility for FTS programs, few if any question how various actors within programs construct what “local” actually means. Many of these studies critique the use of local food systems as a solution to problems caused by the globalization of agriculture, yet this space, for the most part, remains abstract and undefined. The reoccurring critique of assumptions about “proximity” and its potential benefits and outcomes needs to be grounded in more context. Bagdonis et al. (2009) show how champions influence the framing of problems that FTS can solve and the ways in which FTS can solve them. In this case, the ways in which program stakeholders conceptualize local food have an effect on buying decisions.

This thesis shows the ways in which key stakeholders in FTS programs construct local within a particular place, as well as factors that influence their construction and the perceived importance of buying locally. Using the framework of the “local trap,” it portrays buying local as both a practice grounded in a concrete reality and an abstract concept imagined by study participants. While the literature has largely concerned
questions of sustainability and whether or not FTS is an actual departure from the current school food system, how buyers and distributors understand local has a big impact on where money is going and how programs operate. As major actors in FTS programs have noticed, the demand for fresh produce and “local” food from parents has increased dramatically in recent years. The growing attention and demand for “local grown” or “fresh” produce is a major reason as to why FTS proponents feel they need to define what local food is; in this respect, they can guarantee whether or not food for their FTS programs, is, in fact, what they consider to be local. How local is constructed within FTS programs is significant, then, because it gives further insight to questions that academics have asked about problems of scale, embeddedness in the market, place-making, defensive localism, and civic agriculture by shedding light on what constitutes the local scale and how this influences school food buying decisions. By grounding the local trap in how participants conceptualize local, we can understand if key decision-makers conflate localism with outcomes such as sustainability, social relationships, or an alternative to global agriculture.

Most importantly, perhaps, is that the number of FTS programs is exploding, involving millions of hours of work and millions of dollars in investment, both federal and private. “Local” has also been defined by the USDA and Congress has recently passed bills to support buying more local food for schools. Because local food is the cornerstone of FTS programs, investigating how local is understood and practiced becomes critical to both theory and policy.
Chapter 3

Case Study and Methods

This section will review the study site selection for the project and the methods used to collect data for this thesis as well as techniques employed for data analysis.

Study site selection

North Carolina is a state with a large land area; it runs 503 miles from east to west and 187 miles north to south, giving it a total area of 52,712 square miles. It has the greatest range in altitude of any state east of the Mississippi River, from sea level along the Atlantic coast to 6,684 feet at the peak of Mount Mitchell in the Blue Ridge Mountain Range (NC State University 2010). This research was conducted in the Appalachian region of North Carolina, which is limited to the western arm of North Carolina that shares a border with Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, and South Carolina (Figure 3-1). It includes 23 counties; the eastern border contains Ashe, Alleghany, Caldwell, Burke, Rutherford and Polk Counties (Meter 2006). Each of these 23 counties has points of elevation that reach 1,200 feet or higher. The Appalachian region of North Carolina is a space that is both bounded by topographical features (the Appalachian Mountains) and political designations (state lines).
There are several reasons why the southwestern Appalachian region was chosen as the site in which to study how decisions are being made about buying local food for schools, the first of which being how its physical geography affects farmers’ ability to grow food. This space is located within the Mountain Division of North Carolina, is of a relatively high altitude, and experiences a climate common to mountainous areas (NC State University 2010). Due to the difference in climate between the western and eastern portions of the state, agricultural activity in North Carolina varies greatly from place to place. Given the cooler temperatures and rugged topography, farming in the Appalachian region of the state is significantly more difficult, and often leads farmers to participate in specialized agriculture for very specific markets. At the same time, the longer growing season in the southern mountains, particularly in areas like Hendersonville, lends itself to
major apple production, which has become an important crop for North Carolina’s economy (ibid). The average farm size in western North Carolina is about 85 acres, with 57% of farms containing less than 50 acres. There are about 450, 600 acres total of cropland, and this region sees about $5.4 million of farm subsidies, which totals 5.6% of the state’s total farm subsidies (Meter 2006). In general, this region of North Carolina faces shorter, more variable growing seasons and mostly contains small family farms that produce small quantities of food (ASAP 2010). Thus, unpredictable seasonality coupled with difficult terrain for agricultural production makes food production in the area variable from year to year, something that greatly affects the buying ability and willingness to procure food of CNDs in this region.

Additionally, this area, along with the rest of the state of North Carolina, has been in an agricultural transition period since the Federal Tobacco Quota Buyout in October of 2004 (NCDA-CS 2010). Prior to the buyout, many western North Carolina farmers relied on tobacco production as their livelihood due to the relative stability of the tobacco market (ASAP 2003). While North Carolina continues to be the top tobacco producer in the country, the post-buyout tobacco yield has dropped since 2004 (NCDA-CS 2010). This has hit farmers in four western North Carolina counties hard, and a significant number have sold their land and discontinued farming in the area. An area NGO, concerned with the loss of small farms, has created a transition program to help western North Carolina burley tobacco producers convert to vegetable production, which they have determined is a viable alternative (NCDA-CS 2010).

Perhaps the most important reason why the Appalachian region of North Carolina was chosen as a study site for this thesis is that many school districts in this area
participate in either one or both of two of the most highly praised FTS programs in the country. The state of North Carolina has been a national leader in FTS and has become a model for other states. One of the original FTS programs to form in the area was through a partnership between the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (NCDA-CS) and the Department of Defense (DoD) in 1997 and is now run solely by the NCDA-CS. This FTS program is accompanied by another major FTS program headed by a local NGO, the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture (ASAP). ASAP is headquartered in Asheville, NC, and its location and influence was a major impetus for conducting research in the Appalachian region of North Carolina.

Data collection

Data was collected over a four week period between late May and early July 2010. The primary method of data collection while in the field was semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted to better understand how the concept of local is constructed and employed within FTS programs in southwestern North Carolina. Pre-structured questions were created initially to facilitate the interview, but they also allowed flexibility to continue on a different track as thoughts were brought up by the informant (Bernard 2000). Before conducting any interviews, approval from The Pennsylvania State University Internal Review Board (IRB) was secured. Precautions to protect informants were enforced, including providing information about informed consent, requesting permission to interview, storing interview data in a secure location, and concealing informants’ identities if requested (Dowling 2000).
I made the decision to concentrate my interviews on the “middlemen” of the FTS programs: program coordinators, buyers, and distributors. These are the people that are responsible for most of the decision-making within FTS, and they provide an important link in the FTS commodity chain. The interview process began with identifying and contacting child nutrition directors (CNDs) from southwestern North Carolina using the North Carolina Department of Defense Farm-to-School Program website to determine which school districts participated in the programs. Three officials from the NCDA-CS that are involved in the marketing and distribution for the government-run program were also contacted. The first interview was with an official from the NCDA-CS in order to better understand how the program functions in the state and how the NCDA-CS defines local. Afterward the initial interview, three interviews with CNDs from southwestern North Carolina school districts were conducted. While the original research design proposed to conduct five interviews, the snowball method was employed to learn of other useful contacts (Bernard 2000) and the number of interviews and type of participants was expanded.

After the four initial interviews, two food distributors that worked with two of the previous interview participants were contacted, as well as CNDs from other counties recommended by a participant. Overall, twelve participants were interviewed, including six CNDs, three food distributors, one member of the NCDA-CS and two members of ASAP. One of the CNDs worked in a school district located in an urban area, while the other five worked in rural county school districts. Of the three food distributors, one was involved with four southwestern NC school districts, one was involved with three southwestern NC school districts and one was involved with two southwestern NC school
districts. The distributors were regionally based, as opposed to operating at a national scale.

Ten interviews were conducted face-to-face in the participant’s place of work, including school district administrative offices, one food distribution warehouse, one farm store, and one roadside produce stand. Two interviews included tours of distribution warehouses and storage facilities. One interview was conducted over the phone and one interview was conducted via e-mail due to time and travel constraints of the participant and the researcher. Each interview lasted between 30 and 120 minutes, depending on the quality and usefulness of the information being provided and the participant’s willingness to answer questions. Overall, approximately, 12 hours of interviews were conducted. Interviews were recorded with a small digital voice recorder, and minimal handwritten notes were taken to record repeated keywords, gestures and emotions of the participants (Corbin and Strauss 2008). At the end of each interview, the participants were asked if they knew of any other people who may be able to provide information that would help with the research process. This snowballing technique was meant to not only provide more informants, but to also reveal the networks of social and economic relationships between CNDs, school food distributors, government officials and NGO directors (Bernard 2000). In some cases, follow up e-mail questions and phone calls were made to clarify points and ask further questions a couple of months after the original interview.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, participant observation at a conference, in the Appalachian Family Farm Tours, and in a Wallace Center webinar were also used as methods of data collection. The conference, held in a western North Carolina city, was part of a series of meetings open to CNDs, chefs, distributors and farmers in order to
foster relationships and discuss issues concerning buying local food. Handwritten notes were used to record discussion brought up at the meeting. Topics covered at the two-hour meeting included information sharing, FTS and farm-to-chef programs and tutorials by ASAP volunteers on how to use specific functions on their website to connect with farmers with distributors, chefs and CNDs.

The Appalachian Family Farm Tour is an event sponsored and organized by ASAP to connect the public to their local farmers and food. The full tour included over 25 farms in six western North Carolina counties and was held June 26-27 for five hours each day. While it was not possible to visit every farm, about 10 farms were visited, some of which were providers for school districts participating in FTS programs. Limited questions concerning farming practices, types of food grown, types of products sold, farmer attitudes toward selling to local markets and preferred outlets for selling produce were asked and recorded by hand.

The webinar was arranged by the National Good Food Network (NGFN). It was held in mid-November, and participants were members in the food value chain including producers, non-profits, funders, distributors and retailers. The webinar addressed issues involving “scaling up” of food system changes, and was meant to help those involved in the value chain explore ways to address cited obstacles in producing and buying regionally grown food, such as insufficient processing and distribution infrastructure.

Finally, primary documents were used to supplement the interviews, farm tours and conference and provide further information on local agriculture and farm-to-school buying and selling. They provided additional context about the key individuals involved in each particular farm-to-school program and school district, as well as information on
national school food buying guidelines that must be followed. This helped to situate interviews within a broader context. The documents included bid letters, price lists, produce lists, newspaper articles, photographs of school gardens, school newsletters, CND newsletters, local food guides, farm directories, CND buying guidelines, and government reports. Some of the documents were provided by interview participants, while others were found online.

Data analysis

Recorded interviews and general impressions of how the interview went were transcribed verbatim less than one month after the interviews were conducted. One interview was discarded due to a lack of information relevant to this project. Before beginning the process of data analysis, notes were reviewed to uncover themes and trends within the interviews, which were coded to facilitate understanding and to begin asking questions about the data (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Excel spreadsheets were created in order to categorize themes from interviews as well as visually picture the information. The spreadsheets were used to uncover repeated themes and sub-themes from the interviews. Interviews were grouped by the occupation of the participant; one spreadsheet contained themes from interviews with CNDs, one contained themes from interviews with distributors and one contained themes from interviews with the government official and the NGO directors. For example, a theme that was present in each of the interviews with the CNDs was “problems and barriers to buying local for schools,” and sub-themes were “cost,” “seasonality,” “storage,” “farm size and certification,” and “labor.” This
facilitated comparison and analysis of constructed concepts and discourses in the interviews.

Based upon interviews and analysis, there are clear themes of how buying local is conceptualized and practiced by the study participants. In the following chapters, these themes will be evaluated as the ways in which local is understood and contested by participants are explained.
Chapter 4

Program History and Key Actors in NC Farm-to-School

Below, a history of each of the FTS programs will be discussed, as well as a brief comparison of goals and how local food is defined within each program. Following this comparison, each participant in the study will be briefly introduced to explain their roles within the FTS operations in the Appalachian region of North Carolina.

NCDA F2SP

One of the original FTS programs to form in the North Carolina was established in 1997 through a partnership between the NCDA-CS and the DoD. Beginning in 1994, the DoD offered its produce-buying services to several types of institutions, including hospitals, schools and prisons. School districts that participated in the DoD Farm to School Program (DoD F2SP) worked with the DoD to purchase fruits and vegetables grown in state for distribution to their schools. Generally, the DoD worked through state departments of agriculture to establish relationships with cooperatives and growers, the logic being that state agricultural personnel should be most familiar with the agricultural landscape of their state, including which farmers have proper certifications and which farms can produce in the volume necessary to offer produce for a statewide program. School food service could buy produce through the DoD with commodity entitlement funds, Section 4 and Section 11 funds and general funds from within the schools.
Because the DoD did not provide distribution services, distribution of produce depended on the state’s agriculture department capabilities (Kalb and Shore 2009).

The original North Carolina DoD F2SP was created to test the market for Red and Golden Delicious apples, which are almost entirely grown in the western mountain region of the state. Because the market test was successful in schools throughout the state, meaning children responded positively and apples were bought in large quantities and consumed, the North Carolina Department of Defense Farm-to-School Program (NC DoD F2SP) was adopted gradually throughout the rest of the state. In 1998, the USDA hosted a Town Hall meeting in North Carolina in order to build relationships between potential partners in the school food service throughout the state. By 2004, over sixty school districts had joined the program, which was viewed as a way of promoting North Carolina agriculture and linking farmers to schools (Center for Food and Justice 2006). The stated goal of the program was “[to get] fresh locally grown produce from the farmers directly to the schools” (NCDA-CS 2010).

In 2007, however, the DoD bid out their produce business to private industry. Previous to this event, the DoD had ten field-buying stations throughout the country. The NC DoD F2SP was buying through an office in Virginia, where the produce was bought and sold to schools. At first, the NCDA-CS attempted to work through the private business that had won the bid from the DoD, but found that things were not running as smoothly as they had previously. In an effort to recalibrate the program, the NCDA-CS assisted in the establishment of the NC Farm to School Cooperative in 2009 to facilitate the purchasing of produce from North Carolina farmers by school buyers (Fleetwood 2010).
Today, the NCDA-CS runs a statewide FTS program, taking care of everything from finances to storage and delivery. The NCDA-CS creates a schedule of commodities that they will provide each year for the FTS program based on grower capabilities and seasonal availability. The farmers within the NC Farm to School Cooperative produce 19 different produce items for the FTS program and collectively submit a bid for the school districts that prices their produce for the year (Fleetwood 2010). CNDs from participating school districts place orders electronically for each commodity they wish to purchase, including which available weeks out of the year they would like them delivered. The Market Division locates farmers within the state to supply the desired quantities of produce. Distribution workers for the NCDA-CS pick up produce from farmers on Sunday and deliver it to the schools and school systems’ centralized storage facilities located in Butner, NC, on Monday. The state owns delivery trucks and two large warehouses that are used as storage facilities (ibid).

