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Teachers' Perceptions of Student Vulnerability and Risk: Considerations for School Social Work Practice

Marianchuk, Stacey Lynn

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Teachers' Perceptions of Student Vulnerability and Risk: Considerations for School Social Work

Practice

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Stacey Lynn Marianchuk

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Abstract

Risk and vulnerability are common terms used in education, yet there is limited research on teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk. This study uses the epistemological framework of social constructionism and qualitative research methodology of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), to capture the essence of teachers' perspectives that shape understandings of student vulnerability and risk as a way to inform school social work practice. Seven teachers from a large school district in Alberta participated in semi-structured interviews, garnering insights into their identities as teachers, navigating the complex lives of students, making sense of student risk and vulnerability, and ways to strengthen supports for students in schools. Considerations for school social workers as collaborative partners in schools are illuminated, with the hope that this research will inspire further research into school social work practice and training.

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Dedication

I dedicate my thesis to my greatest inspiration for pursuing this research:

My Sister

Laurie Kiselyk

"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much" – Helen Keller

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The terms vulnerability and risk are regularly interchanged in the education literature (e.g., Brunzell et al., 2016; Hanewald, 2011; Foster et al., 2017). There is often ambiguity in the use of who experiences 'risk', is 'at-risk', or is 'vulnerable' within the context of schools (Hanewald, 2011) and variability in understanding what constitutes higher risk environments (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Teachers are also exposed to bureaucratic constructions of these terms, and notions of vulnerability and risk can take on different meanings depending on a teacher's perceived understanding of the terms and such perceptions inform practice in schools (Hanewald, 2011).

School personnel often believe they are able to identify disenfranchised students or, those 'at-risk' or 'vulnerable', yet there is limited evidence that these assumptions or impressions are correct (Bonny et al., 2000). When perceptions are grounded in deviations from dominant cultural norms, misunderstandings between the teachers, students, and families can arise, and foster alienation, reduced self-esteem, hostility, and poor academic outcomes (Irvine, 1999). Negative mindsets towards student vulnerability and risk can also cultivate attitudinal responses that perpetuate oppression, marginalization, and disenfranchisement for students (Meaney, 2016).

In the clinical literature, vulnerability and risk are primarily identified as deficit-oriented terms (e.g., Brown, 2014; Spiers, 2000). A deficit perspective can classify individual experiences at an etic level and, although an etic approach (describing a phenomenon from an outsider's perspective or someone who is outside of the lived experience) prioritizes needs in a workable framework from a social policy standpoint, it typically reflects presumptions about functional incapability at a personal and family level relative to normative or objectively determined

societal expectations (Spiers, 2000). Identifying experiences against external metrics or personal notions of vulnerability and risk is also a perilous task that can lead to judgements that support or justify more intrusive measures. External metrics informed by disclosures of personal histories and private information can also lead to blurred lines of care and control by the dominant group (Brown, 2014). This raises concerns at the wider societal level, but also within the education system, where the dominant group is largely constructed of professionals predominantly trained in education and includes teachers, school administrators/principals, school district superintendents, and school policymakers.

Generating dialogue and conversation about student vulnerability and risk within education can shape teacher behaviours when dominant narratives are examined, and such behaviours can make a positive difference in the lives of students and the wider school culture (Reno et al., 2017). Research that moves away from primarily fixed and deficit-oriented indices of vulnerability and/or risk, and towards teachers' thinking processes, has the potential to shift mindsets about how schools can work with individuals, whether they are students, parents/caregivers/guardians, or colleagues. Thus, there is value in gaining insight into, and understanding of, the experience of teachers, as teachers are the primary point of contact for many students and families, and become natural advocates of, and referral sources for, student and family needs.

Epistemological Framework and Methodological Approach Guiding this Research

This exploration of teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk is guided by the epistemological framework of social constructionism. Social constructionism understands knowledge as something that is generated and produced between people (Burr, 1995). Exploring understandings of how terminology is understood by teachers is particularly important because

language is a tool that can sustain traditional ways of knowing and practice or produce new meanings (Schultheiss & Wallace, 2012). Seeking to understand ways of knowing through the lens of social constructionism acknowledges the central and primary role of language in the transmission of knowledge and examines differences between bureaucratic uses and how teachers understand and apply the terms. Social constructionism also sets the stage for the methodological approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

Exploring teachers' perceptions within the scope of phenomenon honours the nuances of the teaching profession as a lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The lived reality of teachers supporting students who are commonly referred to as at-risk or vulnerable is also a phenomenon that is underrepresented in research. School staff come to their place of work with their own stories and personal experiences outside of the school context, just as students and families live dynamic lives beyond the school day and bring these experiences into the classroom. Educational institutions are also microcosms of the communities in which we live, encompassing diverse views and notions that may not always be shared (James, 2017). Accordingly, eliciting accounts of how student vulnerability and risk are understood by education professionals can foster opportunities for school social workers to be more reflexive in how they navigate complex relationships and potentially divergent views that often arise within interdisciplinary practice; for example, the examination of how clinical terms have been transferred into general or non-specific terms as they are taken up by teachers and in school systems can illuminate particular understandings about students and their personal and socioeconomic circumstances.

IPA was selected as the qualitative approach to inquiry and is a methodological approach that invites in-depth qualitative analysis (Smith, 2004). This approach applies a dynamic and

intentional process that moves beyond surface-level descriptions of data (Peat et al., 2019) and

allows researchers to illuminate how participants make sense of their personal world through

active engagement in interpretative activities (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). While still a

relatively new approach to qualitative research, with the first position piece published in 1996

(Smith, 2011), IPA engages a rich process of seeking to understand the lived experiences of

others (Smith et al., 2009). As an 'other' or 'outsider' to the education profession and an

'insider' to interdisciplinary teams within the education system, IPA also provided an

opportunity for me to meaningfully consider teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and

risk in a way that is relevant to the generation of school social work practice considerations.

Value of Inquiry for Social Work

Social work has a long-standing history in the education system, extending back more

than a century (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; Callahan Sherman, 2016). While social workers may

often hold different positions in schools, the term 'school social worker' is readily recognized in

the literature and, as such, it will be the term used to ensure clarity in this research. School social

workers are often called upon in schools to intervene in times of student or family crisis or

disclosures of abuse, and the broader contributions of and the growing need for social work in

schools is increasingly recognized (Huffman, 2013; Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). School

social workers are trained to intervene at a systems level, and have the potential to influence the

wider school environment, and the responses of adults in schools, to support marginalized and/or

disengaged students (McKay, 2010). School social workers are also skilled in identifying and

prioritizing unmet student needs (D'Agostino, 2013) and have an ability to critically reflect on

the myriad of complexities faced by students identified as vulnerable or at-risk, to bridge the gap

between social-emotional well-being and education to support academic success (Callahan

Sherman, 2016).

As collaborative partners, school social workers are often members of interdisciplinary teams in schools. Interdisciplinary teams are comprised of professionals with knowledge from many different specialities (Brewer, 1999) but, despite their growing presence on interdisciplinary teams, school social workers can also be viewed as surplus (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). By developing an understanding of teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk, school social workers can better equip themselves to navigate the hierarchical and bureaucratic structures and systems in education settings in order to support students (Diaz, 2013) and increase their perceived value on interdisciplinary teams. In this way, there is value in the inquiry into teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk for school social workers, because demonstrating a good understanding of the education system and the language used within it can strengthen collaborative partnerships (Gottlieb & Gottlieb, 1971). There is much that school social workers can learn from teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk to better understand the insider perspectives within the education system, improve their own practice in schools, and enhance supports for students and families. The examination of collaborative and coordinated efforts in schools can also elevate student outcomes, reduce barriers to learning, and increase opportunities for teacher support (D'Agostino, 2013). As school social workers attend to the voices and experiences of those they work alongside, social work practice in schools also has the potential to be fundamentally improved, moving forward in support of students *with* teachers and other school professionals and leveraging opportunities for authentic collaboration and meaningful change for students in schools.

Purpose of Study

Teachers and schools are continually called upon to respond to the varied needs of

students and families, and terms such as risk and vulnerability are often utilized to describe or classify student experiences or circumstances. Accordingly, this research aims to respond to an identified gap in the literature whereby the voices and perspectives of teachers are captured, to better understand how student risk and vulnerability are fundamentally conceptualized at a micro-level within schools, arguably the most impactful level of engagement and support. To have a more meaningful impact on the supports for students, families, teachers, and schools, there is a fundamental need for school social workers to better understand how teachers perceive the diverse experiences of children and youth (or students) in the context of schools and recognize the critical role of language when engaging school-based supports. Efforts to increase understanding of teachers' perceptions of student risk and vulnerability can highlight potential biases when teachers respond to the identified and perceived needs of students, maximize collaborative efforts between teachers and school social workers, and strengthen interdisciplinary practice in schools. Taking the time to explore teachers' perspectives on the personal and social understandings of student vulnerability and risk can also have enduring practice effects for both teachers and school social workers and support a more informed and responsive understanding of the experiences of students and families within and outside of schools.

Research Question and Study Objectives

This exploratory study is guided by the main research question: *"What are teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk?"* To further explore how teachers understand and respond to student vulnerability and risk, related study objectives include:

1) perceptions of student vulnerability and risk as these relate to teacher constructions of risk and vulnerability;

2) risk as separate from or part of vulnerability discourse; and

3) teacher understandings of the complex lived experiences of students and families, and whether teachers' understandings of their own experiences inform their perceptions.

The research question and study objectives seek to understand the vulnerability and risk discourse in schools and generate considerations for school social workers as collaborative partners in schools.

Situating Myself in this Research

As a social worker in the school system, and the sister of an elementary school teacher, I recognized a pressing need to conduct this research. Even though my sister and I have been employed by different school districts, there is an essence of collaboration in our professional practice, as we seek to understand the other's profession and improve our knowledge base. Through conversations with my sister and professional colleagues, I have also noticed some necessary differences in the post-secondary training programs for education and social work. In social work programs, students are generally required to critically navigate, explore, understand, and unpack their social locations, values, beliefs, biases and places of privilege. While this is not to say that education programs omit this exercise, my observation has been that the depth of this practice does not seem to be as extensive as social work programs. Social workers also seek to mobilize change within systems; however, before advocating for or supporting change in a school system, I believe that social workers must first seek to understand and learn from the education profession and its teachers, which is a group that is often just as heterogenous as social workers.

In my professional practice I have also noticed, through intentional dialogue with teachers, that perceptions of student vulnerability and risk appear to be wide-ranging and diverse. It has been my observation that how student vulnerability and risk are understood by school-

related professionals, including teachers, administrators, support staff, and school social workers has the potential to impact how the terms are operationalized in schools, and these notions can also shape relations between the student, the teacher, the school social worker, and the wider school environment. Without any concrete descriptors of how student and family experiences were defined or understood by my school district employers and teacher colleagues, I wondered if we were arbitrarily making statements about student and family circumstances, and potentially limiting what we could be observing in students without the application of labels. As a result, I found myself drawn to my social work training and practice, and vulnerability and risk research for guidance and clarity. I engaged in critical thought about social work practice in schools, which ultimately prompted an eagerness to learn more about the experiences and perceptions of teachers. I am confident that social work is well-positioned to critically and respectfully explore teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk while generating opportunities to reflect on how school social work practice, and training for practice in educational settings, can be improved.

Thesis Structure

This qualitative research engages in a thoughtful application of social constructionism and IPA, as these relate to teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk, with the aim of informing school social work practice and training for practice in educational environments. In Chapter 2, I review vulnerability and risk literature, and offer definitions for both terms. I will contextualize vulnerability and risk discourse in schools and examine school social work practice and social workers as partners in education. In Chapter 3, I explore social constructionism as the epistemological framework and detail the use of IPA as the qualitative and exploratory research methodology. IPA will be extensively reviewed, in addition to research ethics process and

procedures followed throughout the course of this research. In Chapter 4, I share findings of this research. Superordinate and subordinate themes will be presented, and substantiated by participant excerpts, in accordance with IPA recommendations. In Chapter 5, I discuss the research findings, present considerations for school social work practice, and identify limitations of the study and implications for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will consider how risk and vulnerability are defined in the literature. Risk and vulnerability discourse will also be contextualized to deepen understanding of these terms. The specialization of school social work practice will also be examined, along with the dynamic complexities of working within interdisciplinary teams in schools.

Understanding Risk and Vulnerability

The literature on risk and vulnerability is vast and includes qualitative and quantitative studies on risk outcomes and resilience, interventions in schools, narrative reviews, and literature reviews. While education and social work have contributed to the literature on risk and vulnerability, other contributing fields include nursing, psychiatry, psychology, and sociology.

Identifying and Defining Risk

To enhance the promotion of positive development, outcomes, and resilience of school-aged students, it is important to identify and understand risk (Hanewald, 2011). In a review of education literature, Hanewald (2011) discovered an indistinctiveness in defining student experiences of 'risk' or being 'at-risk.' To address the ambiguity between the two risk-related terms, at-risk and risk will be differentiated, and a range of risk features will be illuminated.

Generally, at-risk generates a movement towards a chance of unfavorable or adverse outcomes (Aday, 1994; Hanewald, 2011; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). In schools, at-risk is commonly associated with academic risk and the presence and possibility of school failure, with indi[1]cators of academic risk emerging as early as elementary or middle school (Jimerson, 2000). While school failure is generally understood as leaving school before receiving an education completion certificate, school dropout is identified as a consequence of many

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[1] A list of key terms frequently used in this thesis is presented in Appendix A: Definition of Terms

problems connected to student disaffection with educational systems (Vazquez-Fernandez & Barrera-Algarin, 2017). A lack of school connectedness can also foster estrangement from the school system and contribute to a student being at-risk (Bonny et al., 2000; Chapman et al., 2014). School connectedness is identified as a critical factor that buffers risk and increases positive outcomes for students (Bonny et al., 2000; Chapman et al., 2014), and is defined as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). Externalized behaviours associated with being at-risk that can impact school connectedness and academic success include substance use, violent behaviour, delinquency, sexual promiscuity and gang membership (Chapman et al., 2014). Consequently, being at-risk of school failure and school dropout also has socioeconomic and personal consequences, with implications for employability and impacts on self-esteem and self-concept (Vazquez-Fernandez & Barrera-Algarin, 2017).

Being at-risk is also associated with falling short of normative expectations, and is marked by threats to mental, physical, spiritual well-being (Etzion & Romi, 2015). When the term at-risk is used, there is also a presumed connection to individual, familial, and social circumstances related to marginalization and non-normative ideals that are closely connected to features of risk (Chapman et al., 2014; Lucier-Greer et al., 2014; Jimerson, 2000; Jimerson et al., 2002). Thus, a range of risk features contributes to being 'at-risk.'

Risk can be simply understood as specific concerns in need of intervention (Foster et al., 2017). Features of risk as indicators for high-risk environments and adverse behavioural or social outcomes for children and youth include parental psychopathology, socioeconomic disadvantage, urban poverty and community violence, negative life events, child maltreatment (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008), incarcerated parents, and residing in high crime areas deemed to be

particularly 'at-risk' (Lucier-Greer et al., 2014). Normative indicators of risk also include minority race/ethnicity status, low socioeconomic status (SES), unmarried biological parents, and social isolation (Lucier-Greer et al., 2014). Research on affluent youth populations by Luthar et al. (2013) extends understanding of being at-risk, with findings suggesting that affluent youth may also qualify for the label of 'at-risk' due to high levels of internalizing and externalizing symptoms, such as adverse behavioural outcomes of substance use and delinquency, even though they may not experience the social or material factors often associated with being 'at-risk.' Therefore, it is prudent to reinforce the importance of understanding particular sociodemographic features and familial considerations of risk, rather than generalizing children and youth to be 'at-risk' by drawing conclusions about risk only on the basis of specific risk factors and particular social contexts (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008).

Risk can also be associated with a lack of bonding to family, community and school (McKay, 2010), residential instability, systemic discrimination, strained familial relationships and disorganization, and mental health problems (Lucier-Greer et al., 2014; Moran et al., 2016). Physical or mental illnesses, substance or process addictions, divorce, parental unemployment (Hanewald, 2011), and social challenges experienced as a result of isolation and/or peer victimization are also associated with risk (Foster et al., 2017). Specific to school-related research, features of risk include low-income, ethnicity, one-parent or foster parent families, social worker involvement, a sibling history of school disengagement, limited English proficiency, special education needs, grade retention, and access to school lunch programs (Anderson et al., 2004). While the above indicators of risk are markers for risk-related conditions or experiences, they do not illuminate the potential influences of colonization, racialization, immigration, oppression, and marginalization. Research on school-based supports to address the

prevalence and risk of mental illness and existence of cluster suicides for Indigenous youth, deepens the risk narrative by necessarily emphasizing the multigenerational effects of colonization and residential schools (Merali, 2017). Contributing factors are often systemic and related to colonial impacts of trauma and adverse familial, social and environmental conditions, which can create a sense of hopelessness and helplessness for Indigenous youth (Kirmayer et al., 2007; Merali, 2017).

Trauma as a Pronounced Feature of Risk

Trauma is frequently identified as a feature of risk throughout the literature. Risk in the context of trauma includes simple traumas (short duration and a one-time occurrence, e.g., accidents, natural disasters, house fires) or complex traumas (longer in duration with multiple incidents of violence, personal threat, and violation, e.g., child abuse, bullying, sexual violence, and domestic violence) (Brunzell et al., 2016). The experience of victimization was also found to increase the risk for bullying behaviours, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideations, delinquency, substance use, and early sexual behaviours, while social challenges (such as isolation in schools) also increase risk of adverse behavioural and emotional health (Foster et al., 2017). Trauma can disrupt positive school experiences, and in turn create a threat of school disengagement, social conflicts or social withdrawal, self-injury, and/or emotional struggles that can translate into challenging behaviour (Hanewald, 2011). However, trauma does not take place in a vacuum and it is often situated in the wider social context, as observed by Foster et al. (2017), where community violence was identified as a variable that increases the risk of emotional, mental and behavioural problems in children and youth, specifically trauma-related disorders, internalizing difficulties, and externalizing/aggressive behaviours.

Associations Between Risk and Age

As children age into their teenage years, there is often a prioritization in research on individual behaviours and factors associated with risky lifestyle choices, and less reliance on understanding their sociocultural context or experiences (Edge et al., 2014; Woodgate & Leach, 2010). While a concentration on individual risk features for adolescents and youth may help to identify interventions to reduce health risk behaviours and increase protective factors (Bonny et al., 2000), risky behaviours are also associated with school and family contexts, in addition to individual characteristics (Resnick et al., 1997). Hence the need to continue to consider contextual factors with older youth, as adolescents and youth may experience a multitude of risks in their own lives and in the lives of their immediate family members and/or the wider social context (Hanewald, 2011).

Even though the literature highlights an attentiveness to the cumulative nature of risks rather than any particular type of risk (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008; Anderson et al., 2004; Hanewald, 2011), additive risk models can also provide an opportunity to explore how specific features of risk impact an adolescent or youth (Lucier-Greer et al., 2014). While it is theorized that how risk is conceptualized can impact how risk is operationalized (Lucier-Greer et al., 2014), the operationalization of risk can also impact how risk is understood, further identifying a need to continue to thoroughly research each type of risk on its own (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Understanding the singular and combined effects of different risk factors, especially for adolescents and youth, also deepens the breadth and depth of understanding risk.

Identifying and Defining Vulnerability

The notion of vulnerability often appears alongside social sciences literature and research

concerned with risk (Brown et al., 2017) and has many and varied understandings (Brown, 2014; Hanewald, 2011). It is often considered in the shadow of risk, its 'conceptual cousin' (Brown et al., 2017), and the overlap of terms can foster potential confusion in the use of the terms and differentiated understandings of risk and vulnerability. Vulnerability is also used in the academic literature as a concept that anchors consideration of diverse interests or concerns when discussing adversities or inequalities (Brown et al., 2017); but, despite frequent references to vulnerability in policy and research, it has received little direct attention (Brown, 2014), although it appears to be "gathering political and cultural momentum" (Brown et al., 2017, p. 497). As such, a review of the literature will synthesize a broader understanding of vulnerability.

