

## **German and American Pre-service Teachers' Knowledge and Dispositions Towards Understanding Vulnerable Populations**

Adriana L. Medina, Ph.D.\*  
*The University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

Anselm Böhmer, Professor  
*Ludwigsburg University of Education*

Tehia Starker-Glass, Ph.D.  
Sejal Parikh Foxx, Ph.D.  
Marsi Franceschini, Second Year Ph.D. Student  
*The University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

### **Abstract**

Teachers serve as accessible personnel capable of identifying student vulnerability and suggesting resources and opportunities. To serve in this capacity, teachers need to identify vulnerabilities and know about resources. This study included 52 American and German preservice teachers (PSTs) who were given a scenario and asked to identify who needed help, label the vulnerability, and respond to the scenario. Findings indicated PSTs from both countries had limited insight into community resources, concerns regarding vulnerabilities, and pre-dispositions toward vulnerable populations. Suggestions for providing PSTs with opportunities to understand complex social systems, connecting PSTs to services, and introducing systems thinking within teacher education programs are offered.

*Keywords:* American, German, preservice teachers, teacher education, vulnerable populations

Teachers do much more than provide students with an academic education. They also focus on students' social and emotional needs. Teachers have always been essential and have served as liaisons between their students and their community (Ampofo et al., 2020), "often to the detriment of their own personal lives and families" (Thomas, 2012, p. 2). According to Peralta and Galaviz (2013), bringing together the community, the school, students, and their families is a "pivotal role" teachers play in aiming for overall student success (p. 183). As such, the teachers themselves take on the role of a community resource.

Teachers are often touted as trusted adults to whom students can reach out if they or their families find themselves in vulnerable situations. There is an expectation that teachers are safe people with access to resources to help students and their families. Teachers wear many hats and play many roles because they are expected to "meet [their] students where they are with what they need" (Collins, 2016, p. 78). While experienced educators may be well versed in school and

local services, preservice teachers (PSTs) are often unprepared for all the roles they will fulfill in their teacher education program.

In schools, teachers often need to respond to students and families who find themselves in challenging situations where they are vulnerable. Vulnerable populations, as defined in the context of this study, are individuals at higher risk for being wronged or harmed because they cannot protect their own interests due to societal and/or legal contexts. Vulnerable populations can be found in any country around the globe, yet their situations are not a world unto themselves; they and their situations intersect many aspects of society-at-large.

The danger of pre-service teachers not being knowledgeable about community resources for students and families in vulnerable situations is similar to the research on teachers saying they care but still harboring biases against vulnerable populations (Matias & Zembylas, 2014); it is inauthentic, leads to “false empathy” (p.320), and threatens the foundation of the teacher-student relationship that is essential to helping students and families in vulnerable situations.

Research indicates a significant association between teacher bias and student outcomes (Dennesen et al., 2022). Thus, if teachers cannot offer students and families access to community resources, it could indicate implicit bias related to the vulnerability and could impact students' development and overall success. To be effective teachers, PSTs need to be knowledgeable about community resources to serve all students and their families regardless of their vulnerabilities and the PSTs' biases against these situations. For teachers to serve in this capacity, they need to be able to identify vulnerabilities and be knowledgeable about appropriate resources. Learning about the resources available in the community could be helpful for PSTs to develop an unbiased understanding of vulnerable populations.

This study details an American and German research project initiated to gather knowledge of PSTs for helping vulnerable populations. The first aim of this project was to understand PSTs' ability to identify potential vulnerabilities and challenges. PSTs were provided scenarios (see Appendix) and asked to identify who needed help and why they were vulnerable. Second was the question of what academic and social supports PSTs suggested; thus, PSTs were asked how they would respond to the scenario. In summary, this study sought to explore PSTs' identification of, knowledge of, and dispositions toward understanding vulnerable populations.

## **Literature Review**

### **Vulnerable Populations**

Wisner (2016) posits that vulnerability is a concept with Western origins and develops when “political, social, and economic structures deny people the environment” that will enable them to thrive (p. 30). Vulnerable groups are understood as having definite strengths, rights, competencies, and potentials but cannot use them properly because of specific critical events. To understand vulnerable populations, it is crucial to understand the framing of social challenges. For example, Andersen et al. (2018) describe political, social, cultural, and material conditions when referring to refugees. Vulnerability is not only a psychological category but also a social one that needs to be discussed within educational and other societal systems (Stamm &

Halberkann, 2015). There is no explicit list of factors that create vulnerability (Martin, 2015). In general, educators have to keep in mind “systemic factors that affect the students they serve, especially those who are vulnerable to sociopolitical and system-based inequities and have limited access to resources” (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2019, p. 61) as well as the individual, group, and discursive factors (Jaquith & Stosich, 2019) which can lead to an educational theory as opposed to being reduced to a simple individual circumstance (Janssen, 2018). Therefore, this study defines vulnerable populations as individuals at higher risk of being wronged or harmed because they cannot protect their interests due to societal and/or legal contexts.