On its website, the NCDA-CS states, “The program has been well received. By buying produce directly from North Carolina farmers the child nutrition directors know the students are getting locally grown produce and the program has opened an additional market for the North Carolina farmers” (NCDA-CS 2010). The North Carolina Department of Agriculture Farm-to-School Program (NCDA F2SP) is well-regarded throughout the country, and in the 2009-2010 school year they did about $800,000 worth of business with North Carolina schools and farmers (ibid).

As of July 2010, the NCDA-CS was buying from about thirty North Carolina growers that are involved in the NC Farm to School Cooperative. While the NCDA-CS deals directly with the cooperative, the participating growers both produce food for
schools from their own farms as well as buy from other farms to supplement demand.

Roger, a member of the NCDA-CS that works in one of the FTS divisions, describes working through growers in the cooperative with:

There’s about thirty farmers in [the North Carolina Farm to School Cooperative]. They have to be GAP [Good Agricultural Practices] certified... GAP certification creates somewhat of a barrier for grower participation, but some of these farmers that are members of the North Carolina Farm to School Cooperative are pretty good size growers and they’re also marketers for other growers’ product. For instance…we have three apple facilities in western North Carolina that are GAP certified, good agricultural practice, and they actually market apples for probably fifty other growers. Indirectly, we’re working with, um… well directly we’re working with thirty; indirectly we’re probably working with 150.

Due to the size of the program, officials at the NCDA-CS believe that it is important to have large farms involved in the program in order to meet volume demands. Because the majority of large farms are located in the eastern region of the state, much of the FTS participation from farmers is from this area. Figure 4-1 indicates where the majority of produce is coming from, as well as what types of produce are coming from particular parts of the state.

Figure 4-1. 2009-10 NC FTS program participation (from ncdagr.gov).
All of the apples come from the western part of the state, mainly Hendersonville, along with a lot of the strawberries and some of the tomatoes. In 2009 the NCDA tried to buy potatoes from a western North Carolina farmer as well, but after a drought the product came to them green and ungraded, and the deal was discontinued. Products that are grown in great volume such as lettuce, watermelon, blueberries, potatoes and sweet potatoes come from the eastern part of the state.

The NCDA-CS provides a number of outlets for CNDs and farmers to learn about their FTS program. There is a fair amount of information on the NCDA-CS website, including available FTS commodities, produce calendars, commodity and nutritional information, educational resources, promotions, and instructions on how to get in contact with the NCDA-CS if interested in the FTS program. Additionally, the Farm-to-School Division participates in conferences held by the Department of Public Instruction that are attended by North Carolina CNDs. There are breakout sessions held every year on different topics; in October 2010, a session was held for CNDs on GAP certification, food safety, and different issues concerning farms. These sessions are intended to bring more awareness to different aspects of FTS programs. Moreover, every year a March Across North Carolina takes place, where members of the NCDA-CS and some farmers travel from the eastern part of the state to the western part. Along the way, FTS exhibits are set up and different vendors sell their produce to schools.
Growing Minds

The NCDA F2SP is accompanied by another major FTS program headed by ASAP. The stated vision of ASAP is of “strong farms, thriving local food economies, and healthy communities where farming is valued as central to our heritage and our future,” while the stated mission is to “help local farms thrive, link farmers to markets and supporters, and build healthy communities through connections to local food” (ASAP 2010a). ASAP has a number of different farming- and food-related ventures in the Appalachian region, including creating local food guides, farm-to-hospital programs, educating producers and consumers about selling and buying locally, farmers’ markets, family farm tours, farm tourism, and economic development. Additionally, and most importantly for this thesis, ASAP has a FTS program called “Growing Minds” (ASAP 2010a). ASAP is the regional lead agency of the National Farm-to-School Network, and so they assist (but are not in charge of) programs in Kentucky, Tennessee, South Carolina, Florida, and Georgia.

ASAP provides a somewhat different view on the purpose of FTS. The goal of the Growing Minds program is to “give children positive experiences with healthy foods, including farm field trips, nutrition education, school gardens, and local food in cafeterias” (ASAP 2010a). Grace, a representative from ASAP, summed up the goals of their work in schools with:

I guess our overarching goal is to have children associate a positive experience with healthy, local-grown food… because we feel like if they just have a positive experience, that’s going to help them. And we focus more on the younger ages, thinking that we’ll have a bigger impact on their future decisions and behaviors and attitudes… So I think our overarching goal is to help them have that experience and just to
communicate to the larger community that local food is about community health.

For Grace, “community health” includes the physical health of community members as well as economic prosperity, knowledge, and a sense of togetherness. She believes that,

The more we’re connected to where our food comes from, the more likely we are to want to eat foods from local farms which will make us healthier, will make our economies healthier, you know, it’ll increase our knowledge of our communities which makes us healthier that way.

Current projects include serving as the Regional Lead Agency for the National Farm to School Network, bringing chefs to classrooms to offer educational experiences for children, supporting school gardens, providing resources through the web and conferences throughout the state and country, building connections to help serve local food in schools, and conducting FTS market research (ASAP 2010a). While ASAP services school districts in 24 counties in North Carolina, Growing Minds is most involved with getting local food into the cafeteria in nine western North Carolina school districts, including Asheville City, Buncombe County, Henderson County, Jackson County, Haywood County, Madison County, Yancey County, Polk County and Rutherford County School Districts.

The Growing Minds FTS program differs significantly from the NCDA F2SP. While the NCDA-CS plays the role of both broker and distributor, ASAP does neither of these; rather, they bring farmers together and train them in how to sell to schools in addition to educating child nutrition directors on the importance of participating in FTS and buying local food for schools. They help to connect farmers with distributors and CNDs, as opposed to taking on a middleman role so as not to impose on the existing systems and relationships between CNDs and their distributors.
We bring farmers together, we train farmers, we kind of train the child nutrition directors on the importance of this and why they should do it. They know how school food works so we don’t have to train them on that, but we do have to train the farmers and the community people on how that works, you know, so we help professionalize them through a number of different initiatives.

Some of the initiatives include a cost-share program, business training, marketing assistance and providing promotional materials, such as “Appalachian Grown” stickers.

In the past, the Growing Minds program has received some critique from farmers (not necessarily those involved with the program), agricultural professionals, and advocates for encouraging CNDs to work through distributors. These critics have several arguments as to why CNDs should be dealing directly with farmers, one of which is that working through distributors might negate the social value behind buying local food. According to Grace, they have said “it isn't as effective if there is no direct relationship with the farmer and the buyer [school].” Additionally, there is an economic concern that farmers may not get paid enough when working with a distributor. Grace explained that:

They also believe, though I have never heard this articulated well or with info to back it up, that farmers are getting less for their products by going through a “middle man.” Yes, they do take less for their products, but distribution is not free! Farmers would incur lots of costs to do this distribution themselves. And I am a bit tired of hearing that farmers should form a cooperative...in my experience, this is not necessarily the answer. It can be, but only if lots of sound business planning is done and the market analyzed for its profitability.

Some people are concerned that farmers do not receive enough compensation from distributors, while ASAP is concerned that without distributors, the farmers end up paying a lot out of pocket to deliver food.
While ASAP has been criticized for working through school food distributors, they feel it is more organized than having farmers deliver directly to schools (ASAP does not have the capacity or desire to deliver food), arguing that:

A lot of people think that’s a sell-out instead of having the farmer deal directly with the school, but the way I look at it, is that if a child nutrition director is willing to work with a couple of farmers, there’s a limit to how many farmers she’ll be able to work with… because that’s individual invoices, that’s payments, that’s people coming to her back door, it’s just so… By not working through a distributor, you’re almost canceling out some of the other farmers that might be interested.

The people of ASAP believe it would be nearly impossible to find a farmer, especially a small farmer in western North Carolina, who would have the interest or ability to deliver to dozens of schools. Instead, they prefer to work within existing institutional structures and to support various distributors that are willing to buy locally by promoting them to CNDs:

The distributors are good at distributing. We need to keep them in business because they’re a vital link in all of this… So Polk County for instance, they selected Carolina Produce as their distributor because they heard he buys from local farms, and that’s why he got their business. So that’s going to make him want to continue to buy from local farmers. That’s what his customers, the schools, are telling him they want.

In a way, the directors at Growing Minds feel that by using a distributor, they are able to include more farmers in the program than they would be able to otherwise, since CNDs do not necessarily have the capacity to conduct business with more than a handful of farmers. For example,

A CND, and one that was very into farm-to-school, told me that the most she was willing to work with individually would be three or four farmers. What if 10 farmers are interested in selling to the schools and don’t want to form a cooperative in order to do so? By working with the farmer coming to the cafeteria back door, you have just cancelled out farmers that could be providing product.
By giving more farmers the option of being able to sell to the school market through distributors, ASAP feels that it is building a far-reaching, sustainable system that allows farmers and CNDs more freedom of choice.

ASAP uses several different methods to reach out to farmers, distributors and CNDs alike. Grace emphasized that forging relationships is an important part of outreach and education, and that continuing conversations with various stakeholders in FTS programs can lead to more business. ASAP also provides a variety of promotional materials, such as an apple poster that shows where the growers in Henderson County are located that can be used in school cafeterias. Occasionally they provide money for CND education; for example, last year, they paid for a CND that has been very enthusiastic about FTS to go to a conference in Portland, Oregon. They also awarded $2,500 to two school systems to purchase equipment that would make handling fresh produce easier.

Some of the more innovative strategies that ASAP has used to promote their FTS programs include providing experiences with locally grown produce. For example, ASAP bought CSA shares for cafeteria managers to use personally, so they could experience firsthand the quality of local produce. They also took the cafeteria managers out to the farms where the produce came from in order to meet the farmers and see how the food was being grown. Last year, there was a lot of cabbage available to schools, which children were unwilling to eat at first because it was not something they typically ate at home. However, ASAP brought in the farmer that grew it to walk around the cafeteria and a chef for a cooking demonstration in which they made a simple stir fry, and the students “were scarfing it up.” Many of these outreach strategies include bringing FTS
participants from both sides of the supply chain together to experience “locally grown” food.

Program comparison

The NCDA F2SP and Growing Minds are quite different programs operating at different scales; however, the general idea and goals behind the programs are somewhat similar. Both of the FTS programs strive to provide fresh, local produce in participating school districts for as many weeks of the year as possible, yet the concept of what “local” is tends to be a subject of debate. An important difference that has affected the implementation and operation of each program is how local food is defined. The NCDA F2SP abides by the same definition as the USDA. As Roger says, “When they say it’s local, they mean it’s grown within the state of North Carolina.” As was mentioned previously, due to North Carolina’s large land mass, according to the NCDA-CS, local food in schools could be coming from over 500 miles away in some cases. This conceptualization of local does not include other states, but is meant to support the general agricultural economy of North Carolina. As an example, when the NCDA-CS advertises a product for the program, they are advertising it state-wide. There are no other requirements for a farm to qualify as local; participating farmers do not necessarily have to abide by certain practices (as long as liability is assumed by GAP-certified growers) and are not limited to a certain size. While Roger emphasized program goals such as providing fresh fruits and vegetables to schoolchildren and increasing nutrition education and awareness, he also noted that:
We are the Department of Agriculture, our job is working with, you know, part of our job is working with farmers and all, so sure, we definitely like to increase their market, for the growers to sell into, and that’s definitely a goal, that’s definitely part of, that’s why there, that’s why farmers are doing what they’re doing is to make a living, and to, part of our job is to help them, help them do that, help them create markets and… uh, you know that they can sell their product into.

The NCDA-CS works to include as many interested farmers as possible in their FTS program in order to support agriculture across the state. The school districts in the Appalachian region are also generally much smaller than those in the central and eastern regions of North Carolina, and so the NCDA-CS must be able to buy in large enough volume to fill the orders of so many school districts.

Meanwhile, ASAP has defined local food as within a 100-120 mile radius of Asheville, which is the market and population center of the Appalachian region (Figure 4-2). This radius was chosen after ASAP conducted a survey asking residents in the region to explain what is considered “local” to them, so their definition includes parts of the geographic area that people responded with. Additionally, Grace explains that:

It encompasses a geographic region that has an identity. The southern Appalachians has a culture, has an identity, a lot of common characteristics. So it’s also just about the culture of this area. Because that encompasses southwestern Virginia, eastern Tennessee, a little bit of upstate South Carolina, and northern Georgia. So it’s centered on Asheville because that’s where we are, and that’s where the bulk of markets are.

In order to clearly define which farms fall within that radius, ASAP runs an Appalachian Grown certification program. The certification is not about growing practices; instead as Grace explains, “It’s just about where the food is grown. And [farms] have to meet the definition of a ‘small family farm’, which basically means that they make the majority of the decisions and take the majority of the risks involved.” Because the mountainous
topography makes it difficult to farm large tracts of land, a great majority of farms in western North Carolina would qualify under this definition. A general criticism that Grace had regarding most state FTS programs is that they “only work with large, mega-farms.”

![Map of Growing Minds’ local area](image)

Figure 4-2. Counties within a 100 mile radius of Asheville, NC.

It appears that the difference in the way local is constructed between the two programs is due in part to the purpose the program serves. The NCDA-CS/USDA definition is backed by the goal of promoting the entire state’s economy and to support
North Carolinian farms of all kinds, while the ASAP definition promotes a much smaller farming economy, as well as a preservation of a regional, “Appalachian” culture and identity. At the same time, ASAP will not discourage western North Carolina school districts from becoming involved in both the smaller-scale Growing Minds FTS program as well as the NCDA F2SP. As Grace notes, while ASAP defines local as within 100 miles, “a lot of people are really satisfied with [produce] coming from North Carolina.” She understands why the state program runs the way that it does, but she still laments that farmers just over the state lines should not be excluded:

> What’s unfortunate is that here in western North Carolina we kind of get really small and we’re surrounded a lot by other states. And so it’s silly not to work with… those farmers don’t… you know, it’s just the roads that connect them, the relationships, the community aspects of it all, that part of it doesn’t know those boundaries, those state boundaries. So we like that we’re able to work within all those areas, but it doesn’t make it quite as nice and neat and tidy as it is for a state program.