In the clinical literature, vulnerability is noted to be multidimensional (Rogers, 1997), with variability in vulnerability experiences between persons and circumstances that can be numerous, simultaneous or cumulative (Spiers, 2000). Vulnerability is also a term or concept that blends an individual's experience with their social world, making it a complex and dynamic personal and social experience (Heaslip et al., 2016). It is a term that can also be used situationally, with particular circumstances enhancing or elevating innate vulnerability in conditions that place individuals at risk or create a 'stepping-stone' to risk (Brown, 2014), generating consideration of the underlying complexities of risk.

In a qualitative research study, Brown (2014) identified that types of vulnerability can include behavioural and familial vulnerability, vulnerability in or to particular circumstances, cultural and educational vulnerability, and vulnerability arising from a host of 'risk' factors (e.g., ethnic minority status, individual or familial substance use, conflict with the law, homelessness, mental health issues, or low socioeconomic status). Trauma and experiences of neglect, abuse, violence, being witness to violence, or family home destabilization are also understood as

contributing to the vulnerability of children and youth (Brunzell et al., 2016). Social vulnerability highlights social factors that produce social and place inequalities, such as community characteristics of urbanization, growth, or economic conditions that influence susceptibility to harm and impact the ability to respond to harm (Cutter et al., 2003). Vulnerability can also include emotional vulnerabilities that can impact children and youth in schools, such as hypervigilance, difficulties with emotional regulation (such as being easily overwhelmed or angered), and challenges with relationship formation (Williams & Le Menestrel, 2013).

Within vulnerability, there are also indications of a movement from being viewed as vulnerable to being perceived as at-risk that is positively correlated with age and associated with choice (Dehaghani, 2017); however, the susceptibility to risk, or vulnerability, experienced by children does not become irrelevant as they age. While children and youth are intrinsically resilient, they are also, and remain, inherently vulnerable as they progress through developmental stages (Brown et al., 2017; Dehaghani, 2017). Vulnerability is also a "fundamental feature of the human condition, biologically imperative and permanent, but also connected to the personal, economic, social and cultural circumstances within which individuals find themselves at different points in their lives" (Brown et al., 2017, p. 498).

Vulnerability can also be understood by deconstructing the term itself. As an adjective, vulnerability is understood as being "capable of being physically or emotionally wounded [or] open to attack or damage" (Vulnerable, n.d.). Spiers (2000) identified that the "Latin root of vulnerability is 'vuln', which means 'wound', or 'vulnare' meaning 'to wound'" (p. 716). Fundamentally, vulnerability is understood as an experience that influences susceptibility to negative outcomes (Aday, 1994; Hanewald, 2011; Purdy, 2004; Spiers, 2000). In this study, vulnerability will be understood as a dynamic experience within or between individual, familial,

socioeconomic and/or sociocultural risk and protective factors that can impact the social, emotional, and/or physical well-being of children and youth throughout their school-aged years.

Contextualizing Vulnerability and Risk Discourse

Vulnerability and risk discourse tend to be situated within a framework of individual responsibility that inevitably overlooks the critical role of societal oppression within individual and social experiences (Dorsen, 2010). All children and youth who interact with schools have dynamic experiences that extend beyond the school context. Thus, illuminating the implications of social environments on individuals necessarily contextualizes vulnerability and risk discourse.

In a review of risk and resilience literature, Vanderbilt-Adriance and Shaw (2008) identified that associated studies are often contextualized in either low socioeconomic status or white, middle class children. While consistencies between studies were recognized in the review, hypothesized relationships between risk factors were cautioned because there is limited understanding of how risk factors interact with one another (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Although the intersection of marginalization within other domains of social location could be supposed, it should not be presumed. Vulnerability and risk features are also not a measure of how well children or youth appear to cope with their experiences (Dehaghani, 2017). Experiences are complex and need to be understood as part of a dynamic and ongoing interaction between the student and their environment (Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Thus, when contextualizing vulnerability and risk, it is also essential to attend to health inequalities (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012) and structural determinants or "structures of opportunity" (Viner et al., 2012, p. 1643). Critical components to also consider include national wealth and income inequality, education, war and conflict, and sex and ethnic inequalities, as these factors of colonization, racialization, marginalization, and oppression also mediate health across the

lifespan (Viner et al., 2012).

Social Location and Socioeconomic Status

Poverty and low socioeconomic status have been largely identified as a contributing factor to vulnerability and risk across the literature (Anderson et al., 2004; Bonny et al., 2000; Brown, 2014; Foster et al., 2017; Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012; Lucier-Greer et al., 2014; Moran et al., 2016; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008; Viner et al., 2012; Woodgate & Leach, 2010). Poverty is also associated with family distress, poorly resourced or funded schools, unsafe neighborhoods, and limited access to healthcare (Foster et al., 2017). While children and youth of minority populations are often identified as experiencing higher rates of poverty (Lucier-Greer et al., 2014), it is also important to consider the challenging aspects of resettlement, acculturation, discriminatory exclusion, conflicting cultural values, educational gaps, and language difficulties experienced by immigrant or refugee populations (Edge et al., 2014). However, in the case of immigrant or refugee populations, parental educational gaps should not be assumed, as a lack of credential transferability could be a contributing factor for low socioeconomic status after resettlement. In the context of schools, students of colour and students from low income backgrounds can also experience a lack of congruence between school cultures and home cultures, which can result in a mismatch of cultural norms and expectations (Hopson et al., 2014; McIntosh et al., 2014; Reno et al., 2017). Thus, the navigation of environmental contexts and dominant cultural norms is further complicated by a student's social location.

Despite the prevalence of low socioeconomic status as a prominent indicator of risk, literature on vulnerability and risk in affluent populations extends beyond the traditional landscape of researching children and youth from homes with socioeconomic disadvantage (Luthar & Barkin, 2012; Luthar et al., 2013). Luthar and Barkin (2012) identified that affluent

youth are also at-risk of maladjustment, substance use, and internalizing and externalizing symptoms, while reinforcing that in all sociodemographic settings "there are inevitably some parents who are disengaged, lax, or critical; and in all settings, the quality of parent-child relationships is inevitably related to children's adjustment outcomes" (p. 445). Accordingly, vulnerability and risk persist in varied socioeconomic contexts, which is important to consider in the context of schools, because schools are fundamentally diverse institutions, with students from a range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds and communities.

Environmental and Historical Contexts

There are many moving parts to vulnerability and risk experiences (Dehaghani, 2017), and sociopolitical, geographical and historical contexts have influential impacts on the lives of children and youth (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012). Acknowledging the scope of vulnerability and risk within a wider ecological context attends to and facilitates a wider understanding of the social determinants of health and the systems that shape the conditions of daily life (Woodgate & Leach, 2010). Greenwood and de Leeuw (2012) asserted that the social determinants of health are layered, and proximal determinants (or the circumstances of daily life; e.g., food security, education, employment, income, housing) and intermediate determinants (or the origin of proximal determinants, e.g., social services, justice, cultural ways, health and education systems) need to be embedded within a consideration of distal determinants (or the context in which proximal and intermediate determinants are constructed; e.g., dislocation, social exclusion, racism, self-determination, residential schools, language, culture and heritage). Grounding these determinants is also essential because connection to school, family, peers, and neighborhoods are subsets of risk and protective factors that impact health trajectories of adolescents and youth (Viner et al., 2012). While the social determinants of health are helpful to explore multi-layered

causes (or the causes of the causes) that underlie health inequalities, contextualizing inequities also draws on historical implications of vulnerability and risk for marginalized ethnic or cultural groups, especially those experienced by Indigenous children and youth in Canada (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012).

Specifically, within Canadian schools, Indigenous students (and families) are challenged with distinct barriers that shape their school experiences, given the historical context of racism and discrimination experienced by Indigenous Peoples (Milne, 2016) and the 'colonial legacies' of residential schools that operated in Canada for more than 150 years (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012). With the last residential school in Canada closing in 1996 (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012), it is essential for western educators embedded in the dominant culture to understand Indigenous students and their histories at a deeper level, so adverse educational outcomes of Indigenous students can be ameliorated, and culturally responsive educational practices can be enacted (McIntosh et al., 2014). Accordingly, it is necessary to understand that the experiences of Indigenous students are impacted by distinctive sociopolitical, geographical and historical contexts (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012). Greenwood & de Leeuw (2012) specified that to support the health and well-being of Indigenous children, youth, families and communities, interventions and practices across and between sectors and disciplines need to address microaggressions, recognize determinants and broader social contexts, and implement decolonizing strategies. Changes to both policy and practice must also be made to tackle economic and social factors that influence the social determinants of health and inequitable distributions of power, funding and resources, to improve the conditions of daily life, education, employment, and structural processes (Viner et al., 2012). This need for structural change and reform in education is also found in the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission of Canada (2015), specifically in Calls 6 through 12. Recommendations for educational improvement become necessarily applicable, as schools are centralized institutions for children, youth and families, with opportunities to improve educational experiences and leverage equal distribution of resources to support a wide range of students experiencing features of vulnerability or risk.

Complementing Vulnerability and Risk with Resilience

Resiliency complements the understanding of vulnerability and risk by extending the scope and understanding of trajectories for various experiences. Schools are in unique positions to have an influential impact on student resilience, behaviour, and outcomes (Chapman et al., 2014; Hanewald, 2011); yet they often give less attention to protective factors of positive adjustment in late elementary or middle school years, as students age (Shoshani & Slone, 2013). Schools and teachers also frequently need to rely on students to disclose any adversity they may be experiencing outside of school; for example, when students are experiencing abuse in the home or have minimal access to food. In these cases, teachers and school social workers will often collaborate with each other in support of the student. While disclosures often leverage needed support and ensure student safety, children and youth can also be viewed as more vulnerable when personal histories are disclosed (Brown, 2014) and barriers to support and interventions can be formed if it is perceived that highly vulnerable children and youth are at-risk of only negative outcomes (Purdy, 2004). Unfortunately, student strengths can be overlooked and minimized when there is a heightened focus on adversity, risk behaviours, or vulnerability experiences. Thus, knowledge of vulnerability and risk must be utilized as a mechanism of support to foster resilience, complemented by an understanding that resilience is grounded in the universal finding that there are differences in individual responses to adversity, and all types of

adversity can result in outcomes that are vastly heterogeneous (Rutter, 2012).

Simply stated, resilience is the ability to "flourish despite adverse conditions such as poverty, racism, low family cohesion, family psychiatric illnesses, or alcoholism" (Bosworth & Earthman, 2002, p. 299). Resilience can also be viewed as a set of competencies, coping strategies, or developmental outcomes in response to stress, trauma, or disadvantaged circumstances (Ungar, 2008) that focus on a child's strengths rather than on problem situations and risk conditions (Bosworth & Earthman, 2002). Yet, resilience is not merely a balance between negative and positive experiences, as there is an inherent individuality of experience and not all people are impacted by adversity in the same way or degree (Rutter, 2012).

Perceptions of resilience, or flourishing in spite of or 'bouncing back' from, adverse experiences or events, also need to be culturally relevant and grounded in social context (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011). As such, Ungar (2008) offered a contextually and culturally relevant definition for resilience:

> In the context of exposure to significant adversity, whether psychological, environmental, or both, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual's family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways. (p. 225)

Anticipations of students meeting dominant expectations and demonstrating normative ideas of resilience without the consideration of cultural values has the potential to perpetuate marginalization and neglect inequitable access to opportunities for students from non-dominant cultural groups (McIntosh et al., 2014). Thus, normative societal expectations and considerations for resilience require critical reflection in the conceptualization and operationalization of student

vulnerability and risk within the education system, because an inclusive understanding of the diversity of individual and social circumstances supports success for all students (Hanewald, 2011).

Relevance of Resilience in Schools

A focus on resilience, protective factors, and capacity to navigate resources is all the more important because feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, or a lack of control over life can be engendered from adverse life experiences, leaving individuals to internalize negative feelings and develop negative self-concepts (Rogers, 1997). Supportive and caring school environments that attend to student strengths and personal resources alongside features of risk and vulnerability are critical for encouraging student resilience through the development of positive connections in the school community, school satisfaction and emotional growth, and the ability to excel academically (Bosworth & Earthman, 2002; D'Agostino, 2013; Shoshani & Slone, 2013; Weber & Ruch, 2012). Fostering connections to caring adults and schools in the early school years also helps to promote positive outcomes (Foster et al., 2017; Lemkin et al., 2018), by creating a platform of resilience as students transition to higher elementary or middle school grades (Shoshani & Slone, 2013).

The development of positive school experiences and school cultures are applicable for all student age groups, but are increasingly important as students age, as positive school-related experiences help to support the continued success of students when they transition out of elementary school (Bosworth & Earthman, 2002; D'Agostino, 2013; Shoshani & Slone, 2013). Relatedness and supportive relationships are also particularly influential in cultivating resilience and aid in the transition of 'at-risk' or 'vulnerable' students to junior high (Prince-Embury, 2011). As students age and transition into higher grade levels, they need to respond to an

increased demand in workload and the expansion of their circle of friends, which requires a stable sense of identity and self-regulation skills (Tackman et al., 2017). These needed skills are consistent with Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, and teacher efforts to understand respective psychosocial stages, such as 'identity vs. role confusion' in junior high students, is important for supporting student success and subsequent transitions between grades (Cross & Cross, 2017). Positive transitions also help to promote 'academic well-being' and mitigate the risk of school failure or dropout (Korhonen et al., 2014). Teachers can play a significant role in the cultivation of student growth and resilience through the development of strong teacher-student relationships, positive school connections, and nurturing the belief that students are cared for as individuals by their teachers (Forster et al., 2017). Teachers are not alone in this journey though, with other professions, such as social work, ready and able to help support the dynamic needs of students and positive school experiences.

School Social Workers as Partners in Education

Social workers often find themselves working within or alongside school systems in a variety of ways to support student and families, as partners in education. Despite the varied positions they may hold, school social workers provide specific supports for students and families and explore conditions that further promote marginalization and isolation as insiders to school districts and advocates for social justice, according to the profession's code of ethics (McKay, 2010). School social workers aim to work alongside teachers, administrators, other school professionals, students and families, while balancing the rising need to coordinate services, provide direct service, and engage in advocacy efforts within the academic setting (Callahan Sherman, 2016; Huffman, 2013; Phillippo et al., 2017; Webber, 2018). They often support students who experience challenges in traditional school environments (e.g., mental

illness, socialization difficulties, special education needs, high absenteeism) and academic underachievement (Roberts, 1971; Webber, 2018) but, also have the capability of facilitating resilience-informed supports that promote respectful interactions and engage personal agency (Ungar et al., 2013) with students and families who may be experiencing disruptions within and outside of the school context (Huffman, 2013; Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009).

Due to the systemic thinking of social workers to problems and solutions (Hadfield & Ungar, 2018), much can also be accomplished and learned through the intersection of education and social work. To engage in effective school-based practice and be recognized as change agents in schools, school social workers need to demonstrate an ability to initiate, maintain, and evaluate intervention and support strategies (Gottlieb & Gottlieb, 1971; Phillippo et al., 2017; Webber, 2018); yet, the ability to validate effective supports is often complicated by the reality that schools are often under financial constraints, with insecure or tenuous funding for social work positions. To hold their value in a financially constrained system, school social workers need to strengthen the social-emotional development of students to ultimately promote academic achievement through innovative interventions as both clinicians and facilitators of student success (McKay, 2010; Webber, 2018).

School social work is well positioned to be a significant support for student success in schools, but there is also a need for diligence on the part of the school social worker to be reflexive in their social work practice and to question whether their interventions are conforming with or challenging the education system (McKay, 2010). In an effort to build knowledge and skills that benefit all students and families, school social workers can act as natural advocates and potential educators for teaching and allied staff (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009; Phillippo & Stone, 2011). School social workers are uniquely situated to assist educators in enhancing

their understanding of social issues (Hopson et al., 2014), while also attending to the challenges experienced by students in schools through direct service or agency referrals (Phillippo et al., 2017; Roberts, 1971; Webber, 2018). School social workers are also equipped to provide in-service training to teachers, support staff and school administration, and improve academic achievement for students and the overall climate of the school (D'Agostino, 2013). In a study on school-wide positive behaviour supports, Feuerborn and Chinn (2012) recommended that teacher training should address understanding about possible causes of student behaviour, benefits of prevention and collaboration with other professionals, and classroom-based social-emotional supports. School social workers have the capacity to assist in this type of learning, by providing ongoing professional development to teachers, while also considering the social and organizational phenomena present in schools and school districts to inform effective and collaborative practice (Phillippo & Stone, 2011). In this way, school social workers are invaluable resources in policy and program development in schools (Callahan Sherman, 2016) as embedded advocates within educational structures (Huffman, 2013; Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009).

Social Work in School Social Work Practice

Social workers endeavour to reduce social problems and promote individual well-being by building upon the strengths, capabilities, assets and resources of individuals, families, groups, or organizations (Simmons et al., 2016). The social work profession is also guided by social work values of respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons, pursuit of social justice, service to humanity, and integrity, confidentiality, and competence in professional practice (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005). While much still needs to be learned about how social workers can work to improve the resilience of populations experiencing personal

limitations and/or barriers at the social or structural levels (Hadfield & Ungar, 2018), a steadfast commitment to social work values and the profession's code of ethics in school social work practice is essential (Miller et al., 2004). Although conversations about social inequities of power, privilege and oppression can be difficult, confusing, and frustrating (Miller et al., 2004), these conversations also require critical reflection about marginalization and disenfranchisement (Morgaine, 2014). It is prudent to realize that not everyone has engaged in a level of critical reflexivity, or is ready, willing, or able to invest in conversations or dialogue about the complexity of experiences, especially experiences that differ from one's own. This can be challenging in schools as social work and teaching professionals interact with each other and with students, all of whom have divergent backgrounds and experiences.

While social work in education settings may feel either well-defined or confusing at times, it is clear that engaging in effective collaboration at all levels needs to remain a priority for the school social worker. Barriers to collaborative efforts between school social workers and teachers can arise from differing perceptions of vulnerability and risk, and create potential misunderstandings in how the terms are understood and applied (Lucier-Greer et al., 2014), which can ultimately complicate or compromise interventions and supports for students. Navigating and negotiating understandings of vulnerability and risk circumstances can contribute to tensions and highlight diverse professional frameworks between school social workers and educators; however, Miller et al. (2004) identified that facilitating "a difficult conversation is not an end in itself, but will hopefully contribute to better understanding, different ways of viewing oneself and others, and organizational, social and political commitments to work toward change and social justice" (pp. 390-391). School social workers have a dynamic understanding of the child's social context and nuances of the school environment and system (Callahan Sherman,

2016; Webber, 2018), and when school social workers embrace consultative roles, they enable the facilitation of dialogues related to social identity, diversity, and social justice that can invite opportunities to better understand inherent prejudices and improve relationships between people and society as a whole (Reyneke, 2017). To do so effectively, it is necessary for school social workers to also embrace their strengths-based practice framework within interdisciplinary teams (Callahan Sherman, 2016), as it is consistent with the values and ethics of social work, and can help to improve decision making and guide the unique role of school social work within education settings (Simmons et al., 2016).

Interdisciplinary Practice in Schools

Although there is a natural alignment incorporating social workers in the education context (especially for schools supporting students and families with higher social vulnerability), the inclusion of social work also requires attention to longstanding questions about social work's professional status, dating back at least to Abraham Flexner, an educator in the early 1900s, who candidly questioned social work as a profession (Austin, 1983). Flexner's assertions, made at the 1915 National Conference of Charities and Corrections in Baltimore, have since been referred to as the 'Flexner Myth'; nonetheless, Austin (1983) argued that "perhaps the most important negative consequence [of this discussion] has been a defensive and apologetic posture, reflecting constant concern with the question as to whether other groups in society recognize the professional status of social work" (p. 373). Even though other professions faced similar questions, these questions resonate for social work practice in schools as school social work continues to be a developing area of social work practice and strives to fully secure its place within the education system. To aid in this process, school social workers need to articulate and communicate the professional identity of social work and share their critically constructed

practice frameworks, to encourage reconsideration of the role of social work in education and the profession's valued place on interdisciplinary teams in schools. Within interdisciplinary teams, school social workers also need to incorporate their wider knowledge of schools and communities and maintain a commitment to collaborative practice (Callahan Sherman, 2016; Gottlieb & Gottlieb, 1971).

