LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MATTERING IN TEACHERS:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

by

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Abstract

The concept of interpersonal mattering, or one’s perceived significance in the lives of others, has demonstrated importance in the success and well-being of students. This construct, however, has yet to be adequately explored in the teachers who are responsible for creating mattering environments for their students. The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning of teachers’ lived experiences of mattering in the workplace. The aim was to improve understanding of this phenomenon so that teachers and employers may have a greater understanding of the ways in which mattering may impact teachers’ satisfaction and their ability to support students. Participants included six full-time teachers from a variety of different settings. An in-depth interview and a follow-up member check was conducted with each participant. Interpretative phenomenology was used to gain a rich understanding of the essential meanings of the mattering experience from the teachers’ descriptions of their lived experiences. The following three essential themes were uncovered; impacting students, being seen, and belonging to a community.
Preface

This thesis is an original work by the author, Jodi Campbell. All work including study design, participant recruitment, data collection, transcription, data analysis, and manuscript write-up were completed by the author under the supervision of Dr. Marla Buchanan, with support from committee members Dr. Norman Amundson and Dr. Rhea Owens. Original ethical approval for this study was issued by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board on September 9, 2015 (Certificate H15-01664).
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Chapter One

Introduction

Research Problem

The teaching profession can be demanding. Teachers balance marking, parent communication, extracurricular participation, staff meetings, lesson delivery and planning all the while regulating their own emotions. Additionally, there is a growing need for teachers to meet not only the academic, but also the social and emotional needs of their students. In determining how to best meet their students’ needs, teachers are called on to consider the sometimes conflicting needs of parents, colleagues, and administrative staff. The cognitive and emotional effort required to meet such a wide variety of demands can be costly for both teachers and the students they teach.

Current literature indicates that teachers experience high levels of physical and emotional exhaustion (Tuxford & Bradley, 2014), depression (Borrelli, Benevene, Fiorilli, D'Amelio & Pozzi, 2014), and occupational stress which can lead to burnout (Johnson, Cooper, Cartwright, Donald, Taylor, & Millet, 2005). Johnson et al. (2005) found that teaching ranked among the top most stressful jobs in a sample of 26 occupations. They considered teachers’ high emotional investment to be one of the primary factors in this ranking. Keeping teachers healthy will require an understanding of the causes of burnout as well as the protective factors that prevent the onset of stress and burnout and promote teacher job satisfaction.

The factors that contribute to stress and burnout in the teacher population have been of interest in the literature. Proposed causes include professional isolation (Dussault, Deaudelin, Royer & Loiselle, 1999), perceived pressure from administration, colleagues, and parents (Pelletier, Séguin-Lévesque & Legault, 2002), the expectation of a high degree of emotional
regulation (Zapf, Claudia, Barbara, Heidrun, & Melanie, 2001), as well as the combination of few job resources and high job demands (Sarros & Sarros, 1987). Unfortunately, given the nature and size of the educational system in Canada, many of these factors are difficult to control or change. Although causal research (Klem & Connell, 2004; Naring, Briet, & Brouwers, 2006; Dussault, Daudelin, Royer, & Loiselle, 1999; Friedman, 1995) is informative, it may not provide the only perspective on what is necessary to prevent burnout in the teacher population.

Research investigating the factors that may protect against teacher burnout, and those that lead to job satisfaction could provide a window into the pathway to prevention. These studies are currently underrepresented in the literature. Zunz's (2008) survey of 101 human service managers found that lower burnout scores were correlated with social support factors. The social support factors included guidance from others as well as reassurance of worth. Whaley (1994) found connections between teacher job satisfaction and the effectiveness of principals’ communication. More specifically, job satisfaction was particularly linked to feedback, rewards, and support from principals. One participant indicated that her principal left notes for her indicating when she had done a good job. This served as both feedback and reward for her work. The actions connected to job satisfaction such as guidance from others, reassurance of worth, job well-done notes, feedback and rewards, may also be providing teachers with interpersonal mattering experiences.