While members of the Growing Minds program have worked closely with the NCDA-CS, a major complaint about the NCDA F2SP is that a majority of the produce, aside from apples, is procured from the eastern part of the state, as mentioned above. ASAP believes that for a FTS program to be truly effective, the children consuming the food should be able to visit the farms where their food is coming from. A student in Asheville City School District, for example, may not get the chance to visit a farm supplying tomatoes to their school if it is located east of Raleigh. ASAP believes that buying from the western region of North Carolina helps promote community and economic development in the Appalachian region. However, they understand why the NCDA-CS does not buy much of its FTS produce from the area. The farms are small and
difficult to get to, and they would not be able to procure large quantities of produce from them.

Both Roger and Grace mentioned the importance of having local food in schools and its role in shaping consumer preferences. It was noted that children are the “future generation of grocery shoppers,” so not only is it important to teach them about eating fruits and vegetables, but also to encourage them to eat local produce and to tailor their taste. ASAP focuses more of their efforts on younger-aged children in hopes that it will impact their future decisions. The NCDA-CS has had success not only in encouraging children to eat North Carolina produce, but also in influencing their parents’ buying decisions. As Roger explains,

They interviewed some of those kids and the kids talked about they liked it and they thought that they were going to encourage their parents next time they went to the grocery store to buy those products… you know, they’re the next grocery shoppers so it’s important that we do the best we can to educate them about the fruits and vegetables and buy locally.

From using local produce for their separate FTS programs, both ASAP and the NCDA-CS have the potential to sustain future business for farmers.

These two programs work in conjunction with CNDs, who are in charge of ordering produce for schools among many other responsibilities and distributors, who often have a great say in who they will buy produce from. CNDs and distributors are the key actors within FTS programs in regards to what types of produce is being bought and from whom.
Child Nutrition Directors

A CND’s job entails a great number of obligations. According to multiple participants, they are responsible for each of the cafeterias in their district, including hiring and firing, sending out bids to food vendors, creating menus, nutritional analysis, making budget decisions, buying food for meals, and handling deliveries from distributors and the NCDA-CS. CNDs must use their budgets for all of these activities; for example, one of the participating CNDs is responsible for four cafeterias and in the past year she had just over a one million dollar budget. She runs the cafeterias, and of the four feeding sites she had a total of 21 employees, herself and a part time bookkeeper. About $400,000 of that budget went to food, while about $375,000 went to salaries and benefits. The participating CNDs manage between four and ten feeding sites with anywhere from 1,800 students to 4,350 students, which are relatively small school districts compared to some North Carolina counties east of the mountains.

There are many regulations that CNDs must follow when creating menus and making buying decisions. The National School Lunch Program is federally funded through grants-in-aid from the USDA. Schools only receive federal aid for each student that is fed, as opposed to all students attending the school. According to the CNDs for the 2009-2010 school year, a free lunch given to a student with parents of a certain income level was reimbursed $2.68, while a free breakfast was reimbursed $1.46. A reduced cost lunch was reimbursed $2.28, while a reduced cost breakfast was reimbursed $1.16. Finally, for students that paid full price for meals, a lunch was reimbursed $0.26 and a breakfast was reimbursed $0.25. The revenue generated from Child Nutrition Services
must pay for food, supplies, salaries, benefits, taxes, training, travel, computers, software, equipment, repairs, printing and indirect costs back to the school system. One of the participants broke down the costs of running his school lunch program as compared to running a restaurant into a pie chart, explaining:

Typically, your food costs [in a restaurant] can range from 25-40%. In schools, it’s usually more around 40% because of that $2.68. Labor cost is typically between 40-45% because… that’s the one good thing about state jobs, is that there’s good benefits, so there’s benefits on top of that. So when you’re talking about 40% food costs, you really only have about $1.20 to work with with the food, and that’s when you start taking out your juice is about 11 cents, your bread is about 10 cents, your vegetable, whatever it is, um, is about 20 cents, your fruit, whether it’s fresh or canned, can range from 10 to 25 cents, and your entrée is easily… about the max you can go is about 45 cents.

Almost every CND cited cost as a barrier to being able to purchase what they desired and participating in FTS, including purchasing local produce. While each CND expressed interest in participating in either the NCDA F2SP or Growing Minds in order to get fresh produce into schools and to support regional farms, most of them felt constrained by their budget, which affected their ability to participate.

Cost is a critical factor in determining who to give the bid to and what foods can be purchased. One of the CNDs provided a document she had written as a guide for other CNDs, employees, and her distributors on the breakdown of each meal. To qualify for reimbursed federal funds, each lunch meal must have, at a minimum, two ounces of protein, two or more serving of different vegetables, fruits or both equal to ¾ cup, eight servings a week of grains and eight ounces of milk. Additionally, the School Meal Initiative (SMI) federal regulations require that weekly menus must be 30% or less calories from fat, 10% or less saturated fat and meet the Recommended Daily Allowances
for protein, calcium, iron, carbohydrates, Vitamin A and Vitamin C. Of similar importance, a forthcoming regulation (as of the 2009/10 school year) would require CNDs in North Carolina to limit cholesterol to 200mg or less and to limit food preparation to baking, roasting, boiling and steaming. Federal, state and local procurement regulations state that buying must be through the formal bid process, including everything from food and beverages to equipment. Together, all of these regulations have a great impact on how CNDs are able to perform their required duties, especially making buying decisions. In some cases, CNDs feel that with all of the restrictions on their food buying power, being able to buy local is a luxury and simply out of the question.

**Growing Minds participant**

Of the six participating CNDs, only one, Sarah, participated in the Growing Minds program. Sarah works in the most urban school district of all of the CNDs interviewed. Her school district has ten feeding sites and about 2,500 students. Of those students, 47% of them qualify for free or reduced lunches. Two of the schools in the district use the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetables Snack Program, which is a separate grant program from the USDA to serve fresh fruits and vegetables as a snack on a daily basis. The district receives federal reimbursement for the program, and Sarah has worked particularly closely with ASAP to provide produce for this program. While Sarah receives about $73,000 worth of commodity food deliveries annually from the NCDA-
CS, she does not choose to participate in the NCDA F2SP. She noted that it would not be cost effective to use the program, explaining that:

I don’t have a storage facility of my own. I have to… purchase space in other facilities for storage, cooler storage, greater storage, that kind of thing. And delivery, I have that here. So it’s really not cost effective for me to participate in that farm to school program, because it would cost me more to get it delivered. I can’t do that.

The produce distributor that Sarah already works with provides her with the lowest bid and is able to give her the products that she wants. Thus, working with the NCDA F2SP would mean that she would have to pay the NCDA-CS distributor for some produce items. Additionally, she would not have a place to store the produce until it was ready to be served in schools.

**NCDA F2SP participants**

Two of the CNDs participate in only the NCDA F2SP: Betty and Ginny. Betty works in a very rural county school district on the North Carolina border with just four schools and about 1,880 students. She manages 21 employees and a part-time bookkeeper. She participated in the NCDA F2SP three years from the interview date. Her school district was chosen to participate in the program so that she could use her commodity entitlement dollars to go toward fresh fruits and vegetables without having to spend more money to buy those particular items. She also works with NC Farm to School Cooperative, which is convenient for her because she has to write fewer specs and it gives her buying power. From working with the cooperative, she has seen some savings in food costs, ever important with CNDs, and has also been able to introduce new items
in schools for students to try. Betty’s regular produce distributor that works independently from the NCDA FTS program is located in the county to the east of her school district, and he often goes to the Asheville and Atlanta farmer’s markets to pick up food.

Ginny works in a county school district that shares a border with another state. She manages nine feeding sites in her school district of approximately 4,350 students. The 2009-2010 school year was the first year that she participated in the NCDA F2SP, but she normally uses a produce distributor that works in her county. She bought some items through the NCDA F2SP that she would normally buy through her produce distributor because they were slightly cheaper. Her distributor travels to the Atlanta market weekly to buy produce for his roadside produce stand and the school district. Ginny has been very active in coming up with strategies to get local food into schools; she recently participated in a study of buyers and growers that was intended to determine barriers to buying local produce.

**Growing Minds and NCDA F2SP participants**

Two of the six CNDs participate in both the Growing Minds program and the NCDA-FTSP: John and Jerry. John works in a rural county school district in the northern Appalachian region of North Carolina. John has been a CND in his school district for nearly four years. He was impressed with the system that was in place when he arrived at his position, so he has not made many changes in recent years. He directs six feeding sites that feed approximately 2,200 students daily, while the total enrollment in his
district is approximately 2,600. This particular school district is in a county with a large number of family farms that have formed a cooperative and are able to sell to schools, and it is surrounded by other counties dominated by agriculture. While his bid went to a national distributor, he also works with the family farm cooperative that is located in his county and part of the NC Farm to School Cooperative for buying produce. This particular group of farms works with both the NCDA-CS and ASAP to provide John’s schools with food.

Jerry is the CND for a fairly rural county school district. This county is on the southern border of North Carolina. He is in charge of seven feeding sites and manages 50 employees. Previously, Jerry worked as a CND in a Florida school district, where he was responsible for 44 feeding sites and 350 employees, so he enjoys the smaller load. He feels that it allows him to experiment and be more creative with FTS, saying, “The cool thing is for me, when you have 44 schools, you can’t do stuff like [farm-to-school and school gardens]. When you have seven schools, you can do stuff like this.” He went on to explain that due to the volume and organizational demand that his large feeding operation in Florida required, he did not think participation in a FTS program was feasible. Aside from the deliveries he receives from the NCDA-CS, Jerry works with two producers; one is located just over the county border to the southeast and the other is located just over the county border to the west.
**No FTS program participation**

Finally, the last CND, Karen, does not participate in any FTS program but tries to buy locally, budget permitting. Karen works in a North Carolina county school district with about 3,700 students. She manages eight feeding sites and has a universal breakfast program and after school snack program and summer feedings. She also received the USDA Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Grant to serve all four of her district elementary schools. She appreciates the NCDA F2SP and hopes that will be an expanding program, but has not chosen to use it because

You have to order a year ahead of time and I price my produce weekly and because most child nutrition departments are running on such a tight margin right now, I’m afraid to commit those… essentially commit those funds that aren’t out because I don’t have the ability to sustain or incur the financial loss that might occur. Do you understand what I’m saying? If I decide to buy strawberries at $13.75 a gallon for next year, and next year the market price is $9, then I have just cost my program $5 a gallon.

This is one of the challenges that Roger mentioned of working with the North Carolina Farm to School Cooperative for the NCDA F2SP, which causes Karen to forego participation in the program.

Below, Table 4-1 summarizes which FTS programs each CND participates in.

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<th>CND</th>
<th>Growing Minds</th>
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Table 4-1. CND participation in NC FTS programs.
Distributors

Finally, distributors represent a key piece in the FTS puzzle of buying local food. In the case of the Growing Minds program, where distributors are a separate entity from coordinators (unlike the NCDA F2SP), the distributors are the actors that determine what really happens on the ground. While they have similar perceptions about what it means to buy local, their work shows whether or not the discourses surrounding local food have any impact or significance on the ground.

Kalb and Borron (2009) discuss the four different distribution models that CNDs can use to participate in FTS. They include purchasing directly from farmers, working with a farmer cooperative, ordering locally grown food through a traditional wholesaler and purchasing regional products from farmers’ markets. Each of the CNDs interviewed chose to order locally grown food through a wholesaler, while the NCDA-CS worked through the NC Farm to School Cooperative to purchase food for the NCDA F2SP. ASAP encourages that CNDs participate in FTS through existing structures, or working with distributors that they already have a relationship with.

Kalb and Borron (2009) warn that there is no “one-size-fits-all” model when it comes to transporting produce to school through FTS. Some issues to consider when deciding what manner is most appropriate for distribution include school district size, availability of storage facilities, volume demand and distance of deliveries. For CNDs, the benefits of working through the NCDA-CS distribution network include reducing the time spent on placing orders and receiving deliveries from a single truck (as opposed to multiple trucks) every week. The CNDs that work with wholesalers also enjoy a similar
benefit; they only have to communicate with one person in order to fulfill their produce needs, as opposed to communicating with several farmers (Kalb and Borron 2009).

Nicholas Produce

Jerry’s main distributor is Nicholas Produce. Nicholas Produce, which was founded by two brothers, is Appalachian Grown certified by ASAP. Their main office is just outside Nicholas Farms, a 14 acre farm where the distributors buy a significant portion of food for schools. Jerry praised his distributors highly, saying they seek out local produce for him whenever possible. As he explained, “It’s been a real, real good thing, since they’ve worked for only us they’re always getting farms with the seal of approval so we can actually put it on our menus so that it goes home to children and the parents know that we’re buying local products.” Jerry likes to use Nicholas Produce because they are very enthusiastic about buying locally, and they are GAP certified so they assume liability for other farmers that may not be able to afford or do not desire to obtain GAP certification.

Keith, an office manager from Nicholas Produce, explained what their distributor role entails. Each week, Nicholas Produce faxes Jerry a price list, and Jerry responds with what he would like to purchase for the week. Keith sends the order to his boss, who works at a nearby farmers’ market, to procure the requested items that do not come from Nicholas Farms. They lie amidst several acres of individual farms, and often can get products like tomatoes from “just up the road.” Additionally, Keith’s boss travels to the Atlanta farmers’ market to procure things that cannot be found at the farmers’ market,
such as bananas. After the produce items for the week have been procured, the Nicholas brothers deliver it to each of Jerry’s schools. In addition to delivering to Jerry’s schools, Nicholas Produce also delivers to the school district of the county in which they are located.

**State Produce**

State Produce serves several North Carolina school districts, including Sarah’s. Overall, they serve an estimated 450 schools in both North and South Carolina. They have a relatively large facility located about an hour over the South Carolina border with a fleet of refrigerated delivery trucks and a large, refrigerated storage warehouse. They have a set of coolers at different temperatures to store different types of produce. For example, apples are stored in a different cooler than tomatoes.