There are clear benefits to the integration of social work in schools, but education and social work professionals are not immune to the potential obstacles of collaborative practice within interdisciplinary teams. Differences confronted within and between disciplines in interdisciplinary practice and collaboration include: a) cultures and frames of reference; b) methods and operational objectives; c) language styles and terminologies; d) personal challenges with gaining the trust and respect; e) institutional barriers related to funding, incentives, and priorities; and, f) professional barriers related to hiring, promotion, status, and recognition (Brewer, 1999). If differences between disciplines are not attended to, school social workers can run the risk of interprofessional conflict with school personnel in education environments (Isaksson & Sjöström, 2017) that can foster a diminished ability to effect system changes that benefit students and the wider school environment (Gottlieb & Gottlieb, 1971). Difficulties with interdisciplinary practice can be further complicated by the need for school social workers to navigate the unfamiliar hierarchical and bureaucratic culture commonly observed and experienced in school settings (Diaz, 2013). Even though school social workers may be welcomed on school teams, there is a fundamental distinction between professional responsibilities; and such variances can create a divide in professional comradery. School social workers are also faced with a need to balance competing or conflicting relationships, while they navigate the murky waters of who they are there to serve and support. At times, school social

workers may also even wonder who their client is – the student, the family, the teacher, the school, or all of the above (Phillippo et al., 2017).

Merely relying on "professional perspectives as a moral imperative" (Grossman & McCormick, 2008, p. 110) falls short in the education profession, as school social work interventions and supports can also run the risk of being perceived as inessential if they are not attached to academic indicators (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). The social work profession acts as a supplement to the education profession, so it is imperative that school social workers strategically navigate and own their spaces on interdisciplinary teams and establish collaborative relationships with school principals and teachers in the education system. Support from school principals is identified as a significant factor to the success of a school social worker's interdisciplinary practice in schools (Diaz, 2013; Webber, 2018); and the working relationship between school social workers and school principals becomes strengthened when social workers have knowledge of the pressures faced by school leaders, an awareness of principals' capabilities and orientations to social problems, and are able to demonstrate familiarity with language used in the educational system (Gottlieb & Gottlieb, 1971). Relationships with school principals and understanding of the environmental context of schools can also have trickle-down effects on relationships school social workers create with teachers. Accordingly, school social work practice requires collaboration, cooperation, and communication for effective school-based practice (Teasley et al., 2012).

Interdisciplinary practice in schools is more successful when relationships between teachers and school social workers are grounded in mutual respect, trust, alignment of goals, and collaborative approaches (Diaz, 2013). Collaborative efforts also need to be task-oriented (Roberts, 1971), with opportunities to observe, understand, and value the role of different

professions (Brewer, 1999). A school social worker's team must extend beyond their social work colleagues, because in a system primarily made up of education professionals, interdisciplinary collaboration also helps school social workers reduce the adverse effects of practice isolation (Diaz, 2013; Phillippo et al., 2017). Participation in collaborative and relationally-based interdisciplinary teams at the school level also enhances social work practice abilities and feelings of competency in practice (Isaksson & Sjöström, 2017; Kinman & Grant, 2011).

Summary

This review of risk and vulnerability literature offers comprehensive definitions of the terms, and illuminates the complexity and depth of each term to create a thorough research-based understanding of risk and vulnerability. Numerous indicators are identified for risk, along with recognizing trauma as a pronounced feature of risk, and the tendency for adolescents and youth to fall in the domain of risk. Vulnerability often accompanies risk in the literature and engages in similar functions to recognize concerns faced by children and youth, although it is also acknowledged as a precursor to risk. To deepen the review, vulnerability and risk discourse was also contextualized to generate a more comprehensive consideration of the social context. The examination of the students' social location and socioeconomic status assists in identifying contributing factors to vulnerability and risk experiences; while grounding the terms in environmental and historical contexts firmly plants the terms within complex social experiences that are influenced by colonization, marginalization, and oppression. It is clear from the review of vulnerability and risk literature that the terms are multifaceted and rooted in sociopolitical contexts. The literature also highlights and reinforces the importance of attending to resilience, and the relevance of complementing views of vulnerability and risk with understandings of resilience within the school context to support success for students.

The evolution of school social workers as partners in education is also illustrated in this review. An appraisal of the school social work role illuminates the dynamic professional responsibilities for effective school social work practice, while also elucidating inherent challenges of practicing social work in the education setting. The examination of social work practice within schools also highlights the critical importance of maintaining a commitment to social work ethics and values as school social workers strive to work alongside students, families, teachers and schools. A review of the components and makings of interdisciplinary teams also emphasizes the need for school social workers to manage their spaces in interdisciplinary environments.

Teachers and school social workers ultimately share a professional practice space in the school environment. Vulnerability and risk are terms that have been taken up across professions and are central notions that occupy some of this shared space, but the terms may be understood differently. While some clinical constructs of vulnerability and risk may be shared, particular understandings of the terms may also emerge in response to professional training and preparation, as the terms are constructed for specific purposes (e.g., administrative and functional use of the terms). Effective interdisciplinary practice in schools relies on a cohesive blend of professional insights and skillsets across the development of common terminology and shared understandings. This thesis examines specific teachers' perceptions as a way of informing school social work practice and processes, and enriching interdisciplinary practice.

The following chapter will examine the qualitative and exploratory approach used in this thesis. The epistemological framework of social constructionism will be reviewed and the research methodology of IPA will be detailed.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The methodology of this qualitative and exploratory research study is described in this chapter. Social constructionism and features of IPA are introduced, in addition to the application of the IPA approach for participant sampling and recruitment, data collection, and analysis. A justification for the use of interpretative phenomenology as the research method is also provided.

Qualitative and Exploratory Approach

A qualitative and exploratory phenomenological approach, guided by the epistemological framework of social constructionism, allowed me to concentrate on the diversity of participant perceptions of student vulnerability and risk. Qualitative research is a naturally occurring and contextual method of inquiry that values subjectivity, holistically explores phenomena, searches for meaning through the establishment of patterns or themes, and expresses data in words (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). A qualitative approach was an appropriate research method to gain insight into the perspectives of teachers by giving participants an opportunity to share in an open-ended way and to also circumvent potential constructs that are socially or culturally biased (Ungar, 2003). I was drawn to social constructionism because it invites reflection on knowledge and understanding garnered through social processes and human relationships (Neuman & Blundo, 2000; Rudestam & Newton, 2015), enabling a synergistic opportunity to set the stage for interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in my approach to inquiry.

Epistemological Framework of Social Constructionism

Social constructionism attends to and creates space for conversation about the significance of multiple or differing realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and has a central focus on "how humans create systems of meaning to understand their world and their experience" (Rudestam & Newton, 2015, p. 38). Social constructionism also emphasizes that realities are

understood through lived experiences and are identified as being constructed through interactions with others and the social context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Accordingly, this framework honours the individual values held by research participants in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018), attends to the influence of historical and cultural contexts, social values and norms, gender, and political realities (Neuman & Blundo, 2000; Rudestam & Newton, 2015) that can shape teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk, and acknowledges the subjectivity and inherent values of my own knowledge (Neuman & Blundo, 2000).

Social constructionism is also situated in the cultural backdrop of postmodernism, with a multidisciplinary background that has been influenced by a variety of disciplines (e.g., sociology and social psychology) and the work of French intellectuals (e.g., Foucault; Burr, 1995). Postmodernism rejects the idea that there can be one ultimate truth, arguing that there is no one over-arching way of knowing (Burr, 1995). Consistent with postmodernism, social constructionism is:

> principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live. It attempts to articulate common forms of understanding as they now exist, as they have existed in prior historical periods, and as they might exist should creative attention be so directed. (Gergen, 1985, p. 266)

Social constructionism takes a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, and identifies that there is historical and cultural specificity within knowledge that is sustained by social processes and influenced by social interactions (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1985). Burr (1995) described ways of knowing and understanding as being relative to historical and cultural

contexts, dependent on social and economic conditions, and informed by daily interactions with the social world. Thus, critical thought about our assumptions and observations of the world is encouraged, challenging the notion that conventional knowledge is objective and unbiased (Burr, 1995).

With the significance placed on knowledge in social constructionism (Schultheiss & Wallace, 2012), there is an inherent recognition and consideration of a range of interpretations and perspectives (Hall, 2011). While there is no one right way of knowing, there are alternative ways of understanding (Witkin, 2011). Knowledge is not about comparing who has or does not have it, but as something that is achieved with other people (Burr, 1995). In a school setting, this reinforces the importance of collaborative dialogue between school social workers and teachers, as there are opportunities to learn with and from one another; however, the level of human action, or collaboration, is also dependent on how information or knowledge is processed (Gergen, 1985). To engage in the true essence of collaborative practice, school social workers and teachers must identify the subjectivity of their positions within discourse (Schultheiss & Wallace, 2012), whether dominant and/or marginalized. For school social workers, the imposition of social work ideologies on teachers can create a detrimental divide between the professional frameworks of teachers and social workers; thus, it is critical for school social workers to seek to understand how problems and solutions are understood by teachers and the wider school culture (Hall, 2011). Engaging in research on teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk through the lens of social constructionism is not directed towards changing beliefs about a problem. Social constructionism honours the viewpoints and experiences of teachers to generate authentic expansions in different ways of knowing and practice for both teachers and school social workers.

Integrating the Role of Language and Discourse

Constructivist thought proposes that our very nature (our thoughts, feelings, and experiences) is rooted in, and the result of, language (Burr, 1995). Language constructs how we experience one another and ourselves and can, consequently, be used to create alternative perspectives and understanding (Burr, 1995; Schultheiss & Wallace, 2012). As a vessel for personal and social change, language influences our consciousness and experiences, and is also closely tied to discourse (Burr, 1995). Burr (1995) identified discourse as providing "a frame of reference, a way of interpreting the world and giving it meaning that allows some 'objects' to take shape" (p. 38), and acknowledged the importance of giving equal opportunity for all levels of discourse to be heard, valued and regarded as truth.

It is tenable to suspect that school social workers and teachers subscribe to different language and discourses as they engage in work within the school context, by way of their education and training. This becomes important to consider when exploring teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk, because engaging in these opportunities can contribute to 'consciousness-raising' of the connections between language, social structures and practices (Burr, 1995). When social work comes to understand language and discourse around student vulnerability and risk in education, different ways of knowing and understanding social problems may also be actualized. Examining the perceptions of teachers can also help school social workers to understand our own participation in discourses, while conferring legitimacy on and awareness of possible alternatives (Witkin, 2011), and allowing for insight into how to deal with dilemmas faced in practice and opportunities to think for oneself rather than act on the beliefs and feelings of others (Mezirow, 1998). In this way, social constructionism is a suitable epistemological framework to guide this research, as it shows potential for framing how school

social work can be understood and practiced (Witkin, 2011).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

As a methodological approach that invites in-depth qualitative analysis (Smith, 2004), IPA was selected as the qualitative approach to inquiry. While still a relatively new approach to qualitative research, with the first position piece published in 1996 (Smith, 2011), IPA is a methodological approach that provides a rich and fascinating way to engage with and seek to understand the lived experiences of others (Smith et al., 2009). As an 'other' or 'outsider' to the education profession and an insider to interdisciplinary teams within the education profession, IPA provides an opportunity to deeply and meaningfully consider the perspectives of teachers in a way that is relevant to the development of school social work practice.

Features of IPA

Developed by Jonathan Smith, IPA focuses on how the everyday flow of life brings about significance for people by using an idiographic and hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Smith et al., 2009). While it is commonly identified that there is no single way to do IPA research (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborne, 2003), there are two focal aims at the heart of the IPA perspective. These aims provide a foundation for understanding the intention of IPA research and highlight the components that make up the IPA approach. The first aim of IPA is to understand the participant's world and describe what their experience of a particular event, relationship, or process is like (Larkin et al., 2006). The second aim of IPA is to position the participant's description in relation to a wider theoretical, cultural, or social context through overt interpretive analysis (Larkin et al., 2006).

To best understand the composite nature of IPA, navigating its philosophical characteristics is a necessary process. Locating parts of the 'IPA whole' brings meaning and

context to the application and use of the IPA framework. As such, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography will be explored in further detail.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is an approach to qualitative inquiry that describes common meanings of lived experiences in relation to a concept or phenomenon for several people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology aims to identify essential characteristics that make experiences or phenomena distinguishable or unique (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Pioneered by Husserl, phenomenology's originating principles are descriptive in nature and focused on discovering the commonality or universal essence within the lived experience of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Husserl argued that it is necessary to 'go back to the things themselves' or the consciousness of individuals (Smith et al., 2009). To do this, Husserl articulated a need for the researcher to preserve participant experiences and put aside or 'bracket' assumptions or preconceptions of the taken-for-granted everyday world (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). This process of bracketing aimed to get at the essential features of the conscious experience and let the phenomena speak for itself (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). This led Heidegger, a student of Husserl, to later explore his own understanding of phenomenology and apply a hermeneutic slant to the theory (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Heidegger sought to deepen the understanding of phenomena itself, regarding people as actively making meaning and engaged with the world, with the person always as a 'person-in-context' (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger aimed to examine the appearance of things, and how things can have visible or concealed meanings when they show themselves to us (Smith et al., 2009). Within IPA, phenomenology is understood to be hermeneutic in nature, as developed by Heidegger from the early works of Husserl.

Hermeneutics

The inclusion of hermeneutics in phenomenology has contributed to the development of the IPA approach, as it deepens understanding of phenomena through interpretive activity (Smith et al., 2009). Fundamentally, hermeneutics is an active process of engaging in interpretative actions to make meaning of participant experiences and data (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). There is a commitment on the part of the researcher to explore, describe, interpret, and situate how participants make sense of their experiences (Larkin et al., 2006). In this way, IPA is also noted to take on a double hermeneutic approach, with participants trying to make sense of their experiences and researchers trying to make sense of the participants sense-making (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborne, 2003). Accordingly, a hermeneutic circle is formed, allowing researchers to engage with and make meaning of the data at different levels and with different perspectives, eventually bringing together pieces of text as parts of the whole (Smith et al., 2009). IPA becomes a synthesis of ideas from phenomenology and hermeneutics that is both descriptive and interpretative, by letting things speak for themselves in how they appear, and recognizing that all phenomena are interpreted (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Idiography

IPA is also intrinsically idiographic. Idiography is concerned with the particular, embracing both a commitment to a thorough and systematic analysis that focuses on participant detail and attends to the perspectives of particular people within a particular context about a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Through the intentional application of idiography within IPA, focus is maintained on the exploration of the individual's experience and perspectives, with individuality and distinctiveness of experiences being attended to before

general statements on phenomena are produced (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

As a result, idiography is rooted in the importance of honouring the individuality of participants

in the process of analysis, with thoughtful navigation of perspectives.

Guidelines of IPA

Collectively bringing together the parts of the 'IPA whole' provides a cohesive

understanding of the approach, in meaning and intentionality. Although IPA is noted to be a

method that lacks a definitive structure, IPA's founder, Jonathan Smith, does offer guidelines for

participant sampling and sample sizes, data collection, interview protocols, and ways to uphold

rigor in data analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The recommended guidelines for IPA

research outlined below were followed in this study.

Suggestions for Participant Sampling

Due to the intensity of engagement in each interview, sample sizes are recommended to

be smaller within IPA research (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Recommended sample sizes

range from three to six (Smith et al., 2009), or six to eight (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Smaller

sample sizes emphasize quality over quantity, with a focus on homogenous samples (Peat et al.,

2019; Smith et al., 2009). A smaller number of participants allows for similarities and

differences between participants to be identified and limits the generation of too much data

(Smith et al., 2009).

Methods for Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews are typically utilized in IPA research with participants guiding

the process of the interview (Peat et al., 2019; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

Semi-structured interviews that allow for flexibility and space for novel or unexpected narratives

also create instantaneous dialogue between the researcher and participant, with opportunities for

the interviewer to follow up in more detail with additional questions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Flexibility and flow are achieved through an interview schedule that is open and expansive, and requires minimal verbal input from the interviewer (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborne, 2003). Questions on the interview schedule are also recommended to provide participants with opportunities to share descriptive or narrative accounts and evaluative or analytic reflections (Smith et al., 2009). The participant is regarded as the expert of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009) and, as such, it is important to follow the participant's lead in the interview.

A verbatim record is required for data collection, and semantic transcription is recommended for IPA analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Semantic transcription shows all words spoken by both the interviewer and interviewee (Smith et al., 2009). The inclusion of significant pauses and non-verbal utterances can also be identified in the transcription process (Smith et al., 2009), contributing to the interpretative activity and engagement in the hermeneutic circle.

Recommended Process for Data Analysis

Analysis of qualitative data within IPA is identified as an inspiring process that is also complex and time-consuming (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). A guiding framework for analysis includes a series of six steps that are iterative in nature and support the commitments of IPA research (Smith et al., 2009). Accordingly, Smith et al. (2009) proposed the following steps:

- Step 1: Reading and re-reading: Immersing oneself in the original data so the participant becomes the focus of analysis. Initially reading the transcript while listening to the participant's voice in the audio-recording of the interview assists with a more complete analysis in subsequent readings.

- Step 2: Initial noting: Exploratory examination of semantic content and language use through the production of comprehensive and detailed notes and comments on the data. Comments will have a descriptive and conceptual focus and stay close to the participant's explicit meaning, chunking pieces of the transcript.

- Step 3: Developing emergent themes: Working with the initial notes and exploratory comments rather than the transcript, incorporating engagement with the hermeneutic circle as data is re-organized. The data becomes a set of parts to represent the whole of the original interview, with the interviewer taking a central role in organizing and interpreting the data. Themes are expressed in conceptual phrases that capture the essence of the data.

- Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes: Charting data into how themes are viewed together and in relation to the research question. A structure is created that draws together emergent themes and identifies interesting and important aspects of the participant's account. Exploring patterns and connections can be done through the process of abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeration, and/or function.

- Step 5: Moving to the next case: Repeating the process outlined in Steps 1 - 4 for the next interview. Each interview should stand independently, with efforts to 'bracket' emerging ideas or notions from the prior interview(s).

- Step 6: Seeking patterns across cases: Identifying higher order qualities, nesting themes within "superordinate themes," and noting convergence and idiosyncrasies or divergence. Themes are presented in a graphic, table or chart, to represent the flow and structure of themes, with data excerpts.

Special attention is given to the importance of deepening the interpretation after Step 6 (Peat et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2009), and involves further engagement with the hermeneutic circle. In this process, researchers are encouraged to employ a questioning stance when re-exploring particularly resonant passages, to increase depth of analysis and illuminate the analysis of the whole interview (Smith et al., 2009). Attention is paid to the convergence and divergence of data in IPA studies, presenting the shared themes and the way these themes were experienced by participants (Smith, 2011).

Practices to Promote Trustworthiness and Credibility

While IPA is identified as a creative process that does not follow a rule book, it does draw on four broad measures to assess trustworthiness and credibility (Smith et al., 2009). Developed by Yardley (2000), the measures include:

1. Sensitivity to context: incorporation of relevant literature and participant perspectives;

2. Commitment and rigour in undertaking the analysis: depth and breadth of data collection and analysis;

3. Transparency and coherence of the narrative produced: clarity and transparency in data presentation and reflexivity;

4. Impact and importance: socio-cultural relevance and practicality or usefulness.

As the body of IPA research continues to grow, additional strategies for supporting trustworthiness and credibility are also recognized, with value being placed on audits (Smith et al., 2009); bracketing, peer critique, structure resonance, participant verification, triangulation, and reflexivity (Peat et al., 2019), and the development of a guide that identifies criteria for what makes an 'unacceptable,' 'acceptable,' or 'good' quality IPA paper (Smith, 2011). Smith (2011)

outlined the following criteria in IPA's quality evaluation guide to be met for a rating of 'acceptable,' and exceeded to be considered 'good':

- Clearly subscribes to the theoretical principles of IPA: it is phenomenological, hermeneutic and idiographic;

- Sufficient transparency so the reader can see what was done;

- Coherent, plausible and interesting analysis; and

- Sufficient sampling from corpus to show density of evidence for each theme:

  N1-3: extracts from every participant for each theme;

  N4-8: extracts from at least three participants for each theme; and

  N>8: extracts from at least three participants for each theme + measure of prevalence of themes, or extracts from half the sample for each theme. (p. 17)

Thesis Research Method

As a third-party research project, the study was subject to the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) and review by the school district's research and innovation department. Approval was received from both entities before engaging in recruitment and data collection procedures. Research ethics for participant sampling, recruitment, informed consent, confidentiality, data collection and storage were extensively reviewed and implemented.