Interpersonal mattering refers to the degree to which individuals feel they are significant in the lives of others (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). It speaks to the satisfaction of an aspect of relational human needs. Some evidence indicates that the experience of mattering is correlated to job satisfaction (Connolly & Myers, 2003).

Mattering is largely unexplored in the career context, and to this researcher’s knowledge,
entirely unexplored in the teaching population. The related constructs of needs satisfaction and, more specifically, relatedness need satisfaction, have been more extensively studied.

On a whole, teachers whose psychological needs are not being met experience higher degrees of exhaustion in response to high job demands (Van den Broek, Maarten, Hans & Lens, 2008). Contrarily, those who report a higher degree of needs satisfaction also have higher job satisfaction scores (Wininger & Birkholz, 2012), and more engagement in work (Van den Broek et al., 2008). Positive emotions and reduced stress or burnout have been shown to be connected to the meeting of teachers’ need for relatedness with principals (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2015), colleagues (Viernes & Guzman, 2005), and students (Klassen, Perry & Frenzel, 2012). Mattering could be considered an important component of the need for relatedness, and as such an important launching point for further research.

Rationale

The present research topic was born over several years of staff room conversation in the school where I work. Conversation topics range from student behavior, to administration, to weekend plans. Yet, overtime, I began to notice a pattern in both the stories that I tell and the ones that are told. The teachers who I work with tell stories in the staff room about student successes that made them feel like what they do is meaningful. They complain about behaviours of administration that result in their feeling unappreciated. They talk about colleague interactions that are collaborative and powerful, and ones that resulted in them feeling unheard and invisible. These stories are sometimes followed by laughter and sometimes by tears. They have the power to make or break a day, a year, and, over time, a career. The common thread between the stories seems to be the presence of powerful mattering and non-mattering experiences. Teachers want to matter to each other, to their leaders, to their students, and
perhaps even to society at large. Teachers’ perception of mattering is the topic of interest in the present study. This topic is relatively unexplored in the literature. Additionally, very few qualitative studies on the lived experience of mattering are present in the literature. This study was exploratory in nature and its purpose was to provide initial insight into the ways in which teachers experience mattering in the workplace. It served to deconstruct this experience and provide meaningful understanding of it.

**Study Impacts**

This study provided insight into how teachers experience interpersonal mattering, a phenomenon that had not been explored in this population. In exploring the features of this experience, this study provided a deeper understanding of the ways in which mattering experiences can be expanded on and highlighted in the workplace. The ability to accentuate mattering experiences may have results that reach beyond the workplace. Amundson (1993) proposed that it is through interpersonal mattering that people find meaning in life. The results of this study may be of interest to school administrative staff and educational policy makers who seek to provide positive and inspiring learning and working environments in their schools. The results may also be of interest to teachers who seek to further understand their own experience.

**Research Question**

My research question was: *What is the meaning of teachers' lived experience of mattering in the workplace?* Interpersonal mattering is always a subjective experience. External factors are interpreted by the individual and then integrated into an existing framework of understanding. In exploring the lived experience of teachers this study dives into both the individual nature of the experience of mattering and uncovers some underlying trends that make up the bedrock of this experience.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This study was underpinned by current literature on both burnout and basic needs. The concept of mattering is a useful tool for better understanding basic needs satisfaction in a career context. I propose that the experience of interpersonal mattering in the workplace may serve as a preventative factor in teacher burnout and a supportive factor in teacher job satisfaction. Mattering may be, at least partially, understood as a meeting of basic needs.

Teacher Burnout

Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) define burnout as “a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job” (p. 397). As a reaction to persistent occupational stress it serves an important role in coping with that stress. In this way it actually serves an adaptive role, causing symptoms which can lower stress levels and protect the individual. Though protective, burnout does not promote healthy coping. Its symptomatology consists of three facets; emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Exhaustion refers to the felt sense of having nothing left to give. One component of emotional exhaustion may include cynical and negative feelings about one's clients (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) or, in the case of teachers, one's students. Depersonalization refers to the act of creating emotional space between one's self and their clients (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Teachers experiencing this symptom may begin to lose their sense of the individuality of each student and, in doing so, lose some of the open-minded curiosity that is so important in forming connections. Reduced professional efficacy refers to dissatisfaction with one's own ability to do their job well (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Teachers may feel less connected to their students
and less able to help them learn or grow.