As Shawn of State Produce explained, the company has Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) certification, which is a food safety certification. It dictates what the company can and cannot do as far as safe handling of produce for foods they intend to deliver to schools. It is “a management system in which food safety is addressed through the analysis and control of biological, chemical, and physical hazards from raw material production, procurement and handling, to manufacturing, distribution and consumption of the finished product” (FDA 2009). For example, State Produce only buys from GAP certified farmers. As Ginny remarked about State Produce, “They’re real serious about produce over there.”
**Spring Produce**

Spring Produce, located in the same county as Ginny’s school district, serves both Ginny and Jerry. It is a family operation headed by Happy Hal Springs. Hal’s wife and daughter manage a roadside produce stand on a two-lane, winding mountain road, while Hal handles pick up and deliveries with a refrigerated truck. In addition to his family, Hal also employs about five other people to help run the produce stand and to assist with pick up and deliveries.

Jerry recently got involved with Spring Produce. Currently, Hal only delivers to one of his schools. In the 2009-2010 school year, Hal worked out a deal on strawberries with Jerry, which he hoped “would get [his] foot in the door over there.” Hal would like to be able to service the more urban schools in Jerry’s district. However, he is the full-time produce vendor for Ginny’s schools. He makes weekly runs to the Atlanta farmers’ market to fill her produce orders, and then delivers the orders to her schools.

Below, Table 4-2 summarizes the CNDs involvement with these three regional distributors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CND</th>
<th>Nicholas Produce</th>
<th>State Produce</th>
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Table 4-2. CND involvement with regional distributors.
Chapter 5

Data Findings

After comparing the interviews of each participant group (NGO/ government workers, CNDs, distributors), clear themes on what constitutes local began to emerge. Participants across the board seemed to agree that local, while containing a definite spatial component, also had temporal, cultural, quality, and economic components. A majority of them also seemed to understand local as a continuum, as opposed to a static place. The expansive definitions of local food will be discussed as follows: local as a geographic region and hierarchy, as temporal/seasonal, as cultural, as freshness, quality and nutrition, and as economic. The participants viewed local as both a concrete practice and an abstract concept.

Local as a geographic region/ scalar hierarchy

First and foremost, almost every participant had a clear spatial definition of what constituted the local. They described a bounded space that was local to them, although in most cases they felt that a certain space was “more local” than another. In the spatial context and with little exception, local was viewed as more of a continuum rather than a binary. For the most part, terms such as “more local” and “less local” were used over “not local.”
Local as a radius

The Growing Minds program showed a definite influence on how participants defined local. Both Sarah and Jerry were quick to define local the same way as ASAP does: within a 100 mile radius, although Jerry admitted that he was flexible with the 100 mile radius and was often happy buying out of North Carolina. Due to the fact that her school district is located near the borders with South Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee, these other states fall within this definition of local food, and Sarah does consider food coming from the NCDA F2SP to be local as well. She says,

> With State Produce, we get things out of South Carolina, sometimes Georgia, they mainly… It’s kind of like the regional area where all the produce comes to first, is Atlanta for us, so our produce provider, that’s where he’s getting all his produce, he goes to the Atlanta market to get it. But then, but they also work with local apples and some local things.

While her distributor buys the majority of produce for the school at the Atlanta market, some of the farmers that fall within the 100 mile radius of Sarah’s school district travel to the Atlanta market as well and sell to her distributor. Similar to ASAP, Sarah does not necessarily consider produce coming from the NCDA F2SP to be local in the Appalachian region of North Carolina. Of the program, she says,

> You could buy a lot of North Carolina grown products, now whether you’d consider local from here, if it’s grown east of, you know, east of Raleigh, well that’s 200 miles from here… It’s a long way, and a lot of their farm-to-school is coming east of Raleigh or the mid-section of the North Carolina area so for us it wouldn’t even really be local.

For her particular school district, Sarah does not consider every North Carolina grown product to be grown “locally,” since she strictly adheres to the 100 mile radius definition.
Sarah’s distributor, State Produce, also abides by the ASAP definition of local: within a 120 mile radius of Asheville. This includes part of South Carolina, Georgia and Tennessee. However, Shawn also participates in “local swapping” or trading local, like some of the other distributors that do not work with ASAP. He said that

Akon is a big peach area, so it’s included in the 120 miles to go back to [Beth’s school district]. But you can buy South Carolina peaches, because there’s not that many peaches grown in North Carolina, but there is South Carolina, so you buy them in South Carolina and take them to North Carolina. You pack North Carolina apples and you bring them into South Carolina. So it’s a swap for whatever people have.

John also defined local as within a radius, although his definition was a bit more ambiguous than Jerry and Sarah’s. While the other two CNDs that had close ties with ASAP defined “local” in the same way, John defined it as “things produced in the county or surrounding counties.” Because this is a border county, it also includes produce coming from other states. However, when discussing his involvement in the NCDA FTS program, John said he participated because he “[likes] to support the local produce, and it is far better quality and a good price compared to what we can normally get.” His conceptualization is somewhat flexible depending on which program he is talking about. For John, buying from surrounding counties is “more local” than buying from across the state, but both are some version of local food. This flexibility reflects the idea that local is conceptualized as a continuum, unlike Sarah who constructs it as a strict binary.

Hal of Spring Produce considered the tri-state area of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia to be local, yet he prefers to buy out of the Appalachian Mountains in North Carolina before anywhere else. This is in part because Ginny, his customer, prefers it to come from as close to her school district as possible, and also due to his
desire to maintain existing relationships with nearby farmers. He buys all of his produce for the schools at the Atlanta farmers’ market, and tries to buy the majority of it from these three states. He says,

Well, for [Ginny’s] school district, um, we buy as much local as we can… Local for us is kind of a tri-state area since we’re so close to South Carolina and Georgia. But the growers we buy from out of Georgia actually live in North Carolina. And they have, you know, partial farms in North Carolina, part in Georgia.

One of Hal’s biggest suppliers has a mailing address in North Carolina and a packing house and roadside stand in northwestern Georgia.

While her distributor has a more radial and political definition of local, Ginny uses topographic markers as a way to define local for her school district. Unlike some of the other CNDs, Ginny did not have a radial definition of local. For her, “local” meant as close to her school district as possible, for both economic and geographic reasons. She felt it did not make economic sense to be buying strawberries that are shipped from California, and she preferred her produce vendor to start as close as possible to find local produce and then work his way outward. While she did participate in the NCDA F2SP for the first time in the past year for some produce, such as sweet potatoes, she thinks of “local” as “in the mountains,” where it is especially difficult to have large farms and to grow large quantities of food. Her school district is closer to eastern Tennessee, northern Georgia, and northern South Carolina than it is to much of central and eastern North Carolina.

But from where we rest in the state of North Carolina… we can be in Georgia in thirty minutes and South Carolina in forty minutes. We are just in this… it’s closer for me to go to Georgia’s state capital than to get to Raleigh, so you know, we like to promote, there’s a big thing about, you know, Appalachian Grown agriculture and buying North Carolina grown,
but in reality, right down in Tiger, which is on the other side of Clayton, we purchased apples from those local growers. So the mountains don’t know there’s a state line there. So we’re just trying to buy and get it as fresh as possible from as close as possible as we can.

Ginny recognized that the political construction of state boundaries did not encompass the Appalachian Mountain region that she considered to be local. While she has not been involved with ASAP at all, she shares a similar view of the produce coming out of the Appalachian Mountains.

**Local as within the state**

Like the NCDA-CS, several of the participants considered the state of North Carolina to be the local area, at least in regard to buying food. John and Jerry, who participate in both FTS programs, have flexible definitions of local, which include the state of North Carolina as local. As was mentioned before, John said he participates in the NCDA F2S program because it supports “local” produce and provides competitive prices. When asked how he defined local, Jerry was quick to respond with ASAP’s definition of within 100 miles, although he did not specify if he meant from his school district or from Asheville. Because Jerry also participates in the NCDA F2SP, he clarified that he must also use the state definition of local, which means North Carolina grown. While he prefers to use the ASAP definition, he said,

Jerry: …we are also in a state alliance and they have a state farm-to-school program, um… that it’s their definition is within the state of North Carolina. Now, North Carolina is a very wide state. We’re probably more local within northern South Carolina here than…

Interviewer: Than with somewhere like Raleigh.
Jerry: Right. It’s funded by the state, so they want to, they’d like to encourage you to buy North Carolina produce, so that’s why it… and it’s farm-to-school because, let’s say sweet potatoes are really coming in the eastern part of North Carolina, well they will buy truckloads of sweet potatoes and get those to schools.

Jerry considers Growing Minds to be “more local” than the NCDA F2SP. He also realizes that when apples are coming in during the fall and early winter, they are being sent over to the eastern part of the state, so he believes that it “balances out” when he receives strawberries earlier from the year. To him, this sort of trading of local products within the state “hopefully keeps the money more locally.”

Keith, one of Jerry’s distributors, aligns himself in the same manner as Jerry in regards to what is local. Because Keith works on a farm and his office is surrounded by small family farms, he considers “true local” to be “something that grows in the back of your own farm or on a farm around the area here.” At the same time, he considers buying from the state of North Carolina to be local, much like the NCDA-CS. His definition, like Jerry’s, is fairly flexible. There are various stages of local, centering on what is closest to the cluster of farms that Nicholas Produce is situated in. Keith summarized his definition of local with:

A lot of times, so local is what we get out of the back back here, what we get on the farm, we do that. But it’s not that big a percentage that’s really local, because when you’re dealing with big orders like the schools, we do [two school districts], the hospitals, stuff like that, and there’s not enough out there. You know, we might call Pennsylvania local, because that’s the closest thing you can get to local. So, you know, that’s how it works.

The conceptualization of local at Nicholas Produce was, like Jerry’s, somewhat hierarchical, meaning some places are “more local” than others as they are further away. As they search out produce to fill the order for Jerry’s school, they start with their own
farm, as well as surrounding farms in the area, followed by produce from the state, and then they move out systematically to find produce.

**Local as a scalar hierarchy**

Betty was unsure of how she actually defined local in terms of a bounded space. Betty views “local” food as a sort of tiered hierarchy. She thinks that the “most locally” she could buy would be from her own county, but realizes that there is no existing “farm system that [is] able to deliver to us in the quantities and time frame that we would need it by” to support her school district. She says that within 100 to 200 miles is “as local as we’re going to get here,” which would include Tennessee, Georgia, Virginia and South Carolina. While she is not sure that the produce coming from the Atlanta or Asheville market is shipped in from other places, she would count as far as Asheville or Atlanta as local as well. She also counts the NCDA F2SP as local because:

It may not be within that hundred or two hundred mile radius, but you’re helping local farmers out somewhere. If it is Hendersonville for apples, or downstate for, um… sweet potatoes, or if it is out in California for raisins, the boxes of raisins, it’s helping a farmer out somewhere in the United States instead of sourcing it out to some other country. So to me, it is kind of local. It may not be as *fresh* as you’d like for it to be, but it’s still local.

After she was told how the NCDA-CS defines local, Betty admitted that she had not thought about it that way. She also noted how large the state of North Carolina is from end-to-end, especially since she is very far west. Using the NCDA-CS definition of local, she felt she could qualify “local” as going into several other states, saying:

When you think about it, you could go from here to almost into Florida as long as it takes you to go from here to get to the Outer Banks of North Carolina. So you know, within North Carolina if you were to extend that
either way you could go a pretty good distance circumference-wise. Same thing with Myrtle Beach, or way down into South Carolina. Almost to Memphis in Tennessee (laughs).

Betty had the most inclusive definition of local of all of the CNDs participating; she qualified local in terms of a hierarchy, with her own county as the most local, and 100-200 miles being “more local” than produce coming from California, which she still deemed as local when considering it at a global scale. Betty also conceptualizes the nature of local as continuous and flexible.

Karen did not have a definition of local readily available, and was slightly confrontational when asked what she considered to be local. After she was told how ASAP, the NCDA-CS, and the USDA define local, she responded with

Well, if what we’re talking about is within a 400 miles radius, we definitely buy local produce. If we’re talking about within North Carolina, that adds an additional amount of produce… So I definitely buy within that range. Within a hundred miles, I would say yes we do, because I know that we, for example, this year have purchased apples from Henderson County. We’ve purchased tomatoes and cabbage that I think were produced locally.

She notes that the produce vendor that she deals with buys out of Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida for citrus, and so she would consider that to be local as well. Her lack of a personal conceptualization of local could be the result of not being involved in a FTS program and receiving less pressure to buy local than some of the other CNDs interviewed.

The ways in which the participants conceptualized local as a flexibly bounded space illustrates that local is more of a continuum than static or a binary. With the exception of Grace and Sarah, who each stuck pretty steadfastly to the definition of local as with 100-120 miles of Asheville, the other stakeholders treated local as something that
changed as it became necessary to procure produce from outside of a particular area.

There is also the idea that one can do a “local tradeoff,” where produce from a designated local area is traded with distributors in another area and is expected to have the same general impact.

**Local as seasonal/temporal**

Almost every participant said that seasonality in the Appalachian region was a major constraint on their ability to participate in FTS programs and to buy local produce. The shorter growing season in the Appalachians relative to the central and eastern parts of North Carolina make buying from the local area difficult for those that conceptualize local as within a 100-120 mile radius or in the mountains. When the growing season is at its peak, school is out for summer break. The variability of weather in the mountains can be a problem as well; flooding and droughts are not uncommon, which makes the price of local produce go up and the availability go down. In this regard, the participants’ definitions of local had a definite temporal element. Most of them recognized that local foods, no matter how they defined them spatially, were really only available at certain times of the year.

**Availability of local foods during the school year**

From August to January, apples are usually available. Items like strawberries usually do not come in until late May, when school is nearly let out for the summer. Most
vegetables that Sarah buys for her schools are not available after October in the local area, and there is always the danger that an early frost will wipe out all of the tomatoes and cucumbers for the year. Along the same lines, Betty views seasonality as a major challenge to buying food locally.

Well, here in the mountains [summer] is the time that a lot of the fresh fruits and vegetables are coming in and of course we’re not in school, so, you know, I guess that’s where you rely on other states that can produce things later or at different times of the year to be able to provide that for you, that’s the biggest thing.