Sampling and Recruitment

Criterion and snowball sampling were used for participant recruitment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were required to meet specific criteria in order to participate in the research and 'word of mouth' between school administrators and teachers was relied on for snowball participation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The target group of participants was educators

experiencing the phenomenon of teaching students in high social vulnerability areas. To create a as much of a homogenous group as possible (Peat et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2009), eligible study participants were educators with permanent teaching contracts who were currently teaching grade six students in a large urban school district in Alberta, Canada. This specific grade level was chosen as it was hypothesized that capturing teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk before students typically become defined by categories of risk behaviour would highlight the complex experiences of children before externalized behaviours become prominent identifying features of need and the dominant 'picture' of the student. The school district historically classifies specific schools as socially vulnerable, based on census data and an internally established formula. Based on this internal classification, specific schools within a predefined geographic area of the school district were selected for participant recruitment. Participants needed to be currently employed by one of the district-identified schools with higher social vulnerability in the predefined geographic area.

Recruitment posters were circulated through email communications with selected schools' principals, who then shared the recruitment poster with respective teachers in their school who met eligibility criteria. A total of seven participants reached out to participate in this research study. One participant did not have a permanent teaching contract but was in the process of receiving a permanent contract with the school district. After consultation with one of my thesis supervisors, an informed decision was made to include this participant in the study.

To leverage the probability of school principals sharing information about the research study during a busy time of the school year (May and June), email communication originated from my work email. To maintain confidentiality, contact information on the recruitment poster advertised my university email address and personal cell phone number; however, some

participants chose to communicate through my work email. All emails sent to my work email were redirected through my university email account.

Informed Consent

Informed written consent was received at the beginning of the interview, prior to engaging in the demographic survey and interview. I read the consent form aloud and participants were given a copy to read along before signing. Participants were given a date by which they were able to request all or portions of the data provided be removed. None of the participants contacted me to have all or portions of their data removed.

Data Collection

Data was collected through one-to-one in-person semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted outside of work hours at the participants' location of choice. Five interviews took place in teachers' respective classrooms, one took place at a neutral community space, and one took place in a neutral classroom space at one of the schools I worked at. When meetings took place at the teacher's workplace after school hours, I maintained the confidentiality of the interview.

Demographic Survey

A demographic survey was completed by each participant at the outset of the interview. The demographic survey was utilized to situate the participants within the findings. Participants were asked about: a) number of years as a teacher, b) level of education, and c) degree type(s). Gender and ethnicity were removed from the original demographic survey to meet conditions of the third-party research ethics approval. Post-secondary education and number of years of experience were factors that were considered when applying the IPA approach. Demographic survey information assisted in adherence to the idiographic component of IPA and importance

placed on knowledge within social constructionism. Below is a table highlighting specific characteristics of each participant – see Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Demographic Survey Results

Interview	Name / Pseudonym	Number of Years as a Teacher	Level of Education	Degree Types
1	Bryan	5	Undergraduate Degree	▪ Bachelor of Education - Secondary Education
2	Anna	7	Undergraduate Degree	▪ Bachelor of Education - Elementary Education
3	Sara	9	Undergraduate Degree	▪ Bachelor of Education - Elementary Education ▪ Bachelor of Arts – Anthropology
4	Jenn	16	Undergraduate Degree	▪ Bachelor of Education - Elementary Education
5	Zack	3	Undergraduate Degree	▪ Bachelor of Education - Secondary Education ▪ Bachelor of Science - Human Ecology
6	Alex	2	Undergraduate Degree	▪ Bachelor of Education - Secondary Education
7	Joyce	3	Undergraduate Degree	▪ Bachelor of Education - Elementary Education ▪ Bachelor of Science - Double major Biological Science and Psychology

The participant sample was diverse. There was a range of teacher experience levels from 2 years to 16 years, with a mean of 6.43 years, median of 5 years, and a mode of 3 years. All participants had at minimum a Bachelor of Education. Although gender was not a question on the demographic survey, the participant group was representative of both genders (based on a dominant and binary classification of gender), with four females and three males. The representation of both genders is notable, as there are generally fewer males who teach at the elementary school level compared to junior high or high school levels. While all of the female

participants were elementary trained, the male participants were all secondary trained. Specializations and minors varied, and three participants had a previous undergraduate degree before pursuing their Bachelor of Education. Although ethnicity was not included in the demographic survey, it was particularly relevant for one participant, as he weaved his experience of marginalization, resilience, and attentiveness to cultural nuances throughout his interview. For example, when asked what inspired him to become a teacher, he promptly reflected on the legacy of his grandparent's dedication to helping students, viewing teaching as a respected profession:

> Stacey: *So, tell me what inspired you to become a teacher.*
>
> Bryan: *Umm – it had two sources for me. So, one was kind of a cultural perspective. In Vietnam, because I have a Vietnamese background, teachers are very, very respected. My family was a family of teachers – my father's father, so my grandfather, during the war was a teacher, and he actually helped protect his students during the war, and was killed over getting a bag of rice for his students.*

Ethnicity was not mentioned by the other six participants, who were perceived to be Caucasian.

Interview Structure

An interview schedule was used with flexibility, with a focus on the main research question: *"What are teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk?"* I created the interview schedule, with feedback from one of my thesis supervisors, my sister who is a grade five teacher, and the school district's research and innovation department. Upon recommendation by the school district and as part of their approval condition, the interview schedule was shortened. The use of probes, minimal gestures and non-verbal communication, such as nodding, complemented the interview process. Interviews were scheduled to be 45-60 minutes in length. The shortest interview was 35 minutes in length with the longest interview at 1 hour 44 minutes.

Participants appeared eager to engage with the interview questions, with minimal verbal involvement from myself. Before starting the interview, I also clarified with participants that while the title of school social worker would be referenced in the interview schedule, social workers can interact with schools in different ways and can be in various positions. As such, examples of different positions held by social workers in schools were offered.

Data Analysis

Larkin et al. (2006) highlighted that within phenomenology "discoveries are a function of the *relationship* that pertains between researcher and subject-matter" (p. 107). As a result, the practice of reflexivity in IPA research and data analysis was even more important, as to simply 'bracket' out assumptions or preconceived notions (as suggested by Husserl) overly simplifies the dynamic exploration of phenomena. Moreover, Ungar (2003) specified that qualitative research requires "researchers to account for the bias inherent in their social location" (p. 86), so it was necessary that I actively engaged in reflexivity throughout my research and data analysis process, to consciously and continuously attend to and explore my own biases.

Reflexivity

I have worked in the school system for approximately ten years, so it was essential that I considered my professional experience and interpersonal relationships with various teachers in all stages of this research. In my experience working in schools, I have witnessed inspiring teacher-student moments and unfortunate rumblings about student deficits that were both shocking and cold. But no professional is perfect, and generalizing my interactions with teachers would tarnish the whole premise of this research. Teachers are truly the direct service (or front-line) providers for students, each day of the school year and, in many cases, there is a collective core value of wanting the best outcomes for students. Thus, it is critical to also highlight that

each of my interactions with teachers has been different and invited lessons into how I practice social work in schools and approached this research.

It is also important to note that not all of my working experiences with teachers have been positive. In my experience, there can be a large sense of 'othering' that can happen for social workers in schools. At times, social work can even feel like the inferior profession, and we are undoubtedly outnumbered. My experience has been that a teacher can be a professional colleague who picks you up or puts you down, invites you in or pushes you out. When you are in, it's great. But when you are out, you know it. While there is a range of experiences in between, the dichotomous feeling is real. In this way, as an outsider, I view teaching as an interesting profession, full of layers and complexity. In my own practice and this research, I have aimed to view each professional as an individual person to allow a greater appreciation and understanding of their perspective. As such, I am forever grateful for the learning that has come from being able to get to know different teachers throughout my career and in this research.

To support reflexivity throughout the research process, I journaled regularly. The use of a reflective journal was integral to the process of analysis, and included summarizing impressions and musings after the interviews, the reading and re-reading of transcripts, the development of exploratory comments and emerging themes, and the charting of themes. Summaries of each participant were also recorded in the journal entries, as well as any reactionary or emotional responses I had when interacting with the data. By engaging in an extensive exploration of my own positionality prior to and throughout the process of data analysis (as an insider to schools but an outsider to the teaching profession), I was able to engage in an intentional process of setting aside my own experiences with teachers and the student vulnerability and risk phenomenon in schools, to garner a fresh perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Analysis

I transcribed all of the seven audio files verbatim, as an act of commitment to the data, and to increase my exposure to and interaction with the data. Data was analyzed 'in situ' (Creswell & Poth, 2018), to be representative of teachers within the context of the school environment identified as having students with higher social vulnerability. Engaging in the lengthy transcription process promoted a commitment to the data throughout the multiple steps of analysis as outlined by Smith et al. (2009):

- Step 1: Audio recordings of the interview were listened to once prior to transcription and again during the transcription process. The completed transcript was then read multiple times, at a minimum of three times for each participant.

- Step 2: A table chart was then created for each transcript, with three columns. The far-left column was used as a space for "exploratory comments," the middle column held a copy of the original transcript and was titled "narrative," and the far-right column was used for identifying "emerging themes." Exploratory comments were noted with attention to semantic content and use of language, and descriptive and conceptual impressions were identified by using starting phrases such as "appears to think" "believes" "seems to be" and "views". Line-by-line coding helped to stay close to participant meaning and using participant phrases or words. An extract of the table is presented below – see Table 3.2.

Table 3.2

IPA Transcript Analysis Extract

Exploratory Comments	Narrative	Emerging Themes
	SM: So, what were your hopes when you became a teacher?	
Hoped to connect with kids and take their belief of every student is at-promise into her classroom.	007: Um – I guess my hopes were really to connect with students and see every student or take my belief of seeing every student 'at-promise' and like taking that into a classroom. And I've always wanted to work at a school. I am very interested in your research, but I always was drawn to students that didn't quite pick up things like right away or maybe had stuff going on outside of the classroom that made it a challenge for them to get engaged right away or cause me to kind of have to puzzle together like what's a routine that can get Ally to be able to succeed in math. So, it's a constant, so I guess my hopes were to be constantly learning. That was one thing I realized right away that I would never like, I would never master, I don't believe I would ever like master something because it will always change. Or I might have a mastery of an idea, but then based on the kiddos in front of me it will change. So, I guess I really wanted to keep on learning, but then work like always working with kids. […]	All children matter and can achieve success
Believes all students matter and have a place in the classroom		All students have promise
Hoped to constantly learn and help kids who had more difficulty with learning		Constantly learning through teaching is important
Seems to have a strong desire to be a teacher; always wanted to work in a school		
Believes you can't master teaching because it is constantly changing and evolving		Teachers need to be learners

- Step 3: The exploratory comments were referenced in the development of emerging themes. The essence of the data was captured, with continued focus on using specific participant phrasing as much as possible. Emerging themes were expressed from a conceptual stance.

- Step 4: Emerging themes were then moved over into an excel spreadsheet and refined to create subordinate themes. Through the process of abstraction, connections or patterns across subordinate themes were developed while holding on to the essence of the data and participant voice. In keeping with the original research question, abstraction put similar themes with each other or 'like with like.' A new name was created for the

cluster of themes, which lead to the development of a superordinate theme. Emergent themes were also explored for their function within the transcript in the creation of initial superordinate themes. An extract of the chart is presented below – see Table 3.3.

Table 3.3

IPA Analysis Themes Extract

Emerging Themes	Subordinate Theme	Superordinate Theme
Being uneducated about poverty and social issues can cause frustrated feelings	Teachers need to be learners	Who I am as a Teacher

- Step 5: Before moving on to the next interview, I engaged with each transcript by engaging in steps 1 - 4 in close detail. At least one day space was given between the analysis of each interview to bracket ideas or notions from prior interviews.

- Step 6: Developing patterns across the interviews required lengthy review of each excel chart, and review of subordinate and superordinate themes through the creation of a web-design graphic organizer on multiple large sheets of poster paper. After significant time spent reorganizing and confirming themes, a separate chart was then created, identifying subordinate themes nested within the superordinate themes – see Table 3.4.

Table 3.4

Subordinate Themes Nested within Superordinate Themes

Superordinate Theme 1: Who I am as a Teacher
Subordinate Themes:
Acknowledging privilege   *Teachers need to be learners*   *Negotiating challenging and emotional work*
Superordinate Theme 2: Navigating the Complex Lives of Students
Subordinate Themes:
Schools reflect community struggles   *Balancing curriculum with student needs*   *Looking through a trauma-informed lens*   *Student stories matter*   *A relational approach to teaching practice*
Superordinate Theme 3: Making Sense of Student Risk and Vulnerability as a Teacher
Subordinate Themes:
Risk as exposure to harm   *Vulnerability as susceptibility to adversity*   *At-risk creates a sense of urgency*   *Challenges with vulnerability*   *Notions of resilience within risk and vulnerability*
Superordinate Theme 4: Strengthening Supports for Students
Subordinate Themes:
Student supports need to be meaningful   *Enhancing collaboration between teachers and school social workers*   *Importance of sharing knowledge and information*

An additional chart was also created to articulate the superordinate and subordinate themes, and identify data excerpts that were representative of convergence and divergence. Interpretative comments accompanied data excerpts in bold font – see extract in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5

Charted Themes with Data Excerpts Extract

Superordinate Theme 3: Making Sense of Risk and Vulnerability as a Teacher	
Subordinate Theme: *At-risk creates a sense of urgency*	
Anna	"At-risk sounds more – It makes me more concerned, for some reason. Like they're at-risk. Oh no, what do they need my help with? When their vulnerable, I feel like that's they're leading into that at-risk area."
	Alarm or concern and a responsibility to respond
Sara	"At-risk has more of an urgency factor to it – umm – just because it could be something that happens faster whether or not like it actually does – at-risk feels like it's going to happen and it's just a matter of when."
	Sense of urgency and responding fast because something that will happen
Jenn	"Those are the students that we need to focus on first in a way – if that makes sense. As that ties in with the whole resiliency piece, too. They're less likely to have the tools to be resilient."
	Less resilience and require urgent responses
Zack	"At-risk is like they are here, it's happening right now – And that it needs immediate action to support these people […] we're already seeing the effects of the changes on the student, now […] Like when you think of risk it's just so hard, like almost when you think of at-risk is like they're already long gone, they've been living in it for so long – it's their reality."
	The effects of change are observable requiring immediate action
Alex	"It's the inevitable part of our future. We're not going to have all of a sudden, less and less and less vulnerable/at-risk students in our classrooms, unless we are looking at it really effectively and seeing what we can do to help these kids later on in life and then we might see a lower number and stuff like. It's systemic, and so it's not something that we're going to see a change if we don't do anything about it or talk about it."
	Schools need to talk about risk and vulnerability to ensure supports are effective and in the best interest of students
Joyce	"At-risk to me takes almost – seems like there's less I can do about it, like at-risk there's all these factors going on, but I don't have an effect over them."
	Powerless or unable to help at-risk students

Confidentiality and Research Ethics

Participants were made aware of the limits to confidentiality and efforts to protect

confidentiality prior to proceeding with the interview, as part of the informed consent process.

Participants were informed that the school district, schools, and teachers would be left unnamed in the study findings, but that there were some caveats on protecting confidentiality or anonymity. Not all participants wished to have their participation kept confidential. Each participant was assigned an interview number and, in the consent form, participants were given the opportunity to indicate if they wished to remain anonymous and select a pseudonym. Two out of the seven participants did not want to remain anonymous and wished to have their names used in the research findings. All remaining participants were assigned a pseudonym when writing up the research findings. Participants were also encouraged to use pseudonyms for students. To further ensure anonymity, student names were changed again by the researcher when interviews were transcribed.

A list containing participant names, interview numbers, and pseudonyms was created, encrypted, and stored in a separate and secure location, away from all other data files. The demographic data forms, transcribed interviews, and analysis charting used the participants' interview numbers. All identifiable participant information was stored on password-protected and encrypted devices. Audio-taped interviews were erased/deleted once interviews had been transcribed and processes of IPA analysis were complete.

Ensuring Trustworthiness and Credibility

Trustworthiness, or confidence, is central to establishing credibility in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), Yardley's measures for ensuring trustworthiness and credibility have been followed throughout this research, and sensitivity to context, transparency, and dedication to the impact and importance of this research for school social workers were upheld throughout the research process, interpretative activities, and writing of the thesis. The research methodology has also been comprehensively detailed, and evidence

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between data and the interpretation of data is provided (Shenton, 2004; Smith et al., 2009).

Although criterion and snowball sampling were used, the sample was also random, as I did not know the participants prior to this research (Shenton, 2004).

Familiarity with the culture of participating organizations is also important for credibility (Shenton, 2004). I was able to effectively apply my knowledge of the school system, and through reflective practice, I have also articulated my own beliefs (Shenton, 2004). Commitment to rigor was practiced through regular meetings and consultation with my thesis supervisors throughout the research stages (Shenton, 2004). Regular meetings were coordinated, and discussion of research processes and IPA methodology were consistently reviewed (Shenton, 2004). Interpretive processes were also examined and debriefed (Shenton, 2004), with robust dialogue about data, interpretive activities, and opportunities to go deeper in the analysis. Opportunities for mini-audits (Shenton, 2004; Smith et al., 2009) with my supervisors were recurrently conducted through the sharing of transcripts, exploratory comments, and charted themes. Peer scrutiny was also completed by three teacher colleagues to ensure fittingness, applicability, and internal validity (Peat et al., 2019; Shenton, 2004).

The following chapter will share the findings from this research, through the presentation of superordinate and subordinate themes.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter engages in the honor of sharing study findings and the valued perspectives of interview participants. Through the application of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), participant accounts are explored to capture the essence of their experiences as teachers and their perceptions of vulnerability and risk. Superordinate and subordinate themes are presented, with participant quotations taken from their interview transcript. In keeping with recommendations for IPA research for a sample size of seven, extracts from a minimum of three participants are presented for each subordinate theme. Study findings are the outcome of my engagement with double hermeneutics within IPA, with the end result being an account of how I made sense of what the participants shared (Smith et al., 2009). Based on my observations and dominant classification of gender, gendered pronouns will be used for clarity in the presentation and discussion of findings. A discussion of study findings will follow in Chapter 5.

Interview Findings

The findings reveal a passion for helping students that extends beyond a desire to help students learn. While all participants shared about the meaningfulness of helping students learn, there was also a passion for helping children in a broader sense and being a significant support for students. Participants showed emotion when they shared about helping students, and displayed a commitment to helping as part of their personal and professional identity. Willingness to participate in this study at the end of a school year when days are both demanding and ostensibly long also reflected remarkable dedication to teaching and supporting students. Their commitment to children and creating safer spaces for students should not and could not be overlooked, and I am forever grateful for the time and energy required for their participation in this research.

The interview findings are the result of the application of a rigorous IPA approach, and how I made sense of the data and responses shared by participants. In consideration of the demographic survey results, the number of years as a teacher did not appear to create any significant divergence in the findings; however, degree types did play a role in participant responses, language use, and reflections shared throughout the interview process. Specifically, two of the three participants who had an undergraduate degree prior to their education degree integrated knowledge gained through the totality of their post-secondary training. Four superordinate themes are presented, each with their own set of subordinate themes. A table of each superordinate theme and its nested subordinate themes precedes the presentation of data throughout this chapter.