### **School and Community Connection**

The education system is one particular social structure that often interacts with vulnerable populations. Since schools are nested in the community, they are naturally connected to resources for vulnerable populations. Schools' connection with the community is seen as a powerful means of maintaining democratic and equitable schools (Auerbach, 2009; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). Leaders at the school are often encouraged to connect with the community (Ishimaru, 2013). For students with disabilities, connections with community resources, such as tutoring centers and health care professionals, are crucial to students' success during school and once they graduate, especially if they want to continue to college. The community is also accessed by the school in order to offer opportunities for enrichment through field trips, for example. Teachers collaborate with the community for science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM) related programs and experiential learning opportunities related to technical or vocational career programs.

The common point-person for connecting students to community resources is the school counselor, psychologist, or social worker. These individuals are often perceived as the keepers of information about community resources. However, this is an ineffective perception because the average national ratio of counselor-to-student caseload is 250 - 450 students per school counselor (American School Counselor Association, 2021). Moreover, if a student approaches a teacher first, and the teacher sends the student to the social worker or counselor, that is an extra step that might delay timely access to services. For additional support, many U. S. schools have Community in Schools (CIS) programs. Since the 1970s, CIS has been providing support for students by connecting students to community resources (McShane, 2019). Yet, not all schools have school counselors or CIS personnel, and the work of identifying vulnerable students and generating support is not solely one person's job or a handful of people's jobs.

### **Teacher Roles**

Teachers are well poised to assist students since they interact with students on a daily basis. If teachers begin to notice patterns of vulnerability manifesting in the classroom, they are in the position to ascertain the gravity of the situation and can then assess if they can intervene and protect. Teachers often initiate the referral process for services when they notice or are made aware of a student's need. Thus, teachers can collaborate and communicate with other staff to

triangulate and gather information regarding behavior patterns to provide wraparound services for vulnerable students. As such, teachers can begin mobilizing and generating support services that blend into the school's everyday workings, allowing students to move throughout their day without standing out. Of course, the approach taken should be one of dignity and respect and not of embarrassment and shaming. Ensuring that judgment and deficit thinking ideology do not impede the teacher's ability to support students and families is important. Acknowledging the systemic ways marginalization and oppression make students and families vulnerable is an important step for teachers. For example, capitalism, racism, sexism, colonialism, xenophobia, and other ways that marginalized groups are oppressed because of their social status can cause or contribute to many of the conditions students and their families face. Teachers must be aware that their position of access and power may influence whom they acknowledge as vulnerable and may impact the support they offer. Marianchuk's (2020) findings show that teachers' perceptions of student vulnerability resulted in teachers' acknowledging their teacher identity and how that impacts how they support their students. The participants in Marianchuk's (2020) study realized that teaching more vulnerable students was difficult but worth the work to support the students in their classrooms and schools.