Around late October or November is usually when Betty sees a drop in the delivery of fresh fruits and vegetables. Betty can take advantage of the summer growing season, however, because she has summer feeding in her middle school cafeteria for seven weeks. Karen talked a bit about supply and demand, saying that if consumers are demanding fresh fruits and vegetables in the winter in her school district, than those fresh (not canned or frozen) vegetables are going to have to come from “somewhere else.” By the time students are back in school, a lot of the produce Ginny likes to use, like strawberries and peaches, are not in season in the Appalachians. She says, “At the time that we’re coming back, we’re back that last week of August, and then you know, everything’s really coming to a halt.” By the last week of October, the farmers are expecting the first freeze, which puts an end to the growing season. This affects the schools receiving local mountain produce because “in terms of really local, grown in the mountains produce, there isn’t a whole lot that we can tap into because of the restrictions of the time frame.”
Managing seasonality

In order to manage this problem, Ginny is a proponent of starting at an “interior core,” which would be her county, and then spread out as needed to find the product that she has menued. She does not have a defined radius of local because “We’re going ‘Georgia’s okay, South Carolina’s fine’ where we are located. We’re just looking for as close as possible.” Taking advantage of the NCDA F2SP also allows her to expand the region from which she prefers to buy produce. Hal, Ginny’s distributor, said that he is typically able to buy produce from the mountains in August and September, but that occasionally farmers are surprised by an early frost in September. In the winter, Hal cannot procure any local produce with the exception of apples.

Jerry and John did not see seasonality as quite as much of a problem as the other four CNDs did. John said that he tries to get around mountain seasonality by menuing seasonal foods, and Jerry’s distributors get around it likely by expanding their buying operations to the Atlanta market. Both Jerry and John also decide on produce purchases weekly, so that gives them some flexibility in case there is a bad crop or adverse weather conditions.

Keith estimated that about 40%-60% of produce that he purchases for Jerry’s schools is from the local area, depending on the type of food and what time of the year it is. He says that when the seasons are “down,” he often goes from his county farmers’ market to the Atlanta farmers’ market, since “they have a warmer climate, they can grow twice in a year what we can grow once in a year.” When he is unable to procure produce
from Atlanta, he moves further out systematically, to Pennsylvania, Arizona, New Mexico, California, or Washington.

A few months into the school year, around late October or November, Shawn is unable to procure most types of produce from the local area. He says that after that period, most of the produce, largely with the exception of apples, comes from California. The unpredictable mountain weather can also affect their buying practices. For example, State Produce normally does three strawberry buys a year from a grower in the county in which they are located, but due to weather during the 2009-10 school year, they only could buy once. Additionally,

One of my main growers in North Carolina is in Cashiers [in south Jackson County along the border with South Carolina]. So I bought tomatoes, cabbage, peppers, cucumbers, all that ‘til they was gone… from right there in North Carolina. Then, due to the rains, the storms, weather-related that we can’t control, then we had to move further away. We had to go into like Cherry Grove, North Carolina. We had to go into Columbia, South Carolina in order to get certified farmers that’s got the food safety for me to be allowed to put it in the schools.

While Shawn tries to move outward from the 120 mile local radius as the seasons change, by the winter months, most produce is coming from California or Florida.

These responses to seasonality demonstrate that stakeholders in FTS in western North Carolina recognize the limits of how feasible it is for these programs to operate year round. At a certain point during the school year, it is simply impossible to continue buying from within a 100 mile radius, within the mountains, or within the state of North Carolina, and distributors must expand their procurement practices to encompass a wider area. Typically by January, most fresh produce will be coming from California or Florida, or CNDs have to turn to frozen or canned produce. It changes the understanding of local
as a practice to something that is informed by seasonal availability. This illustrates how participants understood that the practice of buying local is not always a positive, easy, or feasible activity. It also shows how the concept of local as flexible; instead of immediately resorting to buying produce from California, distributors try to move outward from their location as the weather changes in order to keep buying from as close as possible.

**Local as culture**

As discussed before, Grace mentioned that buying local connected children to their heritage and to an Appalachian culture. Several other interview participants understood that the Appalachian region had a culture, particularly as it had to do with small, family run farms that are particularly visible within the rural areas that most of these school districts are located in. Few also felt that creating social ties between students and farmers reduced the stigma around farming as a profession and made food more relatable to students. At the same time, this culture of small, family run farms directs most producers toward selling to farmers’ markets where they might get premium price for their produce. Buying local may create or maintain an Appalachian farming culture, but the large presence of very small farms that cannot produce great volumes of food to sell to schools in bulk can become a barrier to buying locally.
Creating social ties and relating to food

The CNDs often treat produce they deem as local differently in the cafeteria than they do other food items. ASAP provides Appalachian Grown stickers to schools that participate in Growing Minds, so Jerry, Sarah, and John can label food this way as well as hand stickers out to students to create awareness and popularity of local food items. Additionally, the CNDs also put up other promotional or “Know your Farmer” materials to showcase support for local farmers. Jerry’s schools are adorned with posters featuring the two brothers who work as his distributors so that students can see who delivers their food every week. While John does not differentiate local foods on the menu from foods not coming from his county or surrounding counties, he does hang posters and pictures of the local group of family farms in the cafeteria. Since so much of the food for the cafeterias comes from these farms, it’s a way for students to “know their farmers.”

The CNDs that do not participate in Growing Minds also differentiate local food from other food in their cafeterias. Sometimes North Carolina farmers will provide posters and other promotional materials to Betty’s produce distributor to put up in the cafeteria showing where the food comes from “so the kids know that they’re eating something that’s more local than coming from another state or county.” Ginny makes sure to label produce as North Carolina grown where it’s applicable.

Part of the job of a CND is to find ways to make cafeteria items appealing to students in order to ensure that food is consumed and not wasted. While this has reduced many cafeterias to give space to commercial vendors and “junk food” such as chips and cookies, some of the CNDs interviewed viewed advertising local food as a good
marketing strategy. Betty believes it would be a great marketing strategy to be able to sell students produce that is local, especially if it is coming from their country or western North Carolina because “a lot of our kids can relate to that.” This connects the local food to the visibility of the farms in this area.

While ASAP is concerned about children being able to see where their food comes from, few of the CNDs saw that as their responsibility in regard to local food. Most of them said that it was up to the teachers in the classroom to take students on farm field trips or to invite farmers to come to their classrooms. Jerry was the most involved in trying to bridge the gap between producers and consumers through educational and other strategies. Jerry thinks the most important part of FTS is to keep local farmers in business, yet he does not stop with buying produce for schools; he also has been working on ways to create social relationships between farmers and students and to educate stakeholders on the importance of FTS so they can pass their knowledge to others. He arranges for his distributors and farmers to come to schools for “Meet the Farmer Day,” during which they go to classes and talk to students. In addition, they have taste tests of seasonal vegetables that students may not have tried, such as heirloom and yellow tomatoes and different lettuce varieties. These interactions, he feels, “gets kids interested in local foods. “

Jerry has even been able to take local food one step further by having some of the high school students grow hydroponic lettuce in greenhouses, which, as he says, is “about as local as you can get.” The lettuce students grow is mixed in with regular standard lettuce, and Jerry is convinced that you can tell the difference. He provided pictures in which the school-grown lettuce leaves look very green, crisp, and vibrant. While he
realizes that growing food within the schools does not do anything to help the farmers, he has noticed that salad participation has increased tenfold. Students are excited about eating salads because they know their friends are growing it. Additionally, he thinks it is important for students to understand how food is grown and to connect it back to the agricultural roots of the Appalachian region.

**Personal links to farming**

Both Jerry and Ginny were interested in buying local because they have a personal connection to farming. Jerry’s parents came from large farming families, and so he relates to the area farmers. Currently, he is working on his own ¾ acre farm, with which he feeds his own family and gives some of the produce to families in the area. He has received advice and assistance from a man in the area that has been farming for fifteen years, and in a few years Jerry would like to write a paper or book on the “how-tos” of farming in the Appalachians. Because he has had so much involvement with farmers in his county, he feels it is his responsibility to support them through the responsibilities of his job.

Ginny is involved in gardening, and she has received tips from a neighbor farmer on which types of plants to grow and techniques to allow them to flourish. This neighbor “took pity” on Ginny and her husband and even gave them some extra strawberry plants with instructions on growing them. She has also witnessed the trials and tribulations of this farmer trying to make a living producing food in the mountains, which is no easy
Her relationship with this particular farmer has inspired her to try to buy from as close to her schools as possible.

**Family/small farm culture**

While she did not have a spatial definition of local per se, Karen mentioned concerns about being able to buy in enough volume from “local” farmers and she did not “know that the local movement has gotten to the point where it can compete with the really large agriculture entities. You know I’m not really sure how we would define local.” In this regard, it seems that Karen, while she perhaps does not have a geographic definition of local, she seems to construct it as related to farm size, and perhaps a movement against dominant agriculture systems in the United States. These small farms are quite visible in the rural county where her school district lies. Because Karen links “local” with small farms, she is concerned that working with small area farmers would not yield the produce she requires to feed 2,500 children daily.

Sarah noted that the farms in the east are much better able to supply to schools, since they are larger in size and tend to produce a minimal variety of crops in greater bulk. In the urban area surrounding her school district, many of the restaurants purchase food from the city farmers’ market, but for the volume that school food requires “it’s a little more difficult.” Sarah also said that it was important to expand the concept of local outside of her own county, because there simply is not enough farmland to supply to her schools. As she stated:

> Everybody you talk to has a different definition of what they think is local. You talk to one person they say, well you’re buying from [our county]
people, and you’re like, what?! Uh, no, we don’t do that *(laughs)*. That’s *too* local! You know, you really have to expand it. I think we’re at a bit of a disadvantage in the mountains, we don’t have… *large* farms. Most of our farms are smaller in acreage, so they aren’t producing a whole lot of any one thing. Well, when you’re talking, you know, we feed 2,500 kids a day; you need that volume in order to feed them.

However, the CNDs are able to get around this problem somewhat by working through distributors that pledge to buy as much as possible from the local area. Like Grace said, distributors are able to buy from several different farms to meet volume demands for schools, and then make one delivery every week. This cuts down on the number of people that CNDs must contact and in the end allows the CNDs to work with more small farmers that may be interested.

CNDs are required to buy through GAP certified farms or distributors, and they must also assume liability insurance. Because the farms are so small, many of the farmers are not able to, or do not want to, buy the liability insurance and apply for GAP certification that they would need to sell directly to schools. Three of the CNDs mentioned that this was a constraint on their ability to buy from the local area. GAP certification is expensive, and Karen cannot imagine that enough small farmers would be able to pay for it to meet the volume demands for her school district. As she explained:

> If it’s gonna cost 500 or 700 dollars to get a GAP certification, you’re not gonna pay to get a GAP certification for a crop that is only $200 worth of green beans or $500 worth of green beans, so unless there’s a cooperative or something established that can somehow get GAP certification for really small or boutique size farms, I can’t really get food from them.

Karen’s distributor will only buy from GAP certified farms, and so she experiences limitations because of this.
State Produce only buys from HACCP and GAP certified growers, although the growers often buy from smaller farms to fill out order demands. For this reason, it becomes difficult for State Produce to buy from many small, local farms.

Anything we buy from anybody wherever it’s coming from, we’ve got to have a certificate of food safety, whether they’re a California grower or whether they’re a North Carolina grower or South Carolina grower. But we’ve got to have that on file, in house, that we know. We have to keep up with every item that comes into here, and be able to get it back if there’s a recall on lettuce or romaine spinach. If I’m buying from fifty small farmers that’s bringing me one to ten boxes of tomatoes in here every day, that’s a nightmare to try to keep up with, and know where I sent them and how to get them back and who they come from and then you go back to the farmer, and he says no, I don’t have any insurance. Well your products made people sick, then it falls on me because I bought it, sold it, delivered it, so I’m responsible for it.

Having to deal with several small farmers is an enormous job administratively, so State Produce prefers to buy from one large grower. This conflicts somewhat with what Shawn and some of the CNDs consider as local, since they conflate “local” with small farms.

Jerry, on the other hand, is still able to buy from many small farmers because his two distributors assume liability and have GAP certification. Spring Produce is able to buy a lot of produce from the next county to the east, where it is a little flatter and the farms are slightly bigger. Nicholas Produce typically buys from the Atlanta farmers’ market, although much of the produce that he buys from there is produced in the county to the west of Jerry’s school district. Together, these two distributors are able to buy from many small farms and then sell to the schools, and Jerry thinks of them as sort of informal co-ops.
Small farmer attitude and practice

The produce distributors had much less to say about maintaining Appalachian farming culture and community health than either ASAP or the CNDs. In fact, Shawn had some problems with farmer attitude and practice from the local area. Because there are so many safety regulations on buying food for schools, Shawn has to be very selective with which farms he buys from. However, he said he has run into trouble with local farmers who either cannot afford to be GAP certified or will not change their practices to potentially make their food safer for children. Some of this stems from the fact that many of the farms within the 120 mile radius of Sarah’s schools are small family farms that have had multiple generations of farmers. He said,

And if you’ve got a local vendor, you’re local, and we try to source true local stuff that we can put in safely… that’s a big problem. Because farmers don’t want to change. ‘My granddaddy did it this way, my daddy did it this way, why do I need to change?’ …Just for instance, we had a farmers’ market here wanting us to use a farmer here in [our county]. And we talked to him, and he said, ‘I keep no spraying schedule, I have no certified license schedule sprayer, I don’t wash, I don’t grade, I don’t size any apples.’ We told him we couldn’t use him. Couldn’t do it.

Shawn also gave examples of smaller farms with few workers that are unwilling to harvest food in adverse weather conditions, whereas larger, more commercial farms have people that pick no matter what the weather.

While Grace talks about buying local as a way to promote Appalachian culture and community health, each of the interview participants had their own views on how buying local can maintain culture. Some of the CNDs felt that buying local gives students something they can relate to, while others strived to create social ties between students and area farmers. At the same time, CNDs like Karen and Sarah recognized that the
culture of family farms is perhaps not the best buying environment for schools, and Shawn at times was not able to work with local farmers because they had been brought up farming a certain way, and did not want to change to be able to enter the FTS buying market. Here, the idea that buying local supports family farming culture of the Appalachian region is met with concern about safety and volume demands of buying from these particular farms.