Superordinate Theme 1: Who I am as a Teacher

At the outset of this research, I aspired to honour the work of teachers and learn more about their experiences. I also sought to capture the essence of their 'identity as a teacher.' As professionals, we are individuals who embrace the duties and responsibilities of our professions. Our professional selves are inevitably influenced by our personhood, and it was important to come to understand who the teachers are as individuals and how they locate themselves in the process of describing who they are. Opportunities to strengthen collaborative practice between teachers and school social workers can be fostered through greater understanding of how teachers define themselves and their profession.

Table 4.1

Superordinate Theme 1: Who I am as a Teacher

Subordinate Theme	Bryan	Anna	Sara	Jenn	Zack	Alex	Joyce
Acknowledging privilege	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Teachers need to be learners	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Negotiating challenging and emotional work	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Acknowledging Privilege

All seven participants located self and acknowledged their privilege at various points in the interview process. Many participants expressed gratitude for how their own basic needs were met as children. Generally, there was a comparative nature in how participants understood their own lived experiences in relation to their students' lives; however, some participants also identified a common ground with their students.

Alex shared how comparing experiences helps him understand student experiences better, and allows different perspectives for critical thinking and conscious interactions with students.

> *I compare – these kids to my childhood a lot, in a sense like, just not – but not with them, but like, internally. I'll think like how is their childhood different from mine and how would that change the way they perceive school and – 'cause like I had a good childhood. I had both parents at home, they both have good paying jobs. I wasn't ever in a situation that a lot of these kids are in. I didn't have any of those traumatic experiences that changed me. Um – and so, it's hard sometimes to relate, but in the same sense it can be, um – a little easier to understand where they're coming from when I haven't come from that area. Because I can go, okay,*

"I would have thought this way, but I had this in my life. These kids don't have

'this.' This is why they are doing the things that they're doing or tuning me out."

Stuff like that. (Interview 6)

Joyce also identified positive experiences growing up, but claimed a shared experience

with students, despite her own privilege.

I've come from, you know, a two-parent household with always food on the table.

Growing up right by the [university], got to do any extracurricular I wanted, my

parents were like "it's important to volunteer because we give back, it's

important to go get a job, let's go on a trip, here's your allowance," right. Um –

so that's where I came from; however, I wasn't explicitly taught things about

when I do fail, like how to approach that. (Interview 7)

Bryan identified a common ground with students, noting difficulties and barriers he

experienced in school.

I felt like I had a very unique experience as a kid. I actually, even though being

Canadian born, Vietnamese was my first language, so I struggled quite a bit.

(Interview 1)

Zack spoke about a deepened understanding of struggle, personalizing how he perceived

his students and his connections with them.

So maybe the reason my heartstrings tug for some kids is not because of how cute

they are or whatever, um – but maybe you just see something in that kid that you

see in yourself, or you witnessed as a kid. And knowing that what's happening in

the heartstring or the feeling behind it is – that empathy piece, that sympathy the

piece – and I'd rather used them kind of conjunctively because one might lead to

other... (Interview 5)

The above excerpts direct attention towards teachers' location of self and an acknowledgement of privilege. Embracing similarities and differences were shown to have different benefits to their teaching practice for participants. It was clear that these teachers bring themselves into their profession, and there is a conscious awareness of how this impacts their practice.

Teachers Need to be Learners

Teaching and learning are fundamentally intertwined. Embracing a commitment to learning was important for all seven participants, with all teachers identifying themselves as learners in the educational environment. All seven teachers described a need to be learners themselves, and the importance of embracing learning as part of their teaching practice.

Joyce identified the importance of embracing humility and flexibility in her thinking as a life-long learner.

> *I realized right away that I would never like, I would never master, I don't believe I would ever, like, master something, because it will always change. Or I might have a mastery of an idea, but then based on the kiddos in front of me, it will change.* (Interview 7)

Alex also described learning as something that is constant in his teaching practice, and reflected on the necessity of being a fast learner to respond to the higher needs of schools in lower income neighbourhoods.

> *Yeah and it's, it's, you know, it's the kind of thing that helps you kind of grow as a teacher. I feel like, not to say that other schools in the city you're going to not grow, but I feel like I'm kind of forced to grow up quickly as a teacher. I don't*

have like a, I don't, I don't really have the luxury of learning slowly because of

how much can get thrown at you on any given day. [...] When I'm teaching 26 like

I have this year, navigating each kid has been like a daily learning process.

(Interview 6)

Jenn shared about the importance of understanding and learning about her own emotional

responses when working with students and families in lower income neighbourhoods. She

understood feelings of frustration as connected to being uneducated about poverty and social

issues, and a need to develop her own knowledge base to cultivate increased empathy.

> *I used to get frustrated with the families, or frustrated with the parents or the*
>
> *students, and the more that I educated myself on it and the more time I've taught*
>
> *in that I – I still feel frustrated at times, but now I kind of understand and*
>
> *empathize a little bit more where they're coming from.* (Interview 4)

Bryan shared about the importance of being a learner from a cultural perspective. He was

keen to discuss the importance of developing relationships with and learning from different

cultural groups to alleviate potential barriers to learning. There was an essence of partnership

with community cultural groups, and an emphasis on active engagement with other cultures so

he can best support his students.

> *I have a copy of the Quran that's English so I can better understand my students,*
>
> *umm, understand the Pillars of Islam, for example. I have Seventh Day Adventists,*
>
> *so I've also stopped by their church to, like, understand what their particular sect*
>
> *of Christianity means and just understand the religious aspects of things because*
>
> *often religion tends to be, umm – tends to put up more roadblocks to education for*
>
> *students and sometimes it's just a miscommunication between the leaders of the*

community and to what the educational practice or intention, so communication

really helps with that. (Interview 1)

These excerpts highlight the collaborative nature of teaching and learning with and alongside students. Students are also teachers in educational spaces, inviting opportunities for teachers to enhance their own professional practice to meet individualized needs. Students cannot be met with a one-size-fits-all approach, and the examples shared demonstrate the humility and eagerness of teachers to meet student needs, but to also step outside themselves to better understand the social and cultural experiences of their students.

Negotiating Challenging and Emotional Work

The work of teachers is challenging and, at times, emotionally draining. Students and teachers spend the majority of the calendar year together. While consistent interactions and connections with children can be fulfilling work, it can also be quite difficult. All seven participants shared about challenging and emotional experiences in their work as teachers.

Jenn identified how the stories of students and families have stayed with her throughout her teaching career, and working in specific geographic neighbourhoods generates an exposure to experiences that many people are not aware of. She shared an emotional response of how it can be difficult to remember student names, but the painful student stories stick with her.

> *I always thought I'd remember everyone's name. I was always annoyed when we*
>
> *would see teachers later in life and they didn't remember your name – and now I*
>
> *realize - oh my gosh, we teach so many of them. But the stories always stick and*
>
> *the faces stick. Yeah – there's been some doozies that always stick (crying), so*
>
> *yeah – umm – definitely certain stories, and then you think you've heard the worst*
>
> *or you've seen the worst, and then something else comes. – And just throughout*

our whole school. Even students that I haven't necessarily taught directly in my

classroom, but I think the rest of the district would be shocked at what our school

sees sometimes. Or even just people in general, I think sometimes are shocked

that [this city] has pockets like this or has stories like this. (Interview 4)

Similar to Jenn, Zack shared how it is challenging to hear the troubled stories and navigate difficulties without being prepared for the task of teaching in a neighbourhood with many social issues.

Maybe I wouldn't be a teacher if I knew really what I was stepping into, because

you learn so much more and probably more than you really wanted. – Like, if I

knew what I would be going through or learning, or some of the conversations

that I've had with kids, parents, administrators, other teachers – I don't know if I

would've been a teacher. But it prepares you along the way. And that's that

elevation part, like your learning, reflecting, practicing, experiencing, and

everything just gets heightened, and you are more prepared. Your skin gets a little

bit thicker – your back is a little bit bigger, the weight of the world you can hold a

little bit more as you go through it and live it. (Interview 5)

While Alex shared that it is important to provide individualized approaches in his engagement with students, he also identified that this responsivity to student need is both exhausting and challenging.

I think that's probably the biggest thing I've learned, is that the way I approach

kids is very individualized to every single kid, which, like I said, can be a little

exhausting sometimes when you have 26 kids and you have 26 different ways to

deal with just the way that they are in a day-to-day basis – um – can be really,

really challenging. But at the same time, it is the kind of thing that as you work

with these kids more, you see it's the thing that they need. (Interview 6)

Sara articulated that, even though she understood that children behave in challenging ways when they feel a sense of safety, she also noted that this understanding doesn't necessarily make the work any easier. She also identified that it can be especially difficult when teachers have their own children, because the caring and support given to students at school can deplete the resources they have at home.

I totally get it, but there's only so much I can take. And you can't take a day off

here because they go insane when you have a substitute teacher. They can't

handle it. [...] – I have my own family, right. – And so, whatever is left goes to

them and then there's nothing else. I'm glad I only have one child of my own

(laughs). I couldn't do it. I don't think I could work here if I had, like, multiple

children of my own. (Interview 3)

The examples shared above showcase how participants understand, locate, and describe themselves as teachers. How they identify themselves as teachers creates a basis for understanding the challenges faced within the teaching profession, as teachers care for and support so many students each day of the school year. Students rely on their teachers to be present every school day, physically and emotionally, making it difficult for them to even take time off from work. Teachers feel the stories of students, they navigate the stories and resulting needs in their classrooms, and hold on to these student stories throughout the years, whether students have carved out a space in the heart of their teacher or the teacher makes sense of their experience as a professional learning and growth opportunity. Teachers are asked to do so much in the teaching profession, and their dedication and commitment to caring for children needs to

be honoured.

Superordinate Theme 2: Navigating the Complex Lives of Students

   This research highlighted the importance of sensitively navigating the complex lives of

students. While recognizing that schools are part of the communities in which children and

families live, participants contextualized the challenges that students in their classroom may be

experiencing; most examined these through the application of a trauma-informed lens and all

with an emphasis on not making assumptions about student and family experiences. There was

steadfast dedication to honouring student stories and experiences, and sincere commitment to

relationship-based teaching practice.

Table 4.2

Superordinate Theme 2: Navigating the Complex Lives of Students

Subordinate Theme	Bryan	Anna	Sara	Jenn	Zack	Alex	Joyce
Schools reflect community struggles	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes
Balancing curriculum with student needs	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes
Looking through a trauma-informed lens	Yes	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student stories matter	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
A relational approach to teaching practice	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Schools Reflect Community Struggles

   Schools are often community hubs. Particularly in larger urban centers, elementary

schools are typically sectioned off to the neighbourhoods that are in close proximity. This is a

unique experience for schools because, in a sense, they become even more representative of the

community, and the children and families they serve. Six participants highlighted how schools reflect existing community struggles in the school neighbourhood.

Bryan viewed understanding the neighbourhood as important, so teachers can gain an awareness of the social issues students are experiencing.

> *Schools are often a reflection of how the community is. – It's like, almost like a canary in the mine shaft, because the issues we see in the community are amplified at a school level in our behaviours and student behaviours. So, if you know what the issues there are in the community, you can reasonably predict what issues there might be inside a school.* (Interview 1)

Sara highlighted that differences are noticed through behaviours of students, even in neighbourhoods with similar demographic features. She reflected on previous schools she has worked at, identifying that there seem to be more defensive and angry behaviours compared to other areas of the city, with students who also come from low-support and low-income homes.

> *So, our socioeconomic status is pretty low and the vast majority of my students come from very low-income households and very low-support from their families. And it's very different from other schools that I've been at. […] Students here are really angry and defensive right off the bat. And I've never found that other schools I've worked at. Even though the demographics are pretty similar. The behaviours are the biggest piece.* (Interview 3)

While Jenn acknowledged an awareness of the challenges experienced in the school's neighbourhood, she also paid specific attention to the positives.

> *So yeah, it's I guess with any neighbourhood that's in that top percentile, it's a tough spot at times. Emotionally, definitely. Yeah, so I guess I would describe, I*

like to use the word dynamic. I had a friend the other day laugh at me, that he

thought I was being, what's the word – sorry it's been a really long day (laughs).

But that I was being like politically correct by saying dynamic and not being

negative about it. And I was like, well no, it is dynamic 'cause there's good and

bad. (Interview 4)

Joyce also spoke about the diversity within the school, noting that there is a lot of cultural diversity with layers of extreme complexity.

I believe we had over 81 cultures represented this year when we had our

multicultural day. Um – very complex and huge, like, layers in that complexity.

[…] There's lots of family connections, there's lots of, I guess, familial

connections - also social connections both positive and maybe not so positive with

the kids. (Interview 7)

Community struggles are vast and diverse and are an important part of a student's life. Communities engender relationships and are the places children call home. When students come to school, hundreds of children essentially gather under one roof. When this happens, schools need to be responsive to lived realities and diverse needs of students and families, whether those are financial constraints or behavioural difficulties as a result of challenges experienced outside of school. This can make for demanding work for school staff, as they attempt to navigate complex social issues that are often present in low-income neighbourhoods.

Balancing Curriculum with Student Needs

Teaching requires a balance between student needs and curriculum delivery. This balance is not easily struck and is often not considered to be of equal importance. Five out of the seven teachers expressed the need to prioritize the ever changing and dynamic needs of students over

their fundamental responsibility of curriculum delivery.

Bryan shared that school needs to be a safe space for students to be able to heal from adversities experienced outside of the school and to grow their resilience.

> *If they do have, even during school hours, that time to emotionally heal from what happened on the weekend or last night, they can become stronger; but it takes a lot of time and patience.* (Interview 1)

Zack emphasized the importance of having connections with his students and taking the time to get to know them, above all else.

> *We have to use our professional judgment to say "What's going to help us know these kids? What's going to help us help these kids learn?" And it's not worksheets and textbooks and paper and bold print, it's having the conversation daily. Not just once, but daily – about who we are – what we're doing – And it might be at 2-minute conversation, and it might be a 10-minute one-on-one conversation, right. – It might be triggered by a poor morning with their family, it might be, you know, stemming from a whole group conversation or maybe something, an incident, happened in the playground, right? But, the best learning comes, at least I've found or witnessed or observed for all students, is when we're learning from each other and learning from each other's experiences.* (Interview 5)

Sara expressed the importance of being flexible in her teaching, but identified challenges balancing teaching and responding to the assorted mental health needs in the classroom.

> *I try to have all, like, my classwork designed so that I can reach all of them, but to reach all of them on like a mental health level is hard. 'Cause they're all at*

different spots. So, it doesn't matter how I design my lesson, it's how they're

feeling in their body that affects their learning. I can't plan for that! (Interview 3)

While identifying that education is the fundamental goal of students attending school, Jenn had an emotional response when she shared about how education is secondary to supporting the basic needs of her students.

As weird as it sounds, like, education isn't always our first priority, even though

we're educators. It's the whole piece. It's making sure the children are safe,

making sure they're fed, or they're – umm, yeah sorry (crying) – […] I don't know

very many other teachers or schools that that has to be their focus. And I think I'm

noticing it, because I've spent most of my career in these schools, it's the norm to

me... And then now my nieces and nephews are in normal schools or different

schools, so really, I'm starting to see that difference now. My son starts

kindergarten in the fall and, like, doing his kindergarten open house – I was like

"holy shit" – like, you know, it's just so different, um, what they can make the

priority. And we definitely educate them, don't get me wrong there, but we can't

do it unless we do all of those other pieces first. (Interview 4)

Schools are unique spaces, and teachers have a demanding job of simultaneously navigating multiple relationships with over 20 students in their classrooms, all with individual stories and experiences, each day of the school year. The importance of prioritizing student needs over curricular outcomes was consistently shared, with a commitment to connecting with students as a critical step on the pathway to student learning, even when it is difficult.

Looking Through a Trauma-Informed Lens

Trauma-informed classrooms and schools are becoming increasingly common. While understanding trauma is important for teachers, there is also validity in not presuming trauma or the effects of trauma for students. Five participants noted the importance of becoming more knowledgeable about trauma and social issues, without passing judgement.

Joyce shared that teacher education impacts how teachers might view trauma, identifying a narrow summation of classroom behaviour and the complexities of trauma in her post-secondary training.

> *I can even think about in a classroom management seminar, professors saying like "Oh, well in an 'easy classroom' or in a 'hard classroom'" and then comparing those. So not maybe labeling the – "Oh if this child is experiencing trauma from this" – just labeling "Oh, in a hard classroom."* (Interview 7)

Jenn highlighted a necessity to be sensitive to the experience of families and their realities.

> *Educating myself to truly understand where those families are coming from when they are living below the poverty line, literally all the time. And then, we can never truly be in their shoes, but just understanding the students and now lately, I know it's a buzzword for the last few years – the trauma, and um – just having more of a trauma-based environment in my classroom and, and trying to support that.* (Interview 4)

Alex articulated that understanding trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) provides context for student struggles.

> *I know we have a lot of families that score really high on the ACEs test. And,*

yeah, and that – really again when you look at the test like that and like I've done

it – so I know what the questions are and I know when I see it as score of a nine, I

know that means, like that's a lot of stuff that these kids and families are

experiencing. (Interview 6)

While Zack acknowledged the importance of understanding social struggles, he was also firm in his belief that assumptions need to be avoided at all costs, especially with the application of labels such as vulnerable or at-risk.

You need to have the full scope of each kid and what their life is like before you

can start calling them vulnerable or at-risk. It would be very much so like

labeling – anybody, a person – if you just said they're at-risk because they're an

immigrant family. There are lots of immigrant families who are very well-off and

have a great standard of life, or standard of living and a quality of life – So, you

have to have kind of that, that environment and that – You have to be in a place to

be able to make those judgments and those observations before you can first state

who is vulnerable and who is at-risk. 'Cause then you're just being an asshole, if

you're saying that their at-risk or vulnerable without knowing the full picture.

(Interview 5)

Sensitivity and care were key features in the above excerpts. Students need to be viewed through a trauma-informed lens that seeks to understand rather than pass judgement or impose assumptions. As a result, the student becomes the focus, not a biased narrative that seeks to label experiences or circumstances without knowing the story behind the person.

Student Stories Matter

Amongst the diversity in schools, maintaining a focus on the individual student was

essential for study participants. Teachers spend so much time with their students throughout the school year, and are granted the unique experience to engage with students as they grow and evolve over the course of a year. Student stories matter, because the individual students are important. Six participants maintained a focus on the individuality of experiences for their students, underscoring the importance of understanding the story behind the student.

Anna identified that it is important to make connections and understand students in her classroom and school.

> *I think just to really know the, the positives and negatives in each kid's life helps to understand them.* (Interview 2)

Bryan shared the importance of learning about student stories to foster relationships.

> *When my kids misbehave or things are going on, it's symptomatic of something else... and to have that empathy to understand that and understand the story is essential for them to do well because my kids need a teacher who can develop relationships and to take that time to know them, for them to be successful.*
> (Interview 1)

Similarly, Jenn noted that it is important to know about a student's story to help build relationship and understanding.

> *I feel like you can make that relationship connection quicker if you know something about them and, and don't see them as just that behaviour in the class, or the person that's always late.* (Interview 4)

Alex shared that teachers have a responsibility to learn more about all students and their circumstances to better understand behaviours that students exhibit.

> *You have kids who could be, present in the classroom and around their peers,*

really like they would a quote-unquote – like a "normal kid" but there could be

some underlying issue that they have just been repressing – and that kid could, all

the sudden something could go wrong and they could snap or throw something or

yell at somebody. And you're asking yourself "why is this happening?", but if you

take the time to get to know them, you'll understand that they have some deep-

rooted things that have bothered them or if you read previous reports and stuff

like that. (Interview 6)

Knowing the student's story, even somewhat, engenders empathy and understanding of the students and the behaviours they may demonstrate. The excerpts above highlight the importance for teachers to gain knowledge and insight into the experiences of their students, to enhance their teaching practice and engagement with students. Thus, acknowledging the story behind the student becomes essential in trauma-informed classrooms and schools, in an effort to promote sensitivity, caring and empathy.

A Relational Approach to Teaching Practice

Relationships are fundamental to learning and growing. The stimulus of relationship harnesses a meaningful engagement between students and teachers to learn alongside each other. All seven participants identified the importance of infusing a relational approach to their teaching practice.

Anna identified the unique opportunities bestowed on teachers to positively impact the lives of children.