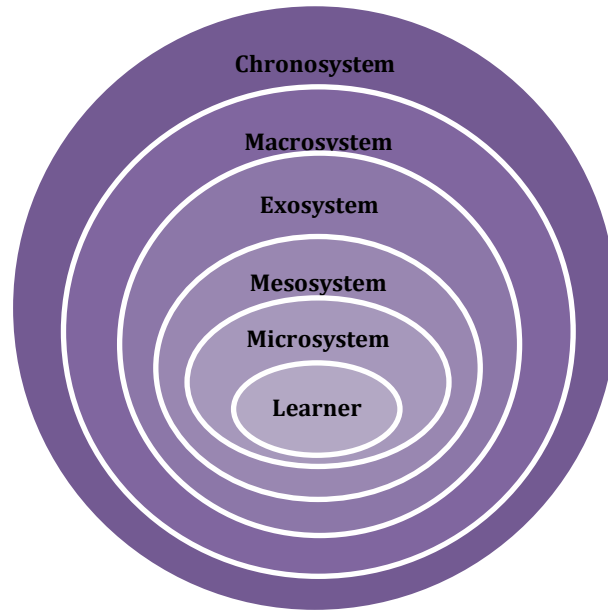
In summary, having defined vulnerable populations and the importance of the teacher's role in identifying and suggesting services for vulnerable populations, this study sought to explore PSTs' identification of, knowledge of, and dispositions toward understanding vulnerable populations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Bronfenbrenner's (1976, 1979) Ecological Structure of the Educational Environment states that a learner's environment has nested structures (see Figure 1). The first structure is the micro-system. This is the immediate environment, or setting, for the learner. This setting has the elements of place, time, activity, and role. The second structure is the mesosystem, or the system of micro-systems since this setting consists of all the major settings of the learner's life (such as family, school, church, and friend groups). The third structure is the exo-system. This structure includes the major institutions of society at the local, state, and national levels. While the learner may not be directly involved with these institutions, they indirectly impact the learner's life. The fourth structure is the macro-system. This structure constitutes the institutions of the culture, such as social, educational, and economic, and carries information and ideology. The overarching cultural context influences the learner as well as the other systems embedded in the culture. The fifth structure is the chronosystem. This structure refers to the influence of changes that occur over time and impact the individual's interaction among the systems. Bronfenbrenner's theory of systems is useful as a lens to examine an individual's relationship within their immediate community and wider society. Understanding how the systems are embedded and interconnected and can work together to support vulnerable populations is also useful.

#### ***Figure 1***

*Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Structure of the Educational Environment*



### Methodology

The overarching research question was: Given a scenario, how do preservice teachers identify and respond to the needs of vulnerable populations, and what might their responses indicate about their knowledge and dispositions toward understanding vulnerable populations?

### Setting and Participants

This study took place at two institutions. One institution is a public urban research university in the southeast United States. The other institution is a university of education in the southwest of Germany. All participants were enrolled in a preservice teacher education program. It was decided not to collect demographic or background information from the participants in order not to introduce labels that might influence their responses to the scenarios. While the sample was one of convenience (See Table 1), the contexts were relevant for both societies. Both German society and U.S. society are impacted by global vulnerability issues, such as the Syrian Refugee Crisis, the war in Ukraine in Europe, and the constant border disputes in the United States and Mexico.

**Table 1**  
*Respondents by University Course (N=52)*

	German University		American University
Course 1	15 respondents	Course 1	18 respondents
Course 2	10 respondents	Course 2	9 respondents
Total	25 respondents	Total	27 respondents

## Data Collection

As part of a class activity, PSTs were asked to read one of the scenarios. They either picked a scenario or were assigned one (See Appendix). PSTs were asked to first think about the scenario on their own. Next, they were allowed to discuss their scenario with a peer. Then, they anonymously submitted their answers for their scenario into an online Google Form. Participants were allowed to answer in either German or English. After all, answers were submitted, a class discussion was held, each scenario was presented and discussed, and community resources were shared.

The online Google Form included the following short-answer questions:

1. To which scenario are you responding?
2. In this scenario, who needs help?
3. In this scenario, how would you label the vulnerability?
4. As an educator, what answer would you provide for the question asked in this scenario?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding this scenario?

## Data Analysis

The short-answer responses for each question from the online form were aggregated and qualitatively analyzed by scenario and line by line using a constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) by the first two authors. Any responses in German were translated into English by the second author, who is fluent in German and English. Due to the research questions, it was determined that there would be codes related to disposition and labels of vulnerability. First, all the responses for each scenario were grouped together. The first two authors analyzed the data for Scenario 1 independently. Then, they met to discuss discrepancies and came to a consensus about codes. Next, the scenarios were divided into sets - evens and odds. Each researcher took the lead in coding one set. Afterward, they swapped and reviewed each other's data analysis. Last, they met to discuss discrepancies and reach a consensus on all codes and categories. NVivo 12 (QSR International, 2019) was used to facilitate data organization and management. Finally, they shared and explained the codes and categories with the other two authors, and together, all four of them applied Bronfenbrenner's theory as a lens for interpretation.

## Results

Where applicable, findings are supported by direct quotes. The words in bold align with the codes described in the data display tables.

