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# School Social Workers' Roles Involving Teacher- Student Sexual Misconduct and Exploitation

Cedrina Monique Ruffin  
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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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2017

Abstract

School Social Workers' Roles Involving Teacher-Student

Sexual Misconduct and Exploitation

by

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MSW, Southern University at New Orleans, 2008

BA, The University of Louisiana at Monroe, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Social Work—Social Work Administration

Walden University

December 2017

## Abstract

Incidents of sexual misconduct by educators continue to become more prevalent in the United States, resulting in negative social, emotional, and psychological effects on many students. School social workers are professionals with backgrounds in prevention, intervention, and advocacy; however, very little literature has examined the roles of school social workers in preventing and addressing teacher-student sexual misconduct. This case study explored school social workers' roles and their perceptions thereof in relation to incidents that involved teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation. General systems theory provided the framework for understanding the roles of social workers and their approaches to working with the different systems associated and connected with the entire education system, including teachers and students. Nine school social workers participated in 30-45-minute audiotaped, in-depth, face-to-face interviews and provided data for this study related to their roles and responsibilities in addressing sexual misconduct in schools. Transcribed interviews were coded, first using emergent open coding and then using focused/axial coding, to form 2 main themes. School social workers in this district were identified as having no well-defined primary or secondary roles related to prevention of and response to teacher-student sexual misconduct, which was reported to result from a number of barriers to school social workers' ability to deliver effective services. A reevaluation of school social workers' roles to include addressing crises such as sexual misconduct has the potential to promote positive social change by improving the educational system and the school's ability to provide a healthier educational environment for students.

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## Dedication

It is most important to dedicate this dissertation to the individuals who have been here with me from the beginning to the end. My loving daughter, Demi Monae', has been my inspiration to move my career and profession further. Her presence motivates me to strive higher in life to be able to provide for her through her childhood, with prayers that I am instrumental in the guidance of her adulthood. I know that no matter what I am going through, at the end of the day I have her and she loves me dearly. My dissertation and doctoral achievements are a part of my plan to show her that anything is possible and that goals are achievable even when you once thought they were not.

## Acknowledgments

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

When in the role of student, most children place a large amount of trust in their teachers, who have chosen a career that involves educating them and helping them prepare for their futures. There is no doubt that teachers often have a tremendous effect on the lives of their students (Knoll, 2010). Unfortunately, a small percentage of educators have chosen to use their connections or positions of influence to sexually abuse their students (West, Hatters-Friedman, & Knoll, 2010). A study examining trends and patterns sexual misconduct allegations in public school teachers between the years 2007 and 2011 in the southeastern United States identified 319 male and 112 female certified public school educators who had been arrested and charged with sexual misconduct (Ratliff & Watson, 2014). Today, trends and patterns in teacher-student sexual misconduct in the United States indicate major social concerns that may create negative social, emotional, and psychological barriers for children who are affected (Barrett, Lester, & Durham, 2011; Edwards, 2017). Surveys conducted nationwide have indicated that approximately 7% of K-12 or 3.5 million students, reported having physical sexual contact with an adult, with more than half of these incidents involving a school teacher or coach (Jaffe et al., 2013).

There is a great deal of trust and responsibility placed in schools to guarantee a safe and productive environment for each student to learn, and the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct raises concerns not only for parents, but also for the education system (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014). In an effort to respond to this issue, the U.S. Department of Education conducted a national study of sexual abuse in

schools in 2004. This study, mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, amended Section 5414 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) to provide recommendations for the prevention of educator sexual misconduct (Shakeshaft, 2004). Findings of this study indicated that educator sexual misconduct was understudied and that very little had been done to prevent it in schools (Shakeshaft, 2004). Recent literature suggests that there is still much research to be completed concerning prevention efforts and any associated reduction in the prevalence of educator sexual misconduct, as well as the effectiveness of current prevention programs (Schwilk, Stevenson, & Bateman, 2017). Though the data from Shakeshaft's 2004 study are now outdated, this study is frequently referenced by many writers because it was the last study conducted under the U.S. Department of Education that provided a literature review on sexual abuse and sexual misconduct; described the prevalence of sexual misconduct, offender characteristics, and targets of educator sexual misconduct; and provided recommendations for the prevention of educator sexual misconduct.

This study focused on the roles of school social workers and how they are involved in prevention of and response to teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation. Conducting this study included exploring the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct and how school social workers in one of the largest school districts in the state of Texas are being used to prevent sexual misconduct in schools, or how they respond to the issue when it affects their students. This study provides beneficial information to not only members of the profession of school social work, but also to school districts, legislators, principals, and educators. Researching this issue from a social

worker's perspective is essential to the profession of social work and educational systems in developing a more effective and efficient practice for prevention and response for school social workers in relation to incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct.

This chapter provides an overview of my study. I describe the study's background, exploring current literature in areas such as the prevalence of teacher-student sexual misconduct, its effects on students, and the history and roles of school social workers. I then provide a detailed description of the research problem in addition to the gaps that exists in current research. Next, I elaborate on the primary focus of this study, which explored the current roles of school social workers in incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct. Following the purpose of the study, the research questions developed to gain insight on this issue are presented, along with general systems theory as the theoretical framework and how it served as the foundation for this study. Definitions of some of the key terms frequently used in this study are provided, along with the assumptions, limitations, and the study's significance. To summarize this chapter at the end, I provide a brief overview of the information provided in this chapter, along with what to expect in Chapter 2.

### **Background**

Sexual misconduct in schools has spread throughout the United States and Canada (Jaffe et al., 2013; Mitchell, 2010). The impacts of sexual misconduct in schools are known to be negative, taking a toll on victims and leaving them to deal with lifelong issues (Mitchell, 2010). In incidents where educator sexual misconduct is left unaddressed, the negative effects tend to spread to other students and, in some cases, to

other staff members (Shakeshaft, 2004). Students can sometimes exhibit signs of teacher avoidance, embarrassment, and truancy, while other staff members may single out victims of sexual misconduct as a threat (Shakeshaft, 2004).

Social workers are well-trained professionals who are knowledgeable about dealing with school-aged youth and their psychosocial, academic, and psychological needs (Allen-Meares, Montgomery, & Kim, 2013). School social workers are major contributors to environmental changes in schools that help to promote the success of many students (Joseph, Slovak, Broussard, & Webster, 2012). By researching this group of individuals, I sought to provide in-depth knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of school social workers in incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct.

Many of the studies that exist on teacher-student misconduct do not include information related to how school systems respond to the issue, or their use of school social workers in this regard (Allen-Meares & Montgomery, 2014; Allen-Meares et al., 2013; Jaffe et al., 2013). Recently, Schwilk et al. (2017) sought to address the role of human services in relation to sexual misconduct in education. However, their research only touched on the roles of school counselors, not making reference to school social workers, who have a completely different professional background than school counselors do (Edwards, 2017). Anthony (2017) focused on social workers avoiding sexual misconduct, not how they can prevent and respond to teacher-student sexual misconduct. Therefore, there is a gap in knowledge concerning roles of school social workers, who have the responsibility in school systems to not only provide solutions to complex issues, but also provide direct counseling to students, families, and staff while

creating prevention programs and training (Allen-Meares & Montgomery, 2014; Grand Prairie Independent School District [GPISD], 2016).

This study explored the current roles of school social workers employed in Harris and surrounding counties in the state of Texas as well as their perceived roles in responding to teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation. Conducting this study allowed me to explore the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct and how school social workers are used to either prevent its occurrence in schools or respond to the issue when it affects their students. Furthermore, this study provides information that may be beneficial to not only the profession of school social work, but also school districts, legislators, principals, and educators.

### **Problem Statement**

Child sexual abuse has grown epidemically in the United States, making inappropriate sexual relations between teachers and students a major legal concern (Mitchell, 2010). Nationwide, 10% of students have been described as victims of sexual misconduct at some time in their K-12 school careers by perpetrators who have been their teachers (Surface, Stader, & Armenta, 2014). Both males and females in school settings have been reported as victims of sexual abuse, with the likelihood of females being victimized slightly higher than that for males (Wurtele, 2012). In the state of Texas, reports of inappropriate student-teacher relationships soared between the years 2009 and 2013, making the state number one in the country for reported occurrences of inappropriate student-teacher relationships (Salvoy, 2013). According to the Texas



Education Agency (TEA, 2013), the number of open allegations of inappropriate relationships in the 2009-2010 and 2012-2013 school years soared from 41 to 163 cases.

Teacher sexual abuse has a profound ability to leave negative emotional, psychological, educational, and developmental effects on its victims (Jaffe et al., 2013). In most cases, students tend to develop behaviors that range from teacher avoidance to lack of attendance and attention in school due to sexual encounters with teachers (Jaffe et al., 2013).

Some students are more at risk than others of impaired functioning at school due to some of the personal disadvantages they face. This is why school social workers are employed to provide behavioral and socioeconomic support to each student. School social workers represent key components of a well-functioning school system (Fisher, 2010). According to Peckover, Vasquez, Van Housen, Saunders, and Allen (2013), the roles of social workers have often been designed to respond to the needs of the education system and follow changes in policies that are implemented at the state and national levels. The role of school social workers differs from that of other school-based professionals because of their ability to serve marginalized and oppressed populations and to contribute to building successful bridges between schools and homes (Richard & Sosa, 2014). In school systems, social workers are qualified and are best suited to provide the support needed by students who have been involved in situations of sexual misconduct and exploitation (Allen-Meares et al., 2013).

Although there has been some research about teacher-student relationships, none has addressed the direct involvement of school social workers in cases that involve issues

of teacher-student sexual abuse, misconduct, and exploitation (Allen-Meares & Montgomery, 2014; Allen-Meares et al., 2013; Jaffe et al., 2013). In multidatabase searches of literature for this research, I did not find any sources that examined the involvement of school social workers within schools where cases of teacher-student sexual misconduct have occurred. This lack of research on school social workers and their involvement in incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct presents a problem for the profession of social work in terms of its ability to contribute to social change by responding to teacher-student sexual misconduct and prevent sexual harm to children and youth.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the current roles of school social workers in incidents that involve teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation in order to (a) gain insight on how school social workers in the Texas educational system are used in the prevention of teacher-student sexual misconduct and (b) examine how they professionally respond when cases of teacher-student sexual abuse arise. This study employed a qualitative approach with an interpretive paradigm from which to interpret, understand, and gain knowledge of the experiences of school social workers. Within this interpretive paradigm, it is important to understand the world from the personal experiences of individuals (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994). In the effort to better understand the experiences of each social worker, face-to-face interviews assisted with the process of data collection concerning the social workers' perceptions of their current roles. Face-to-face interviewing has been identified as a well-known data source for case

studies (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The intent of this study was to gain a better understanding of the roles of school social workers in one of the largest school districts in the state of Texas from the viewpoint of more than one social worker, as well their involvement in schools if and when teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation occur (Yin, 2013).

### **Research Questions**

- RQ1: What are the roles of school social workers in situations of teacher-student sexual misconduct?
- RQ2: How do school social workers perceive their roles in incidents involving teacher-student sexual relationships?

### **Conceptual Framework of the Study**

This research study used Bertalanffy's general systems theory, which provides a framework for research and school-based social work practice (Fitch, 2004; Friedman & Allen, 2011). In Bertalanffy's general systems theory, *systems* are defined as sets of elements in interrelationship with one another (Fitch, 2004). Systems are also represented by principles underlying systematic structures and behaviors that persist across different disciplines (Rousseau, 2015). Within school systems, Bertalanffy's general systems theory provides a framework for research and practice on school social work practice. General systems theory is also used to support interdisciplinary communication and cooperation (Rousseau, 2015). The relationships between each element are most important within general systems theory because of the cause-and-effect properties, that implies that the change of living organisms are a cause of the interactions in which occur

between the parts of the organism (Friedman & Allen, 2011). In social work, general systems theory is also often linked with the concept of ecology to form the ecosystems perspective (Hare, 2004). In systems theory, there is a huge emphasis on process and the patterns of processes that occur within the context of relationships (Rayburn, Winek, & Anderson, 2016). In schools, systems relationships for students are often hierarchical, building a network around them. For this study, Bertalanffy's general systems theory was instrumental in providing me, as a researcher, a lens to view the roles of social workers and their approaches to working with the different systems associated and connected with teachers, students, and the entire education system while also gaining a better understanding of the impacts they have on the issue of teacher-student sexual relationships. In Chapter 2, I provide a more wide-ranging depiction of the theoretical framework.

Systems theory helps to explain the connections or relationships between different elements. Taking into consideration the real world, systems are how many families, organizations, and communities function. Systems theory is also instrumental in exhibiting the process by which different systems interact or exchange information. Information is often transmitted through systems, and without its exchange or interrelation, these systems would not exist (Fitch, 2004).

When systems are used to promote social change, interaction and exchanges of information tend to be goal oriented, and there are boundaries that separate these systems from their outside environment (Fitch, 2004). In the context of this study, a number of systems play a major role in the reporting of teacher-student sexual misconduct as it is

discovered within each school. There are hierarchies within the educational system, just as there are within communities. These hierarchies are made up of elites or systems of power in which people make decisions and implement changes in relation to various issues that occur within schools.

### **Nature of the Study**

This study had a qualitative design with a case study methodology. Qualitative case study was used for this study because it involves the study of a single intensive unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of a similar unit (Baskarad, 2014). The unit of analysis for this study was the independent school district, and school social workers represented the informants who provided data for analysis. Social workers in the study were also classified as the single unit because of their professional distinction from the entire general profession of social work as a whole as a larger unit. The primary goal of this study was to investigate the roles of school social workers from their personal viewpoint for the purpose of gaining knowledge (Yin, 2014).

Participants in this study were recruited based on their professional job duties as school social workers. Each school social worker contacted for participation in this study held a status of active employment within the school district.

### **Definitions**

To provide clarity and meaning to this study, I have identified terms that are used continuously throughout this paper. The terms are used in connection with experiences of sexual actions directed toward students by teachers/educators in the state of Texas.

*Teacher*: Female or male individual who provides education to students (Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2015).

*Educator*: Any person 18 years of age or older who works with or for a school or educational or learning institution, including but not limited to teachers, counselors, school administrators, secretaries, and tutors (Shakeshaft, 2004).

*Educator sexual misconduct*: Behaviors by an educator that are directed toward a student to titillate or arouse the educator or student (Shakeshaft, 2004).

*Student*: Any person, of any age, who is in an educational institution up to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Shakeshaft, 2004).

*School social worker*: Social work professional employed within a school system to address social and psychological issues of students (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2012).

### **Assumptions**

In qualitative research, there are aspects of studies that researchers believe are true but cannot be demonstrated to be true. It was my assumption that I would eliminate bias during the process of conducting this study to assist in ensuring the validity of the study's results (Yin, 2014). The next assumption was that all participants took part in this study of their own will, offering truthful responses expressing their knowledge and/or experiences of the research topic (Yin, 2014).