The literature indicates that burnout among teachers is experienced as reduced levels of engagement that may include feelings of apathy, detachment, and cynicism (Hakanen, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2006). Teachers' level of engagement can have an important effect on their students. In one study Klem and Connell (2004) used threshold analysis to compare 4276 American students’ scores on perceived teacher support to their student records. They found that students who felt more supported by their teachers performed better on academic tests and attended class more regularly than their peers. Elementary school students who experienced support were 89% more likely to feel engaged in school while supported middle school students were three times more likely to feel engaged.

Much of the current research on teacher burnout centers on its causes. Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner and Schaufeli, (2001) suggested that burnout is the result of a combination of high job demands and low job resources. In this context job demands refer to aspects of work requiring sustained attention while job resources refer to aspects of the job which provide support and reduce the weight of demands. Naring, Briet, and Brouwers (2006) suggested that the large emotional investment of teachers may be a leading factor in burnout. More specifically they found that the display of emotions that are not actually felt was significantly correlated to the depersonalization component of burnout in teachers. Indeed, teachers are frequently required to display emotions that they do not feel. It is an important aspect of classroom management, and student encouragement. Other studies have drawn connections between burnout in teachers and professional isolation (Dussault, Daudelin, Royer, & Loiselle, 1999), perceived pressure (Pelletier, Séguin-Lévesque & Legault, 2002), and student behaviour (Friedman, 1995).

As is the case in most areas of health care, prevention can have a much larger impact than
cure. Despite this, much of the research on burnout has focused on causal evidence while fewer studies investigate possible protective factors and preventative strategies. Bakker, Demerouti, and Euwema (2005) investigated the ability of job resources to buffer against the impact of job demands on burnout. They found that emotional demands could be buffered by autonomy, social support and feedback from leaders and colleagues. Ranđelović, Stojiljković, and Milojević's study of the burnout symptoms in 200 teachers provided evidence that the meeting of basic needs may play a role in preventing burnout in teachers. More research in the area of prevention could play a big role in reducing the negative effects of burnout on teachers and the students they teach.

**Basic Needs Theory**

The role of physiological and psychological needs in motivation has been present in the literature for more than fifty years. Maslow (1943) was the first to propose that human motivation is the product of a drive to meet one’s own needs. According to Maslow (1943) there are a finite number of basic human needs and those needs are both universal and innate. He categorized these needs into five hierarchal categories; physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Meeting the third and fourth level needs is a necessary, though admittedly not sufficient, precursor to self-actualization.

According to Maslow (1943) humans have an actualizing tendency; they are motivated to find ways to meet their needs and ultimately develop a unified sense of self. Self-actualized individuals share several characteristics one would expect to see in effective teachers. They exhibit a high tolerance for uncertainty, strong moral and ethical standards, a high level of creativity, acceptance of others, and concern for the welfare of humanity (Maslow, 1968).
**Self-Determination Theory**

Deci's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) also proposes that humans are driven to meet their needs and that basic needs are universal (Deci & Ryan, 2002). SDT builds on the assumption that humans have an innate drive to develop a unified sense of self and posits that that drive can be nurtured or hindered by environmental factors. Basic needs, under the SDT umbrella, are defined as the, “necessary conditions for the growth and wellbeing of people's personalities and cognitive structures” (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p.7). These needs are segmented into three categories; competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Competence refers to both the feeling of adequacy. In relation to career this is an individual’s belief that they are able to function in their role and have opportunities to showcase their abilities (Deci & Ryan, 2002). For teachers, the degree to which the need for competence is met may be associated with aspects of the job such as professional development opportunities and the extent to which individuals are asked to, and are able to, contribute to the learning of their students and colleagues.