### PSTs' Responses to the Scenarios

As seen in Table 2, PSTs offered suggestions for the vulnerable individual and the educator. Regarding the individual, suggestions fell into four themes: **Experience-based, Responsible Action, Practical Suggestion, and Confer with another professional.** PSTs

offered suggestions based on **experience**. For example, in response to Scenario 11, one PST wrote, “*I’ve actually had students come out to me in their writing before.*” Sometimes, PSTs offered to assume **responsibility** for the next steps. In response to Scenario 6, one PST wrote, “*I would offer to act as a liaison as necessary.*” Other times, PSTs provided **practical solutions**, such as for Scenario 6, where one PSTs suggested [he/she] “*would direct the father to an advocacy group for immigrant rights.*” On occasion, PSTs made suggestions for the educator to **confer with another professional**. For example, for Scenario 9, the PST suggested the educator would “*Acquaint [another] pedagogical specialist with the situation.*”

**Table 2.**  
*Response Suggestions Provided by PSTs*

Category	Theme	Description	Exemplar Quotes
For the vulnerable individual	Experienced	Already experienced this scenario or something close to it and offers suggestions based on experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I used to volunteer [in a place that did...]</i></li> </ul>
	Action Oriented Suggestion/ Responsibility	Takes on responsibility for figuring things out and helping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I would begin by getting her and her kids some food.</i></li> <li>• <i>I would also try to assess the situation</i></li> <li>• <i>I would also follow-up with the school counselor</i></li> </ul>
	Practical Suggestion	Suggests to implement something practical even though it might not completely solve the issue/problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Buy cheap food, e.g., in the "Tafel"</i></li> <li>• <i>I would get the child some food from the cafeteria</i></li> <li>• <i>I would make sure the student knows breakfast is free in the morning</i></li> </ul>
For the educator	Confer with another professional	The educator should confer with or inform another educator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Acquaint further pedagogical specialists with the situation.</i></li> </ul>

***PSTs’ Concerns***

PSTs expressed concerns about aspects of the scenarios, and eleven themes emerged (See Table 3). PSTs expressed concerns based on the **individual** situation. The majority of this code

was composed of questions the PSTs asked about the individual and his/her agency in the circumstance. Many PSTs felt there was not a “*one-size-fits-all answer.*” PSTs expressed **caution** about responding to the scenario. For example, one PST indicated, in response to Scenario 1, “*There could be rules and legal consequences for the teacher, school, or district when getting involved.*” Some PSTs felt the individual’s **culture** or **language** would be a factor in the help they could get. For example, for Scenario 6, one student felt that “*the father's country of origin [would be] information [that] may alter [his/her] response.*” PSTs asked many questions about the **societal rules** and **structures** in place to help vulnerable populations, structures such as public transportation and school-level resources. For example, for Scenario 7, two PSTs asked, “*what kind of rights does this person have?*” In other scenarios, PSTs seemed overwhelmed by the **complexity** of the issue. For example, for Scenario 9, a PST believed: “*It's almost impossible for a student to stay in school and make it with a baby.*” For example, PSTs wondered about social spaces available for transportation and childcare help. In other scenarios, PSTs asked about **financial** supports. In some of their responses, PSTs subjectively **criticized** the systems and gave their point of view on issues. At times, PSTs drew conclusions that indicated they did not fully understand or lacked perspectives of the underlying vulnerability issues. For example, for Scenario 6, one student asked, “*If you work and pay taxes, why worry about getting deported?*”

**Table 3**  
*Concerns Expressed by PSTs*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Exemplar Quotes</b>
Individual	Differences based on individualities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>There are many things to consider with each individual.</i></li> </ul>
Cautionary	List of roadblocks, other problems, and cautions against issues that might (or might not) arise.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Sometimes [help] may not be wanted.</i></li> <li>● <i>It is always a good idea to include in the conversation the school counselor and/or principal.</i></li> <li>● <i>Is this single mom comfortable communicating and interacting with a man?</i></li> </ul>
Cultural	Felt culture would be a concern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Maybe she is of a culture that frowns upon unmarried men and women interacting</i></li> </ul>
Language	Felt language would be a concern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>If her high level of education was earned in another country, possibly a non-English speaking country, and her English language skills aren't great...</i></li> </ul>



Structural	Infrastructure and resources such as the services that are in place in the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Is the student getting support they need?</i></li> <li>● <i>Does his degree count for anything in the States?</i></li> </ul>
Societal	Policies (Politik”) in place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>What kinds of rights does this person have?</i></li> </ul>
Complex	Complex system concerns to navigate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Why can you not become a citizen?</i></li> </ul>
Social Spaces	Availability or access to community spaces concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Are there any family members the mom knows that would allow her and the child to stay with them?</i></li> </ul>
Material Support	Concerns about money, housing, shelter, job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Employment opportunities and struggles</i></li> </ul>
Critical	Analyzes and criticizes the given system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>I was curious if the classification was accurate or appropriate for this student.</i></li> </ul>
Lack of Perspective	Cannot imagine aspects of the situation and/or does not have knowledge about the vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Why do you believe health care is not safe?</i></li> <li>● <i>If you work and pay taxes, why worry about being deported?</i></li> </ul>