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The research problem addressed in this study included the roles of school social workers in relation to the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation in

one of the largest school districts in the state of Texas. The purpose of this study was to explore the current roles of school social workers in incidents that involve teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation. I sought to gain more insight into how school social workers are used in prevention of and response to teacher-student sexual misconduct, as well as to gather their perceptions of their roles for evaluation.

In the state of Texas, counties are furnished with their own independent school districts, which are overseen by school boards that are elected by the communities served. Currently, there are over 1,200 school districts in the state of Texas (TEA, 2016). The TEA oversees all primary and secondary public education in the state of Texas and monitors the compliance of each school with federal and state guidelines (TEA, 2016). Primary delimitations of this study included the research topic and my choice to conduct face-to-face, telephone, and videoconference interviews with approximately 10-12 school social workers who were actively employed in one the largest school districts in a densely urban city in the state of Texas.

For this qualitative case study, only one school district in the state of Texas was selected to represent the study's results, restricting the amount of information in comparison to a study reflecting all school districts located within the state. The selected geographical area and the possibility that the results would differ if data had been collected in other areas of Texas limit the scope and define the boundaries of this study (Yin, 2014).

### **Limitations**

There are no set sampling standards in qualitative studies, so for this study, I chose to hand select a sample of only 10-12 school social workers (Yin, 2014). The results might have been different if school social workers from other school districts in the state of Texas had been included. I planned to recruit as many school social workers from this district as possible by reaching out to as many schools as I could to assist with reaching a favorable sample population. Another limitation of my study was related to the volunteers who chose to participate. Participation in this study was determined by each school social worker who chose to dedicate time to assist with this study; as such, the data collected might have differed if social workers who chose not to participate in the study had been included.

To successfully answer all of the study's research questions, it was imperative to gather information from all of the participating school social workers about their perceptions of their roles. Perceptions are usually personal interpretations of things, and in this study, the school social workers provided their personal interpretations of their roles. These perceptions varied among the social workers who participated and depended on their encounters of or relationships to incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct. Participants' views on their roles in relation to this issue differed. To address this limitation, I planned to triangulate the data collected between each social worker who participated, by cross verifying the data collected between each participant to analyze the consistency of the collected information which would also contribute to the credibility and validity of my study.



### **Significance**

The purpose of this study was to investigate current roles of school social workers in incidents that involve teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation. The completion of this study will successfully contribute to filling the gap that currently exists in research on school social workers and teacher-student sexual misconduct. This research supports the professional practice of social work by providing insight on how social workers are used within school systems when incidents of teacher-student misconduct occur, as well as how school social workers currently view their roles related to this issue. Social workers may also examine their involvement in improving the issue as well as how they can effectively respond to misconduct in order to make schools safer for their students. The results of this research provide information that can be useful for school social workers seeking to advocate for changes within their roles in their schools. On a societal level, the issue of sexual misconduct in schools has become a huge problem in many states, and it endangers and affects the lives of students in their process of receiving a decent education that will help them to succeed in life. The findings of this research may indicate a need for a reevaluation of the current duties that school social workers are assigned. These duties are designed to help eliminate any barriers between students and academic success. Second, school administrators as well as policy makers may use the results of this study to assess current social work duties for potential changes.

## Summary

Teacher-student sexual misconduct continues to be a frequently reported issue on the news in the state of Texas. School social workers are employed in school systems to respond to the needs of the education system, and my literature review for this study indicated a need for a response to this issue in many school districts in Texas (Peckover, Vasquez, Van Housen, Saunders, & Allen, 2012). In this introduction chapter, background information on teacher-student sexual misconduct has been presented, along with information on the profession of social work in schools. There is a gap in existing knowledge of the roles that school social workers play in schools when a complex issue such as teacher-student sexual misconduct occurs (Allen-Meares & Montgomery, 2014). In the next chapter, I provide a more comprehensive look at this issue, describing current literature relevant to not only this issue, but also the study's problem, purpose, and theoretical framework.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Incidents of sexual misconduct by educators are a phenomenon that has become a growing epidemic in the United States (Ratliff & Watson, 2014). Mitchell (2010) reported that due to the epidemic of child sexual abuse, 1 in every 6 boys and 1 in every 4 girls is at risk of sexual abuse before reaching the age of adulthood. Surveys conducted nationwide and in the U.S. have also indicated that approximately 7% of K-12, or 3.5 million students, have reported having physical sexual contact with an adult, with more than half of these incidents involving a school teacher or coach (Jaffe et al., 2013). Nationwide, 10 % of students have been described as victims of sexual misconduct during some time in their K-12 school careers (Surface et al., 2014). There have been many profound negative impacts associated with incidents of sexual abuse committed by educators against students.

Many schools are equipped with supportive staff to assist with the elimination of barriers to successful education for many students. School social workers are among the population of staff trained and equipped with skills to address impacts and barriers by providing supportive services within the school setting (Jaffe et al., 2013).

The primary purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the current roles of school social workers in one of the largest school districts in the state of Texas in incidents that involve teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation. The focus of this study was gaining insight into how school social workers are used in school districts in the prevention of teacher-student sexual misconduct, their professional response to

such incidents, and how they evaluate their roles when cases of teacher-student sexual abuse cases arise.

This literature review explores the current literature exemplifying the lack of data on school social workers and their involvement in incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct. In this chapter, I provide a comprehensive overview of literature as it relates to teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation and the roles of school social workers. To inform this dissertation research, this literature review also focuses on the search strategy used to gather literature relevant to school social workers' roles in relation to teacher-student sexual misconduct and the theoretical framework of systems theory. Systems theory served as the foundation of this study to indicate how the systems associated with schools, the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct, and the development of school social work roles interact, communicate, and exchange important information that is vital to the success of change and improvements within schools. I also provide a review of key concepts, including sexual misconduct, educator sexual misconduct, regulation of educator sexual misconduct, educator roles, and responsibilities, impact of teacher sexual abuse, and social work and school social work roles. Discussion of these concepts helps in providing a brief review of some of the key factors that constitute the issue addressed in this study. Finally, I provide a summary of this chapter, along with what to expect in the chapter following.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

Due to the severely limited amount of research conducted on the roles of school social workers and their response to teacher-student sexual misconduct, a variety of

databases, keywords, and search engines were used to gain a better understanding of the research problem. To identify available and pertinent peer-reviewed literature, the following databases were accessed: EBSCO, ERIC, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, Academic Search Premier Host, Thoreau, ProQuest Central, and SAGE. Keywords used to search each database included *sexual misconduct*, *sexual abuse*, *sexual relationships*, *teacher-student relationships*, *teacher-child sexual misconduct*, *educator sexual abuse*, *teacher-student sexual misconduct*, *school social work*, *school social work and teacher-student misconduct*, *social work and teacher-student sexual misconduct*, *roles of school social workers*, *sexual misconduct in schools*, *general systems theory*, and *school social work and systems theory*. A thorough check of the reviewed articles' reference lists was also performed to identify additional articles of interest.

Due to the limited amount of research conducted on teacher-student sexual misconduct and its relation to school social workers, I used a study conducted by Shakeshaft in 2004, *Educator Sexual Misconduct: A Synthesis of Existing Literature*, to guide this study and develop many of the subsections of this literature review. Shakeshaft's study was submitted to the U.S. Department of Education to fulfill a requirement for a national study of sexual abuse in schools. Shakeshaft's study assisted me in providing definitions of commonly used terms, important concepts of focus, and some of the most recent characteristics of offenders and victims of teacher-student sexual misconduct.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

### **General Systems Theory**

Bertalanffy's general systems theory provided the conceptual framework for this study. General systems theory, which was founded in the 1930s by the late Ludwig von Bertalanffy, is used as a framework for viewing systems as a whole with regard to their relationships and interactions with other systems (Friedman & Allen, 2011). Defining systems as sets of components in interrelation (Fitch, 2004), systems theory indicates that everything in the universe has a system, which is made up from many different or separate parts that actively work together to make the system a whole. According to Taplin (1980), general systems theory is known for its consistent and successful means of recording systems that are influencing certain behaviors. Different levels of administration within a state's education system are a great example of a system where actions or behaviors are carried out to influence decision making and implement change. As things occur within a school, district, or county, each system has to interact and communicate to establish a commonality or come to a consensus. In general systems theory, Bertalanffy applied basic scientific principles to many different organisms to better explain as well as measure behaviors and the interactions that occur between systems (Friedman & Allen, 2011). Systems theory is an attempt to show how the behaviors of one system can affect another unconsciously. In school systems, there are levels of hierarchy that follow a chain of implementation in relation to policies, procedures, and/or regulations. In the state of Texas, the TEA serves as the overseer of the state's primary and secondary public education to help improve outcomes for all

students (TEA, 2016). Decisions made at the TEA level are carried down through the states' regions, counties, districts, and schools. As these decisions are made, they are made with the consideration that individuals at the lower levels of the hierarchy, such as those in counties, school districts, and school subsystems, will follow and abide accordingly with behaviors that are expected by the TEA.

The concepts of general systems theory are related to this study because of the multiple system levels that are involved when incidents of child sexual abuse occur within schools. General systems theory provides a model for schools to analyze how they function (Bowen, 2004). Schools are a part of a system, and their interaction with other parts of the system is important in the school's ability to properly function and achieve their primary goals. Within the school system, there is reciprocal interaction that occurs between people and their environments, students and families, the school, and the social worker. In the state of Texas, the TEA is the highest level of hierarchy in the education system that can implement and monitor federal and state guidelines. The education system is then separated into the different regions of the state, and then into individual counties. Within each county in Texas, there are independent school districts that house large numbers of primary and secondary schools. All of these systems at each level can be considered influential in efforts to decrease and eliminate sexual behaviors exhibited in schools because of their interaction and ability to influence change.

A system can also be defined as a structured whole that is composed of elements that, because of their relationship, interact with each other in a very way that is very distinct from the way in which they interact with elements outside the system (Friedman

& Allen, 2011). The manner in which a system is defined and organized determines the kinds of interactions between systems that occur. In efforts to investigate areas of improvement, implement change, and understand the complexity of service delivery, school systems often have applied the principles of systems theory (Anaf, Drummond, & Sheppard, 2007). Both general systems theory and systems theory have been observed in social work practice for decades. In practice, social workers continue to observe and analyze multiple systems that are involved in and that contribute to clients' issues or problems. Systems theory also emphasizes the possibility and needs to intervene on multiple system levels all at once to assure maximum effectiveness (Mapp, 2006).

Since the mid-1970s, a systems model approach to school social work has been suggested (Costin, 1975). The systems model has made a major contribution to the social work profession by allowing social workers to focus on how both the school and community as systems can have an effect on the behaviors of many different groups of students. In the development of interventions for various social problems, it is important for change agents to recognize and become more aware of the systems that influence the behaviors of individuals (Allen-Meares & Montgomery, 2014). According to the systems model, students are associated with multiple systems, such as their family, community, and school, which have an effect on their behaviors. In the social work profession, the incorporation of many different systems is important and influential in the process of intervention. Social workers must be aware of these systems, as they tend to affect the level of intervention for a problem or issue (Richard & Sosa, 2014). Within the school



setting, students are deeply rooted in their classroom, school, school district, family, and community (Richard & Sosa, 2014).

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts**

#### **Sexual Misconduct**

Dr. Charol Shakeshaft (2004), an expert on educator sexual abuse, defined *sexual misconduct* as behaviors that are directed toward a student and are intended to sexually arouse or titillate the educator or child. Sexual misconduct may be defined differently in different professions according to state licensure boards. The Texas State Board of Social Work Examiners and the TEA informed the definitions for this purposes of this study, as these groups are both responsible for the regulation of sexual misconduct for social workers and educators. Furthermore, because this study focused on the Texas education system, it is important to understand how Texas defines misconduct. The TEA (2016), which is responsible for overseeing primary and secondary education in the state of Texas, has defined *sexual misconduct* as “sexual conduct harmful to a student’s or minor’s mental, emotional, or physical welfare” (p. 78).

#### **Educator Sexual Misconduct**

The issue of sex offenses committed by both male and female teachers has not received much attention in the media until now (Colson, Boyer, Baumstarck, & Loundou, 2013). A survey conducted by the Association of University Women (AAUW) in 2000 indicated that 38% of students in Grades 8 to 11 had experienced some sexual harassment by a teacher or school employee (Ratliff & Watson, 2014). The very idea of teacher sexual misconduct and its existence has been considered absurd and has come up against

a lot of resistance for many years, resulting it being overlooked as an important issue (Colson et al., 2013).

Shakeshaft (2004) defined *educator sexual misconduct* as encompassing a range of inappropriate to criminal sexual behaviors, which may be verbal, visual, and/or physical and that are unacceptable when directed by an adult school-based authority figure toward a student. Sexual misconduct occurring within the school system has become a pressing topic publicized by the media. Shakeshaft conducted numerous studies on educator sexual misconduct and has been a primary source of literature for new researchers concerning this topic. One of the most publicized types of sexual misconduct in the media today is committed by educators who make poor decisions to engage in flirtatious behavior or inappropriate calls and emails in their relationships with their students (Hayden, 2015; Knoll, 2010). There have been numerous reported cases in which teachers were convicted of sexual misconduct at the elementary, middle, and high school levels (Knoll, 2010; Shakeshaft, 2004). Reports have also shown an equal divide in the reported occurrence of sexual misconduct among female and male teachers (Hayden, 2015).

Recently, there have been no new prevalence studies conducted nationally in the U.S. that have examined educator sexual abuse (Burgess et al., 2010). Shakeshaft's synthesis of literature, conducted in 2004, is the most recent work in this area, and it reported on seven U.S. studies from six different data sets examining the prevalence of educator sexual abuse while also providing a wide range of estimates of percentages of U.S. students and their involvement in sexual abuse by school staff (Burgess et al., 2010).

Since then, there have been limited data on this topic, with the majority of knowledge about the issue coming from newspapers and the media (Celik et al., 2012).

Offender characteristics reported in Shakeshaft's (2004) study showed that teachers whose job descriptions included a great deal of time with students individually, such as coaches and music teachers, were more likely to sexually abuse a student. Findings also suggested that abuse of female students was more likely to be reported than abuse of males, and that females were more targeted than male students (Shakeshaft, 2004).

The school environment is considered one of the most reliable sources of safety for students; however, issues of educator sexual misconduct with students have helped to provide a sense of insecurity for many families (Celik et al., 2012). Schools are also places where teachers are most commonly believed when they deny student claims of misconduct, due to their power and status (Shakeshaft, 2004). Incidents involving educator misconduct among teachers and students can be difficult for many schools to deal with and require well-trained professionals to step in and assist with providing support throughout the entire school.