I think it's part of being a teacher. […] You hope and you pray that whatever you

said to that kid and however you helped him, he'll remember that and yeah… and

I think some sometimes you can't say too much, you can't, you can't hold anything

back because then they're gone – you know. – So, while I have them I want to

teach so much and I care for them so much, and respect them, and adore them,

and love them and give them so much, like, love and respect that they hold that

with them, so hopefully respect themselves. And, yeah that's a hard part of being a

teacher, I think. You can, you have them for a year, and you have them so much

for a year and then they're just gone. (Interview 2)

Caring for students also takes time, commitment, and energy. Jenn shared about her instinctual nature to care for her students like they were her own.

One of the reasons why I didn't have my son until quite later in my life because it

– I was – "how do I share?" How do I have room for my own when I have so

many that I have to take care of, too – So yeah, no I definitely, – I probably care

too much. (Interview 4)

Zack highlighted how building relationships with children helps to make change in the lives of children. In this way, he was attentive to how teaching is personal and sensitive work.

The change that you're going to make is really, not small. It's sensitive and it's

really personal. […] There's reciprocal and mutual value between every

interaction. […] When I first started, I didn't think that it was that. I thought it

was just coming in here, rocking these kids' lives with new information and fun

things. But when you come in here, you really realize that your hope is that at the

end of the day you've made a relationship with those kids – a positive one. That

they feel comfortable with whatever new learning they've acquired and any

previous knowledge that they've built upon. That they can go out and move on to

the next relationship, or continue building relationships because of yours.

(Interview 5)

Alex imparted a spirit of persistence in relational practice, as he navigated strategies to support students.

> *I saw what building relationships for kids in this area [of the city] could do. [...] I have kids who will, you know, throw things in class or call out inappropriate words. Or I have kids that will just regularly just talk back to me and stuff like that. And you just throw different strategies at them to try and see what sticks, especially when they're, when they're constantly mad at you (laughs) and so getting through to them is, is a little harder because they don't want to talk to you. [...] And these kids, 95% of what they need is you to just kind of be patient with them and let them process things in their way.* (Interview 6)

Relationships infuse connection and belonging into schools and respective classroom spaces. Participants were steady in their dedication to building relationships, and when they shared about inspiring growth and learning in students, their passion for helping was astonishingly clear. The participants collectively demonstrated an inspiring commitment to children.

Superordinate Theme 3: Making Sense of Student Risk and Vulnerability as a Teacher

It was observed that some participants appeared to have given more thought to the terms risk and vulnerability than others; but at some level, all teachers articulated being witness to the complex experiences of students and families. Concepts and signs of empathy and resilience were woven into the interviews, as participants strove to share their perspectives on vulnerability and risk, while honouring the complexity of social issues and the individuality of students and

families. In most cases, participants shared their perspectives on vulnerability and risk in a reflective, but also cautious stance. In essence, the interview process really became a process of 'thinking out loud' as participants voiced their thoughts about terms that are often placed on students and their families.

Table 4.3

Superordinate Theme 3: Making Sense of Student Risk and Vulnerability as a Teacher

Subordinate Theme	Bryan	Anna	Sara	Jenn	Zack	Alex	Joyce
Risk as exposure to harm	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-
Vulnerability as susceptibility to adversity	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes
At-risk creates a sense of urgency	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Challenges with vulnerability	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes
Notions of resilience within risk and vulnerability	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Risk as Exposure to Harm

Risk, or at-risk, are terms often used in educational contexts. The term risk characteristically precedes the notion of an adverse behaviour or outcome, and often generates concern for well-being and academic performance, especially with younger students. Six participants identified risk as being associated with the potential of some kind of exposure to harm in their home or community.

Alex shared his understanding of risk as the potential of circumstances having a negative effect on students.

> *I feel like at-risk is a lot more kids that are like living in a situation or being a part of situations that can do harm to them.* (Interview 6)

Zack perceived risk as a significant experience that had a direct effect on a child's well-being.

> *At-risk is like there's a catalyst that could drastically change the direction of this person's life, academically, financially, mentally, emotionally physically, in their well-being. There's something that if it happens, or something major, or something – maybe not major – that immediately will change the well-being of all of those.* (Interview 5)

While Sara identified that risk could be associated with the home environment, there was a focus on risk being connected to choices, and individual choices that create the potential for harm as children age.

> *I think like maybe their home life, the choices that they make, the people that they hang out with – Um – how they're – even just how they perform academically or their attitudes towards academics and what they think that they can achieve in their life. The perception of themselves. […] At-risk is kind of their own choices.* (Interview 3)

Bryan recognized that risk could also be connected to community influence, sharing how a child's surrounding environment can elevate student risk and exposure to harm.

> *At-risk students would be the ones I describe where they're not necessarily struggling at home and the immediate household, but influences from the community put them at-risk because it increases their likelihood to do risky behaviour.* (Interview 1)

Notions of risk, or being at-risk, was strongly connected to the behaviours of students, and the behaviours of others in the home or in the community. While there was a focus on

student choices, there was also an overriding concern about the well-being of students who are experiencing risk as a result of family behaviours or community characteristics. Concerns about the impacts of risk were wide-reaching, with ripple effects that could negatively influence the trajectory of a child's life and positive outcomes.

Vulnerability as Susceptibility to Adversity

Vulnerability is a complex and dynamic term. Regardless of how vulnerability may be defined in academia or on social media, this research sought to gather understandings of how teachers comprehended the term in their teaching practice. While three participants articulated low socioeconomic status or poverty as related to their understanding of vulnerability, there was an overwhelming focus on susceptibility for almost all participants. Accordingly, six participants described vulnerability as a susceptibility to adversity, arising from risks encountered and leading students to places that are undesired or unintended.

Zack shared that vulnerability has the potential to subject children to shortcomings and an inability to handle changes.

> *Vulnerability for me is – there is potential that something through whatever experience they have, for whatever is going on in their life – they are subject to shortcomings to a lack, to a, to a lacking of something, to some kind of big change. Like they would not have the stability and the support if something changed in their life to deal with it, to handle it.* (Interview 5)

Anna explored vulnerability as something that creates limited control over circumstances leading to susceptibility to adversity.

> *Maybe kids that are, have other circumstances going on, like they are very anxious kids or they also don't have a very structured home life so they're*

vulnerable to heading down the wrong path. (Interview 2)

Similarly, Sara identified that the choices of others make students susceptible to making unfavourable decisions.

> *I think vulnerable is where they could kind of end up in a place where they shouldn't [...] Vulnerable as to their choices because of other people.* (Interview 3)

Alex articulated that vulnerability encourages a susceptibility to adversity and a powerlessness to circumstance.

> *Vulnerability could be more of a situation of they're more inclined to be influenced by certain things, um – because of previous life experiences or whatever social experiences, they may be more vulnerable to, you know, being influenced by certain things because that is their normal. [...] Vulnerable is very distinct in that means something could happen to them.* (Interview 6)

Vulnerability was situated in an experience of powerlessness, and susceptibility to adversity and the influence of others. Vulnerability was understood to be embedded in a student's life, with the potential of impacting a student's ability to navigate challenges or difficulties. There was an essence of vulnerability engendering a lack of individual control or agency, resources, or support.

At-Risk Creates a Sense of Urgency

While some teachers described risk and vulnerability interchangeably, the term at-risk created a larger sense of urgency for participants. Six participants shared a sense of urgency and responsibility to help when the term at-risk is utilized. Participants felt as though they needed to respond immediately to mitigate further harm.

Zack shared that at-risk sets a tone of urgency and need for action.

> *At-risk is like they are here, it's happening right now – and that it needs*
>
> *immediate action to support these people.* (Interview 5)

Sara recognized a sense of urgency with at-risk, and identified a need to respond quickly because of a sense of uncertainty.

> *At-risk has more of an urgency factor to it – umm – just because it could be*
>
> *something that happens faster whether or not like it actually does. – At-risk feels*
>
> *like it's going to happen and it's just a matter of when.* (Interview 3)

Concerned about student resilience in the face of challenges or difficulties, Jenn believed there needs to be a level of prioritization for students who are identified as at-risk.

> *Those are the students that we need to focus on first in a way – if that makes*
>
> *sense. As that ties-in with the whole resiliency piece, too. They're less likely to*
>
> *have the tools to be resilient.* (Interview 4)

Joyce shared a feeling of helplessness and inability to alter risk factors for students.

> *At-risk to me takes almost, seems like there's less I can do about it, like at-risk*
>
> *there's all these factors going on, but I don't have an effect over them.* (Interview
>
> 7)

Students who are at-risk require a response. While the need for additional support is clear, there was also a sense of powerlessness and ineffectiveness. The term motivates action, but it is also daunted by the overwhelming nature of what this risk means for students.

Challenges with Vulnerability

The term vulnerability was often used to describe student situations or circumstances, individual, familial, or societal. Six participants identified that it was a challenging term to

articulate, but described some of their students as being vulnerable. There was an anecdotal sense and accompaniment of stories to describe vulnerability, lending it a uniqueness that was separate from risk.

Anna believed that vulnerable children know their vulnerability but struggle to articulate it.

> *Vulnerable children, I feel like are students that, that know they're vulnerable and that know that they need help but sometimes don't know how to ask, or sometimes show it in different ways by being closed off or sad or upset.* (Interview 2)

Sara shared disheartened concerns and a need for interventions to occur much earlier.

> *Somewhere – they got lost. And I think to me it's family. It's like we do whatever we can with them here, but they go home. And if they have no support or no one at home to look after them, then they're being failed at home. And that's the hardest piece for me. […] They just they all need so much and so I just think like – but I also think they need to be caught earlier. Like if you know that students are in a vulnerable situation or in a situation that could get worse, that they need to be supported right away and I know it 'cause there's so many of them here, – but I just think that it needs to be caught a lot earlier.* (Interview 3)

Zack identified that it is difficult to support students when concerns are not tangible but are grounded in feelings.

> *Vulnerable is – it's like you can see it more – even though it's so hard to describe it. Like when a kid is vulnerable and you know they're vulnerable it's a different, it's a different look. It's a different sense. It's a different feeling that you get as a person. […] But what about that kid who today they're okay, tomorrow they're not*

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– or yesterday they weren't okay, but today they're fine. What do you do for that

kid? You can't put him on a program and justify that that's how you're helping

them, because it's not an everyday thing for that kid or it's not – I usually say it's

not a lot because it's just so easy to point out the 'it's not.' – But you can't

because, because it's changing. It's so volatile. It's so arbitrary – that it requires

more attention, it requires more of you. (Interview 5)

Joyce offered an overall scope of understanding vulnerability in relation to risk, by articulating that vulnerability creates a more personal understanding of the complexities experienced by students and families.

Vulnerability, is just for me like I just think, I think of the students. I think

vulnerable, I think of like raw emotion in a classroom and if I think of at-risk, I

think of like the data, I guess. I guess that might be how I view it. So vulnerable

might be the day-to-day, like in the trenches and then at-risk is kind of an

umbrella outside of it. (Interview 7)

Vulnerability was understood through emotive responses and the identification of obstacles for students that are closely tied to dynamic home-school complexities. The above excerpts identify how participants navigate vulnerability on a daily basis, with concerns of student exposure to harm or adversity in social, family, or community situations. There was a heightened sensitivity and perceptiveness with vulnerability, with an unyielding focus on the student well-being.

Notions of Resilience within Risk and Vulnerability

Discussing concepts of risk and vulnerability without traversing the tempestuous waters of resilience would dismiss a complicating factor that informs teacher perceptions of

vulnerability and risk. All seven participants offered perspectives on resilience, emphasizing an importance of fostering and encouraging student resilience. When referring to students who are vulnerable or at-risk, there was a recognition of the complexity of resilience, and being able to understand the level of resilience for vulnerable or at-risk students.

Sara viewed students as needing to build resilience to be able to accept or cope with life's challenges.

> *Some of these kids are pretty amazing. They've dealt with a lot of stuff in their lives, loss of parents, or foster care, or group homes, or lots of things. – And some of them are really trying hard to just deal with it and move on and build whatever they can for themselves and it's pretty amazing. And some of them haven't quite gotten to that point yet, where they can be resilient or learn the skills to be resilient. That's to me, I think that's where the defensiveness comes in, 'cause they haven't built those resiliency skills yet. They don't really know how to accept and deal with either their choices or things that have just happened to them, as a result of life.* (Interview 3)

Bryan connected resilience to the ability to heal, noting that students who are vulnerable or at-risk don't have enough time to heal from hurts to be more resilient.

> *Vulnerable and at-risk students are – less resilient – I view resiliency almost as like scar tissue, like emotional scar tissue. To be resilient you do have to go through these growing and trying moments, but then you need time to heal. Time to heal to say I am alright, I've grown, I've moved beyond this – and once you've healed and you go through another trying moment again, it's opening up new wounds for it to scar and become stronger. My vulnerable and at-risk kids don't*

have time to heal. (Interview 1)

Zack viewed all students as having some measure of resilience, but displayed a sense of uneasiness with overrating or underrating a student's resilience.

> *We know kids are resilient. We know they are. Some more than others. Some have*
> *the skills, some don't. Some have a certain skill-set, some have many attributes*
> *about themselves to be able to navigate their own world and this world and their*
> *environments that they're in, but for me [...] if I made the wrong judgment I've*
> *now not, I've now put that kid in their own position – – and that would be a*
> *disservice.* (Interview 5)

Jenn noted resilience as both perplexing and interesting, and as unpredictably changing from student to student.

> *I still don't get how some have it and some don't. Like, there's all those kinds of*
> *'what they need to be resilient' and 'foster resiliency in your children' – but then*
> *you have this diamond in the rough that shines no matter where they came from,*
> *right. – And it just kind of always boggles me. And then you have students that*
> *should've had all the tools there and did have all the tools there to be resilient –*
> *and they don't have it at all.* (Interview 4)

The above excerpts highlight presumptions about resilience through participant observations of student behaviours, paired with an overwhelming tentativeness and matter-of-factness around identifying student resilience. Resilience, as it was understood by participants, is a complex phenomenon worthy of further investigation outside the scope of this research. It necessitates critical thinking around vulnerability and risk, and the level of possible action.

Superordinate Theme 4: Strengthening Supports for Students

      Supporting students in schools is important work. There are times when the circle of care for students extends beyond teachers to also include collaboration with other school-related helping professionals, such as school social workers. Participants placed emphasis on schools being able to facilitate meaningful supports for students and teachers, and engage in effectual interdisciplinary practice. Ideas to enhance collaboration between teachers and school social workers were offered by participants, with a need to create space to share information and engage in interprofessional dialogue, in the best interest of students and families.

Table 4.4

Superordinate Theme 4: Strengthening Supports for Students

Subordinate Theme	Bryan	Anna	Sara	Jenn	Zack	Alex	Joyce
Student supports need to be meaningful	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Enhancing collaboration between teachers and school social workers	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Importance of sharing knowledge and information	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Student Supports Need to be Meaningful

      Supports in schools need to be meaningful and thoughtful. The inclusion of helping professionals in schools was heavily valued by six participants, although many identified that they didn't have regular contact or interactions with social work supports. Value was placed on the professional expertise of social workers, and teachers being able to share in supporting the emotional well-being of students. Concern was raised over social workers having an accurate snapshot of students and welcomed the idea of social workers joining their classroom spaces, to strengthen the support plan for students.

Zack shared about the importance of having supports in school because supports help to access and understand students.

> *We need people – we need social workers. We need community support, we need partnerships within our own working environments, within our building, within the school community – umm – to help us understand how we can teach students or access, not teach - access students who are vulnerable or at-risk. There is an understanding that we do not obtain. There is a lived experience, a lived knowledge, understanding.* (Interview 5)

Joyce identified the benefit of having supports in schools, so students can build relationships with other adults in the school and teachers can maintain focus and attention on teaching for all of their learners.

> *My bottom line, my bottom, my bottom line is I want you to feel safe, but then the other line, like the level up is I want you to feel safe and cared for, right. That's what I hope for, for everyone, but I am the teacher and I am here to push you for the highest levels possible for you.* (Interview 7)

Alex identified that students navigate challenges and relationships throughout the day, suggesting social workers join classrooms to get a better picture of students.

> *You understand the whole kid a little more when you see them in both sides. And I think that's, that's the biggest thing that I would love to see more social work people doing is sitting in on classroom situations and seeing how the kids are when they're at, like that's probably more of the hours they see a kid – more of the hours a kids at school, they're seeing them away from the classroom – and so, but there's still more hours being spent in the classroom. And so, if the majority of the*

time that kid is here, they're in a classroom. That's a better visualization of how

that kid is and what they are, what they do and stuff like that. (Interview 6)

Jenn also recognized the benefit of social workers joining classrooms, pointing out that

the school environment is a place to help kids and share support ideas with teachers.

Maybe even just being in the classroom sometimes, seeing how they interact with

their peers or interact with me – like it's all just that collecting the puzzle pieces,

right – and collecting the info […] having that time to actually be able to share,

and them ask – and me fill in what's needed. Because sometimes I think we

assume that it wouldn't be helpful for them to know, but maybe it would

be. (Interview 4)

The above excerpts highlight the value placed on collaboration with helping

professionals. There was acknowledgement of social worker expertise and also the importance of

being able to share snapshots of how students engage throughout the school day. Participants

appeared eager to be able to share their spaces with other professionals who were supports for

their students.

Enhancing Collaboration Between Teachers and School Social Workers

Collaboration and connections between teachers and school social workers are essential.

All seven participants offered ideas about how to improve collaborative efforts between

professionals, offering suggestions for how to enhance collaborative practice in schools, while

being mindful to the "busyness" of schedules and work days.

Working together in the classroom can often be the essence of collaboration in a school.

Sara identified opportunities for and an appreciation of collaboration inside the classroom, by

providing direct supports to students in the classroom.

I think it would be nice if they [mental health supports] could be in the classroom as a whole a little bit more […] just giving them some different strategies from what I give them in class, somebody else's perspective on it I think would be really helpful. (Interview 4)

Zack recognized the importance of teaching and social work professionals to learn how to effectively work alongside each other and know their scope of practice to efficiently layer their supports.

We need them [social workers] so we can help build a picture of these kids' lives, and so without their work and without, without their best practice and without the communication and the relationship with them, we are only limiting ourselves to what we can do. […] You really have to have a good understanding of what is within your scope of work, what is in your scope of what you can do, like every day or I guess competently, and then once you understand where your, kind of your lines are, it's how can we overlap the lines. It's not blending the lines, it's not crossing the lines, it's layering those lines. (Interview 5)

Joyce shared Zack's sentiment by noting how communication between social workers and teachers could support a collaborative approach to helping students.

Sometimes my kiddos have goals that I don't know about and I'm like, if we both knew we could be tag teaming this. (Interview 7)

Jenn appeared frustrated and identified that collaboration can be influenced by partnerships between social workers and teachers, with a need for social workers to value the perspective of teachers.

I guess the biggest piece that frustrates me is I, in my thirteen years with the

district, I can count maybe two times that the social worker actually has heard me

and taken my feedback, and asked me – and actually had that reciprocal

conversation. And I know FOIP and all those things come into play, where it's

difficult sometimes to have that conversation with each other, but I find it very

segregated at times, and they don't see us as a valuable piece. (Interview 4)

To foster better supports for students, teachers and social workers must work collaboratively. The above excerpts identify the importance of valuing each other's work, in addition to being in service to the presenting needs of classrooms. Through a shared understanding of student and school needs, and all parties understanding their scope of practice, collaboration between social workers and teachers can thrive.

Importance of Sharing Knowledge and Information

There is shared wisdom between social workers and teachers, in addition to knowledge about student interactions, behaviours, and abilities. Sharing this information and learning from each other was identified as significant to actualizing collaborative practice. Six participants shared how they valued the importance of sharing knowledge and information between professionals, to enhance teaching practice and support for students.

Anna identified that sharing varied perspectives helps to create a whole picture of the child.