### ***PSTs' Dispositions***

PSTs' dispositions towards vulnerable populations fell into four themes: **detached**, **empathetic**, **supportive**, and **reserved** (see Table 4). Some PSTs made statements that seemed they felt **detached** from the human issue presented in the scenario. For example, in response to Scenario 6, one PST responded, *“I would also inform the father that it is important that his daughter does not miss school as this will affect her performance in school and bring unnecessary attention to his family.”* In contrast, some PSTs seemed **empathetic**, and their responses indicated they had the capacity to understand what those in the scenario might be feeling. For example, in response to Scenario 10, one PST responded, *“I think it is awesome when anybody has a passion for something and they want to pursue it.”* In response to Scenario 6, another PST stated, *“I would inform him that neither of these clinics would deport him.”* In response to Scenario 10, another PST stated, *“My first reaction would be one of joy and support.”* Relatedly, some PST responses indicated they were sympathetic and could provide encouragement and emotional **support**. For example, in response to Scenario 10, one PST stated, *“As a teacher, you can be encouraging and offer support and motivation for the student.”* In response to Scenario 10, another PST said, *“I would also just generally be supportive and tell him that I think it is great that he wants to pursue something that he enjoys.”* In other cases,

some PSTs seemed **reserved** or hesitant to get involved and thus “passed” the issue onto someone else. For example, in response to Scenario 4, one PST suggested telling the mother to “*notify authorities of the abuse.*” In another example, in response to Scenario 5, one PST said he/she would “*point him to a local refugee center.*”

Many of the PST's responses pointed people away and gave direction or vague information, such as, “*I will point them to ...*” or “*I would provide information about ...*”. For example, for Scenario 2, one PST wrote, “*Point them to a homeless shelter (where they could stay), point them in the direction of an unemployment office.*” PSTs gave generic names for resources such as “*a women's shelter*” or “*a mother-child home.*” For Scenario 8, a PST made a very general and generic suggestion: “*I would advise the woman to reach out to her community.*” This was in contrast to the response to Scenario 3 where the PST gave the name of a specific resource, “*He can go to the local food bank, Loaves and Fishes.*”

**Table 4.**  
*PSTs' Dispositions*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Exemplar Quotes</b>
Detached	Lacks concern or desensitization to the issue/problem/individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Unfortunately, this type of scenario is very common.</i></li> </ul>
Empathetic	Engaged with feeling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>I can't imagine what it would be like in that situation</i></li> <li>● <i>We need to be mindful and careful when offering help so as to not hurt anybody's feelings</i></li> </ul>
Supportive	Offers support and/or encouragement; cheerleader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>I would encourage the mother</i></li> </ul>
Reserved	Takes a step to pass the work to the next person; includes words like “send them to...,” “get them in touch with...”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Send to the employment office</i></li> <li>● <i>Get them in touch with a social worker</i></li> <li>● <i>School counselors are usually trained for these types of scenarios</i></li> </ul>

### **Through Bronfenbrenner's Lens**

As can be seen in Table 5, many themes could be placed into Bronfenbrenner's systems. For example, the first category, *Scenario Responses*, falls into four themes: Experience-based, Responsible Action, Practical Suggestion, and Confer with Another Professional. Within these themes, pre-service teachers' responses aligned with the micro level – for example, one person suggested: “*I would begin by getting her and her kids some food.*” Pre-service teachers'

responses aligned with exo-level - for example, “*I would also follow up with the school counselor.*” Themes fell only at micro- and exo-system levels, but not meso- and macro-system levels. Themes for *Concerns* and *Dispositions* could also be placed in Bronfenbrenner’s systems.