There have been policies written to guide school districts in addressing educator sexual misconduct and to aid in its prevention (Surface et al., 2014). Missouri's Amy Hestir Student Protection Act provides guidance in policy regarding nondisclosure agreements related to educator sexual abuse (Surface et al., 2014). Due to the Amy Hestir Act, school districts have been forced to adopt a policy to address allegations of sexual misconduct related to the information that school districts provide about former

employees (Surface et al., 2014). The policy also includes a clear definition of sexual misconduct and physical and emotional boundary-crossing behaviors, training for employees, and guidelines for how allegations should be reported (Surface et al., 2014). In 2011, in response to the Missouri's Amy Hestir Student Protect Act, a Texas law was signed requiring the superintendent to complete an investigation of allegations of sexual misconduct in a district (Surface et al., 2014).

The professional and ethical expectations of teachers are often ignored when sexual misconduct between a teacher and student takes place. According to Segheden (2014), when a teacher works with children, moral conscience and behavior are required, and teachers may need coaching while experimenting with their own values and beliefs. Professional competence is also imperative for educators because it exhibits their abilities, principles, and awareness of the meaning and consequences of their educational practices (Segheden, 2014).

### **Regulation of Educator Sexual Misconduct**

According to the TEA, the number of open allegations of inappropriate relationship cases rose between the 2009-2010 and 2012-2013 school years, soaring from 41 to 163 cases (TEA, 2013). During this time, Texas ranked first in the country for reported occurrences of inappropriate student-teacher relationships (Salvoy, 2013). The TEA is responsible for overseeing primary and secondary education in the state of Texas, with a firm mission to provide leadership, guidance, and resources to help schools meet the educational needs of students (TEA, 2016). The TEA holds responsibility for regulations and prevention of educator sexual misconduct. The TEA, along with all Texas

school systems, is driven by laws that are created by the Texas legislature to provide guidance and support for school districts and charters (TEA, 2016). The Texas legislature has a responsibility to at least make an effort to address the issues of schools such as sexual abuse and misconduct and make changes. The TEA holds each and every educator accountable for his or her actions, and it is educators' professional responsibility to follow all of the TEA's regulations regarding sexual misconduct.

### **Educator Roles and Responsibilities**

As a professional educator, teachers are guided in practice laws, policies, and ethical codes at the national and state level. Many teachers spend a considerable amount of time investing in their careers as educators and are required by many different states to become certified or licensed to provide their services (Umpstead, Brady, Lugg, Klinker, & Thompson, 2013). It is a teacher's responsibility to teach and instill knowledge in students, to prepare them for their futures.

Many states have developed professional policies and guidelines to help provide regulations and standards that are to assist teachers in maintaining a professional relationship as well as providing an atmosphere conducive to learning for their students (Hayden, 2015). Professional competence is imperative for educators because it exhibits their abilities, principles and their awareness of the meaning and consequences of their educational practices (Segheden, 2014). The professional code of ethics exemplifies an agreement of the values, beliefs, and concerns about the appropriate behaviors of professionals (Umpstead et al., 2013). Ethics and the professional responsibility of teachers have been a topic given limited or no coverage in the required curriculum of

teacher preparation programs across the U.S. (Umpstead et al., 2013). Professional educators are expected to operate in the form of moral-professional standards that are mandated by their professional code ethics.

### **Impact of Teacher Sexual Abuse**

Students trust their teachers and administrative leaders to guide and protect them throughout the academic career. When in a role of a student, most children place a great deal of trust in the teachers, who have chosen to dedicate their lives to educating them and helping them prepare for their futures. There is an undoubted fact that teachers have an overwhelming effect on the lives of their students (Knoll, 2010). Unfortunately, there have been a small percentage of educators who have chosen to use their connections or positions of influence to sexually abuse their students (West et al., 2010). Students tend to confide in their teachers about a variety of issues, with a sense of safety that they are in good hands. These levels of trust are what in most cases place them at risk of sexual abuse. The impact of teacher sexual abuse has a profound ability to leave a number of negative emotional, psychological, educational, and developmental effects on its victims (Jaffe et al., 2013). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mood disorders such as major depression, nightmares, flashbacks, sleep disorders, and developmental disruptions such as peer relationships, dating, sexual behaviors, and academic achievement have been reported as some of negative effects of teacher sexual abuse (Burgess et al., 2010; Collin-Vezina, Daigneault, & Hebert, 2013).

According to Celik et al. (2012), children exposed to sexual abuse often develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) according to the DSM-IV. As it relates to students

who are sexually abused by teachers, it can be assumed that PTSD would be an association to teacher-student sexual misconduct. In Shakeshaft's (2004) reanalysis of the AAUW data, it was found that victims of educator abuse suffer emotional, educational, and developmental or health effects. Sleep disorders and appetite loss were amongst some of the health effects reported due to educator abuse with developmental issues associated with doubts of happy romantic relationships and confused identity (Shakeshaft, 2004). These effects are not displayed alone but are in most cases accompanied by teacher avoidance, a decrease in attendance, the inability to pay attention, and decreased class participation (Shakeshaft, 2004).

### **School Social Work**

According to the National Association of Social Worker (NASW), the school social work profession is a specialized area of practice where professionals are well equipped to address any social or psychological issues that may tend to block a student's academic progress (NASW, 2012). The social work profession also entails the knowledge of human behaviors, social problems, social services, and values (NASW, 2015). Traditionally, school social work practice focuses on helping children adapt to schools while utilizing their present learning opportunities (Costin, 1975).

In schools, social workers are highly trained professionals who are skilled in dealing with complex problems such as child sexual abuse. Not only are they employed in schools to provide counseling and crisis intervention, but they also help provide solutions to complex issues within the school through the creation of prevention programs and training (Allen-Meares & Montgomery, 2014). Today, school social

workers provide a bridge between the school, home, and community as a source of support for students and families (Richard & Sosa, 2014). Communication is important in the interaction of each system component for school social workers. This is because social workers need to pay attention to how each and every system component interacts to better understand the systems as a whole and to make a relevant assessment (Michailakis & Schirmer, 2014). It is very important that children within school settings be provided with an opportunity to receive an education free from any blocks in their academic progress.

For the past decade, school social work has continued to evolve into a multifaceted and concentrated field of practice since the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Richard & Sosa, 2014). The roles and responsibilities of school social workers have continued to expand adding a number of additional responsibilities to school social workers to assure that all children are provided an equal educational opportunity.

### **School Social Worker Roles**

Historically, school social work roles have been known for their inconsistency and fragmented demarcation (Richard & Sosa, 2014). Over a century ago school social workers were known as “visiting” teachers (Kelly et al., 2010). Since then, there has been a major shift in their roles, which has since linked them to students, homes, and schools with a clinical casework model (Kelly et al., 2010). These roles have had a tendency of being perceived as confusing to other education staff because of the confusion of roles between school social workers and administrators, colleagues, and the community (Peckover et al., 2013).



The original role of school social workers was to respond to the needs of the educational system and support the educational policies at each judicial level (Peckover et al., 2013). This has since changed to accommodate various school district missions and goals throughout the nation.

### **Current Changes in School Social Work Roles**

Over a period, school social workers have acquired a number of additional duties. Duties that now include more roles that contributes to a progression and growth in the responsibilities of school social work to social policies, education, training, and skills. These additional duties included task focused, but not limited to individual, familial and group therapy, case management, teacher and classroom support, and child and family advocate (Allen-Meares et al., 2013). Along with the addition of these additional duties, counseling continues to remain one of the primary and basic functions pertinent the school social work profession. However, with the number of changes in school social work roles, there is still limited data on what school social work practice presently looks like (Kelly et al., 2010). In many schools, social workers work collectively with school counselors to address the needs of students. Literature has also noted that school counselors are placed in school systems to protect children and to work collaboratively with key stakeholders (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2016). Their primary role is to serve as consultants, collaborators, leaders, and advocates within schools (Edwards, 2017). Within most school systems, social workers are employed to provide behavioral, as well as socio-economic support to each student due to some of the disadvantages which students face, placing them more at risk of an impaired functioning

in school. School social workers are also one of the key components that help contribute to a well-functioning school system (Fisher, 2010). According to Peckeover, Vasquez, Van Housen, Saunders, and Allen (2013), the roles of social workers have often been designed to respond to the needs of the education system and follow changes in policies that are implemented at the state and national levels. School social workers carry a distinguished role that differs from other school-based professionals because of their ability to serve marginalized and oppressed populations and contribute to building successful bridges between schools and homes (Richard & Sosa, 2014).

In the state of Texas, social workers share a unique responsibility of assisting with the enhancement of the district's ability to meet its academic mission (Grand Prairie Independent School District [GPISD], 2016). To do so, according to the GPISD (2016), school social workers are called to help students, families, and teachers for: consults and/or counseling with students, families or staff on school or personal issues, mediation, crisis intervention (at the district and campus level), bio-psychosocial assessments, mental health assessment, behavior management and intervention concerns, family needs resources, case management, and participation in the Response To Intervention (RTI) process. The Grand Prairie Independent School District's school support social worker job description provides an example of the typical expectations that the state of Texas has placed on their school social workers. School social workers are a responsible for a number of duties and responsible for assisting to help meet the district's mission.

As exhibited in this review, it is evident that social workers are called upon to carry out a variety of duties for not only students but for families as well as teachers.

There are some duties that are school related and there are many that relate to the personal issues that arise qualifying social workers as well trained professionals with the abilities to practice and provide services to many different types of individuals. Working with students, families, communities, schools, state and national legislatures, social workers are experts in linking clients with various service providers to help streamline the flow of communication between all systems involved (Dean & Rowan, 2014). In the school systems, social workers assist with making connections between the school and other outside systems. The current literature available in relation to teacher-student sexual misconduct does not provide information relevant to the involvement of school social workers in the intervention or response to this problem.

### **Literature Summary**

Although there has been some research about teacher-student relationships, there is none that addresses the direct involvement of school social workers in cases that involve issues of teacher-student sexual abuse, misconduct, and exploitation (Allen-Meares & Montgomery, 2014; Allen-Meares et al., 2013; Jaffe et al., 2013). Social workers are qualified and are best suited as professionals within the school system to provide the appropriate support needed by students who have been involved in situations of sexual misconduct and exploitation (Allen-Meares et al., 2013). In my review in multi-database searches of literature, I have not found any sources that have examined the involvement of school social workers within schools where cases of teacher-student sexual misconduct have occurred. This lack of research on school social workers and their involvement in incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct presents a problem

for the profession of social work in its ability to exhibit how social workers can and have been utilized to help in the elimination of this problem, as well as the harm which this problem can pose upon student victims.

The primary objective of this qualitative case study was to explore the current roles of school social workers in incidents that involve teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation and school social worker's perceptions of their current roles related to teacher-student sexual misconduct. The focus of this study was to gain an insight of how school social workers are utilized in the prevention of teacher-student sexual misconduct and how they professionally respond when cases of teacher-student sexual abuse cases arise. The results of this study will successfully contribute to filling the gap in knowledge and literature on school social worker's roles and teacher-student sexual misconduct. In the next Chapter 3, I will present the methodology of the study.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The primary objective of this qualitative study was to examine the current roles of school social workers in incidents that involve teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation. In this chapter, information related to the selected methodology for this qualitative study is presented to explain why this approach was chosen. In the first section on the research design and rationale, I explain why I chose case study as the best approach to carry out this study in one of the largest school districts in a densely populated urban city in the state of Texas. In the next section, I discuss my role as the researcher, the ethical principles I followed, and measures I took to protect participants. Next, I provide a brief synopsis of how I selected the participants for this study as well what instrument I used to collect important data from each participant. In the data analysis section of this chapter, I discuss the process I followed after the collection of study data and how I analyzed and interpreted the findings. Last, I touch upon potential issues of trustworthiness, describe the steps I took to establish credibility, and outline ethical considerations and procedures in establishing and assuring trust and validity within my study. A summary of this chapter follows, providing a recap of the chapter's discussion.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

For this qualitative study, the research questions I developed were the following:

RQ1: What are the roles of school social workers in situations of teacher-student sexual misconduct?

- a. What is the role of a school social worker in the prevention of teacher-student sexual relationships?
- b. What is the role of a school social worker in response to a teacher-student sexual relationship?

RQ2: How do school social workers perceive their roles in incidents involving teacher-student sexual relationships?

- a. What are the identified strengths and barriers to effectiveness within school social workers' current roles in incidents of teacher-student sexual relationships?
- b. What do school social workers identify as areas to improve in their role?

These questions were developed to ascertain the roles of school social workers in preventing and responding to teacher-student sexual relationships and exploitation and what perceptions school social workers have of their current roles. The aim of this study was to find out how social workers are being used within school systems, whether their roles are shaped to incorporate the delivery of services in relation to situations in which teacher-student sexual misconduct may have occurred, and to evaluate school social workers' roles in this regard.

A case study design was identified as one of the best approaches that could be used to achieve the purpose of this research. Case studies are formulated from research questions that seek to examine "how" or "why" some social phenomenon occurs (Yin, 2014). The goal of this study was to examine how school social workers are professionally used in one of the largest school districts in the state of Texas when cases

of teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation arise. A case study involves the collection of in-depth and detailed data on a current event, program, activity, problem, or individual within a natural setting (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014).

Qualitative case studies also involve the study of a single intensive unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of a similar unit (Baskarad, 2014). This study met the criteria for a single case study because I sought to gain a better understanding of the roles that school social workers play in the prevention of and/or response to teacher-student sexual misconduct in the state of Texas, from the viewpoints of school social workers in one of the state's largest school districts. School social workers were purposefully selected for this study to engage in face-to-face, phone, or video interviews based on their experience working as school social workers. Each school social worker who was selected for this study helped by providing a better understanding of social workers' roles within school systems when sexual misconduct cases arise as well as their perception of the roles that they were assigned in their districts.

### **Role of Researcher**

It was my goal as a qualitative researcher to be involved in every step of the research process of design, interviewing, transcription, analysis, and reporting in addition to striving to meet the highest ethical standards (Yin, 2014). This included following all necessary guidelines to protect not only the study, and my participants, but also myself. As the researcher, I was the primary instrument of this study. I collected all data by conducting interviews, and I analyzed and reported the data. In qualitative research, some researchers incorporate the role of an observer to its participants, by actively listening and

gathering in-depth details about their participant's individual experiences. This is because research is an act of gaining knowledge, and it was my goal to learn from my participants about their roles and experiences as school social workers in incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct. It was not my plan to educate the social workers on any of my past research about their roles, but to become more familiar with their personal experiences and perceptions of their current roles. It was also my role to refrain from forceful influence, intimidation, or bias during the interview process with participants in the study and to exhibit professional conduct at all times (Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, & Cheraghi, 2014; Yin, 2014). It was important that I exhibit neutrality throughout the research process. Doing this required me to recognize, reflect upon, deal with, and report my potential biases by journaling throughout the research process and debriefing with peers and committee members to assure that my biases did not have an effect on my research analysis and results.