**Local as quality, freshness, nutrition**

Similar to the local trap, quality, freshness, and the nutrition of locally grown food were extremely important for CNDs. They all had some belief that buying food from within their conceptualized local space meant food was fresher, of higher quality, and retained more nutritional value than food coming from further away. Additionally, they felt that a lot of the produce coming from the local area tasted better than what one might find in a grocery store.

Most of the CNDs used the words “fresh” and “quality” to describe local produce. For example, Sarah believes that food coming from the local area is fresher and more nutritious, because it must be used quickly and so it does not lose its vitamins and minerals over time. Karen agreed to a “large extent with the proposition that closer is fresher.” Betty supported this claim, saying, “There’s nothing like fresh green beans, there’s nothing like new potatoes out of the garden versus going to the store and buying them in a can or frozen.” She said food that is fresh as opposed to canned or frozen has a lesser sodium content and does not lose its vitamins and minerals over time. Betty also
mentioned the “quality” of local food, saying that it tastes better, and that it “looks prettier too. They cook better; something that’s fresh versus out of the can or frozen.” This is especially important when feeding children, because she would like to be able to encourage them to eat more fruits and vegetables, and they may be more likely to eat food that looks colorful and interesting. John also emphasized “quality” several times, and that the produce coming from the family farm group that he works with is high in quality. However, he did not elaborate much on what he thought quality meant.

Ginny had a very specific way of thinking about quality, and stressed that local food was better in quality than food that is shipped long distances. She likes to be able to buy local varieties of items like strawberries that are not the generic grocery store variety that so often come from California. She talked about how the strawberries coming from across the country are bred to ship well and last for weeks, but lack a lot of the flavor and color of the strawberries that her friend, a farmer down the road from her, grows on his land. Although these varieties must be used quickly, she thinks they taste better and are of a higher quality.

**Food safety issues**

While several of the CNDs felt that local food is of better quality, the distributors, who must be concerned with certification and food safety, had a different perspective on the freshness of local food. Shawn talked extensively about food safety and HACCP certification, especially as it related to buying local food. Prior to the interview, there had been a salmonella scare from spinach coming from a California farmer. Shawn
discussed how the spinach had been local to some group of people, and that consumers likely had a relationship with the farmer. To this event, Shawn responded,

Everyone wants to tell you how safe local is. They don’t, they don’t want to realize that everything that’s caused a problem was local somewhere. And that farmer had no intentions of making anybody sick… but everybody misses, everybody wants to conclude that local is the best. And I agree, it’s good. It eliminates a lot of shipping. But everything that’s made somebody sick has been local somewhere.

While local food may be fresher and farmers may be acquaintances or friends, Shawn thinks it does not necessarily mean that it is safer.

HACCP certification has a lot to do with temperature. Shawn mentioned that with buying local corn, likely from a smaller farmer without access to a temperature-controlled storage facility, the corn is more likely to spoil.

Most people don’t understand with like local corn, why if they go buy it from a farmer today, if they don’t do something with it, in three days it’s ruined. And it’s because it’s not hydrocooled and the heat’s not pulled out of it, that it’s coming from a 100 degree field and it’s still hot. And then if it’s not treated right, it sours. Whereas corn that we buy from a large grower is harvested, carried and the heat pulled out of it, then it’s packed and cooled and shipped and then it will last two weeks.

Because Sarah’s schools have no storage facility, any food that is not hydrocooled or stored has a very short shelf-life, which means State Produce has to be careful with who they buy from.

Contradictions of “freshness” and “quality”

While almost all of the CNDs agree that local food is fresher and thus more nutritious, the food is often not coming straight off the farm to schools. Produce has to be inspected to meet federal guidelines, and it is then boxed or packaged. Keith explained
that sometimes food is not even coming directly off the farm to Nicholas Produce, but instead:

It has to be prepackaged up where they know it’s been cleaned and shelled and everything like that. So, if you want radishes you’re not going to get a pound of those, a half pound of those, six ounces of those or whatever. It depends on what you get in those bags; they’re coming from a processing plant that’ll package them up and then we buy them. Yeah, so not everything, you know, is going to be right off the farm.

During the interview at State Produce, Shawn presented a set of storage coolers with pre-sliced apples. The apples had been treated in a way that allowed them to age only one day for each week they were in storage, giving them a significantly longer shelf-life; the apples in storage during the month of June were to be used during the next school year. While the apples retained their nutrients and “freshness,” this still calls into question the discourse around what “fresh” actually means in this case.

Another barrier that Sarah discussed was the difficulty of handling fresh produce in school cafeterias. There are regulations on how school food workers are allowed to prepare food in order to meet nutritional guidelines (for example, frying vegetables is generally not permitted). She also has to take into account what kind of labor is needed to prepare raw products, such as potatoes.

Buying a raw product is way more difficult to handle, and I don’t have the labor or the equipment to do that… The only raw potato that we get is that we’re going to bake. Now if I had to take a raw potato and turn it into baked fries, with all the labor and equipment needed for that, well by the time you get through paying for all that you could have probably bought the whole French fry plant! So yeah, you just can’t do that. And any kind of raw product you have to be careful, you don’t want it to have a lot of prep time and you don’t want to have a lot of waste with it.
For products that can be left raw, such as broccoli, Sarah often has to find creative ways to encourage kids to eat them, like adding cheese or ranch dressing, while still being mindful of fat content.

Ginny also touched on cafeteria labor as a barrier to buying local food. Many farmers in her county grow items like corn and beans, which Ginny says are of “great quality.” However, the handling and preparation involve too much labor for her to ask of her cafeteria managers; she is unwilling to ask them to shuck corn or beans to prepare for school lunches.

Locally, they grow a lot of corn and beans, but I mean [the cafeteria workers] would really take me out and punish me if I had them shucking corn, so no corn but I’ve thought about it if somebody’s shucked it already could I buy some of that. So we’re just continually trying to find other ways to incorporate, you know, local grown.

The quality that Ginny associates with local food is also a barrier to being able to serve it in school cafeterias. Most of the local varieties of strawberry, for example, break down very quickly and must be served almost immediately after they are delivered to schools, unlike strawberries that are shipped in from across the country that are bred to last for weeks.

It always comes to mind that those [local strawberries] are so much better and even they’re so sensitive that you don’t wash them. If you got them in on Monday, you don’t wash them and then serve them on Tuesday; you wash them right before meal service and serve them because they will start to break down that quickly… so good quality.

These berries may account for a lot of waste, since she has occasionally lost about 20% of them before she is able to serve them. Product shelf life has had an impact on Ginny’s recent buying decisions; apples, for example, have a 21 day shelf life, so Ginny has a lot of flexibility in buying them. While she used to buy apples from her local produce
distributor, this past year she started buying them from through the NCDA F2SP because she could get them for two cents less, even though the apples were actually coming from the same place. However, she needs the NCDA F2SP to deliver on Mondays or Tuesdays; otherwise the products will sit in her warehouses until the next week (Ginny is one of the lucky CNDs to actually have a refrigerated facility). Her local distributor delivers to all of her schools individually when she asks, so she prefers to work with him over the NCDA-CS when possible.

The idea of local produce as something that is fresh and of high quality is both held by many of the participants in this study as well as contested. As Shawn and Sarah point out, there is great difficulty in shipping and preparing fresh produce, and the mere fact that it comes from a nearby place does not guarantee that there is trust between producer and consumer. Ginny raises the point that the “quality” of produce that is not meant for shipping long distances can mean that it breaks down more quickly and can be a waste of money. Even the fact that sliced apples can be stored for months and remain edible calls into question what “fresh” really means; in this case, freshness seems to lack some kind of temporal element that seems inherent to it. Here, as local is conceptualized as something that is fresh, nutritious, and high quality, some of the tensions that exist between local as a concept and a practice begin to emerge.

**Local as economic**

Both the NCDA F2SP and Growing Minds emphasized supporting local economies as a major, if not the most important, goal of FTS programs. Roger
emphasized that he worked for the Department of Agriculture, and that one of his main jobs is supporting and marketing for North Carolina farmers. Rich, a member of ASAP, asserted that he works for the “Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project.” In this case, “sustainable” refers to maintaining an economically sustainable local food system where farmers can not only survive, but live comfortably for their profession. The distributors and CNDs, while emphasizing benefits to local economies from buying local, had more expansive ideas of who buying local really does benefit. Additionally, participants understood that buying local had economic benefits for their school districts and distribution operations in addition to the surrounding area farmers.

“Helping the economy” and farmer survival

The first reason that Keith cited for buying locally was that it helps the economy, both locally and nationally. When he was asked to clarify if this meant that it helps only the people producing the food, he responded, “Well, you know… like one hand washes the other. You’re buying this, you’re helping them out… in the long run you’re helping yourself out, too.” Keith preferred to think on a more national scale, saying that “anything you buy in the United States is beneficial to the United States.” Shawn agrees with the CNDs that it is important to buy locally because it is fresher and it helps the regional economy.

“Supporting local farmers” was often cited as a reason for why buying local is important by the CNDs involved with ASAP. Sarah echoed some of the ASAP mission, explaining that she tries to buy locally as much as possible “because we want our farmers
to survive.” However, she seems to mean this generally, adding that “you can’t be getting your food from outside the United States; that wouldn’t be a good thing.” While it seems that the nutritional value of local food is important, the economic component of what constitutes local seems to be a bit more flexible for Sarah. John also agrees that buying from the family farm group in his county “helps the local farmers.”

Jerry has seen how farmers can be devastated by adverse weather conditions and how it can deeply affect their livelihoods. When Jerry lived in Lake County, Florida in the late 1980s, he saw firsthand how farmers can be impacted by circumstances beyond their control; in 1988, there was an unseasonable freeze, which killed almost all of the orange trees. Many of the farmers replanted the next year, but then were hit with another freeze, and few of them could afford to replant a second time. Of watching them experience this disaster, Jerry said,

Oranges were just such an important crop down there. Some of them switched over and started doing watermelons, different things like that, but most of them just decided to sell their land, so the growth and the urban sprawl, it just, it just killed the place. It just totally devastated the way of life. And that’s why even the small farmers here, I want to find some way to support them and keep them farming so they don’t build houses and stuff.

While Jerry understands that farmers within the 100 mile local radius may not be as excited about selling to schools as they are about selling to farmers’ markets where they can get premium prices for produce, the prospect of FTS may encourage farmers to take risks they may not otherwise. For example, farmers in the area that specialize in one crop may expand their plots from ten acres to twenty. While they may not be able to get premium prices on the extra ten acres of crops, they know they have the schools as a safety net, so they will make some kind of returns on the crop. This can help to keep
farmers farming and potentially prevent farmland from being sold and used in another manner.

**Shaping future consumers/farmers**

Both Roger from the NCDA-CS and Grace from ASAP mentioned shaping future consumers as an important goal of their FTS programs, though few of the CNDs mentioned this. Jerry, however, was enthusiastic about this idea and even takes it a step further by trying to excite students about farming as well as buying. Jerry is involved in a program with Western Carolina University where the school sends him five nutrition students and five education students every year to shadow him and learn more about FTS, so they will hopefully pass on what they learn when they are employed. With the education students, Jerry introduces them to gardening tools and teaches them gardening techniques that they can use in the classroom or with school gardens.

The whole idea is to get the kids to like local food. And really, the neat thing came about the other day when they were talking about this, in this particular area, in past years it’s almost like if you had a garden, it’s almost like a negative connotation because you were poor, you had to garden. This is taking a total spin it, in fact, um, they’re pretty sure a generation has missed gardening because… the kids that are in school right now, their parents don’t know too much about gardening but their grandparents do. So it kind of became almost like, um, if you said your grandpa had a garden, it was almost like, ‘well, y’all must be poor because you have a garden, you don’t go to the supermarket.’

By giving students new experiences with local food, Jerry believes he is reducing some of the stigma surrounding farming, and benefitting kids by teaching them where their food comes from and how they can grow it themselves. He encourages top students in the school district to try new entrepreneurial strategies, like creating school greenhouse
projects. Not only is he potentially shaping consumers, but Jerry also may be creating a new generation of farmers to preserve the historic farmland of the Appalachians and its farming culture, so generations can continue to buy locally.

Reducing transportation costs

Several of the CNDs stated very matter-of-factly that buying local food should reduce transportation costs and generally made economic and environmental sense. Karen speculated that “closer should be more reasonably priced because there’s not as much of a transportation component involved.” Jerry cited a rather well thought out reason why it is important to buy local food for school as it relates to lesser transportation:

Because we’re all supply and demand, in essence that’s our carbon footprint when we are requiring people to bring this broccoli from California because we love broccoli. And if you can buy it locally you can cut that down, and hopefully our dependence on oil.

To him, the small scale act of buying locally can have bigger impacts on the nation and, possibly the entire globe.

More simply, Betty thinks that it is possible to save a little money from limiting transportation, since the cost of gas is high and continuing to rise. If she could buy more from her own county, she thinks that she could save money, because “somebody having to drive to Asheville and back, if it was somebody that was local maybe getting it directly from here and you might have some cost savings on that.” She will often compare prices of fresh produce versus canned or frozen, and if the prices are close, she will pick the fresh produce.
Keith argued that buying local makes the most sense economically, due to the rising cost of freight. While food prices across the country are competitive,

It’s more expensive to go through California because shipping is so high. You know, shipping is ridiculous. Before where you just ship a truckload of apples from California or from Washington, you’d pay two to three dollars a box. Now it’s like twelve dollars a box for freight. So it, you know, it gets up there. So we try to stay away from those places as much as we can, but eventually you’ve got to order from them because you gotta have the product for people to have.

Hal mentioned that price is a big factor when determining what he can buy for schools. Because buying from the tri-state area cuts down on transportation, he says that “when stuff’s coming in cheap, it’s usually local stuff.”

While almost everyone cited reducing food miles as a reason that buying local food for schools is important, food was not delivered directly from farms to school. Shawn mentioned that they often buy from farms in the same county that Sarah’s schools are located in, but the food was usually packaged and always sent back to their facility in South Carolina, about 90 miles away, to be cooled, stored and delivered. Food safety regulations, among other things, do not allow for many of the small farmers in Sarah’s county to deliver directly to schools. In addition, Shawn needs to know that he has the product in house on Friday or Saturday for the delivery on Monday or Tuesday, so he cannot pick up produce and deliver it to schools from the farms.