> *I worked with a social worker and I really appreciated her speaking to me*
>
> *separately and kind of getting a background of the kid and his behaviour in the*
>
> *class around all his peers, his behaviour in reaction to certain circumstances or*
>
> *certain situations. Other experiences I've had, they just talked to the kid one-on-*
>
> *one, but I don't think that's a very true representation of I don't, I think the more*

perspectives you can get and the more you understand the kid I think it might be

easier to properly help the kid – I could be wrong. I don't know. I don't have the

schooling, but in my experience, I think that really helped. (Interview 2)

Bryan noted the importance of maintaining focus on the common goal of helping

students, when navigating efforts to communicate and engage in collaborative practice.

It's so specific down to the kid that is hard for me to understand what she [school

social worker] does and if I don't know what they're saying what she does, I can't

support her or I can't find ways that she can support me. – But due to the

confidentiality of things, some things that she works on with the kid might not be

up to me to know. So, I think it's almost like the island syndrome where your kind

of working on your own island and I'm working on my own island, and you have

no idea what's going on in either place. – On the other hand, she might not know

what I'm doing in the classroom conversations I'm having with the kids.

(Interview 1)

Jenn affirmed that communication between social workers and teachers is crucial for

effective teaching.

I know I'm not a social worker, I don't have that level of expertise – but I can

bring some things to the table, and I can share those as well. Maybe then we have

a more-full picture, so that would be my biggest thing. Whenever a social worker

actually asks, it's like "Hey, can I talk to you about it?" "Can you talk to fill me

in?" – and that sort of thing, so yeah. Umm – yeah. Because that back story helps

me teach as well. – I know they can't tell me all the details, but if they can let me

know little bits and pieces and that helps me empathize with student and maybe

not be so hard on them with their tardiness or tiredness, or whatever it may be. I mean it helps us when we have that full picture too. [...] Again, I know we're not trained social workers, but we definitely can be implementing some of those things to help the students realize that it's not just when I'm with this person that I practice these. (Interview 4)

Joyce came back to the importance of social workers knowing that teachers are doing and trying their best to support students, but there is still much to learn from each other from communication and knowledge exchanges.

Knowing that the goal of the teacher is to reach high levels of learning and that I'm sure that every teacher is doing the best that they can with what they feel they have. But – there's so much to learn from those people in a school. (Interview 7)

When teachers and social workers communicate, opportunities to enhance care and greater collaboration are optimized. The above excerpts acknowledge the limits to what can be communicated to teachers by social workers, while underscoring the importance of appreciating each other's responsibilities, expertise, and demands on the road to cohesive partnerships between social workers and teachers in schools. There are different skillsets brought to the table by teachers and social workers, but the common goal of supporting students can help to maintain a trajectory that supports heightened collaboration and successful interdisciplinary practice.

The following chapter will discuss research findings, along with considerations for school social work practice. Study limitations and implications for future research will also be identified.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study set out to explore the essence of teachers' experiences, with a particular focus on grade six teachers' views on student vulnerability and risk. The research question, *"What are teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk?"* allowed for exploration of how teachers respond to constructs of vulnerability and risk, differentiation between the two terms, and consideration of their own experiences and the experiences of students. There is limited research on teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk that moves beyond perceptions of student behaviour, academic achievement, or standardized indicators of risk or vulnerability, and this study helps to fill that gap. Addressing this gap in research and capturing teacher perspectives of student vulnerability and risk helps to strengthen understanding of the necessary resources required to address student needs in schools. Student behaviours only tell a small part of the student's story. Descriptive definitions of student vulnerability and risk can also fall short of attending to the varied needs of students, particularly when teachers are tasked with the complex work of supporting the social, emotional, and basic needs of students.

Exploring teacher perceptions of student vulnerability and risk takes into consideration the role of language, frame of reference, and potential bias of teachers as they respond to the individualized needs of students, parents, and schools. How vulnerability and risk are perceived directs attention to the role of language and discourse in schools and creates an awareness of the implications of language or terms used when school social workers collaborate and communicate with teachers. Brewer (1999) made the assertion that "real world problems do not exist independently of their sociocultural, political, economic, or even psychological context" (p. 329); and as socially constructed terms, vulnerability and risk are permeated with latent assumptions that guide teacher understandings and influence actions and behaviours towards

students. Due to the significant role language plays in our understandings (Witkin, 2011), attention to teachers' perceptions, underlying assumptions, and notions that guide teachers' or schools' responses is important and valuable information for school social workers to be aware of in their practice. The examination of teachers' perceptions also helps to inform an understanding of the needs of school staff (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012), and promotes heightened consciousness for school social workers as they partner with teachers and schools. The presence of underlying assumptions is also likely to be true for school social workers, but an acute focus on teachers' perceptions generates considerations for school social work practice and training for social work practice in educational settings.

Teachers' Perceptions of Student Vulnerability and Risk

This study invited opportunities for participants to tap into their own perspectives and deconstruct possible binaries within, and ambiguities between, vulnerability and risk. Participant accounts emphasized a lack of clear direction from their school district on how the terms are conceptualized and, as a result, teachers were left to rely on their own discretion, assumptions, frames of reference, and biases. Consequently, the study moved beyond the bureaucratic usage of vulnerability and risk and highlighted implications for how the terms are understood and mobilized at the micro-level by teachers in schools. Several participants noted that there are both upsides and shortcomings of being left to your own devices and opinions on student vulnerability and risk, acknowledging that school district policies could necessarily guide teachers away from reductionistic labels and towards more positive ways to view social issues through organizational messaging; however, participants also identified that overarching policies could also restrict the individuality and humanity of their efforts to understand and support students if they were constrained to only viewing students through finite or concrete measures. As such, all participant

interviews were characterized by fluid and intuitive dialogue about student vulnerability and risk.

From the findings, four superordinate themes emerged in this study: 1) Who I am as a Teacher; 2) Navigating the Complex Lives of Students; 3) Making Sense of Student Risk and Vulnerability as a Teacher; and 4) Strengthening Supports for Students. Each superordinate theme will be discussed in this chapter, through an interpretive lens, and complemented by existing literature. Limitations of the study will be identified later in the chapter, in addition to implications for school social work practice and training, and recommendations for further research.

Who I am as a Teacher

Teaching is a dynamic and complex experience. Participants offered insight into who they are as individuals as they navigate the teaching profession, while also sharing the importance of being learner themselves and understanding their own privilege as they work to support students who are commonly referred to as at-risk or vulnerable. There was an infusion of self within the teacher identity, with emotional consequences that make teaching challenging work. There was an eagerness for learning, not just as teachers, but as individuals whose teaching practice would naturally improve with humility, flexibility, and a fundamental willingness to engage in continual learning and reflexivity. It was clear that the participants do more than teach; they also learn from the environments and people around them. They are learners just like their students, but are in receipt of different lessons as the teacher at the front of the classroom.

When reflecting on student vulnerability and risk, all participants reflected on their own privilege. Participants positioned themselves in relation to their views on student vulnerability and risk, with several participants openly identifying their own privileged upbringing. Yet,

merely viewing vulnerability and risk from a normative lens limits the potential for understanding the experiences and issues of social inequality that may restrain opportunities for students to thrive. Even so, empathy was woven through the stories shared by participants, with a tone of recognition and appreciation for their own experiences, however similar or different their stories were from their students' stories. Even though the perceived differences between the experiences of teachers and their students were generally noted by participants, there was a commonality of experience across participants, particularly as they sought to explicate their commitment to supporting their students. In this way, participants demonstrated the importance of understanding and valuing the experiences of others, to enable heightened interpersonal relatedness to promote non-discriminatory interactions (Heaslip et al., 2016).

The dialogue generated in the interviews reflected participants' exploration of their own experiences and privilege as they navigated concepts of vulnerability and risk and, in turn, some of their own biases and feelings were uncovered (Reneyke, 2017). Subsequently, the sharing of their own perceptions and stories invited opportunities for participants to step out of their own personal realities (Reyneke, 2017). Through the lens of social constructionism, dialogues that engage tough topics contribute to an increased acceptance of diverse views and beliefs, enlighten different ways of looking at oneself or others, and improve interpersonal relationships (Miller et al., 2004; Reyneke, 2017). This was particularly demonstrated by one participant, who initially spoke in a deflated and frustrated tone about one student but, by the end of the interview, their demeanor and language suggested increased optimism and hope about how they could support the student. This was a powerful and inspiring observation, and a reminder for school social workers to create space for more dialogue to deepen our understanding of the teachers' perceptions of students. It is evident that there is more to teachers' stories, and what they might

initially share about their experiences with students should not be taken at 'face value' as this doesn't reveal their full or possible understandings of students.

Balancing the diverse needs of students, and providing a classroom space that is responsive to the safety and security needs of students is not without its difficulties though, with all participants highlighting the challenging and emotional work of teaching. While this sensitivity and vulnerability to share their challenges could have been more prevalent because data collection and interviews took place in the final months of the school year, there was a genuine rawness in their identity as teachers. Participants highlighted the need to emotionally extend themselves in the best interest of their students, forfeiting sick days or time away from the classroom, because their students benefit from the consistency of their presence. Teachers can often feel a sense of responsibility in their teaching practice to work long hours, act as positive role models, and demonstrate commitment and motivation to help students experience success in school (Lauermann, 2014). This commitment to supporting student success makes for demanding and exhaustive work, as teachers are often the "key points of interventions" (Forster et al., 2017, p. 33).

Participants identified making personal sacrifices, something they may not have expected at the time of entering the profession. According to a study by Lauermann (2014) on teacher responsibility from the perspective of teachers, influencing factors to teacher responsibility are comprised of teachers' personal characteristics, skillset, personal life outside of school, pressure from others, and interpersonal relations and school regulations inherent in organizational climates of schools, with the notion that teacher responsibility leads to positive and negative personal consequences for teachers and their students. It is clear from Lauermann's research that teaching as a profession is a layered experience, and the findings from this research expands

understanding of the teaching experience to also include the attention to student experiences and relational considerations with students. Despite the positive results from connections with students, professional respect and pride, and accolades from superiors, teaching is difficult and emotionally exhausting (Lauermann, 2014). Teachers are working hard and are feeling tired for it. While social work training aims to widen the scope of understanding for the clients or consumers social workers will serve and work alongside, it is important for school social workers to remember that they must also seek to understand and empathize with their teacher colleagues. It is critical that school social workers are attentive to this, so they can glean insight into their own perspectives, values, beliefs, and biases (Reyneke, 2017). Through understanding and empathy, school social workers can strengthen interdisciplinary professional relationships and support teachers in collaborative efforts to support students.

Navigating the Complex Lives of Students

Student lives need to be handled with a level of delicacy and sensitivity. Participants shared how schools end up spotlighting prevalent community struggles and how teachers need to balance curriculum and be responsive to emerging and changing student needs. There was also a tendency to apply a trauma-informed lens and attend to the individuality of students through relational teaching practice. While cultural diversity within the student population was noted, there was caution by all participants to provide specificity around demographics that extended beyond low socioeconomic status; nonetheless, community and familial influences were important considerations for participants as they shared about navigating the complex lives of students. Schools are centralized sites that reflect the needs of communities, especially underprivileged neighbourhoods, and children and youth unwittingly become the representatives of social issues and struggles. Consequently, teachers become tasked with the complex role of

navigating the diverse social and economic realities faced by students and their families, even when such social and emotional needs seem to move past the boundaries of teacher responsibilities (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012).

The participants' commitment to students also extended into the necessity of attending to the individualized needs of students before students are able to access the curriculum being delivered. While learning is the central activity and aim of schools, student well-being can be negatively impacted when there are difficulties with or barriers to learning (Korhonen et al., 2014). Specifically, and in response to the social and emotional complexities, participants expressed the need for a trauma-informed lens. Participants were fundamentally knowledgeable in trauma-informed practice in education, exerting a non-judgmental stance in response to student trauma and family experiences. This compassionate understanding of trauma is crucial, as outcomes in school can be affected when a child has experienced trauma (whether the teacher is aware of the trauma or not), particularly when an adverse experience(s) creates subsequent disruptions to 'neurosequential brain development' that leaves the trauma-affected brain developmentally inhibited (Brunzell et al., 2016; Perry, 2009). There was a sincerity illuminating the importance of a trauma-informed lens, not because of the growing trend of schools to engage in this perspective, but out of necessity for the participants and their involvement teaching students who have often experienced trauma. Consistent with the assertion that schools are detection and treatment sites for mental health interventions (Roberts, 1971), working with students who have experienced some level of trauma is the lived reality for all of the participants. Attentiveness to the individuality of students was all the more important for participants as they shared nuances and uniqueness within and between each student they teach, and articulated the benefit of taking the time to learn about who their students are as individuals.

There was also a genuine commitment to building connections and relationships with students. The findings indicate that participants put trauma-informed teaching into practice by attending to individualized needs of children through relational teaching, and a display of relentless dedication to the growth and learning of students. Fostering relationships with students was important to participants and was identified as more than a teaching practice, it is a way of being with students. This is particularly relevant for those students who deviate from dominant or normative childhood behaviours or experiences, because education is a powerful intervention tool for students who have experienced trauma or social challenges (Brunzell et al., 2016; Foster et al., 2017). Consistent with the literature, participants highlighted that the way of being with students can be intrinsic to the individual teacher or influenced by the school culture that is fostered by school administration (Lauermann, 2014). There was an acknowledged commitment to their students, with participants figuratively giving a piece of themselves to students on a daily basis. Participants clearly had a passion for supporting and helping students experience success inside and outside of the school environment.

Relationship-based teaching contributes to the significant ability of schools to thrive as protective factors for students, particularly when relationships with students are positioned as a priority, and school connectedness is stimulated (Brunzell et al., 2016). School connectedness is identified as a modifiable protective factor (Chapman et al., 2014; Foster et al., 2017); as such, fostering this connectedness is an important responsibility placed on teachers. Attentiveness to connectedness and positive relationships can mitigate misunderstandings between the school administration, teachers, students and families, to ultimately lessen student experiences of adverse outcomes in schools (Irvine, 1999). When teachers take the time to truly get to know students through relatedness and supportive relationships, school connectedness and engagement

can be nurtured, and schools can actualize their potential to buffer adversity and cultivate resilience (Prince-Embury, 2011).

Making Sense of Student Risk and Vulnerability as a Teacher

The exploration of vulnerability and risk appeared to be a reasonably novel experience for participants. Participants were largely reflective when describing students who might be vulnerable or at-risk. All of the participants had experience supporting students who were commonly referred to as at-risk or vulnerable, but teasing apart understandings of the terms became a journey of discovery as participants shared stories, considered particular students, experiences, or mindsets around the application of terms.

While external metrics of vulnerability and risk can create clarity around static measures or categories of behaviour, the findings do suggest there is a consequence of applying labels or buzzwords to students. This finding is in line with literature on the elusiveness and arbitrariness of factors associated with risk, as there can be varying outcomes of risk that do not always identify true causation (Brown, 2014; Masten, 2001; Ungar, 2003). As a result, teachers' perceptions become all the more interesting, particularly as attention is brought to the nuanced challenges, identification of student strengths, and heartfelt work, that contribute to how participants make sense of student vulnerability and risk. While some spoke about the challenging behaviours observed in the classroom, the more prevalent themes were identified as risk being understood as exposure to harm, vulnerability as susceptibility to influence, the sense of urgency that comes from being identified as at-risk, challenges with responding to the needs of students perceived as vulnerable, and notions of student resilience.

Risk was generally understood as being caused by exposure to harm in a child's home or community. It was noted as a term that elevated concern and produced a sense of urgency and

responsiveness required on the part of the teacher. There was a yearning and call to help in response to the term risk or at-risk, but this was also coupled with feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness. Therefore, the findings suggest that the term, in and of itself, did not promote a sense of agency or action, despite the level of urgency it initially ignited. Risk, as a term, was also connected to experiences of well-being for students, with the perception that exposure to one or more harmful person(s), place(s) or behaviours(s) could potentially compromise student well-being. This influence of external factors is consistent with the literature, with features of risk associated with high-risk environments (Lucier-Greer et al., 2014; Moran et al., 2016; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008) and externalized behaviours (Bonny et al., 2000; Chapman et al., 2014). When exploring risk as a term, there was also a matter-of-factness surrounding the reflections on risk, fitting with the reductionist slant that is often associated with risk (Heaslip et al., 2016). Negativity and adversity surround risk, with direct assumptions towards negative outcomes, and limited consideration of protective factors that enhance student competency.

While not identified by all participants, four participants also associated exposure to harm with choice. Concern was raised over the choices of students or others to engage in adverse behaviour or inappropriate peer/social connections which could result in harm to the student. This is consistent with the literature, with a common emphasis on student responsibility and choice theory among practicing teachers (Dehaghani, 2017; Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012). The implication of choice is also in line with assertions about social fairness and blame made by Miller et al. (2004), stating that "since most people like to think that their social world is fair and that they have earned what they have achieved, it is easier to blame target groups for their own predicament" (p. 381). The concept of responsibility of choice is an important consideration, because discerning externalized behaviours as choice diminishes the influence of the wider

sociocultural or sociopolitical context (Bonny et al., 2000; Foster et al., 2017; Lucier-Greer et al., 2014), with the potential of contributing to less supportive attitudes towards or supports for students. This association with choice could contribute to a potential divergence between vulnerability and risk, as the implications of choice increases with age (Dehaghani, 2017) and perpetuate gaps in needed supports for older students when aberrant behaviours can become the leading observation.

Vulnerability was understood to be more connected to susceptibility to adverse influences. There was an overall essence of potential for adverse outcomes and student powerlessness when considering the term vulnerability. Students were detached from personal responsibility within vulnerability, even by participants who highlighted the concept of choices, with responsibility being transferred on to people or environments surrounding the student rather than being placed directly on the student. Brown (2014) asserted that vulnerability is a term that is used situationally to emphasize circumstances that place people in a more fragile state and put them at higher risk. The findings also affirm that there is more appreciation for the external factors being experienced by students within the context of vulnerability (Williams & Le Menestrel, 2013). Consistent with the literature, participants shared how vulnerability attended to the impact of environments on individuals (Williams & Le Menestrel, 2013), while risk tended to focus more on the environment or behaviour that generates risk (Bonny et al., 2000; Chapman et al., 2014; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). As a result, the term vulnerability invited a special uniqueness, separate from risk, yielding less student responsibility for the social circumstances students may find themselves in.

There was also an attentiveness to student experiences and their stories, when participants reflected on the term vulnerability. This is consistent with the argument by Williams and Le

Menestrel (2013) that "viewing children, youth, and families at risk through the lens of vulnerability provides a well-rounded understanding of the impact that external factors have on young people's lives" (p. 98). Understanding children and youth as being vulnerable to the exposure of adverse experiences, circumstances, and behaviours also values the multidimensional needs, strengths, inherent resilience and resourcefulness of students and families within the wider social context. Through the lens of vulnerability, abilities to act, and empowerment to support their students (or support access to help) were also heightened; however, the findings suggest that vulnerability also necessitates discretion and forethought, as it can be diverse, changing, and undefined. As a result, attention is directed to how external perceptions of student circumstances and vulnerabilities cannot (and arguably should not) be presumed, nor should assumptions be made about negative outcomes or trajectories (Purdy, 2004). Vulnerability was clearly perceived as something that is less defined, with more covert features than risk. There was a thoughtfulness to the sensitivity of circumstance when vulnerability was perceived, and this attention to social context is valuable for school social workers to be aware of when they collaborate with teachers and support students and families.

Prior to engaging in the research, I held the belief that it would be a disservice to explore concepts of vulnerability and risk with teachers, without also navigating notions of resilience, even if only in brief. This belief is similarly echoed in vulnerability and risk literature, where resilience is identified as a missing element that needs to be explored to highlight different needs, strengths and resources (Bosworth & Earthman, 2002; Dorsen, 2010; Ungar, 2008). All participants identified that fostering and encouraging student resilience and associated skills was critical, while highlighting puzzling observations of the innate complexities of resilience. There was a tentativeness but also a matter-of-factness around student resilience, in relation to students

who are commonly referred to as at-risk or vulnerable, which emphasized that resilience is a

variable that is necessary to consider when exploring concepts of vulnerability and risk.

Resilience is naturally complex and "contextually heterogenous" (Ungar, 2003, p. 88); therefore,

the context and resources that nurture resilience need to be understood, to avoid dominant views

about what is successful and unsuccessful development or coping (Ungar, 2008). Within the

parameters of teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk, understanding of resilience

is certainly worthy of further investigation.