Given the fact that this study might touch on a subject viewed as sensitive for some and not others, confidentiality played a major part in the protection of the participants. All information reported was to be kept confidential, and I gathered no identifying information related to sexual abuse victims or perpetrators. However, in case any participant shared specific or detailed information about an event of sexual misconduct, it was important that I inform each participant that I was a mandated reporter with responsibility to the profession of social work. This information was presented to and acknowledged by each participant in the content of the participant consent form. It was my responsibility as the researcher to outline my roles as the researcher to carry out



an ethical, confidential, and nonbiased study as well as my ability to maintain confidentiality and integrity during the entire research process (Sanjari et al., 2014). All information related to my research study, such as the name of my dissertation chair, the IRB approval number, and information on a research participant advocate, was provided to each participant to ensure each participant knew who they could contact, besides myself, to address concerns or questions regarding this study. Each participant was informed of how I planned to use the information received from each interview to create themes as well as how the results and findings would be shared and disseminated upon completion of this study for purposes of further research.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The sample for this study consisted of nine school social workers employed in one of the largest school districts in a densely populated urban city in the state of Texas. In Texas, counties are furnished with their own independent school districts (ISD), which are separated by county and divided into regions under the TEA. The selected school district was classified as one of the largest districts in the state of Texas; therefore, I anticipated that it would provide a greater chance of school social worker participation in the study. During the 2013-2014 school year, Texas employed 654 social workers within schools in over 1,200 districts throughout the state (TEA, 2016). For this study, saturation was achieved with a sample of nine, providing a thorough examination of how school social workers were used and of their individual perceptions of their roles.

Sampling is a major component of qualitative case study research and is very important to the data collection process (Baskarad, 2014; Robinson, 2014). This study employed two distinct but similar sampling strategies, purposeful and snowball sampling. Purposeful sampling is one of the most commonly used sampling strategies in qualitative studies because it involves selecting research participants based on preselected criteria that are relevant to the research question (Robinson, 2014; Suri, 2011). Purposeful sampling affords a major advantage to qualitative studies because it allows a researcher to gain information directly from informants who all have the same experience with the phenomenon of interest (Suri, 2011; Yin, 2014). The participants for this study were purposefully selected based on the criterion that they were school social workers and held current positions in one of the largest school districts in a densely populated urban city in the state of Texas, which was the bounded system for this study.

Contact information for each participant was obtained through a site that was publicly available. Each school social worker whose name and number were listed on the site was contacted in an effort to strengthen the possibility of recruiting a good number of participants for the study. Interviewing school social workers for this study allowed for the collection of data from individuals who had direct experience and knowledge of their roles in school systems when incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct arise (Sanjari et al., 2014; Yin, 2014).

Though the participants in this study were selected based on a specific purpose related to the study, additional participants were recruited through another form of purposeful sampling called *snowball sampling*. Snowball sampling is employed in

qualitative studies when there is a small population from which to draw, or the population is difficult to reach, and who carry details about “information-rich cases” (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Suri, 2011). Social work services can be very limited in many schools, with some social workers serving multiple schools within a school district in the state of Texas. This is why I chose to incorporate a snowball sampling strategy; using a referral and social networking process involving participants with whom I had already made contact, I sought to recruit other social workers to participate in the study. It was my plan prior to the start of data collection to contact each school social worker via phone and/or listed email address to request help with the recruitment of additional study participants. Every personally addressed email that I sent to each listed school social worker included a script (Appendix C) informing the potential participant that I was a doctoral student at Walden University who was conducting independent research that was not connected to their specific school or district, along with an attached recruitment flyer for their review (Appendix B). After I had successfully conducted an interview with a school social worker, I planned to provide the school social worker with an additional flyer to pass on to other school social workers whom he or she knew for the purposes of recruiting additional participants, which began the initial phase of snowball sampling.

The sample size chosen for this study was determined by the study’s research design. According to Robinson (2014), sample sizes should be provisionally decided upon in the design stage to help with planning, estimating the duration of the study, and allocating resources if needed. Based on this research study’s approach and data collection method, I sought 10-12 school social workers to participate. Range selections

allow flexibility in data collection and are crucial to the achievement of the goal of replication and saturation (Yin, 2014). Providing a sample range instead of an exact number helps with providing cross-case generalities and gives the researcher flexibility to recruit within a limited range, with the option of meeting or not meeting the largest number selected for the proposed sample (Robinson, 2014). This sample range allowed me to recruit with a goal of reaching saturation in the information that was presented from each interview.

It is also important that researchers take into consideration the purpose of a study, reliability and credibility, and any time constraints that the sample could create for the study (Robinson, 2014). The purpose of my study was to gather information from school social workers about their roles related to teacher-student sexual misconduct, and to do this I had to trust that the information being provided was truthful. Additionally, I had to have patience, given that participation in this study was strictly voluntary and there was a possibility that the amount of time required would be much longer than what I expected. Due to the amount of time and money that a research study requires for successful completion, it is imperative to focus on what is most important about the study, which is the study's sample size and reaching the point of saturation (Dworkin, 2012).

When a researcher has selected an adequate sample size for a study, the point of saturation can be explored. Saturation can be defined as the point at which a researcher feels that data collection is no longer offering any information that is new or relevant to the study (Dworkin, 2012). In an effort to reach my data saturation limit for this study, I examined all responses to each interview for patterns as well as repetitiveness of themes

during each interview to confirm that future responders would present no new data. Due to the patterns of repetitiveness presented, I conducted two additional interviews to confirm that no new information would emerge, finalizing the study's sample at nine. Prior to reaching saturation, I had planned for recruitment to continue for no longer than 90 days, with the aim of recruiting a sufficient number of participants to provide an abundant amount of detail for this study.

### **Instrumentation**

The method of instrumentation for this study was semistructured in-depth interviewing. This technique allowed me to gather information related to each of the interview questions while still allowing the participants to elaborate on their responses. Interviews are among the most commonly used data sources in case studies (Yin, 2014). In case study research, interviews provide information pertinent to the study topic as well detailed explanations of individuals' perceptions, views, attitudes, and meanings (Yin, 2014).

As with any data collection instrument, there are certain precautions that a researcher using interviews should take to prevent any possibility of tainted data. When conducting interviews, researchers should try their best to establish reflexivity by not influencing the participants' responses with the display of personal biases through poorly articulated interview questions (Yin, 2014). To increase this study's validity and credibility of the collected data, a well-developed collection of interview questions was formulated to gather information about participants' current roles and responsibilities as school social workers and their perceptions of their roles (see Appendix A).

These interview questions were developed based on theory and my extensive literature review. They were refined based on feedback from my committee and my independent piloting of the questions with colleagues and friends. All questions presented in each interview were the same and were administered in the same order and manner to promote consistency and contribute to the credibility of the interview responses.

It is always best to build a relationship with interview respondents to help contribute to the collection of trustworthy data (Patton, 2002). My professional background as a social worker assisted with relationship building and establishing trustworthy data due to the professional code of ethics that the participants and I shared. The NASW Code of Ethics guided my professional practice, as it did for each school social worker participating in this study.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

I sent a recruitment flyer and a brief introduction of myself to each school social worker via email or fax to request participation in the research study (see Appendices B & C). The recruitment flyer included details about the research study such as the purpose of the study, participant eligibility, study benefits, location and scheduling, and compensation. I conducted interviews with the social workers to serve as a part of the study's data set, and I took notes. Each school social worker selected an interview method of choice (i.e., face to face, phone, or video). School social workers who elected a face-to-face interview selected a confidential, comfortable, and convenient location. All interviews were conducted at the convenience of the school social workers at scheduled times that worked best for them. Upon completion of each interview, I provided each

school social worker with a small amount of compensation for their voluntary participation in the form of a \$10 Target gift card. Although this compensation was provided to each participant, it did not exert any undue influence on the participation of each school social worker.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data collected from the face-to-face, phone, and/or video interviews, direct notes, and transcripts that were conducted during this study served as the primary data sources. I analyzed all interviews upon its completion to identify the themes and keywords that I would utilize during the coding phase (Yin, 2014). I immersed myself in the data, by reading and rereading each and every transcript. It was important that the transcripts from each interview and direct notes be reviewed, as well as organized to categorize the emerging themes. To prepare for coding, I planned to organize the data into groups by questions to identify any keywords or themes (Yin, 2014). Yin (2014), stressed the importance of a well-organized database to help external readers but also to make the researcher's data analysis easier. That is why it was important for me to organize my data in advance to eliminate the loss of important information that was relevant to the development of my analysis. I chose to conduct member checks by clarifying information during each interview, as well as confirming my transcriptions of audio recordings with my participants. This was to assure that there was a relevant connection or relation to the themes that were formulated between each tool collected from each data source.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

The criteria utilized to demonstrate this study's trustworthiness was established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Lincoln and Guba proposed the four criteria to develop trustworthiness in qualitative research (Cope, 2014). In conducting this study, it was my goal to achieve the highest possible quality when managing and reporting the research findings of this study.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility can be displayed through the researcher, by their ability to provide information about themselves and the experiences they have encountered while in the field of research. Researchers have to be certain about the information collected as well as provide accurate explanations to show their credibility. I selected to utilize my committee as peer review to assist with the study's credibility and well as my research journal to exhibit reflexivity. In this study, I exhibited credibility by establishing rapport with study participants. Building their confidence in the study with informed consent, confidentiality and establishing trust helped to do this. Patton (2002) implied that the best credibility of qualitative findings requires technical rigor in the analysis. This implies that the findings of a study should present accurate information, which was carefully collected and analyzed following a very strict process. Identifying and communicating the themes and patterns that emerged from the interviews as well as the data saturation of repetitiveness presenting no new data, in this study helped me confirm credibility as well as increased the internal validity of this study (Yin, 2014). The credibility of the research



findings was also dependent upon the researcher's ability to establish trustworthiness (Patton, 2002).

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to transferring of research outcomes or techniques that pertain to one group to another (Cope, 2014; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011; Yin, 2014). This is done in qualitative research by providing a rich description of the population at hand as well as the reporting of findings that are accurate (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011; Yin, 2014). In this study, transferability was displayed by providing a detailed description of the study participants. Transferability, as it relates to this study was established by exhibiting the ability of the findings to relate to other school districts in the state of Texas. In this study, a description of the selected school social workers recruited for this study is presented in Chapter 4 displaying transferability by showing how other school social workers in other districts could relate to the study by its findings and descriptions that are presented in this study.

### **Dependability**

Dependability in this study was obtained by keeping detailed evidence or documentation of everything that is found, recorded or observed during the entire research process (Yin, 2014). A research journal was kept by this researcher throughout the process of formulating and conducting this study to record every stage of the process. This journal included information of my initial development of my research topic, the process of constructing a prospectus for this research study, notes and data about the multiple changes and revisions made throughout the process, and pertinent information

related to new knowledge and beneficial information about the research study. This was created to help with keeping an audit trail for this study, jotting down what and when I did each step of this study. In the data collection process, I thoroughly reviewed all information, transcripts, notes, and techniques to assure that the information being recorded was a good reflection of what was reported by each participant (Yin, 2014).

### **Confirmability**

Once credibility, transferability, and dependability were strengthened in this study, this is when confirmability occurred. Confirmability is exhibited when a researcher demonstrates that the data represented is truly the responses and views of the research participants and is not associated with the researcher's biases or personal point of views (Cope, 2014). Researchers can achieve this by effectively describing the interpretations and conclusions of the study and how each was established directly from the data collected (Cope, 2014; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Keeping a well-organized archive of the data collected from each interview assisted with auditing and provided confirmability of the study's findings.

### **Ethical Procedures**

When researching human subjects, it is important for the researcher to by all means safeguard any and all information obtained and shared for research purposes. Research ethics plays a major part in the development, process and success of a professional and scholarly research study. In preparation for this study, many approvals and steps were achieved to ethically carry out this study. I obtained approval (IRB approval number of study is: 03-20-17-0477276) from the institutional review board

(IRB). This study had the potential of touching on a subject that was viewed as sensitive to some and not others, that is why confidentiality played a major part in the protection of the participants. All information reported was kept confidential to the research study, but as outlined in the participant consent form the researcher was mandated reported and had a responsibility to the profession of social work. To avoid any potential dilemma, no questions were asked by the researcher to gather specific identifying information related to sexual abuse victims or perpetrators.

Participation in this study was strictly voluntary with the option to withdraw at any time for each participant, so no threats, forces or influences would recruit any participant's involvement in this study. Upon completion of participation, all received a gift card if they continued to the end or not. Participants were informed at the beginning of the study of their rights as a participant and the use of the collected information, which was provided to each and every participant as outlined in copies of their participation consents. Professionalism assisted with maintaining ethical behaviors during each interview and contributed to the researcher staying focused and involved as needed in the research study. Research data, notes, journals, recordings, and findings were securely filed on a laptop that was password-protected, and that had only been assigned to the researcher and for the study's use. Non-electronic data was securely filed and locked in the researcher's home in a file cabinet with key access. As required by Walden University, all data collected for this study will be stored for a period of 5 years, after which I will destroy.

### **Summary**

This study utilized the qualitative case study approach to explore the current roles of school social workers in incidents that involve teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation. Research questions for this study were developed based on the qualitative design with a goal to gather a better insight of social work roles, while also collecting individual perceptions of their roles. This study employed the data collection strategy of in-depth semi-structured interview that was conducted amongst nine school social workers in one of Texas' largest school districts. A thorough description of my role as the researcher was introduced in this chapter providing my actions and responsibility as the researcher and my ability to provide confidentiality to my participants. In the upcoming chapter, I report the results of my qualitative case study.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the current roles of school social workers in incidents that involve teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation. Data for this study were collected by individually interviewing nine school social workers who were actively employed in one of the largest school districts in a densely populated urban city in the state of Texas. This school district has a mixed population of over 200,000 students who represent a variety of racial/ethnic groups, including Hispanic, African American, Asian, and White, with over 75% of the student population classified as economically disadvantaged. The main research questions for this study were the following:

- RQ1: What are the roles of school social workers in situations of teacher-student sexual misconduct?
  - a. What is the role of a school social worker in the prevention of teacher-student sexual relationships?
  - b. What is the role of a school social worker in response to a teacher-student sexual relationship?
- RQ2: How do school social workers perceive their roles in incidents involving teacher-student sexual relationships?
  - a. What are school social workers' identified strengths and barriers to effectiveness within their current roles in incidents of teacher-student sexual relationships?

- b. What do school social workers identify as areas to improve in their role?

In this chapter, the findings of this study are presented in sections addressing setting, evidence of quality, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results.