**Table 5.**  
*Alignment of Themes within Bronfenbrenner’s Systems*

	<b>Micro</b>	<b>Meso</b>	<b>Exo</b>	<b>Macro</b>
<b>Scenario Response</b>	<b>X</b> (Experienced; Action Oriented; Practical)		<b>X</b> (Confer with another professional)	
<b>Expressed Concerns</b>	<b>X</b> (Individual)	x (Family)	<b>X</b> (Societal infrastructure)	<b>X</b> (Rights, Policies)
<b>Dispositions</b>	<b>X</b> (Empathy)	x (Supportive)	<b>X</b> (Reserved)	x (Detached)

Note: **X** signifies strong alignment; x signifies weak alignment

*Concerns:* Concerns about the individual in the scenario aligned with the Micro-level. Family-related concerns aligned with the Meso-level. Concerns around societal infrastructure aligned with the Exo-level, and structural concerns aligned with the Macro-level. Other codes within the theme of Concerns did not clearly align with Bronfenbrenner’s Systems. As seen in Table 5, the codes within the theme of Dispositions aligned with Bronfenbrenner’s systems.

*Dispositions:* The fact that many of the responses that fell into the Dispositions theme were of pre-service teachers “pointing away” towards an agency or suggesting to refer the issue to someone else could suggest that PSTs do not know enough about community resources, so they do not know how to respond or what to offer as a resource. There might be more concrete responses if PSTs knew about and could name opportunities, agencies, resources, etc. In the US, counselors and social workers are trained regarding resources and processes, and in Germany, social workers at school are trained; yet, teachers in both countries need this knowledge, too.

### **Limitations**

The researchers created the scenarios based on previous personal experiences and knowledge about situations teachers have encountered. For future research, other scenarios could be added, and the scenarios should be vetted by individuals who have been in those vulnerable situations. It should be noted that PSTs’ responses to an academic exercise with hypothetical

examples might differ from their actual responses if they were truly faced with the scenarios in person and knew the individuals. The fact that these are solely scenarios could explain why some responses made it seem that the PSTs felt detached from the scenario. Since demographic and background information was not collected, it is impossible to know how personal factors contributed to PSTs' responses. Future research could attempt to ascertain if age, prior experience of vulnerability, and other factors influenced responses. Additionally, since this study did not find any differences between German and American PST responses, future research could further examine this. It is possible PSTs gave answers to scenarios they have never had to think about; they are not taught how to address these issues, and they are not yet in the classroom regularly where they might be confronted with some of these issues. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Structure was used as a theoretical framework because this model is introduced in many educational foundational courses. Thus, for future research, it might make sense to use this model when educating PSTs about vulnerable populations and their intersection with the different levels. It was beyond the scope of the study to examine the responses through Bronfenbrenner's Chronosystem structure, which depends on a span of time. Future studies should examine if PST disposition and understanding evolve. Future research should survey PSTs at the beginning, middle, and end of their teacher education program to gauge growth in knowledge about vulnerable populations and available resources. Since the small sample size of PST (N=52) might be seen as a limitation, future research should increase the sample size of participants.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This research study sought to gather knowledge, competencies, and attitudes of PSTs regarding understanding and helping vulnerable populations. Taken together, the findings have implications for teacher education. In this study, PSTs lack of concrete responses, such as the names of community agencies, showed the PSTs' limited insight into the available meso-systems. This lack of knowledge may explain some of the concerns PSTs expressed about the vulnerabilities in the scenarios as well as their dispositions towards vulnerable populations. Additionally, PSTs' dispositions might be linked to the preconceived notions and biases they bring to their teacher education program about vulnerable populations. This finding aligns with other research that also acknowledges the need for preservice teacher education to address the knowledge gap when it comes to vulnerabilities, such as mental health and suicide, and knowing about and facilitating direction and access to resources (see Maclean & Law, 2021; Whisenhunt et al., 2022).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological structure of the educational environment was introduced as a theoretical framework to conceptualize the different levels of social interaction and welfare necessary for coping with societal challenges. Learning about Bronfenbrenner's structures would be effective in helping PSTs understand and direct vulnerable populations toward appropriate resources. PSTs would benefit from becoming familiar with perspectives, analyses, and reflections on Bronfenbrenner's structures to work in schools. PSTs need to get information on

these different ecological structures, learn to define their role across these structural differentiations, and develop their competencies when dealing with students and their challenges on some or even all of those levels. It is important to realize that PSTs have a role as *individuals* as well as *professionals* across Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems. Therefore, they need opportunities to increase their personal and professional knowledge and competencies.