While Hal says that local is cheaper because it cuts down on transportation, the food he is buying still travels to the Atlanta farmers’ market. Some of his neighboring farmers in southern North Carolina travel all the way to the market, where Hal picks up the produce and then drives it back to his produce stand. While this still cuts down the number of food miles that the food might travel if it was coming from California, the
produce coming from these North Carolina farmers still travels an extra couple hundred miles to Atlanta and back.

**Economic benefits for stakeholders**

Shawn has noticed that there has been “a big push everywhere for local.” For him, buying local is important economically, because he needs to “give the customers what they want.” In addition to maintaining relationships with other farmers and getting the freshest produce possible, Hal also is trying to get his foot in the door with the FTS market. While he is Ginny’s full-time produce distributor, he is also trying to build a working relationship with Jerry to serve more of his schools as well. Hal recognizes that they are both serious about supporting local produce, and even mentioned that Ginny is “real thorough with her job.” It is good business for him to advertise that he buys local whenever possible.

Ginny thinks that selling local foods in the cafeteria is good marketing. Because of the popularity of buying local and the attention that it currently receives, she thinks that advertising North Carolina sweet potatoes and strawberries makes students more likely to buy and eat those items.

Well, I think it’s good marketing anytime that the lunchroom ladies or the school lunch program can be doing something that is popular, helps to improve the image of our program. And so marketing-wise, I think it’s good to say North Carolina strawberries or, you know, to say North Carolina sweet potatoes to show that we are wanting to support the economy, locally if we can.

By playing into a popular trend, Ginny thinks that she can sell more fruit and vegetable items in her cafeterias.
Trading local

Jerry and Betty also think that promoting produce that grows within a 100 or 200 mile radius to their school districts in other areas is sort of like buying local themselves. For example, while Jerry abides by the ASAP definition of local and is perhaps less enthusiastic about buying produce from eastern North Carolina, he knows that apples come in during the fall and early winter in Hendersonville and are sent over to the eastern part of the state. He believes that it “balances out” when he receives strawberries from eastern North Carolina as part of the NCDA F2SP earlier in the year. To him, this sort of trading of local products within the state “hopefully keeps the money more locally.”

Betty’s distributor partners with other states, so he will promote items like North Carolina apples or sweet potatoes to another state in the mid-Atlantic or southeast that does not grow them. In return, Betty will promote whatever fresh fruit or vegetables that the partner state provides so they get a variety of new produce for the students to try. Like Jerry, this sort of “trading local” action provides some of the same benefits of buying locally, and allows students to try new varieties of produce.

Cost as a barrier to buying local

Cost was a major barrier that the CNDs discussed in buying local food for their schools. For Sarah, cost is the biggest factor in her ability to buy local. With the $2.68 reimbursement, she must buy protein, milk, fruit and vegetables for each plate of food to meet USDA requirements. Additionally,
We have to pay for labor, you have to buy equipment, taxes, and on and on and on. You’re only getting that amount of food for money… it doesn’t give you a whole lot to play with. You’ve got to get your best price for food, possible. There’s a reason why we don’t serve lobster (laughs).

When she puts out her bid for the year, she must choose the person that gives her the products she wants for the lowest price. That her distributor is able to buy some produce from the local area is seen as an added bonus.

Karen seemed to find that her ability to buy locally was the most constrained of all the CNDs interviewed. Because “the National School Lunch Program is federally funded and the requirements for use of those federal funds is that you have to competitively procure or obtain all your food items,” she felt that she did not “have the ability to impose [her] preference” on whether or not she could buy produce from nearby farms or counties. However, she would like it if food came from nearby areas, for example from Georgia or Florida rather than California, but only if she could get it for the best possible price.

Cost is less of a problem for Jerry than for other CNDs because he receives bid lists weekly from his two distributors. Because of this, Jerry is willing and able to buy local produce, and even will pay slightly more for it if it is available from the Appalachian region. For example, during the 2009-2010 school year, Jerry made a one crop deal for strawberries grown in his county.

On that particular case, strawberries, I probably could have gotten some strawberries from a different area, even North Carolina, but because I love to be able to say ‘This is [my county] strawberries, I’d pay a dollar or two more per flat.
Occasionally, CNDs are able to maneuver around federal regulations concerning competitive bids by being specific about exactly where they would like to buy produce from or what type of soil they would like their produce grown in.

These examples illustrate how economics, whether it means helping local, state, and national economies, or whether it means pricey produce, is a factor that participants took into account when constructing their ideas of local. Even though some of the ideas about how buying local is an economic act different from not buying local are somewhat abstract and potentially overstated or inaccurate, they still weigh into the decision-making process when it comes to produce procurement. For CNDs, the perceived economic benefits of reducing transportation costs did not seem to match what happened on the ground. The distributors, on the other hand, saw personal economic gain from buying local since it had the potential to help their business and attract new clients. This points to some of the contradictions present between local as a practice, which is constrained by cost, and local as a concept, which is thought to maintain Appalachian farms and reduce cost through less transportation.

**Summary**

Below, Table 5-1 summarizes which conceptualizations of local were the most important for each participant. There are clear differences across groups of participants as to which elements of local are the most significant. For example, the cultural element of local was not as important to most participants as the spatial or economic elements of local. In contrast, each participant had some idea of how buying local was related to
economics, whether it was in a positive way such as cutting transportation costs, or whether it was negative, such as the high cost of niche market produce.

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Table 5-1. Conceptualizations of local discussed by participants.
Chapter 6
Discussion

The previous chapter reported on how “local” is understood as both a practice and a concept. As a practice, buying locally means defining a space as local and working around the challenges presented by seasonality and temporal availability of produce. Most of the participants understood local as flexible and on a continuum as produce becomes less available later in the year, with the notable exception of Sarah, who subscribes wholeheartedly to ASAP’s definition of local. As a concept, local is thought of as a potential way to connect schoolchildren to Appalachian farming culture. It also reflects the small family farm culture of the mountains. Local is understood to be fresher and of better quality food, although this becomes a real barrier to buying and using local varieties of produce, and distributors must understand the risk that is also a product of that freshness and quality. Finally, CNDs understood local as a way to cut down on transportation costs, while distributors thought of it as a way to increase business with the school food market. Tensions exist between how participants conceptualize local and the actual practice of buying local and the challenges it presents.

These findings yielded many general themes surrounding the importance as well as difficulty of creating successful FTS programs that meet proposed goals and reach all interested participants, from CNDs to distributors to farmers. Additionally, the differences in results from those of Allen and Guthman (2006), Bagdonis et al. (2010), Izumi et al. (2010) and Sonnino (2010) illustrate that, as Kloppenburg and Hassanein
(2006) posit, all FTS programs are different, from the people that inspire them to the way that they are carried out. FTS programs in public schools exist within a structural context that is common across the country, yet the nuance of place affect how local is defined within these programs and how goals of buying more local produce are met. The ways in which participants conceptualize local food reflects on the particulars of the place from which their schools are located and the food is being procured.

Below, the findings of this study are discussed within the context of the literature and the broader scope of geography to show how grounding FTS research within the context of local food adds to current and future research.

**What is local?**

Like Selfa and Qazi (2005), this study shows that local can be defined several different ways within a particular place. While they narrowed it down to “place, taste, and face-to-face,” stakeholders in FTS in the Appalachian region of North Carolina constructed local differently. Like producers and consumers in Washington state, proximity and quality were important factors in determining what is local. In addition, participants in this study saw a cultural component, a temporal component, and an economic component with their construction of local. Notably absent was a face-to-face component; with the exception of Grace from ASAP, who thought that local farms should be places that children might see in their daily lives, none of the other stakeholders saw social interaction between producer and consumer as an ultimately defining aspect of local.
This notable absence of social interaction is likely to do with the highly structural context of school food. Jerry noted that each person that enters a school campus must go through a security check, which costs about $100 per person. This is a major reason (along with general time management) why CNDs buy from a limited number of distributors as opposed to buying from many individual farmers that would then in turn have to deliver produce to schools. Additionally, school food is subject to very strict health standards, and so food must be coming through relatively formal channels. This limits face time, unless it is arranged by CNDs or teachers, for schoolchildren with food producers.

**The local trap?**

Some elements of the local trap were present in the responses of participants in this study. Having stakeholders define what local is to them helped to shed light on how school districts, distributors, and farmers were or were not able to participate in these programs and whether or not social, health, and economic outcomes were conflated with local food in the dual FTS programs that operate in the Appalachian region of North Carolina. Asking how local was defined also illustrates how stakeholders imagine the way that the small scale food systems fit within a larger, global food system. In fact, they have not conceptualized it as in opposition to conventional agriculture or to large scale national farming operations, but instead see it as working within a larger, national food system.
Defensive localism

Unlike some of the California FTS programs that Allen and Guthman (2006) studied, the state government runs its own FTS program available across the entire state. By facilitating the creation of the growers’ cooperative and adhering to a definition of local food that spans the entire state, the NCDA-CS is relatively inclusive of all interested farmers that would like to get their feet in the door with the FTS market. As long as farmers are able to either meet GAP certification standards or sell to growers that assume liability for them, farmers from Durham to Bryson City theoretically have the opportunity to participate. As far as school participation goes, the bidding process limits which CNDs are willing and able to participate, like Karen, since the growers’ cooperative prices are set collectively and may not be the most competitive. Some CNDs, like Sarah, do not participate because they disagree with how the NCDA-CS uses the word “local” and prefer to work with the Growing Minds program in closer proximity. While the NCDA F2SP is more inclusive of schools and farmers than Growing Minds, because they have their own food distribution division, they may cut schools’ ties with their former produce distributors, however, which could be devastating to business, especially in counties with very large school districts.

Growing Minds is clearly less inclusive of both farmers and school districts that are able to participate. While their program is more informal than the NCDA F2SP, by encouraging CNDs and distributors to work within a 100-120 mile radius whenever possible, they are excluding the majority of North Carolina. They have even gone as far as to create their own sort of “terroir”; the Appalachian Grown certification program
brands mountain-grown produce in a way that makes it recognizable to consumers. By constructing Appalachian Grown against North Carolina Grown produce, ASAP has created a label that consumers might understand as “more local” for products coming from this area. However, the exclusivity coupled with the informality of their program discourages some CNDs, such as Betty and Ginny, from participating. At the same time, because they are working through existing structures and relationships between CNDs and distributors, as well as creating new relationships between farmers, distributors, and CNDs, they may be creating more opportunities for participation within the western North Carolina area. This shows how key stakeholders, or champions, have an influence on how other program participants define local and may also constrain who may participate in the program.

There is a concern that this kind of exclusivity can cause injustices across space. Allen and Guthman (2006) argue from their case studies that the quality and success of FTS programs differs across space, and that predominantly white, affluent school districts tend to see the best results. In the case of western North Carolina, however, Grace explained that most of the schools in western North Carolina qualify as Title I, where at least 50% of students qualify for free or reduced price lunches. Some of the CNDs mentioned that some of their schools in very rural areas have close to 80% of students qualifying for free or reduced price lunches. With a significant minority population in this area, these programs really do have the potential to broaden access to local produce for populations that may not have the opportunity otherwise. Whether or not the school can participate is generally up to the CND and who they would like to work with as their produce distributor. This reflects back to the idea that local food systems, especially as
they relate to FTS, may not promote democratic decisions because a few key stakeholders are able to impose their ideas more than other people that are involved. While FTS programs in western North Carolina have the potential to increase access to local produce in certain populations, key actors have the ability to influence which school districts are able to participate based on their outreach and strategies they use to get local produce into schools.

Reflections of neoliberalism

As far as devolution of responsibility goes, each of these programs are held together mostly through federal funding for school lunches. It is up to the CNDs to decide whether or not they can and want to participate in the programs, and the money they receive from the federal government allows them to procure local produce. While ASAP writes grants to experiment with activities, such as bringing CSA shares to cafeteria managers and bringing professional chefs into schools, Grace is adamant that FTS programs operate through existing structure and not be reliant entirely on grants and subsidies. She thinks these programs are an opportunity to create economically sustainable food systems, saying

We’re big on existing systems, don’t recreate, don’t put a lot of energy and resources into something we’re grant funded, that would have to be, this should be about economics, it should be about the school can buy it, the farmer can make a living selling it to them. And if it’s all propped up on grants and it’s not real and won’t really ever get real, you know, I think you’re just leading farmers and schools down a path that we can’t really see the end of.
Instead of using money that the schools will not have long-term access to, ASAP works to create a FTS program, or a set of opportunities to allow CNDs to purchase from sources within a 100-120 mile radius.

The actual act of procuring produce from local sources within both of these FTS programs still relies almost entirely on the lunch reimbursement coming from the federal government. The NCDA-CS simply made it easier for farmers to be able to sell to North Carolina schools by acting as distributors, being a middleman in terms of brokering, and creating electronic order forms. Neither FTS program is reliant on grants or volunteer work to remain in operation. This does not reflect a clear move to neoliberalism, since the funds for these programs still come from the federal government, and CNDs are simply finding that participation in FTS allows them to be somewhat more selective in procuring produce from a specific geographic area.

**Children as consumers**

The construction of schoolchildren as consumers, which Allen and Guthman (2006) find troubling, is in fact an objective of both programs that is viewed positively by many of the key stakeholders. Both Grace and Roger were supportive of children developing a taste for local produce, both so they encourage their parents to buy it outside of school and so they will continue to buy it when they are old enough to be making their own decisions about consumption. They would like to see a culture created around eating local food, either from the state of North Carolina or the Appalachian Grown region. Jerry not only wants children to become consumers of more local food, but also thinks
that these programs have the potential to remove the stigma from farming and might even create the next generation of Appalachian farmers. He would like to see the tradition of small, successfully run family farms stay alive in western North Carolina, and sees FTS as an opportunity to inspire this generation of schoolchildren. This points to the contradiction that while schoolchildren may be constructed as consumers, they are doing so in a way that is intended to challenge the dominant agricultural model. Allen and Guthman (2006) argue that constructing children as consumers means trying to change demand through supply, but in fact the distributors in this case are feeling the demand and responding by supplying more locally sourced food. More CNDs are giving their bids to distributors that will promise to buy as much local produce as possible. This shows that instead of creating children as consumers, the decision-making stakeholders (CNDs) are the ones actually creating both the supply and the demand scenarios in these cases.