### **Setting**

I gathered data from various school social workers who were actively employed in one of the largest school districts in a densely populated urban city in the state of Texas. I collected data by conducting interviews with each participant during the spring semester of 2017, while school was still in attendance. I knew that the summer would be approaching and wanted to reach out to school social workers while they were still actively employed, due to their upcoming break in employment, which would be occurring during the summer vacation months. A choice of face-to-face, phone, or videoconference interview formats was provided to each participant. All interviews were to be conducted offsite, away from the participants' school campus, in a location of their choice. Each participating school social worker asked to participate in a face-to-face interview at an offsite location, such as a local Starbucks coffee shop, library, or restaurant. I did not conduct any interviews via phone or videoconference for this study.

The contact information gathered for the school social workers to solicit participation and initiate contact was obtained from websites of schools in one of the largest school districts in a densely populated urban city in the state of Texas. The list of schools located in the school district that I used for this purpose was obtained from the

district's public website. There were over 200 schools listed within the district, with only about 75 to 80 school website addresses publicly listed. Using the listed addresses, I searched each school staff directory for the school social worker's contact information. My initial contact with each social worker was attempted via email. An email (Appendix C) was sent to 22 school social workers whose email addresses were listed on their school's website from my Walden University email account. In this initial email, I included an email script with the social worker's name, a brief introduction of myself, information on the purpose of the research study, and a request for voluntary participation in a 1-hour, in-depth interview related to school social workers' roles and perceptions related to incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation. A copy of the study's recruitment flyer (Appendix B) was attached to provide additional details on the study as well as my contact information to set up interviews and ask questions if needed.

After sending this email, I began to receive inquiries from school social workers at my Walden University email account and in phone calls on my Google voice phone account, to which I subscribed to keep my personal cell phone number private during the administration of this study. Initially, I received emails and calls from only five out of the 22 school social workers I contacted to inquire about the study. The five potential candidates identified themselves as social workers who were actively employed at a school within this large school district in the state of Texas by sending a confirmation reply from their school's email account and consenting to a face-to-face interview. I scheduled each participant's face-to-face interview at a time, date, and offsite location of the participant's choice. Upon the completion of each face-to-face interview, I provided

the participant with a \$10 Target gift card for voluntary participation and an additional copy of the recruitment flyer to share with other school social workers with whom the participant came in contact who might want to participate in the study.

### **Demographics**

School social workers employed in one of the largest school districts in a densely populated urban city in the state of Texas were the desired participants for this study. For this qualitative case study, there were nine school social workers who met the participation criteria and fully completed the semistructured interviews. I used purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit the study participants. The school social workers shared the same responsibilities within their schools. They were called upon to help students, families, or staff with school or personal issues, mediation, crisis intervention (at the district and campus levels), biopsychosocial assessments, mental health assessments, behavioral management and intervention concerns, family resources, case management, and participation in the Response to Intervention (RTI) process (GPISD, 2016).

Personal demographic information about the school social workers was not included in this study to ensure confidentiality and to protect the identities of all participants. All nine study participants were female school social workers. Six worked for the district full time, and three were part-time employees of the school district. The school social workers' years of school social work experience ranged from 1 to 10 years of service.

Descriptions of each participant follow:



- SW01 had worked as a school social worker in this district under research for 2 ½ years. At the time of the study, she worked part time for 2 days a week and provided services to students in only one school located within the district.
- SW02 had 7 years of social work experience. She had contributed three of her years of experience working in the school system and, at the time of the study, worked full time providing services to students located at three different schools located in the district.
- SW03 worked full time providing services to students located in one high school in the district. She had 2 years of experience working in the school system.
- SW04 had almost 10 years of experience as a school social worker. At the time of the study, she worked full time at two different schools within the district.
- SW05 had been employed in this district for 6 years. When the study was conducted, she worked full-time for the district and had provided services to students in 10 different schools in the district throughout her school social work career.
- SW06 worked part time at only one middle school located in the district. She had 5 years of school social work experience and a total of 8 years of professional social work experience.

- SW07 had almost 3 years of school social work experience and a total of 7 years of professional social work experience. She was employed full time providing services for students at two different schools in the district.
- SW08 was a part-time school social worker in the district with less than one year of school social work experience.
- SW09 had over 20 years of service in the social work profession, with 9 in the area of school social work. At the time of the study, she worked full time providing social work services to elementary and middle school students in two different schools in the district.

Demographics pertaining to personal information and specific schools were not included in this study to ensure confidentiality of all participants and to protect personally identifying information. All nine of the participants had earned a master's degree in social work and were professionally licensed to practice in the state of Texas.

### **Data Collection**

I used the purposive and snowball sampling approaches to recruit participants to interview for this study. Open-ended, semistructured interview questions were constructed as the data collection instrument for this study. The time allotted for each interview was 60 minutes, as stated in the recruitment flyer (Appendix B) and participant consent form. However, the nine participants were successful in providing all of the information needed during each recorded interview in 35 to 40 minutes. The interviews took place between April 5, 2017, and May 27, 2017, over a period of 8 weeks. Each interview was scheduled at a time and location of the participant's choosing in order to

offer a comfortable, familiar, and safe setting in which the participant could be as open as possible during the discussion.

Initial contact with the participants began with emails sent to 22 school social workers listed on schools' websites in one of the largest school districts in a densely populated urban city in the state of Texas. Of the 22 school social workers contacted via email, only five responded by phone or email and were successfully interviewed for the study. Secondary contact began when I received phone calls from new school social workers who were not originally on my contact list but were referred by one of the five previous study participants. I confirmed that each caller met the criteria to participate in the research study before providing additional details about the study, and scheduling interviews. After all of the emails and phone calls, a total of nine school social workers participated in the study. It was after completing the third interview that I began to notice repetition in the themes that were emerging from the completed interviews. I continued to conduct more interviews to determine whether the themes would provide new data, but by the seventh interview, I noticed that the themes continued to stay the same and that no new information was being provided by the participants. After multiple consults with my committee chair about the findings that had been presented after each interview, I began exploring the idea that I could be approaching my study's point of data saturation. The redundancy in responses led me to conduct two more interviews to assess whether any new information would surface for this study. However, after completion of the ninth interview, I was able to confirm that data saturation had been reached. Saturation is

reached at a point when a researcher feels that data collection is no longer offering any new or relevant information to the study (Dworkin, 2012).

All nine of the face-to-face interviews were audio recorded with the agreement of the participants at various locations and times of their choice. Four of the participants' interviews were conducted at a local Starbucks coffee shop; two took place at a local library; two were conducted at local restaurants; and another occurred at a personal office. Prior to the start of each face-to-face interview, I reviewed the participant consent form and obtained the participant's signature indicating consent for participation. Once the participant and I had signed all forms, I provided an additional blank copy to the participant for later review if needed.

I assigned each participant an alphanumeric reference number to replace the participant's name and maintain confidentiality. Participants were identified by "SW" for *social worker*, followed by a two-digit number to represent the participant's number in the chronological interview sequence (i.e., SW01 ... SW09).

The interview process began as I set up my digital handheld recording device and began reading from my interview protocol (Appendix A). During each interview, I employed a qualitative research technique called *responsive interviewing* to stimulate further elaboration of responses and gain a better understanding of responses from each participant. Responsive interviewing helps induce in-depth responses from interviewees by employing main questions, which structure the interview; probing questions, which help to bring about exchange of ideas, and follow-up questions that help in exploring those ideas (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). As I read each question to the participants, I allowed

them as much time as they needed to respond and elaborate on their responses. Each recorded interview ranged from 35-40 minutes from start to finish. I followed the process suggested by Baxter and Jack (2008) and Robinson (2014), by documenting field notes and memos in my research journal, noting key words, and any additional questions I wanted to ask the participant to control my biases during the audio recorded interview, which I later reviewed during my data analysis process.

In the process of collecting data for this study, only one unusual circumstance occurred, which involved the playback of one of the audio recordings. Due to a high level of background noise and placement of the recording device positioned in a spot not near enough to catch the responses of the participant and myself, the playback was difficult to hear. This unusual circumstance was resolved with multiple playbacks during the transcription process and clarification of the resulting transcript with the participant. I personally transcribed all interviews; I did not use the services of a professional transcriber due to my desire to actively engage myself in the entire research process and gain an experience with interview transcribing. The transcribing process was tedious as well as time consuming, but it served as a valuable learning experience for me and helped me to gain intimate knowledge of my data. I was able to transcribe each interview verbatim in 3 to 4 hours. Each transcription varied in typed page length within a range from 8 to 10 pages, double-spaced. After I had transcribed all interviews, I listened to each recording while reading the transcript to make sure that I had transcribed completely. Following this process, I forwarded each participant a copy of the transcription and asked that she confirm the contents via an email reply with any

comments and clarifications. No revisions were made or clarifications provided, and each participant agreed that the transcriptions accurately reflected what she shared during the interview. All field notes, memos, interview recordings, and transcriptions were stored in a safe location in my home to await future analysis. The interview recordings were also removed from the digital recording device and transferred to my password-locked personal computer before its use for the next face-to-face interview.

### **Data Analysis**

In case study research, semistructured, in-depth interviews are one the most commonly used data sources. Such interviews allow researchers to gather information related to the interview questions while still allowing participants to freely elaborate on their responses (Yin, 2014). The purpose of this research study was to explore the roles of school social workers in one of the largest school districts in a densely populated urban city in the state of Texas, as well as how they perceived their roles in incidents involving student-teacher sexual misconduct. Doing this required me to immerse myself in the data that were collected from each participant and actively involve myself in the entire data analysis process.

Again, as stated above, I chose to complete the audio transcription process myself and not hire a professional transcriber because I wanted to take part in the entire process and enhance my qualitative research skills and techniques. Upon the completion of each transcription, I conducted a member check by providing the participant with a copy of the transcript to review to ensure that the responses were recorded properly. I then read each transcript multiple times, line by line, word by word, while listening to the recording to

assess for accuracy while making a comparison to what had been recorded. Doing this allowed me to prepare for the next step of data analysis, which was the coding process, by consciously searching for commonalities among the data (Saldana, 2015).

### **Qualitative Data Analysis Software**

I initially began coding the data by hand by reading and highlighting different concepts from the hard copies of each of the interview transcriptions. To double-check my initial coding and to evaluate for any data variances I utilized a data analysis software called Nvivo 11. Nvivo 11 is the latest version of the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). This CAQDAS software helped me by efficiently managing, storing, organizing, and reconfiguring my data (Saldana, 2016). I selected to utilize this particular software due to my familiarity with the software from past training and use during my educational courses. This software allowed me to code the data much faster than when I proceeded to hand code. It also allowed me to organize and store my data to refer back to in the future.

### **Coding**

The coding analysis process included the administration of the initial, focused, and axial coding steps. Each of these steps was conducted during my initial coding process administered directly on the hard copies of each interview transcription and during the use of Nvivo 11 for my data analysis process.

In cycle one, during the initial/open coding phase, I took my time and cautiously reviewed and examined the raw data by hand. Reviewing the responses of each participant to identify key words from each of their statements (Saldana, 2016). I read

every audio transcript line-by-line and notated and highlighted different concepts or words that stood out as my respondent's feelings or personal perceptions. I wanted to capture how each participant's feelings towards the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct, their current professional roles and responsibilities and potential to change differed from each other. This process was an attempt to define and label the data to develop themes so that I could review later on for patterns. Between all nine of the interviews conducted, a total of 23 different codes emerged from the responses of each participant. Social worker concern, barriers to help, limited support, uncertainty, and no relationship or experiences, are a few amongst the list of codes that were used to identify some of the feelings and actions in the responses collected from each participant (Saldana, 2016). These codes, along with others, still needed to be further analyzed and organized to determine their frequency in use amongst each participant. These steps were necessary for the organization of each category, which would then assist in the development of emerging themes of this research study.

In cycle two, I began to focus code by identifying the codes that were most frequently used. For example, I grouped ideas like "none", "no", and "never" related to roles, due to their similarity in meaning as each participant expressed them. During the interviews, I asked participants "What is your role as a social worker when incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct occur within your school or district"? Responses included, "I have never been asked to assist" or "No roles have been assigned to me..". I was able to reexamine each of these codes and minimize the number of initial codes into ten categories, by determining their relationship to each other. This process helped me



inductively work to combine these initial codes into larger groups to see how they would fit into distinct categories, as they related to the interview questions and field notes. As indicated by Saldana (2016), focus coding helps categorize data that has been coded based on their thematic or conceptual similarities.

Of the ten broad categories grouped, two main themes and three subthemes emerged:

- Theme 1: School social work roles
  - Teacher-student sexual misconduct experiences
  - Potential strengths of social worker involvement
  - Recommendations for future social worker roles
- Theme 2: Barriers to service delivery

### **Discrepant Cases**

During the initial interviews and the member check process I clarified any discrepancy issues by refining all information during each interview. I solicited clarity of responses from each participant that I felt could be misinterpreted by others or myself. I restated responses to assure that what I heard from the participant was what they actually stated. All transcriptions of the audio-recorded interviews were verified with the participant to assure accuracy in what was transcribed. There were no discrepant cases noted that had any significant influence on the study results. However, each participant expressed differences and similarities in their responses to the interview questions, but through negative case analysis, I was able to establish credibility and analyze the content (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The participants had different perspectives in response to

several of the interview questions. There was not a consensus in the responses of the participants in how they felt they could utilize their social work skills to assist when incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct occurs.

Five out of the nine felt that they could only provide support and comfort services to the family of the child, while four of the school social workers felt that they could do more by collaborating with their administration to help prevent it in their school. SW09 stated “I don’t see what services I could provide as a school social worker to a teacher or student involved because my time and the resources that I’m supplied with are limited.” While SW08 felt differently and stated “I would like to help bring awareness to the issue and help my administrators be more proactive than reactive to this issue.” Through negative case analysis I tried to present the different perspectives and those different perspectives are further represented in the results section of this chapter.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

It was my goal to achieve the highest possible quality during the management and reporting of this study’s research findings. According to Yin (2014), the researcher’s ability to establish trustworthiness will contribute to the credibility of the research findings. An attempt to contribute to the trustworthiness in my study was displayed through my openness and honesty during the interview process. My effort to provide all of the details and information related to the research study and confidentiality of each participant was openly displayed, providing them with information that they could confirm if needed through the Internal Review Board (IRB) at Walden University along with my contact information. The trustworthiness of this study was enhanced through my

attempt to solicit truthful responses, with the ability to allow my participants an opportunity to speak freely in their own words throughout the entire interview process. I also remained professional at all times during the research process and strictly adhered to the dates and times scheduled for each face-to-face interview.