The need for autonomy refers to a need to act in ways which are congruent with one’s values and represent genuine expression of the self (Deci & Ryan, 2002). For teachers this need may be met though inclusion in decision-making processes, freedom to choose instructional methods, and flexibility in working hours.

The need for relatedness refers to a need for connection and a sense of belonging. It indicates that both, “caring for and being cared for” (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 6) by others are important to one's well-being. This need may be particularly important for those in helping careers in which fostering relationships with clients and colleagues is a major component of the employee's role.
Basic Needs and Well-being

The meeting of needs has far reaching effects on the individual. Studies show that the degree to which an individual's needs are met has an impact on both their mental and physical health. Ng, Ntoumanis, Thogersen-Ntoumani, Deci, Ryan, Duda, and William’s (2012) meta-analysis of 184 studies indicated that satisfaction of needs was predictive of higher levels of health maintenance behaviors such as smoking cessation and increased physical activity. They also found an overall negative correlation between needs satisfaction and negative mental health. In one particular study on undergraduate university students, needs satisfaction levels were shown to account for more than half of the variance in scores for attachment shame, depression, and loneliness (Wei, Shaffer, Young & Zakalik, 2005) and 54% of their overall reported happiness (Sapmaz, Dogan, Sapmaz, Temizel & Dilek Tel, 2012).

Basic Needs and Career

Similar and significant trends are found in the current career literature as well. An employee's engagement, mental health, and satisfaction are significantly affected by the satisfaction of their need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness at work.

Van den Broek, Maarten, Hans, & Len’s (2008) study indicated that insufficient meeting of psychological needs accounted for the exhaustion experienced by employees in workplaces with low resources and partially accounted for exhaustion in response to high job demands. As a result of their findings they proposed that overall employee motivation may be the direct result of needs satisfaction. Indeed, the degree to which an individual's needs are being met in the workplace is positively correlated with job satisfaction (Wininger & Birkholz, 2012), and work related engagement (Van den Broek et al., 2008). Additionally, satisfaction of needs may play a role in employee performance. For employees in an American banking corporation needs
satisfaction was predictive of both successful performance evaluations and psychological adjustment (Baard, Deci & Ryan, 2006).

**Basic Needs and Teachers**

Although limited studies investigate the impact of basic need satisfaction on teachers, and this researcher could find no studies in the Canadian or American context, some initial evidence suggests its importance. Uzman's (2014) study of teacher candidates in Turkey revealed a significant negative correlation between needs satisfaction and negative psychological symptoms such as anxiety, depression, somatization, and hostility. It is not difficult to imagine how teachers experiencing these symptoms may have more difficulty maintaining relationships with, and investing in their students. Some evidence suggests that teachers whose needs are being met are less susceptible to burnout. For teachers in one Spanish secondary school district, needs satisfaction was positively correlated with engagement and negatively correlated with burnout (Doménech-Betoret, Lloret-Segura, & Gómex-Artiga, 2015).

**Teachers and the Need for Relatedness**

While all three needs outlined by SDT are important for teachers, the highly social nature of the teaching profession places a spotlight on the need for relatedness. Recent studies have investigated the importance of the principal-teacher relationship. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis’ (2015) correlational study of 3215 teachers from two US school districts found a relationship between the degree to which teachers reported trust in their principal and the teachers' professionalism and community involvement. Teachers’ trust in their principal also had an impact on their perception of student engagement. Notably, Aloe, Shisler, Norris, Nickerson, and Rinker’s (2014) multivariate meta-analysis of 144 correlational studies indicated that student misbehavior, which is often an indicator of student lack of engagement, has a moderate
relationship with burnout in teachers. Indeed, some evidence does suggest that teachers’ trust in principals can act as a buffer against burnout symptoms. Van Maele and Van Houtte’s (2015) used multilevel modelling in a quantitative study of 673 teachers across 58 schools in Belgium to analyze the buffering effects of trust on teacher burnout. They found that teachers’ trust in students was particularly effective in preventing the emotional symptoms of burnout.