In this way, perhaps, some neoliberal values are reinforced through these programs. CNDs emphasize health and eating well, yet these programs at their core are based on economics and farmer survival. Both programs operate mainly by the funding that the federal government provides as opposed to grants and volunteer work. Much like Kloppenburg and Hassanein (2006) argue, the two programs are working to benefit farmers within a particular bounded space and to influence and inform children in future decision-making and career opportunities. This is all grounded through working within a smaller, constructed “local” space.
Conflating the local with outcomes

Like Selfa and Qazi (2005), I have shown that each of the participants in this research had ideas about the meaning of local beyond a certain bounded, physical space. In Appalachian North Carolina, local was constructed in several different ways. Besides the obvious spatial element, local had temporal, cultural, quality, and economic components as well. While some of the local trap literature focuses on how proximal space is often conflated with outcomes of justice and sustainability, it appears that the concept of local, especially in the case of western North Carolina FTS, is made up of more than just an abstract spatial relationship. This has implications for the local trap in that the stakeholders that are involved in buying local have clear understandings of what the local can yield. At the same time, these participants had some abstract ideas about local that may or may not have been supported on the ground, yet most of these conceptualizations come from real elements they experience from buying local produce.

Barriers to buying local

Many of the ways in which participants constructed local had to do with the difficulties of procuring local produce. For example, local produce, no matter which participants’ definition, is only available during a few months out of the school year, so local has a temporal element. While this does limit what can be bought locally and when it can be bought, it has encouraged CNDs to create seasonal menus, which is another way to educate children about how and under what conditions food is grown. The freshness, taste, and nutritional quality of local produce that CNDs raved about is a barrier for
procuring and storing produce. Shawn must make sure the local varieties of produce are being stored at the right temperature to ensure that it does not break down before being delivered to schools, and cafeteria managers must plan strategically to use local food as quickly as possible to reduce waste, since the majority of them do not have storage facilities of their own. Also, some of the CNDs are concerned that local produce, usually coming from smaller, boutique farms, is far too expensive to have in school.

In these ways, their understandings of local as temporal and quality are grounded in challenges of being able to procure local produce for schools, both within environmental and structural contexts. Some of the concrete elements of buying locally, including local varieties that are not meant for shipping and storage and a growing season that is at its peak while students are on summer vacation, are issues no matter how the term local was defined, whether it was within a 100 mile radius, within the state of North Carolina, in the Appalachian mountains, or in the tri-state area. The practice of buying the “most local” produce is only possible for select months of the school year.

**Abstract benefits of buying local**

The more abstract, conceptual elements of local, including culture and benefitting local economies, may be more in line with the local trap since they are conflating certain perceived ideas with proximity. Because the two FTS programs impacting the Appalachian region of North Carolina are primarily focused on getting local produce into cafeterias, it is mostly left up to teachers to decide whether or not to teach children about growing food and the farming heritage of the region. While Jerry is hands-on by bringing
his distributors into schools for meet and greets and having school gardens, CNDs like John and Sarah do not arrange for these types of activities. Children may relate to menu items with Appalachian or North Carolina Grown stickers and to seeing posters of their farmers around the cafeteria, yet CNDs are not requiring that students be taught how they might be more connected to this farming culture.

**Economics and sustainability**

Sustainability and themes linked to sustainability (such as reducing transportation of food) were mentioned several times during interviews. Additionally, maintaining economically sustainable farms in the Appalachian region of North Carolina was a huge motivator for getting local food into schools and reaching a new market. Most of the mention of sustainability seemed to be inherently linked to helping local economies and making economically rational decisions, as opposed to creating food systems that did not degrade the environment to the point where it could not regenerate itself enough for future generations to continue farming.

In terms of sustainability, CNDs did not consider whether or not farmers were using sustainable techniques to produce food when making their buying decisions. Instead, they believed that buying from a proximal location was a way to practice sustainable consumption because it likely reduced food miles. Much of the discussion of strengthening economies, the economic benefits of buying local, and sustainability touched on the idea that buying local produce shortened food chains. For example, Betty and Keith both mentioned that buying local, or even buying within the United States,
keeps dollars within our economy which strengthens it as compared to other countries. Many participants viewed buying locally as an economically efficient choice, because it reduced transportation costs of long-distance shipping.

At the same time, food was not procured and delivered in the most efficient way in regard to transportation. As was explained earlier, due to procurement regulations and distribution inventory, food still traveled hundreds of miles between where it is produced and where it is consumed. The NCDA F2SP has a central facility in Butner where all produce is sent to first, and then shipped out to schools. Food coming from western North Carolina may be sent back to western North Carolina. Outside of the NCDA-CS distribution division, independent distributors pick up produce, which was likely sent to a grower or a processor, bringing it back to their warehouse then distributing it from there. While this is necessary to make sure they keep track of inventory and meet volume demands, food still travels longer distances than if farmers delivered directly to schools. Admittedly, although this involves considerably less transportation than produce coming from California, many participants assumed that local food is transported more efficiently, or otherwise glossed over the complexities of delivering certified local food. It seemed that the only participants that were aware of the miles the food was traveling were the distributors; CNDs always assumed local food meant it traveled a shorter distance.

Grace was frank in her discussion of sustainability. ASAP is concerned with creating economically sustainable local food systems, as opposed to advocating for sustainable farming practices. Roger as well admitted that most produce that is procured for the NCDA F2SP is coming from larger, commercial farms, which traditionally are not
environmentally sustainable. For Grace and Roger, buying local is about helping the regional or state economy and creating economically sustainable farms by providing them with another market option. They are not advocating that schools necessarily buy from environmentally sustainable farms.

The only person that seemed to take the environment into account was Jerry, who linked less transportation to fewer emissions (and ultimately, less of a dependence on foreign oil). The lack of any mention of environmental sustainability is a notable absence. The small family farms and farming culture in the Appalachian region are generally highly visible through advertising and farmers’ markets, yet none of the participants were conflating proximity of place explicitly with environmental sustainability. Because these CNDs are for the most part only interacting with their own private distributors or distributors from the NCDA-CS, they may have little knowledge of the agricultural practices that local farmers are using. The CNDs using the NCDA F2SP have even less knowledge of many of the farms that are involved in the cooperative, since they are located east of the mountains and remain somewhat anonymous. At the same time, the distributors, who have much more face-to-face interaction with farmers, are constrained by the structural context of buying operations for school food, and have to be more concerned with health, safety, and certification than they do with sustainable agricultural practices.
Embeddedness

The lack of knowledge about sustainability and farmer practices that are contributing to FTS programs by CNDs brings to light the idea of embeddedness. As Izumi et al. (2010) find, the structural context of school food buying is a disembedding force. Though Grace defines local in part through visibility of farms and works to increase farmer-consumer interaction, the CNDs making buying decisions tend to only have relationships with their distributors. The distributors, then, are most important when determining whether or not this is a system that can be influenced by social relationships that transcend simple market interactions.

Keith and Hal, who are both involved in small scale operations, often buy from their neighbors and people that they have created relationships with over the years. Keith, however, is still more likely to buy from farmers that can produce a large volume of one product in bulk, as well as from packagers that meet GAP certification standards. Shawn, who works at a much larger produce distribution operation that sells to many more school districts than Keith or Hal, generally works with large growers simply because it is easier. While he definitely does develop relationships with these growers, the decisions he is making on who to include on the produce pricing list are determined by who is GAP certified, who tracks and grades all of their produce, and who can sell to him in the volume necessary to fulfill school orders. The scale at which buying operations happen seems to have an impact on the types of relationships it creates and whom the distributors choose to include on the produce pricing list.
Scale

The true champions of these programs are also the operators: ASAP and the NCDA-CS. In fact, the FTS programs in the Appalachian region of North Carolina do not differ much from the existing school lunch system; what they offer is the opportunity to buy more food from a conceptualized local space. The space defined as local for each program serves a purpose to each of these champions. Participants may subscribe steadfastly to these definitions, like Sarah and Shawn, or may have more flexible definitions that change with the seasons and availability of food within certain places, such as Keith and Betty.

Ultimately, however, each participant seemed to recognize that these programs were not taking place in isolated spaces disconnected from the larger, global scale. The reality of both FTS programs is that they rely on the little reimbursement money coming in from the School Lunch Act and are subject to structural and environmental barriers. The growing season in the Appalachian Mountains is unpredictable, and the rugged topography does not allow the creation of large farms that produce food in great volume to sell to schools. The growing season in the state of North Carolina is notably shorter than some of its neighbors, such as Georgia. Participants were realistic in their recognition that all of the produce for their schools could not come from the local area; it would not fulfill the requirements for children’s school lunches. In these ways, the participants of this project recognized that the local, and all it encompasses, is not a viable solution for procurement of all produce, so they have to shift and jump scales when the time comes. Some of the distributors deal with this by moving outward from
their central local space, while others, like Hal, wait at the farmers’ market for the freshest produce possible to come in on refrigerated trucks. This reflects the flexible and continuous nature of local, both as a practice and a concept.

For these reasons, it appears that the FTS participants in the Appalachian region of North Carolina have not constructed a re-localization project to counter the hegemonic global food system. In fact, many of the participants apart from those of ASAP and the NCDA-CS were supportive of buying American agricultural products in general. CNDs and distributors did not have the luxury of choosing farmers that practice sustainable farming practices due to restrictions on their buying capabilities. The NCDA F2SP buys from many of the larger, conventional farms in eastern North Carolina in order to meet volume demands for their programs. All participants were very aware that it was not possible to buy produce from the local area year round, and so were realistic in their goals for the programs: provide fresher, quality produce for schoolchildren, support area farmers, and perhaps save some money on shipping costs. They saw local as something that was flexible as opposed to a static, bounded space, and were able to contextualize it within a larger, national scale. It was not separate from this scale, but necessarily interrelated. The ways in which CNDs procure produce for these programs are still based on economics and competitive buying, but these programs perhaps allow them to impose more of their preference when making decisions.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

This thesis has explored a side of FTS and its local food component that has yet to be addressed in academic literature. It has shown that within the context of the Appalachian region of North Carolina, stakeholders in FTS negotiate factors such as the seasonal difficulty of procuring produce for school in the mountains, the small farm culture of the area, the quality of Appalachian and North Carolina grown food, and the perceived economic benefits when constructing their definitions of local. While some understand local food through the influence of other stakeholders, others construct their definitions of local through their experiences of the challenges and benefits they encounter when buying food for schools through FTS programs.

It appears as though the major difference in how participants constructed the concept of local is simply the bounded space that constitutes local. This can be influenced by a program champion, by a geographic location, or by the difficulties of being able to procure local produce for school. The ways in which local are constructed then, not only have to do with nuances of a particular place, but also depend largely upon the individual and what functions they expect the local to serve. Local in this case becomes both a practice that is grounded in the difficulties of buying produce in this particular region of North Carolina, as well as something more conceptual that could yield potential economic, cultural, and nutritional benefits. It is also understood as a spatial scale that is flexible and interrelated with a larger, national scale.
As Kloppenburg and Hassanein (2006) posit, no two FTS programs are alike. While this research is beneficial in that it helps us to understand how local is defined, what factors influence this definition, and what that means for program participation and buying decisions, more research is needed on FTS programs throughout the country to continue to understand this trend in food system re-localization. The next step may be to study if, how, and where environmental sustainability through FTS programs is possible, and what those FTS programs look like. As this study also brings to light, more research would be useful on FTS commodity chains and whether or not they are really cutting down the food miles they purport to reduce. Another point of study that might yield some interesting and informative results would be examining the interaction between distributors and producers at farmers’ markets. The Atlanta farmer’s market was mentioned several times, and it seems as though many relationships are formed and decisions are made within this particular space. Additionally, understanding how FTS affects students and teachers and the ways in which they begin to shape their own meanings of local food and everything it encompasses could be an enlightening point of study. Students and teachers are important parts of these programs that were beyond the scope of this research. The ways in which they conceptualize local produce as it is influenced by these programs could be important when considering if and how FTS actually constructs consumers.

This thesis adds to the literature on the local trap by defining how local is conceptualized within a particular place and within the context of FTS programs. It shows that local is both a practice and a concept, and something that is flexible between key actors across space and time. This research and similar studies could be used by
policymakers or lobbyists in order to secure more funding for school lunches at the national level, which may make it possible for more schools to participate in FTS and buy more local produce. It could also be used when considering how the USDA actually defines local, as this study shows what the implications are for constructing a definition of local.

Finally, while it is perhaps easy to critique FTS in that it conflates outcomes with goals and may not be a great departure from the current School Lunch Program, it is undeniable that the discourses around local have spurred thousands of schools across the country into action. If nothing else, the re-localization goals of FTS lead key decision-makers to question the current food system and whether heavily subsidized, industrial agricultural products are really what they want in schools. In turn, this may cause them to explore other possible outlets from which to procure school lunch items.

It remains important, however, to understand FTS as an activity that is grounded in a structural context and based on economic transaction. At the same time, innovative program champions such as Grace and Jerry can inspire CNDs and distributors to work the system to get the types of foods they want in schools. As FTS becomes an option for an increasing number of schools throughout the country, it will continue to provide many topics for research in terms of sustainability, health, and the relationships around producers and consumers.
References


Van Esterik, P. 1999. Right to food; right to feed; right to be fed. The intersection of women’s rights and the right to food. *Agriculture and Human Values* 16(2): 225-232.


Appendix

Interview Dates and Methods

- Interview with Roger: May 19, 2010 via telephone and November 14, via telephone
- Interview with Sarah: June 14, 2010 via face-to-face interview
- Interview with Betty: June 16, 2010 via face-to-face interview
- Interview with Jerry: June 17, 2010 via face-to-face interview
- Interview with Keith: June 21, 2010 via face-to-face interview
- Interview with Shawn: June 22, 2010 via face-to-face interview
- Interview with Ginny: June 24, 2010 via face-to-face interview and December 6, 2010 via e-mail
- Interview with Hal: June 24, 2010 via face-to-face interview
- Interview with Karen: June 29, 2010 via face-to-face interview
- Interview with Grace: June 30, 2010 via face-to-face interview and November 9, 2010 via e-mail
- Interview with Rich: July 1, 2010 via face-to-face interview
- Interview with John: August 17, 2010 via e-mail
- Appalachian Family Farm Tours: Attended June 26 and 27, 2010
- Farmer-to-chef meeting: Attended June 28, 2010
• NGFN webinar: participated November 18, 2010