Strengthening Supports for Students

Social and emotional supports for students in schools was highlighted as an area of major

importance. Participants offered insight into the need for meaningful supports in schools, ways to

enhance collaboration between teachers and school social workers, and the value of sharing

information and knowledge between professionals.

Strengthening supports for students through the provision of meaningful supports is

fuelled through school social workers being valued members of the school community. While

participants valued the knowledge base and expertise of school social workers, they also

identified that school social workers have much to gain by being immersed in the routines of the

school day. School days are long, and students can have a range of experiences throughout the

day. There was an overwhelming belief that school social workers would benefit from being able

to garner more accurate snapshots of student behaviours and social interactions by stepping

outside of the one-to-one interactions that they often coordinate with students. While it was

generally understood that it may not be feasible for school social workers to spend every day

inside classrooms and be a part of daily routines, participants raised concerns over school social

workers being disconnected from teachers. To this point, the findings reinforce the

acknowledgement that school social work practice is more effective when it moves beyond individual supports (Gottlieb & Gottlieb, 1971; Webber, 2018). When school social workers move beyond individual supports, there are increased opportunities to further the development of shared goals for students, prosocial behaviours, positive attitudes towards school, higher rates of academic achievement and attendance, and to create openings for collaboration between teachers, families, and other professionals (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012).

The importance of connection and joining classroom communities to support teachers and students was resoundingly underscored by all participants. A lack of school social worker connection or interaction with teachers was understood by participants as a barrier to school social workers being able to fully appreciate the needs of students and teachers in schools, ultimately creating a chasm in the circle of support. Teachers value accessibility to supports within the busyness of the school day (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012), so school social workers need to make attempts to address student needs within the current system of education (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). This also attends to the importance of structural shifts at a systems level to ensure that school social workers are directly embedded within schools. Participants also expressed an eagerness to share their classroom spaces with other professionals who are supports for their students; however, it is reasonable to predict that not all teachers would welcome social workers coming into their spaces, so this practice would benefit from teacher and school readiness (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012). To encourage this readiness, school social workers need to remain committed to providing support to students (and their families), to mitigate interferences with or barriers to school success (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009).

Participants expanded further on ways to improve interdisciplinary efforts, by offering their perspectives on how to enhance collaboration, and ultimately communication, between

school social workers and teachers. The findings suggest that both teachers and school social workers benefit from understanding their own scope of practice, while attending to the incredible value of communication as a way to enhance collaboration. Understanding scope of practice naturally strengthens supports for students, because members of the support team are able to clearly identify their role and responsibility in supporting students and engage in purposeful communication between support team members. Communication not only improves supports for students, but it can also provide opportunities to enhance teacher practice and capacity in the classroom. Receiving information about student experiences increases teacher compassion and reinforces a shared appreciation for each other's professional responsibilities, expertise and professionalism. There also needs to be a mutual understanding of what is important for each professional group to know about students in the school and significant information that needs to be shared within and between their respective practice environments. Thus, continual dialogue between school social workers and teachers remains of utmost importance, to develop an acceptance of diverse beliefs and values, enhance empathic responses, and cultivate a reciprocity in understanding each other's perspectives and thinking patterns (Reyneke, 2017). Further, it is also crucial for school social workers, or any professional who is in a supportive role in schools, to also understand and acknowledge teacher efforts and knowledge base (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012), and seek to understand teachers' perspectives from a place of support.

Summary of Findings

School social workers often receive referrals for students who are considered, in some way or another, to be vulnerable or at-risk. While existing research on vulnerability and risk can inform determinations about which students (and families) may benefit from school social work support, this research set out to learn more about how teachers perceive student vulnerability and

risk within the most impactful level of engagement, the classroom. The findings suggest that there are no clear or universal teacher definitions of vulnerability and risk, but there are implications for how teachers may respond to a chosen term. Due to the nature of the terms having an ability to create instinctual and lasting teacher responses, as predispositions towards or assumptions about certain students and families may tend to 'set in' over time, it is critical for school social workers and school policy makers to be aware of the implications of terms used.

Teachers can be remarkable partners for school social workers as they work to support student needs in the school, but partnership and interdisciplinary collaboration is not without its difficulties. Maintaining focus on students, and taking the time to gain insight and understanding into teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk, can help to mitigate barriers to collaboration and cohesive supports for students. In a study focused on teachers' perceptions on school-wide positive behavioural supports, Feuerborn and Chinn (2012) asserted that "identifying common perceptions and practices across teachers with different experiences and job roles can help us to adjust our general understanding of teacher needs" (p. 226). Once we come to understand each other as individuals and professionals, we can be more attentive to our collective efforts and strengthen supports for students. Increasing collaborative efforts can also help to decrease practice isolation and build an ancillary professional community for school social workers, as they often find themselves unsupported and isolated from other school social workers who are working in separate schools.

This study also offers opportunities for school social workers (practicing or in training) to challenge and interrogate their preconceived ideas about teachers (Miller et al., 2004). Although school social workers tend to position themselves in opposition to school staff or the organizational structure of schools (Isaksson & Sjöström, 2017), there is strength in the

collective efforts of teams. Embracing an appreciation of other disciplines also creates

opportunities for observation, understanding and the enhancement of interdisciplinary practice

(Brewer, 1999). Despite being advocates against oppressive forces within the large

organizational system of education, school social workers must engage in relational practice and

work alongside teachers, in support of student success and systemic change. While this study

offered insight on ways to improve social work practice within the education setting, the

emphasis on collaboration and valuing each other's professions within interdisciplinary teams is

learning that could be extended into other institutions or practice settings, such as hospitals,

mental health services, child protection and family supports, disability services, and criminal

justice systems. Below is a figure highlighting a summary of considerations for school social

work practice – see Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1

Considerations for School Social Work Practice
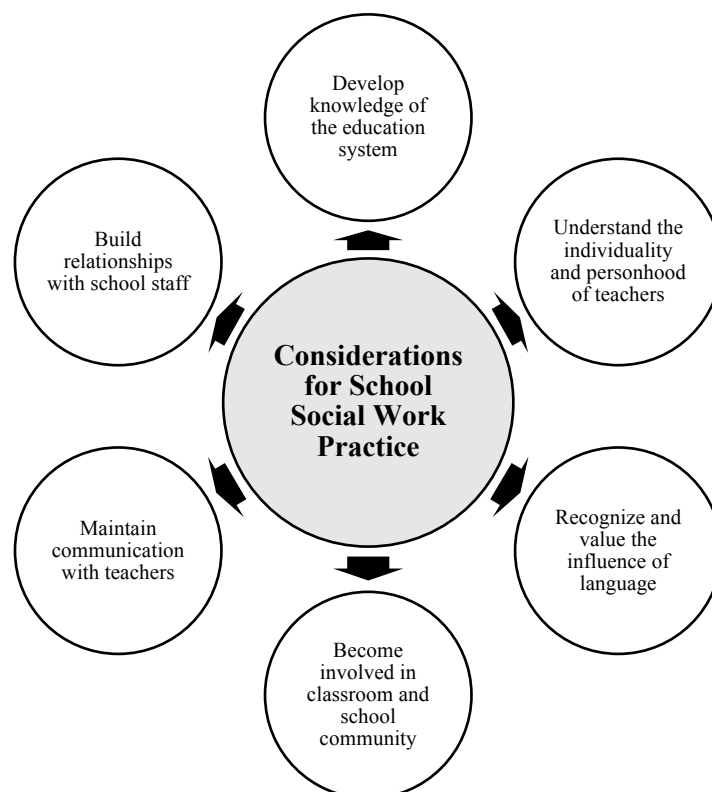
Study Limitations

The discussion above highlights study findings and considerations for school social work practice. That being said, there are several limitations of this study.

This was my first IPA study and although I am satisfied with the level of analysis I was able to engage in for this research, a smaller number of participants would have been more manageable when exploring patterns and connections, and could have led to a more detailed analysis. A shortened interview protocol could have also invited a greater depth and breadth of data, with fewer but more focused open-ended questions.

Participants were required to be teaching a specific grade level in a school with demographics considered by the school district to be the most socially vulnerable, and within a particular geographic region of the urban center that was set out by the researcher. In an effort to preserve as much consistency as possible in the study sample, these restrictions naturally excluded the perceptions of teachers who teach outside of these study parameters. Due to the participants being from schools determined to have higher social vulnerability, the inclusion of teachers from schools considered less socially vulnerable could have led to more expansive and divergent data. This study is also concentrated on the perceptions of teachers in an urban school district. Schools in rural communities are undoubtedly distinctive from the urban setting, as such further research on the teachers' perceptions in rural communities would extend this research.

The time of data collection and interviews was also a study limitation. Schools are generally sensitive to the time of year, as expectations and fervour typically adjust to the school calendar, for teachers and students alike. Data collection occurred in the last month of the school year, near the end of what can feel like a marathon with the finish line of summer break just around the corner. Research is typically not permitted in the school district during this time of

year, but because I was an employee of the school district, I received special consideration. Consequently, the timing of data collection could have influenced participant perspectives and, accordingly, the study findings. It could be queried that participant responses may have been more enthusiastic and less 'jaded' if data collection took place at an alternate time of year.

My affiliation with the school district may have also been a limitation. Recruitment posters were initially shared with school principals for dissemination from my school district email account, to alleviate potential barriers to participant recruitment near the end of the school year. Emails were forwarded to teachers and, as such, participants became aware of my employment within the same school district as them. As such, it is possible that participants may have been more cautious in their interviews with me than they would have been with an outsider to the school district. However, it is important to identify that the opposite may also be true, as I could have been perceived as an insider.

The term school social worker was prefaced in the interview as a social work professional working in a support capacity in schools. Not all social workers hold the formal position of school social worker in schools or school districts, so this title of school social worker was understood to have some flexibility. In response to questions about school social workers, reflections by teachers included titles of mental health professionals, mental health therapists, success coaches, family support workers, social workers, and community social workers. Accordingly, the title of school social worker encompasses helping professionals within schools and school districts, and is reflective of professional titles determined by school district authorities, grants, and funding. When participants referred to experiences with school social workers, it is also necessary to consider that there is likely variability in the post-secondary education, expectations, roles, and responsibilities of professionals working in a support

capacity, depending on the participants' experience and school in which they work or have worked.

I have also worked in schools, in a social work capacity, for several years. Throughout this research, I have continued to work in schools and have experienced both hopeful and frustrating moments. Consequently, reflexivity and regular journaling was essential, due to the likelihood of bias throughout the stages of this research and in my interactions with the data, particularly when engaging in interpretative processes and writing up the findings. Rigorous attempts to set aside my biases were made, but I acknowledge that it is difficult to do so entirely.

Implications for School Social Work

Considerations for social work practice were implicit in the study, taking what can be gleaned from study findings and applying this to school social work practice in the above discussion. As someone who has worked with various teachers over the course of my professional career, I am forever grateful for this opportunity to individually sit down with multiple teachers previously unknown to me, for a dedicated amount of time, and to learn more about who they are as individuals, behind their professional identities as educators or teachers.

This study illuminated the need for social workers to be willing and eager to learn more about teachers and their perceptions of students from a non-judgmental stance. We are all individuals who are guided by our professional training, expertise, experiences, responsibilities, and ethical guidelines. By gaining a greater appreciation for how teachers think about student vulnerability and risk, school social workers and teachers can collectively strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration and cohesiveness.

School social workers also need to create space on interdisciplinary teams within the education environment. School social workers need to honour the social work profession, and

critically reflect on their engagement in interdisciplinary teams. That being said, the expertise of teachers must also be valued and appreciated for authentic collaboration and practice cohesion, with the ultimate focus on supporting student well-being and connectedness to school.

School social workers are partners in education. They are part of the educational teams supporting student learning and development. Attentiveness to the social and emotional needs of students is strengthened through the combined efforts of teachers and school social workers, and social work needs to be a valued profession in schools. Generally, all school-aged children and youth connect and engage with schools. The needs of families are of a sensitive nature and require a professional skillset and level of expertise. Students (and their families) are deserving of this level of support and intervention.

Training for social work practice in schools is also an identified area of attention. While there are courses in undergraduate and graduate level social work programs that attend to social work practice in healthcare, community social work, and child welfare, social work practice in schools largely remains an unchartered terrain. The school environment is as distinctive and unique as other institutions and practice environments, and merits specialized attention to the diverse and demanding needs of school settings in social work education and training.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study explored teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk, highlighting areas for further research around practice frameworks for both teachers and school social workers. Further research on training for school social work practice and interdisciplinary collaboration in schools would contribute to the school social work literature. The study findings suggest caution in becoming more descript with regard to indicators for student vulnerability and risk, as this is likely to perpetuate normative standards that can neglect the resourcefulness and

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resilience of students and families, and stifle the ingenuity and creativity of teachers; however, more research on teachers' perceptions of student resilience would extend this research and further unpack teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability and risk. The prominence of trauma in vulnerability and risk literature is also worthy of further exploration, particularly in how teachers perceive, think about, and understand trauma. This thesis has also been completed during the COVID-19 pandemic and it is possible that how student risk and vulnerability are understood will be impacted by this unfortunate global crisis. Further research on the potential implications of this pandemic on student vulnerability and risk would extend this research and attend to the current and future sociopolitical context.

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Appendix A: Definition of Terms

Key terms frequently used in this thesis are given the following definitions.

At-Risk: The influence of external factors that can produce non-normative externalized behaviours that can impact student social, emotional, physical, and academic well-being, in addition to school success and achievement of high school completion.

Reflexivity: The practice of critically thinking about one's own experiences and being ready, willing, and able to come to understand the complexity and diversity of experiences.

Resilience: The ability to enable internal and external resources to achieve culturally relevant well-being, in spite of or in response to, adverse experiences.

Risk: Experiences, events or circumstances that can impact or compromise student well-being. Influenced by exposure to harm or harmful person(s), place(s) or behaviour(s), in a student's home or community, producing a sense of urgency and responsibility to respond to presenting behavioural, environmental, or health-related concerns.

School Social Worker: A position title used in this study that is understood to be a non-teaching helping professional, working in the school to support the social, emotional, and academic well-being of students.

Trauma: A prominent feature of risk and vulnerability that can impact school engagement and achievement.

Vulnerability: A dynamic experience within or between individual, familial, socioeconomic and/or cultural risk factors that can create a susceptibility to adverse influences and impact the social, emotional, and/or physical well-being of students. Often detached from personal responsibility, with responsibility transferred to people or environments surrounding the student.

Appendix B: Consent Form

Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:

Stacey Marianchuk, Graduate Student
University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work
Email: stacey.marianchuk@ucalgary.ca
Phone: 780-887-9487

Supervisor:

Dr. Rick Enns, Associate Professor
University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work
Phone: 780-492-6971
Email renns@ucalgary.ca

Title of Project:

Teachers' Perceptions of Student Vulnerability and Risk: Considerations for School Social Work Practice

Sponsor:

N/A

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Participation is completely voluntary and confidential.

Purpose of the Study

There is often a back-and-forth interaction between the use of the term's vulnerability and risk in the research literature. Compared to its conceptual cousin, risk, the term vulnerability has received little attention from social policy commentators even though it is a frequently used term in social policy. Vulnerability also appears to be a buzzword that is gathering cultural and political momentum and is a term often attached to funding for schools. How student vulnerability and risk are understood by teachers could impact how the terms are operationalized in schools. Exploring the perceptions of teachers is a starting place for understanding how student vulnerability and risk are fundamentally conceptualized at a micro-level within schools - arguably the most impactful level of engagement and support.

What Will I Be Asked To Do?

We are asking you to take part in a research project that explores your experiences as teachers of grade 6 students in schools with High Social Vulnerability status. This research is being conducted by the University of Calgary, as part of thesis research.

Participants will be asked to share their experiences as a teaching professional, teaching grade 6 students in schools with High Social Vulnerability status. Participants will complete a demographic survey outlining aspects of their teaching experience, such as: a) number of years as a teacher; b) education level; and c) degree type(s). Participants will also engage in a semi-structured interview with the researcher, approximately 45-60 minutes in length, to explore how student vulnerability and risk are understood by the participant. Interviews will be audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis. Participants will be assigned a participant number (rather than names), which will be used for the demographic survey and transcribed interviews.

Participation is completely voluntary. As a research participant, you may refuse to participate in this research study altogether, refuse to participate in parts of the study, decline to answer any and all questions, and withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which s/he is otherwise entitled.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide the number of years you have worked as a teacher, your education level, and degree type(s). All participant data will be anonymized.

The interview will be audio-taped to make printed transcripts of the conversations from the interviews. While the printed transcripts will be used for data analysis and portions of the transcripts may be presented in conference presentations, published journal articles, or in other academic or professional settings, all identifying information will be removed and the audio files will never be played in public settings.

Only individuals involved in this research will have access to the audio tapes before they are erased. This includes Dr. Rick Enns, the Principal Investigator and Stacey Marianchuk, a graduate thesis student and member of the study team. Clerical staff will be used to produce transcripts but are required to maintain confidentiality as a condition of their involvement.

There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. You can choose all, some, or none of them. Please review each of these options and choose Yes or No:

I grant permission to be audio-taped: Yes: ___ No: ___

I wish to remain anonymous: Yes: ___ No: ___

I wish to remain anonymous, but you may refer to me by a pseudonym: Yes: ___ No: ___

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: _____

You may quote me and use my name: Yes: ___ No: ___

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?

We believe there are no risks associated with your participation in this research.

Interviews will need to be conducted outside of work hours, and this may be inconvenient for some participants. As a measure of appreciation, participants will be given a gift card of nominal value upon completion of the interview to support materials for their classroom.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

Participants will be assigned a participant number, which will be used for the demographic survey and transcribed interviews. The list containing the participant names and the assigned numbers will be stored in a separate and secure location, away from the data collected.

No one except the researcher, their supervisor, and university clerical staff will be allowed to see or hear any of the answers to the demographic survey or the interview tape. Collected data will be kept in a locked cabinet only accessible by the researcher and their supervisor.

Any information stored in electronic format on computers or other electronic storage devices will be encrypted and kept in password-protected files on computers that are also password-protected. No information that can be used to identify you will be included in electronic files. Printed and electronic files produced through transcription may be stored electronically, but all electronic files will be encrypted and password-protected, and all identifying information will be removed from the paper and electronic files. The anonymous data will be permanently erased after 2 years, or sooner.

Participants are free to withdraw until June 28, 2019, or up to two weeks after completion of interviews on or after June 15, 2019. If you choose to withdraw from the study, all data you contributed to the study will be destroyed.

Would you like to receive a summary of the study's results?   Yes: ___ No: ___

If yes, please provide your contact information (e-mail address, or phone number)
_____
_____

_____

Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

<div align="center">

Dr. Rick Enns
Faculty of Social Work
Telephone: 780.492.6971
Email: renns@ucalgary.ca

</div>

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at 403.220.6289 or 403.220.8640; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

Appendix C: Recruitment Poster

Appendix D: Demographic Survey

ID #: _____

<u>Demographic Survey</u>

Number of Years as a Teacher: _____

Education Level: _____

Degree Type(s): _____

<center>**Appendix E: Interview Schedule**</center>

Teachers' Perceptions of Student Vulnerability and Risk: Considerations for School Social Work Practice

<u>Interview Questions</u>

1. Tell me about what inspired you to become a teacher.

    a. What were your hopes when you became a teacher?

2. How would you describe your school's demographics?

    a. How are your school's demographics the same or different from others schools in the district?

    b. What inspired you to work at this school?

3. How would you describe students who may be vulnerable or at-risk?

    a. Would you describe vulnerability and at-risk as the same or different?

        i. What do you think has influenced your thoughts about student risk and vulnerability?

        ii. Do you find yourself drawing on personal experience, or any particular students you have taught?

        iii. Does one term lend itself to foster more empathy of student need than the other?

    b. How do your observations of resiliency inform how you think about risk or vulnerability?

4. What do you believe is important for future teachers to know about your students who may be vulnerable or at-risk, as they transition to junior high and eventually high school?

5. What would you say is important for school social workers to know about teaching students who may be vulnerable or at-risk?