According to Cope (2014), trustworthiness in qualitative research can also be established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility of the research findings in a study is dependent upon the researcher's ability to establish trustworthiness (Patton, 2002). According to Cope (2014), confirmability is exhibited when a researcher demonstrates that the data represented is truly the responses and views of the research participants and is not associated with the researcher's biases or personal point of views. Credibility and confirmability in this study was achieved by my administration of member checks, which took place from my returning of each audio transcription to the participant for verification of their response accuracy. Also I asked each participant to report any discrepancies in the responses recorded, resulting in all indicating that were in agreement with the interview transcriptions, and there was no additional information to be reported. Each participant was knowledgeable about their role as a school social worker and was provided an opportunity to speak freely and in their own words. My confirmation of the information provided by each participant in each interview recording and transcription helped with confirming the legitimacy of this study.

Transferability refers to transferring of research outcomes or techniques that pertain to one group to another (Cope, 2014; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011; Yin, 2014).

Transferability in this study was established through my ability to provide a rich, detailed description of the participants' demographics, disclosures, and interview settings. Large, densely populated urban cities are located in many other states across the U.S. and are furnished with school social workers and school districts that serve their youth. The descriptive data about the participants, their experiences and the findings of my study will enable future researchers the ability to conduct studies in other settings and replicate in other locations across the world (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011; Yin, 2014). Dependability in research studies can come from keeping detailed evidence or documentation of everything reported and recorded (Yin, 2014). The measurements of dependability remained the same as mentioned in chapter 3 because I documented everything in my research journal that was found, recorded, and or observed during the entire research process. I administered the audio recordings and transcriptions of each face-to-face interview, as well as the hand coding of each transcription. Due to the exclusion of a professional transcriber, I was able to personally provide the details of all of the audio recordings and provide the details of each participant's experiences through the themes that emerged and their alignment with my research questions, theory, literature review in the upcoming results section.

## **Results**

This research study aimed to explore the roles of school social workers in incidents of teacher student sexual misconduct to help expand the current knowledge of school social workers and their utilization in the Texas education system. Although each participant of this study was actively employed as a school social worker in the district

under research, their experiences with teacher-student sexual misconduct in their schools were deficient. The findings of this study show that there were no primary or secondary roles assigned to the nine participants who participated in this study related to the prevention or intervention of teacher-student sexual misconduct.

### **Theme 1: School Social Worker Roles**

During the interviews, all participants began the interview by responding to the opening question and provided their description of their current social work roles in their district or school. The characteristics of the roles each school social worker described were crisis intervention, student advocate, case management, behavioral management, family and community resources, truancy management and prevention, and school and community liaison. Of the nine participants, none of them mentioned any roles related to teacher-student sexual misconduct. The primary roles provided were geared towards standard social work practice and services, and the identification of teacher-student sexual misconduct as an issue that they dealt with was not in their description of their primary roles. The participant's impression of their social work roles provided a brief background of their school social experiences while examining their perception of the assigned roles in their schools. The participants provided quotes regarding their experiences and duties a school social worker in their schools. SW04 shared her years of experience as a school social worker and her ability to provide services as needed:

I have been a school social worker for over nine years and have worked in a number of schools and districts in the state of Texas. I have always been called up to provide resources to students and families in need. I try my best to provide as

many resources, but in some cases, the resources are limited depending on what is needed by a student.

SW08 added:

I work with students, mostly low-income and behavioral students. Majority of the low-income students need services like food, community health, and resources.

The behavioral students in most cases require my assistance for psychological evaluations and behavioral modifications.

SW02 expressed her desire to change the lives of her students who have needs that are beyond her reach:

Every day I strive to make a child's educational experience much better. There are a number of students in the schools I provide services to that need more than the help I can provide. I see some students come to school so that they can eat breakfast or lunch or to just get away from their homes.

The services that each school social provides and professional roles that they play in their schools are often guided by their administration, to keep up with the individual schools' and districts' educational mission and goal. SW07 shared how her role as a social worker is often adjusted based on the needs of others:

My roles often change from day to day...with me taking upon roles that are not even mine, to begin with. I do my best to help my administration but it's hard to see some of the problems that most of my kids are faced with, and there is nothing I can do.

SW30 elaborated on how she goes the extra mile to support her school's yearly goals:

I help with keeping the attendance rate high, making sure we have enough kids in the school on a regular basis. There are some kids whose homes I have to visit all the time, and of course, they don't like it, but it gets them in school regularly.... because at the end of the year we don't like to see horrible numbers and rankings at my schools.

The overarching theme, school social work roles emerged from the data and displayed the respondents' interpretations of their current social work duties that appeared to be unrelated to the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation. Responses by each participant, to the interview questions provided a list and description of the common duties in which each school social worker would normally fulfill in their schools.

**Subtheme: Teacher-student sexual misconduct experiences.** All of the nine participants (100%) stated that they had no direct primary role or responsibility to teachers or students involved in teacher-student sexual misconduct. Their ability to answer questions related to this issue implied that they were familiar with the existence of this issue and its occurrences in schools. Referring back to their primary roles provided above, it is obvious that the schools, as well as the district, have not viewed the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct as a social work concern at this time. This subtheme resulted in an overwhelming response from the school social workers as they shared that they are not expected to step in and assist when the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct arises.

SW01 expressed her experiences as a social worker with teacher student sexual misconduct:

Teacher-student sexual misconduct hasn't been something, of an issue so far at my school but it has occurred in my district. From what I have heard through administration and staff, it's usually handled by the state and law officials. I haven't had any personal experiences or duties assigned as of yet to assist with sexual misconduct, but at the rate, it is occurring I am sure things could change soon because they always do.

SW03 shared:

Since I have been a social worker in my school, I haven't had to deal with any issues of sexual misconduct. I've heard of cases that have occurred in other schools, and the student is usually transferred, or the teacher resigned, but my principal has never informed me of any responsibilities that I would have if sexual misconduct occurred.

SW05 related to the following experience "I have never been asked to do anything related to sexual misconduct allocations or incidents. Majority of the cases that I've known of were handle by CPS and the district police".

SW04 also added her experience related to teacher-student sexual misconduct, but share her opinion about how she became aware of the incident in her school:

In past four years I have been a school social worker, I only have been informed of an incident by the administration because a teacher was needed for a conference and was no longer available because they had resigned due to



accusations of sexual misconduct with a student. I believe that if I did not already have a scheduled meeting with that teacher I probably would have not found out about the incident at that point.

SW09 said the following regarding her ability to provide services related to teacher-student sexual misconduct:

I don't see what services I could provide as a school social worker to a teacher or student involved because my time and the resources that I'm supplied with are limited.

SW09 expressed her perception of her role in prevention and responding to this issue as:

I believe that due to the severity of the crime and the involvement of minors it should be handled by the police and CPS. Engaging in sexual misconduct is wrong and goes against all professional ethics if you ask me.

These quotes suggest that teachers are not a school social worker's primary concern for reasons of providing services, and assuring that they succeed within their schools, due to students being assigned as their primary service population. This is also true because school social workers are employed in schools to primarily provide services to students and their families that are in need of services related to issues that have affected a student's success in school. These are issues such as mental illness, and personal and family crisis. These are also issues that could possibly have an effect on the district's or school's goals and missions, which is guided by the administration and carried out by school personnel such as school social workers.

SW02 elaborated on her role to primarily provide services to her students:

All the time I work with teachers in their time of need, when a student is having a hard time or they are having reoccurring problems with a student, I step in and help a teacher to brainstorm and come up with solutions to their problems, but I have never had to help a teacher with their own personal problems. I am there for the student and teachers have their administration team to consult in when they are faced with problems.

**Subtheme: Potential strengths of social work involvement.** The social work profession is a unique profession that embraces some specialized areas of practice, such as school social work. Social workers are knowledgeable about human behaviors, social problems, social services and values and all of these distinct knowledge's are what assist school social workers in helping children adapt to schools and become successful in their academic careers. The participant's concerns and desires to utilize their professional skills as social workers to improve the outcomes of teacher-student sexual misconduct are what define the potential strengths of their involvement in this issue. The roles and services of school social workers can be viewed by officials within the school system as beneficial and/or positive to the wellbeing of all students. Each school social worker that participated in this study was asked if they had any additional information that they would like to add about the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct or their school social work roles. All nine of the participants had additional information to share about the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct as well as their roles as a school social worker in the state of Texas. All participant's felt that as a social worker there was something positive that they could do to help this issue, whether big or small. There was

something that they could do, to help not only their students, but also their schools, in bringing about awareness, and providing support as needed to everyone when issues of teacher-student sexual misconduct arise.

SW09 expressed her desire to advocate for her students and eliminate teacher-student sexual misconduct as an issue:

I love working with kids and I love to see them make progress in school. I am an advocate for my students and I want to see them in all of the right situations in life. I know it can be hard to reach many but if I am able to make a change in some I feel great. Sexual misconduct is a terrible thing and I want to be amongst the few to help stop it from happening in my state.

SW07 recognized teacher-student sexual misconduct as an issue and confirmed her professional responsibility to make changes:

I'm a change agent and I want to help make changes to issues like this. This is an eye opener and I have never really thought of ways I could help until now.

SW02 embraced her participation in this study with recommendations to share and encourage her administration to do more:

I hope this study makes it to the hands of the individuals that will determine a better a solution to the problem of sexual misconduct....and I think I can help when this study is all complete and finished. I would love to bring this to my administrators to let them know that we could do more and work together to help our students as well as teacher become more aware of the seriousness of this

problem... We need to speak about this and try our best to a positive role model for our students.

According to the study participants, there is more to be done in their schools and districts to improve the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct. They are change agents and advocates in their schools and perceive their social work roles as such, related to any issues that their students are facing, including teacher-student sexual misconduct.

**Subtheme: Recommendations for future school social worker roles.** The school social workers were asked how they could utilize their social work skills in assisting when incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct occur. Five out of the nine felt that they could only provide support and comfort services to the family of the child, while four of the school social workers felt that they could do more by collaborating with their administration to help prevent it in their school. Due to a number of barriers, which are mentioned further in this study, five out of the nine participants felt that they were limited in their ability to assist with this issue. Exhibiting the lack of current roles for school social workers in this district to effectively assist in preventing and responding to teacher-student sexual misconduct in their schools, even though they carry professionally knowledge about the victim population.

SW06 expressed her experiences with working with victims of sexual abuse:

I have worked with sexually abused children and I know the types of effects these types of incidents can have on a child and it is devastating to see them go through them. Some of my kids are alone, their parents are so preoccupied with family and personal issues they cannot see if their child is hurting or even experiences any

changes. I would want to help prevent sexual misconduct from occurring but I know it will have to start with administration seeing that this problem is serious and should not be taken lightly or ignored until it affects a student on their campus.

SW03:

I feel terribly sorry for the students and families that have been affected by teacher sexual misconduct and I fault our administration. There is more that can be done about this issue but I feel it will require a lot more education and awareness to individuals who do not know what the effects of this issue entails.

SW08 recognized the affect of this issue in her state and offered how she would like to help improve this issue:

There is a need for change in the state of Texas because we rank one of the highest for teacher-student sexual misconduct. Until today I have never really thought of how I can, as social worker help my school and district improve this problem. I would like to help bring awareness to the issue and help my administrators be more proactive than reactive to this issue.

This subtheme developed because the professional experiences the participants described in the previous main theme links a strong desire amongst the participants to improve their roles with duties that are better structured that would allow them to exhibit all of their social work skills and trainings that they have received throughout their educational, as well as professional career. For instance, SW09 provided her professional

experience as a social work with the ability provide services to a number of diverse populations:

I have over 20 years of social work service in many different service areas, deal with a number of populations like the homeless, disabled, elderly, substance abuse, and the mentally ill. I love the professional of social work and I love what I do and the changes I make for my clients. I just want to do some great things for my students and their families to help turn things around for them, because believe it or not each and every student is a product of their environment as well as our future. I just want to see them succeed, and do well and not become a statistic.

The perceptions and views of each participant's roles related to teacher-student sexual misconduct varied in the participant's experiences and knowledge of incidents of teacher-student misconduct as they occurred within their schools. The participants lacked the thoughts of how they could help, but explored their skills as professional social workers to seek future involvement in improving this issue.

## **Theme 2: Barriers to Service Delivery**

School social workers are placed in schools to provide services as needed to every student. As previously mentioned, all of the participating school social workers had a variety of reasons and barriers that they believed hindered them from providing services in their schools related to teacher-student sexual misconduct. This theme exhibits how all nine of the participants identified the barriers they felt were limiting their effectiveness as school social workers in playing a role in assisting with teacher-student sexual

misconduct. They all believed that due to these barriers their role to provide services related to this issue would continue to be overlooked. Barriers that they identified were:

- Administration matter
- Legal issues
- Closed and private discussions
- Lack of time
- Lack of resources
- Lack of training
- Administrative role management

The administrations within school systems are the leaders assigned to organize the schools and handle all matters as they arise. All participants (100%) felt that the administration had a responsibility in the prevention and response to teacher-student sexual misconduct. In the state of Texas, school systems are driven by laws created by the legislature that help provide guidance and support for school districts (TEA, 2016). They are responsible for following the necessary guidelines assigned to not only protect the school and district but the students as well. It was evident that incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct were not discussed as openly as in other issues in schools in the participant's schools. The administration teams in most schools tend to manage the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct, by not sharing the details of the occurrences with other school personnel. Making this issue a matter for only individuals who are a part of the administration team and a closed and private discussion.

SW05 expressed her opinion on why her administration team privately manages this issue in her school:

These are incident that is hushed by the administration. I think in an effort to not scare the kids, but it's devastating. As fast as it happened that's how fast its swept under the rug...I just hope and pray none of my kids are going through this now and keeping it a hush to themselves.

The reporting, formal investigations, protection of students and prevention of sexual misconduct are all responsibilities that are to be upheld by the schools, districts, legislative and state administrators. Some participants agreed that it was solely the administration's responsibility to prevent or reduce the occurrences of teacher-student sexual misconduct, while other participants felt that is a responsibility of not only the administration but a responsibility of the staff as well. SW01 elaborated on her view of why teacher-student sexual misconduct should be a shared responsibility:

Everyone is responsible for this happening...we need to do better.... it's because we don't want to cause problems at work. There are teachers, coaches, janitorial staff and other auxiliary staff that have contact with students on a daily basis.... it's up to all of us to keep our kids safe and not turn the blind eye.

SW03 supported a shared responsibility by adding:

The media has had the ability of making us all look like careless individuals in the school systems. I have seen stories where they stated that the schools did nothing to help a student, to stories state that the teacher was reported but nothing was done by the administration. I see myself as staff member at my school that has



just as much responsibility as my administrators to report any suspicious activity between students and teachers.

SW06 opposed a shared responsibility and expressed her opinion on how she feels her administrative team is responsible for early prevention:

Better precautions have to be taken by our administrative team when hiring teachers to teach or students. There could be something wrong with how they are screening these teachers. I have heard of incidents where teachers have resigned from one school, and rehired at another after being accused of sexual misconduct.

Incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct are viewed as an unlawful act, and in most cases are labeled as an act of child sexual abuse, which is a legal crime. The classification of child sexual abuse as a crime, there is a requirement that the police and state agencies are called to regulate and make decisions for not only the accused but for the victim as well. SW05 expressed her opinion of why the classification of incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct as a legal issue, she has been limited in ability to effectively playing a role in the response to this issue:

... Majority of the cases that I've known of were handle by CPS and the district police.

SW01 also added:

... When CPS is involved we are very limited to the amount information we can know due to student confidentiality.

It is evident from the results presented that this group of social workers have not been directly informed of any incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct in their

schools. The findings of these results could potentially have had an affect on the participant's available opportunities to step in when needed and the option to effectively solicit their social work services related to this issue within their schools.

Each and every school also has a responsibility to strictly follow all of the proper guidelines, policies and procedures when different situations arise in their schools. There are a number legal issues that could occur if a school fails to follow the proper protocol to respond to a certain situations. These are such legal issues that could prevent a school social workers from voluntarily stepping in to assist with teacher-student sexual misconduct due to the potential consequences of improper response to this issue. SW09 reported how her administration actively supports the education system's ability to manage issues that shall arise in her school and how the consequences are often a reminder:

My principal is very strict about following guidelines, policies and procedures for almost everything. He always reminds us that neglect on our part shows a level of neglect on his part. He consistently reminds us of guidelines, and he reminds all of his staff about the consequences that follow neglectful actions.

The informing of incidents of sexual misconduct to school staff, by the administration is important in the prevention of future occurrences in many schools. None of the school social workers that participated in this study had an experience with being officially informed of incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct at the schools where they are employed. There were some that felt that if this issue would occur at their schools that they would be informed by their administration and there were some that felt

that they would not be directly informed and would get updates via of word of mouth. This barrier, described by the participants as a hindrance in their ability to assist as needed, exhibits how this matter has the possibility of becoming a closed and private discussion by administration, who is are also responsible for the appropriation of professional roles, not only related to this matter, but other matters as they arise in their schools. As a mentioned barrier to school social worker roles, the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct has had the advantage of being hidden by the administration. Incidents have not been shared with other school personnel and kept confidential to the administration team. Contributing to the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct being treated as a closed and privately discussed matter by many school leaders. SW05 expressed her desire to report and confidence in her administration to inform her:

I would not hesitate to report any suspicions of sexual misconduct between any staff member and a child in my school. My principal is very good about keeping us informed about any issues that affect our students and find their well-being a major part of his responsibility and I feel the same.

SW03 elaborated on her experiences but expressed her lack of confidence in being informed by her administration:

As of today I have never been informed of any incidents of educator sexual misconduct occurring in any of my schools and if it has occurred...I guess I was left out of the reporting. Which is possible because not all cases are publicly displayed in the media and some are potentially kept quiet...I just hope that is not

the case in my school, I trust my administration to keep me updated on incidents like this.

In many schools, social workers are called upon to assist with a number of issues related to students that can in most cases go beyond their normal duties. The services that school social workers often provide require networking and collaboration with students, families, and various community programs and resources, which can be very time consuming. Lack of time was a major barrier mentioned by a number of participants in their ability to help with incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct. When I asked SW02 how she thought she could utilize her skills to assist when incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct occurs, she replied:

We don't have the time to deal with a very sensitive issue. There's a need for more intense treatment and or therapy that as a school social worker I cannot give to a student who experienced sexual misconduct. I would guess a therapist to provide one on one counseling would help them move past and from it.

SW07 also added:

School social workers are in put in place to eliminate barriers for mostly students and their families...we are there to help them with their education needs and sometimes forget about their personal needs... We are usually focused on meeting our goals and missions that we forget about what's really affecting our children.

The above quotes displayed how these participants felt that time was a major factor in their ability to provide effective services in their schools. In order to properly focus, and provide the attention needed to issues such as sexual abuse, these participants

felt that their current roles did not allow them enough time to provide the attention needed for this issue and other issues that are directly displayed by their students.

In order to be an effective professional, you must be properly trained. This assumption stems from the participants' training experiences that were expressed during this study, revealing that their training on sexual relationships and misconduct provided by the school or district was very minimal. Six participants reported watching a video during the district's orientation, and three reported reading a handout and testing on it during their employee training. The trainings were conducted during their standard annual employee training, via computer video. This described barrier provides a glimpse of the training received by the respondents and their perceptions of the training as being inadequate in the information provided about sexual relationships and misconduct in schools. The inadequate information received in training about the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct could have potentially played a factor in the participant's ability to advocate in the past for roles related to this issue, and provide services as needed, due to their lack of factual information as it affects their district or schools. SW02 provided information on her most recent training on sexual misconduct and what she could remember about her training:

I completed my most recent training in January of this year and I had to go through a series of modules for my annual training. I do recall the sexual misconduct module because I had to watch a YouTube video. It was not very informative and provided very little detail about it. ...It basically reminded you over and over not to do it.

SW01 experience varied slightly from other respondents, but she was able to relate to others with receiving a minimal amount of information about this issue:

I completed my annual training and completed a test at the end. All that I can remember is a brief section on this topic with very little to remember about it...I do remember taking a quiz on it that had questions on how to avoid inappropriate relationships with staff and students.

As the profession of social work continues to change and expand to a number of different populations and service areas, a few of the school social workers agreed that their primary roles are guided and managed by their administration. Depending on the need for social work services, the existence of a school social worker in many schools can be rare and in others they can be severely utilized. The responsibilities and duties of school social workers, as previously mentioned in this section are managed by school administration to help with achieving the school's mission and goals. With all of the responsibilities the school has in achieving their mission and goals, school social workers are essential in seeing that the schools succeed in their educational promises. Limiting their ability to provide other social work services that may not be aligned with the school's mission or goals. There were some participants who felt that their current social work roles were enough to handle and could not imagine taking on other responsibilities, and there were some that felt that their positions and responsibilities as social workers were limited. For example, SW09 expressed her perception of her role as a school social worker and her administration manages her regular duties:

The profession of school social work has been minimized in a sense that school workers hardly do any of the things that they were taught during their educational courses ... This is because school administrators limit them to certain roles and there are even some schools without school social workers because their level of social problems are low so they do not add the position of a school social worker to their yearly budget.

SW05 elaborated on how she is asked to go beyond her regular duties to help in her school, as needed:

I do a lot in my school.... probably more than what I should be doing due to our lack of support. My principal calls on me help out in many different issues, events, and situations. Some are not social work related, but they are what helps keep the school running and organized.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I provided a report of the findings from the collected data from nine school social workers employed in one of the largest school districts in a densely populated urban city in the state of Texas. The study's purpose was to examine school social workers' roles involving teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation, by addressing the study's primary research questions. The primary research questions aimed to examine the roles of school social workers in situations of teacher-student sexual misconduct, as well as how school social workers in the district under research perceived their roles in incidents involving teacher-student sexual relationships.

It was revealed through the study participant's responses to the interview questions, that school social workers in the district under research are still primarily responsible for carrying out some of the traditional school social worker roles, such as advocacy, case management, family, and community resource provider, and crisis intervention. The school social worker roles related to teacher-student sexual misconduct have not yet been added to the list of primary roles by the administration, with all nine of the study participants expressing that they currently do not have an assigned role in the prevention or response to this issue. They also perceive their current roles related to teacher-student sexual misconduct as limited, undetectable, and vague.

As each participant personally expressed their concern about the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct, deeming it an issue that should be addressed and better managed in schools, they included some of the barriers that they have encountered that were possibly hindering them from contributing to its improvement. Barriers such as labeling the issue as a "legal issue" and "administration matter" were amongst the identified causes why this group of school social workers has not been considered as valuable talents to the available services related to teacher-student sexual misconduct. Positive characteristics such as "change agent" and "advocate" along with the repetitive expressions of each participant's love and passion for working with their students and wanting to see them make progress in school are some of the strengths that evidenced their potential to effectively contribute to this issue. Seeking administration awareness and recognition of the many skills and experiences of the profession of social work, was how this group of school social workers felt that they could see improvements in their



current primary assigned school social worker roles as well as future roles related to teacher-student sexual misconduct.

Face-to-face interviews were held and served as the primary data collection technique. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed by myself. Hand coding was used to initially analyze the data and was followed by the use of the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, Nvivo 11. I integrated the use of initial, focused, and axial coding in the analysis, emerging two main themes: School social work roles and barriers to service delivery. In addition, there were three emerging subthemes: social work services for teachers and students related to sexual misconduct, potential strengths of social worker involvement, and recommendations for future social worker roles. In Chapter 5, I will present interpretations of the study's findings, elaborating more on the limitations, recommendations, and implications of this study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the current roles and perceptions of school social worker roles in incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation. All participants in this study were school social workers who were actively employed in one of the largest school districts in a densely populated urban city in the state of Texas. Using the case study approach with this population was very important because previous studies related to the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct were conducted on other helping professionals in the school system (Edwards, 2017; Schwilk et al., 2017) and did not include school social workers.

Professionally, school social workers are trained to manage school-aged youth and their psychosocial, academic, and psychological needs (Allen-Meares et al., 2013). School social workers are advocates and major contributors to the environmental changes that help schools promote academic success for their students (Joseph, Slovak, Broussard, & Webster, 2012). As indicated in the literature review presented in Chapter 2, most of the research conducted on teacher-student sexual misconduct has been focused on its prevalence in schools, its causes, its outcomes, and common prevention strategies (Collin-Vezina et al., 2013; Hayden, 2015; Knoll, 2010; Ratliff & Watson, 2014; Shakeshaft, 2004, 2013; Wurtele, 2012), but there has been little research on how schools respond to the issue and their use of school social workers in this regard (Allen-Meares & Montgomery, 2014; Allen-Meares et al., 2013; Jaffe et al., 2013). Thus, my intention in this study was to gain better insight into how school social workers in the Texas

educational system are used in the prevention of teacher-student sexual misconduct as well as examine how they respond professionally when cases of teacher-student sexual misconduct arise in their schools or district.

The results from this research study revealed that school social workers in the Texas educational system do not have any well-defined primary or secondary roles in the prevention of or response to teacher-student sexual misconduct. In this chapter, I present my interpretation of the research findings compared the findings in the literature review presented in Chapter 2, expound on the limitations of the study, suggest recommendations for further research, and discuss the study's implications for social change and conclusions.

### **Interpretations of the Findings**

Findings of this research study demonstrate the thoughts, views, and opinions of the participants, guided by two main research questions and four subquestions, which served as the foundation of this study. The main research questions were the following: (a) What are the roles of school social workers in situations of teacher-student sexual misconduct? (b) How do school social workers perceive their roles in incidents involving teacher-student sexual relationships?

#### **Research Question 1**

In the state of Texas, and in many other states, school social workers are employed to address students' social or psychological issues; address complex problems such as child abuse; and act as a bridge between the school, home, and community, providing a source of support for students (NASW, 2012; Richard & Sosa, 2014).

Previous literature on the roles of school social workers implies that historically, school social workers' roles were known for their inconsistency and fragmented demarcation (Richard & Sosa, 2014). These professionals, however, are highly skilled in a number of areas, with capabilities to serve children as well as adults. Given social workers' expanded range of service delivery, one would probably say that school social workers have a tendency to wear a number of different responsibility hats. There are many responsibilities in which a social worker has that are geared towards effectively responding to the needs of the education system, which can often appear to be confusing to other educational staff. This confusion can be credited to school administrators, colleagues, and individual in the community who solicit social worker services that are far beyond the needs of the education system (Peckover et al., 2013).

According to the participants in this study, the roles of school social workers vary depending upon the needs of the student population. Teacher-student sexual misconduct is an issue that negatively affects students, families and communities, but based on the responses of all nine of this study's participants, school social workers do not share a role in the delivery of services related to teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation. School social workers are trained to serve marginalized and oppressed populations during their times of crisis, which distinguishes them from all other school-based professionals (Richard & Sosa, 2014). Teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation can be classified as a crisis situation because of its condition of instability and the danger it presents to a student. Although teacher-student sexual misconduct is considered a crisis, school social workers in this Texas school district have not been assigned any permanent

roles in addressing this issue, or even used toward that end. As stated in Chapter 2, in the job description for school social workers for Grand Prairie Independent School District (GPISD, 2016), also located in Texas, crisis intervention (at the district and campus level) is listed as a school social worker role. Currently, however, teacher-student sexual misconduct is not crisis that can be classified as a school social worker's duty. There was unanimous agreement among the participants that teacher-student sexual misconduct was a problem in the school system, but none of the school social workers could identify any tasks, roles, or responsibilities that they had been administratively assigned to help repair this problem. For instance, SW06 replied,

I have never been asked or told to assist with this problem, and it hasn't been an issue at my school so far and I don't believe my principal would want me to help because I am needed for so many other problems that our kids are having. I would be nice if I could help students who have experienced this but I don't know how I could with all of my other daily responsibilities.

In Texas, the incidence of inappropriate student-teacher relationships continues to increase yearly, ranking the state first in the nation in the number of occurrences of such relationships (Salvoy, 2013). Given the high number of occurrences and the negative emotional, psychological, educational, and developmental effects that such misconduct often has on its victims, it would be beneficial for teachers, students, parents, and the community to know that school social workers are well informed about this problem and are instrumental in efforts to combat it, but in this district, this has not been the case. Recent literature suggests that there is a need for further research to show prevention of

teacher-student sexual misconduct and reduction in the prevalence of such misconduct, as well as the effectiveness of prevention programs (Schwilk et al., 2017).

Participants shared that their administrators had never directly informed them when allegations of sexual misconduct occurred in their district, though they had been informed of details through word of mouth from colleagues and the media. Rumors indicated that the investigations were handled privately by the school administration, and in some cases, the accused teacher resigned and the student was transferred out of the school. Actions such as these would have left the school social worker without a means of contact to assess the student's well being and ability to cope with the event.

Responding to this issue has not been a primary concern in schools as it relates to the assistance of supportive staff such as human service workers. Both school social workers and school counselors are classified as human service workers, but they differ in their professional backgrounds. The most recent literature outlines the duties and roles of school counselors but not school social workers in responding to sexual misconduct (Edwards, 2017).

### **Research Question 2**

All of the participants described their current social work roles in their schools and district as service providers for their students. On a daily basis, they provided support to their students and families, and on occasion, they supported teachers to help enhance their school or district's ability to meet its academic mission. Their roles have often been designed to respond to the needs of the education system and follow changes in policies as they are implemented (Peckover et al., 2013). There is a current need in the

education system to address the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct, and social workers are not being used to their full capabilities in this area. The participants all felt that, as trained professionals with experience in dealing with child sexual abuse, they could be beneficial to their schools in bringing about awareness that sexual misconduct is often overlooked by all staff members. SW04 explained,

The training we receive on sexual misconduct through the district was very informal; it didn't provide any information that would be educational to anyone about some of the causes, effects or consequences of sexual misconduct. It would have been nice to get some history on the problem and how it affects our students.