This combination of individual and professional increase in competence bears some complexity. Thus, becoming an educator does not only mean learning how to teach; it also means knowing how to behave with students and motivate, promote, connect, and advocate. PSTs should be given opportunities for self-reflection around this knowledge. This is a critical step in developing empathy and genuine concern for others. For example, PSTs can be provided opportunities to engage with diverse communities and critically reflect upon those experiences. They could go on neighborhood walks (Peralta & Galavis, 2013) or participate in a community resource mapping activity (Munoz, 2003). Specific prompts can be offered that encourage the exploration of concepts related to privilege, oppression, power, and marginalization. These points of self-reflection should foster responsible action and the development of strengths-based interventions rather than a teacher-as-savior mentality.

Given the context of working with vulnerable populations, PSTs can also be given opportunities to understand systems Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory contextualizes. In addition, teacher education should include an introduction of systems thinking approaches as a way of helping PSTs provide adequate responses to vulnerable individuals struggling to navigate multi-level and complex social systems. PSTs can create maps of the systems that exist within their communities. These maps can be used as a discussion point for how vulnerable populations may experience barriers to access to resources. Once barriers are identified, PSTs can explore strategies to support their students by collaborating with other professionals.

To understand how to connect students to services, PSTs may attend an information fair early in their preparation program, highlighting other school personnel, community agencies, and organizations that can support vulnerable populations. Then, they can visit those organizations later in their program to make further connections and gather first-hand practical suggestions. These experience-based opportunities may help PSTs understand the complex nature of accessing and navigating systems so they can critically reflect when the system is the cause of some barriers. Having an understanding of the barriers can also create a disposition of advocacy on behalf of students and their families. To understand and help vulnerable populations, PSTs need to understand more about the interconnections of education, socioeconomic resources, students' progress, and the educational system's embeddedness within the larger systems.

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## Appendix Scenarios

**Scenario 1:** This morning you got to school to find one of your students telling you she was hungry. You call home and find out that the mother is...

- A single female in her 30's. She has a high level of education. She got laid off and has depleted all her financial resources over the last 9 months. She still has not found a job because of the competition in her field. She does not have family in this country. She will soon be losing her house. She has two school age children. She is trying to be proactive. Where do you begin to direct her for help? What information can you offer?

**Scenario 2:** You get to school this morning and one of your students points to the PE shelter and tells you that where his dad sleeps. You were curious and called his dad and found out that...

- He's a 27-year-old male. He lost his minimum wage paying job and couldn't pay rent. So, he had been couch surfing with various buddies, but had overstayed his visits and ran out of buddies. He did sleep in the PE shelter.
- You later confirm this information with his former sports coach/PE teacher who spotted him sleeping in the school's playground early one morning. What information can you offer the dad?

**Scenario 3:** You get to school this morning and one of your students is crying because he's worried about his grandfather. You call the grandfather who takes care of the boy and find out...

- The grandfather is a 60-year-old male. He never went to college so he never got a "real job." He's always made ends meet working here and there. He doesn't have any money saved to retire. Currently, he works at the local grocery store bagging groceries. Most of his income goes towards his medications and sometimes he doesn't have enough money left over for food. Even though he works at the grocery store, he is embarrassed to ask for a food handout. He thinks that if he asks, he might get fired and he needs your job because he needs your medicines. Where in the community can he go to get help?

**Scenario 4:** You get to school this morning and find one of your students crying and afraid. You call the mother and you find out...

- She's a 30-year-old female. She moved to town only three years ago and has been living with her boyfriend for the past year at his place. Within the last six months he has been struggling at work and he has been taking out his frustrations on her. First, he would verbally abuse her. Yet two nights ago he came home drunk and hit her. Last night he threatened to kill her. She believes he's capable of doing it and fears for your life. After he fell into a drunken stupor on the couch, she quietly and quickly left the house with nothing but her purse and the clothes on your back and picked up her child from school. They slept in the car last night. She doesn't have family or friends in town. What informational help can you offer her?

**Scenario 5:** Afterschool, one of your students' parents come to you and asks you for information....



- You find out he's a refugee from the Congo. He has been here for a little over two months. He wants to take language classes. Where can he go for information? How will he get there? What information do you offer him?

**Scenario 6:** This morning when you got to school, one of your students who has been absent almost every other day from school is sitting in the corner crying. She tells you she is worried about her dad. You call home and find out...

- The father is an immigrant. He just turned 31 years old. He has lived here longer than he lived in the country of his birth. He would like some help because lately he hasn't been feeling well (that's why his daughter stayed home from school). He is afraid to go to the hospital because he fears being deported. He would like to become a citizen; however, because of the law that brought him here, he cannot. With the recent political changes, he is scared. What information can you offer him about where to go to get health help and do so feeling safe?

**Scenario 7:** At a parent/teacher conference, you find out that one of your students' parents would not come to the school. So, you plan a home visit. While there, you find out....

- The father is a 41-year-old male refugee from Afghanistan. The last 10 years before fleeing, he had been working as an engineer in his country. He came here together with his family (wife, 5-year-old girl, 1-year-old boy) two years ago. He has been waiting since then for his allowance to stay there. Up to now he could not get that allowance. He cannot attend an official language course and so it is impossible for him to get any legal work. His plan is to learn more and have more opportunities for work. He understands the legislation and you he does not feel safe from being deported in the next months as some of his friends have been. What information can you offer him?

**Scenario 8:** In class, a student shared with the class that...

- He has a 79-year-old grandmother. She came into the country in 1973 together with her three children, to live here with her husband, who came as a foreign worker in 1966. After the move, she raised her children, lived in her small community in a large city, but did not learn the official language very intensely. Her children work and live in different regions of the country. Her husband died in 2014. Lately she has been feeling a little unhealthy. The student said she feels unsafe because she is not sure where to get suitable health care and social support. What information do you offer?

**Scenario 9:** You are walking out to your car one day after school, and one of your former students comes up to you...

- She is a 16-year girl who confides in you that she just found out she's pregnant. She told her boyfriend. She does not know how to tell her parents and she doesn't know where else to go. She and the boyfriend are both still going to school and want to continue going to school. What helpful information can you offer her?

**Scenario 10:** You are sitting at your desk early one morning and one of your students comes in and says he wants to speak with you. You find out....

- He is a 14-year-old teenage boy with a disability – he has long been classified as developmentally delayed. He enjoys working on cars with his dad and brother. He wants to graduate from school and find a job as a mechanic. His dream would be to work for Porsche. What information do you offer to him?

**Scenario 11:** You are sitting at home grading personal essays...

- You find out one of your students is a teenager who identifies as male. Yet he is currently struggling with determining his sexual desire. He would like some help. In the essay he asks: Where can I go? Who can I speak with at school or in the community? What do you offer in response?

### About the Authors

**Dr. Adriana L. Medina** is an associate professor of reading education in the Department of Reading and Elementary Education in the Cato College of Education at UNC Charlotte. Her research interests include students who struggle with literacy, teacher education, global learning, and the impact of study abroad on preservice teachers. She is co-author of *Studying a World Language: An Interactive Guidebook*.

**Dr. Anselm Böhmer** is a professor of pedagogy at the Pädagogische Hochschule Ludwigsburg. His research interest is directed toward socialization processes and focused on socio-structural and cultural-theoretical perspectives of education. He teaches on the philosophy of education, structural discrimination, political aesthetics, organizational violence, and designation practices of performative and intersectional identities. He has edited books and authored articles on his areas of interest.

**Dr. Tehia Starker-Glass** is an associate professor of Elementary Education and Educational Psychology in the Department of Reading and Elementary Education at UNC Charlotte. Her research interests include preparing preservice and in-service teachers' culturally responsive teaching self-efficacy, examining motivational factors that influence teachers' behavior towards culturally diverse students, culturally responsive classroom management, the impact of teacher education at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and instructional design. Her current personal and research endeavors include preparing caregivers and teachers to discuss race with children.

**Dr. Sejal Parikh Foxx** is a professor and Counseling Department Chair at the Cato College of Education at UNC Charlotte. She is also the Director of the Urban School Counseling Collaborative. She has experience as an elementary and high school counselor. She is co-author of *School Counseling in the 21st Century*, 6th ed. She teaches both doctoral and master's level courses, and her special areas of interest are school counseling, multicultural and social justice, urban education, and creating equity and access to college and career readiness.

**Marsi Franceschini** is a second-year Ph.D. student in Curriculum and Instruction: Urban Literacy at UNC Charlotte. Marsi teaches English at Central Piedmont Community College, where she was awarded the title of Professor of English. She earned a Bachelor's Degree in Secondary Education at the University of Portland in Oregon and a Master's Degree in English at

UNC Charlotte. She hopes to teach writing and English Education at a university where she can help prepare preservice teachers to effectively engage students and use diverse, culturally responsive classroom strategies.

**Corresponding Author Information:**

Adriana L. Medina, PhD  
UNC Charlotte  
Cato College of Education  
Department of Reading and Elementary Education  
9201 University City Blvd.  
Charlotte, NC 28223  
[AdrianaLMedina@uncc.edu](mailto:AdrianaLMedina@uncc.edu)