As each participant mentioned the barriers that she was facing in attempting to provide services effectively, it was evident that these were issues involving the roles already assigned to school social workers by their current administrators. They were serving as consultants, collaborators with school counselors, leaders, and advocates to address the needs of their students (ASCA, 2016; Edwards, 2017). All of the participants in this study, given their specialized skills, felt that they were being limited by the services that they could provide in their schools. Their leadership may have been lacking knowledge about the social work profession as a whole. Six of the participants expressed that they felt that their administrative team and staff members viewed a school social worker as a "problem solver" or a "resource book." There were several services that these participants had provided in the past that were not social work related or directed to the care of their students. Performing staff mediations, providing resources for staff and

administrators for personal use, and assisting with education-related events and programs at their schools were among the non-social-work-related services provided by the participants of this study.

The responsibilities, tasks, and roles of the study participants were shaped by their leadership at the campus, district, region, and state levels. These individual levels are the subsystems that make up the entire education system in the state of Texas. Each system is ranked at a specific level of hierarchy and must follow a chain of command in the implementation of policies, procedures, and regulations, including the management of job descriptions, which affect the entire education system. Each of these systems is involved in how change occurs for this large, densely populated school district in Texas. These are the systems that each school social worker must reach in order to make changes and see any improvements in their current roles related to teacher-student sexual misconduct. Each participant was open to collaboration with her administrative team to prevent teacher-student sexual misconduct in their schools and district.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This research study used Bertalanffy's general systems theory as a conceptual framework to explain school-based social work practice, school social worker roles, and participants' approaches to working with the different systems associated and connected with teachers, students, and the entire education system to gain a better understanding of the impacts they have on the issue of teacher-student sexual relationships (Fitch, 2004; Friedman & Allen, 2011). General systems theory defines systems as a set of elements in interrelationship and explains the connections of relationships between different elements



(Fitch, 2004). In the educational system, there are levels of hierarchy in decision making and the implementation of change. In the state of Texas, the TEA is at the highest level, followed by the state's regions, counties, districts, and finally, schools. These systems all have connections and relationships with each other and depend on each other to regulate and follow guidelines for the implementation of various changes that are adopted within the system.

The issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct and the involvement of school social workers in its prevention and response are regulated at all of the aforementioned levels of hierarchy. Each of these levels is a part of a system that makes a whole with regard to their relationship and interaction with other outside systems (Freidman & Allen, 2011). In the state of Texas, the TEA oversees the improvement of outcomes for all students (TEA, 2016), which includes improving outcomes for students related to teacher-student sexual misconduct. Participants in this study were part of this system in their connection with the individual schools and district. The roles that they were assigned in order to assist their students were created by the multiple systems with which they had relationships. The school social workers who participated in this study all followed the job descriptions and tasks that had been assigned to them by their administrators, regional leaders, and state legislators. These were the systems that were responsible for providing a safe and secure educational environment for their students. According to Salvoy (2013) and the TEA (2013), incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct continue to increase yearly, exhibiting a major deficit in the TEA's ability to continue to provide a safe and secure educational environment for students.

School social workers rely on these systems for support and are required to interact and communicate with each system to determine interventions to problems or issues as they arise within their schools or district. In summary, the participants in this research study were active members within the education system in the state of Texas that is instrumental in improving the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct. However, the roles of school social workers and their ability to assist with the improvement of this issue have not yet been considered in the state's plan to improve teacher-student sexual misconduct and its occurrences in schools. In the next section, I discuss the limitations of this study.

### **Limitations of the Study**

An original assumption that guided this study was that school social workers would play a role in either the prevention or response to teacher-student sexual misconduct. However, from the results of this study showing lack of utilization of school social workers related to this issue, the question arose of whether they should be used. The sample for this study was composed of nine school social workers who were actively employed in this school district. All of the participants reported that they had no current well-defined primary or secondary roles in their schools related to the prevention of and response to teacher-student sexual misconduct. The individual experiences of all nine of the study participants were inadequate in their ability to provide information that could enhance this study's findings. I cannot say that this sample is representative of this population. However, based on the fact that this study included the participation of nine school social workers employed in the same school district, who reported no primary or

secondary roles or experiences with teacher-student sexual misconduct, it is evident that these findings suggest that further research is still needed. The participants who volunteered for this study may be different from school social workers who have had an experience with teacher-student sexual misconduct at their schools. The inclusion of a school social worker who had an assigned role in his or her school to prevent or respond to teacher-student sexual misconduct would have yielded broader findings in the results of this study.

Another limitation of this study was that participation was strictly voluntary and limited to active employees in the district. Only the school social workers who volunteered to participate in this research study were included. The social workers who chose to participate may have volunteered due to their lack of experiences with teacher-student sexual misconduct. Other school social workers who were also actively employed in the district may not have been open to volunteer due to their involvement with teacher-student sexual misconduct and the sensitivity of the issue. Social work roles and perceptions for the volunteers who participated offered limited and possibly biased data that may not be transferable to other schools or districts.

Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit participants for this study. More than half of the participants for this study were recruited via referral from another school social worker who had already volunteered her participation in the study as well. The snowball sampling method was a limitation because referrals were solicited from school social workers who already had a connection or relationship with the participants who referred them. As a result, those referred may have carried the same

experiences with teacher-student sexual misconduct as the participants who referred them.

### **Recommendations**

The results of this study helped identify the lack of involvement of school-based social workers in the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation in the district under study. School social workers who participated in this study currently do not have any well-defined, primary, or secondary roles in the prevention and response to teacher-student sexual misconduct. There were a number of barriers that were identified in this study that currently prevented the school social workers from actively engaging in the improvement of teacher-student sexual misconduct as an issue within their schools and district.

The results of this study also show that these school social workers are compassionate about the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct and want to help. There are some services that school social workers can provide in schools that will not only assist students but assist staff in bringing awareness to the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct and its negative effects on students. However, these services are limited and regulated by systems that make up the entire education system in the state of Texas.

The results show that the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct should be further studied with the inclusion of the helping professions such as school social workers to assist in its prevention and response. This study focuses on one particular school district in the state of Texas, but the details and findings of this study could be applied to

future studies in other states to examine social work roles, due to the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct as a nationwide issue. Further studies could examine this issue to discover how school social workers and their roles differ or compare to other school districts related to the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct.

The current roles of school social workers who participated in this study are very limited with the consideration to the school system and administration. There has been a regulation in the assigned roles of school social workers by leaders who do not carry a professional social work license or degree. There are often differences in roles in states and districts, just like school counselors and their lack of uniformity in their duties, because of their dictations by school principals (Edwards, 2017). It is recommended that leaders such as district and state legislators, principals, and other influential administrators become more aware of the profession of social work and all that it entails to help better serve and protect their students. The profession of social work requires the knowledge of human behaviors, social problems, social services, and values (NASW, 2015), which are essential to understanding students and how they function in their daily lives. As it is most important for school districts to utilize school social workers to help with meeting the mission of the district, it is important that districts know what is needed to help students successfully succeed in their mission goals.

School social workers can be strong advocates in the community and schools because they can provide services, unlike any other school personnel. Their ability to work with oppressed and marginalized populations to build successful bridges between schools and communities (Richard & Sosa, 2014) separates them from others. They have

connections with various systems that share a relationship with each other for various reasons. These connections with various systems aid in the process of intervention for social workers and influence the changes, which occur for their students. Allowing school social workers, the opportunity to exhibit their skills and knowledge of sexual abuse in schools can help school systems in a number of ways that could contribute to an improved safety environment in schools, and potential community involvement and legislative improvements. One last recommendation is a call for further research, with studies that examine cases where school social workers are effectively utilized in the prevention and or response to teacher-student sexual misconduct. Further research could examine how other states define their school social worker roles in comparison to this study's case.

### **Implications for Social Change**

Openly acknowledging that teacher-student sexual misconduct is a tremendous issue for schools could be one of the first steps to social change. In society, we tend to ignore and in most cases blame issues such as sexual misconduct on different individuals involved. Sexual misconduct is unethical for all professionals who are employed in the education system, and it is expected that all will operate in the form of moral-professional standards. Inappropriate relationships and sexual abuse compromises an individual's privacy, individual rights, and trust, leaving them with a number of negative effects. The effects of sexual misconduct and abuse often have a tendency of continuing in an individual's life for many years. The emotional, psychological, educational, and developmental effects on victims can be life changing with the possibilities of additional

onsets of future disorders (Jaffe et al., 2013; Burgess et al., 2010; Collin-Vezina et al., 2013).

The school house is viewed as a safe haven for many. Parents trust the school system to provide an education to their children that will bring them further in their lives and allow them to reach their future goals. Parents trust that the education environment will be safe and free from any and all harm possible on a daily basis. The occurrence of sexual abuse in schools does not exemplify a school's ability to protect and provide a safe educational environment for any student. A school ability to prevent issues of sexual abuse and misconduct promotes a school's primary focus of safety, trust and that every child is a primary concern of the school.

Schools are equipped with the support personnel to assist with various issues that could arise on a daily basis. It is important that schools utilize their resources to come together and brainstorm solutions to the problems as they arise within their schools. School social workers serve as a valuable resource for schools in their ability to deal with a number of complex human behavioral, educational and social problems. Crisis intervention, counseling, prevention programs, and training are amongst the wide variety of services that school social workers are trained to provide in schools (Allen-Meares & Montgomery, 2014). These are all skills that can contribute to assisting the education system to prevent or respond to teacher-student sexual misconduct.

The roles of school social workers are created at the state and district levels in the state of Texas. It is important for the TEA to provide consistent training for school social workers, and more well-defined roles that confirm their official duties related to teacher-

student sexual misconduct, instead of relying on the dictation of school principals. The education system and its components of leadership help shape the professional roles of school social workers in many states. Advocating for more profound roles and duties at each level of this system will require an increase in education about the profession of social work, starting at the lowest level. This approach will be an effort to seek change and improve the systems involved in not only the assignment of school social worker roles but also the improvement of the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct. School social workers are a valuable asset to the entire education system and the school's ability to promote social change. Advocating for more well-defined roles within their schools to help prevent teacher-student sexual misconduct. The quality of services provided by the education system will improve if school social workers were allowed to assist with this issue. Overall, social change in schools can promote a healthier education environment for students as well increase the employee responsibility to prevent teacher-student sexual misconduct to a level that satisfies the state and district's mission and goals.

### **Conclusion**

Sexual misconduct in schools continues to widely spread throughout the United States, especially in the state of Texas (Jaffe et al., 2013; Mitchell, 2010; Salvoy, 2013). School social workers are employed in schools and are professionally educated and experienced in child sexual abuse to help with the elimination in occurrences of sexual misconduct as well as the provision of service to those affected. The results of this study showed that school social workers do not currently assist within the school system related to teacher-student sexual misconduct. School social work roles have been limited by the



administration and have yet to expand to incorporate an additional complex social and behavioral problem that continues to occur within schools today. A number of studies on the issue of teacher-student sexual misconduct have contributed to the existing literature on this issue but do not include the involvement of school social workers and how they are utilized by schools or districts to help prevent or respond to teacher-student sexual misconduct (Allen-Meares & Montgomery, 2014; Allen-Meares et al., 2013; Jaffe et al., 2013, Schwilk et al., 2017; Shakeshaft, 2004).

This qualitative case study explored the roles of nine school social workers in one of the largest densely urban populated school districts in the state of Texas. The findings of this study indicated that some school social workers do not have any well-defined primary or secondary roles in the prevention and response to teacher-student sexual misconduct. The data presented in this study assisted with providing the baseline for this study's assumptions as well as providing the foundation for recommendations for further research.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Gender:

Employment Status:

Years of service:

# Of schools services are provided for:

Opening question: What are your roles as a school social worker in your school /district?

1. What is your role as a school social worker when incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct occur within your school or district?
2. What are some of your responsibilities as a social worker to students involved in teacher-student sexual misconduct?
3. What are your responsibilities as a social worker to school teachers related to incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct?
4. Describe for me any training that you have received in reference to educator sexual misconduct.
5. How would you describe the quality of training provided to staff within your district about sexual misconduct?
6. What is your district's process in notifying school social workers of incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct as they occur within your district?
7. Describe what your district does to help students involved in teacher-student sexual misconduct?
8. What do you believe is needed to either reduce or eliminate teacher-student sexual misconduct in your school district?
9. What changes would you make to your current roles as a school social worker that would benefit in the reduction or elimination of incidents of teacher-student sexual misconduct?
10. As a school social worker how do you think you could utilize your professional skills to assist when an incident of teacher-student sexual misconduct occurs?
11. Is there anything else you think would be important for me to know or to ask others about this topic?

## Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

# School Social Workers Needed



**IRB NUMBER**  
03-20-17-0477276

## School Social Workers as Research Participants

Seeking individuals to participate in a **1 Hour** individual interview

Where you will be asked about:

- Your current roles as a school social worker in relation to teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation.
- Your perception of these roles.

**PURPOSE OF STUDY:** To gain insight on how school social workers are being utilized in the prevention and response to teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation in their school districts.

**ELIGIBILITY:** Participants must meet the following criteria to be eligible to participate:

- Active Full-time or Part-time School Social Worker
- Employed in one of the largest school districts in the state of Texas.

**BENEFITS:** Your participation in the research study will be of a benefit to society by helping researchers to learn more about school social workers and their roles in the school system in relation to teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation.

**LOCATION & SCHEDULING:**

- A face-to-face interview can be scheduled at any location of your choice in the Harris or surrounding counties near Houston, Texas.
- A phone or videoconference can be scheduled an alternate option.
- Scheduling will be at your free times (mornings, evenings, or weekends).

**COMPENSATION:** Target Gift Card (valued at \$10).

\*\*\*\*All interviews will be confidential, and your participation is voluntary. You may opt to withdraw from the study at any time. \*\*\*

## Appendix C: Phone/Email Script

Good Morning/Afternoon, \_\_\_\_\_

My name is Cedrina Ruffin and I am a doctoral student with Walden University. I am currently working on collecting data for my dissertation. The purpose of my study is to explore the current roles of school social workers in the state of Texas, in incidents that involve teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation. The intent the study is to gain insight on how school social workers are being utilized in the prevention and response to teacher-student sexual misconduct and exploitation in their school districts. I would be an honor to have you as a participant for my study to help with contributing valuable information not only to this study but also for the purposes of future research. If you are willing to volunteer and participate, a 1-hour interview will be asked of you followed by a gift card to compensate you for your time. Interviews can be conducted face-to-face in a location of your choice, but you also have the option of video or phone conferences, if they would best suit your time.