The relationship that teachers have with their colleagues has its own importance. Although Canadian informed studies are presently absent from the literature, Viernes and Guzman (2005) used semi-structured, narrative-biological interviews and thematic analysis to investigate this relationship with 50 teachers from the Philippines. They found that supportive relationships with colleagues were a 'life-giving force' for teachers. One participant in this study indicated that her relationships with colleagues were one of the reasons she chose to stay at school. Several participants even described their colleagues as a second family of sorts. This conjures images of a supportive workplace network.

The relationship that teachers have with their students has been the relationship most extensively studied in the literature. The meeting of relatedness needs with regards to teachers’ students may be of particular importance. In a correlational study of 409 practicing Canadian teachers, Klassen, Perry, and Frenzel (2012) investigated the connection between the meeting of teachers’ relatedness needs with students and their well-being. Results indicated that teachers whose need for relatedness was satisfied with students displayed a higher incidence of positive emotions, decreased negative emotions, lower rates of exhaustion, and higher job satisfaction. Additionally, in a phenomenological study investigating teachers’ experiences of caring for their students, O’Connor (2008) asserted that the professional identities of the three teachers interviewed were largely shaped by their working relationships with students. One participant in
this study commented that taking on the role of a care-giving family member for her students provided her with the feeling that what she does matters.

**Interpersonal Mattering**

The concept of interpersonal mattering was first introduced by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981). When considered through the lens of needs-based motivational theories, mattering can be considered an important component of relationship and a specific component of the need for relatedness. While individuals seek to be in relationship with others who are significant to them, mattering provides a way to conceptualize the innate human need to perceive one's own significance in the lives of others.

Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) defined interpersonal mattering as, “the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension” (p. 165). In an effort to further elucidate the original definition of interpersonal mattering Scholossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) outlined the four factors involved in mattering; awareness, importance, reliance, and ego-extension. Elliott (2004) later provided support for a three-factor model, dropping the ego-extension factor. Support for, Lynch, and Chickering's (1989) four factor model was provided several years later, evidencing a need to further define this construct in the literature (France & Finney, 2009). For the purposes of the present study a brief outline of the four-factor model will be given here.

The four-factor model begins with the factor of awareness (Scholossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). This refers to one's perception that they are noticed. This can be evidenced by simple greetings or other actions resulting in the feeling of being welcome. Do colleagues say hello in the morning? Do they know your name? The answers to these questions give some indication as to one's perceived level of awareness mattering.
Importance refers to the perception that others are concerned with one’s well-being. This is experienced when an individual feels that others care about what they think, feel, say and do. Do others check in after a sick day? Do they express concern for your well-being? Feeling that others care is an important component of mattering.

Reliance is the feeling of being needed by others (Scholossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). One can feel needed when others ask for advice, seek input in making decisions, and seem to value their contributions. In the school setting this may involve administration seeking input from teachers before implementing new policy, students asking for extra help, or colleagues seeking lesson plan suggestions.

Lastly, the factor of ego-extension is the perception that others are deeply connected to the individual (Scholossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). This occurs when others are perceived to be significantly invested in one’s successes and failures and to genuinely care for the individual.

**Mattering and Health**

The perception of interpersonal mattering in these four ways has demonstrated importance in the literature. Perhaps most notably, mattering has been shown to have a positive correlation with self-esteem (Elliott et al., 2004). Finney and France (2009) postulate that it is this connection that allows mattering to play an indirect role in reducing levels of depression, anxiety (Dixon, Scheidegger & McWhirter, 2009), and suicidal ideation (Elliott, Colangelo, & Gelles, 2005) while increasing levels of physical health (Raque-Bogdan, Ericson, Jackson, Martin & Bryan, 2011), belonging (Tucker et al., 2010), and overall wellness (Rayle & Myers, 2004). In short, those who feel they matter to others experience fewer negative psychological symptoms and more positive ones.
Mattering and Career

Considering that the construct of mattering has been present for more than thirty years, literature on the topic is still fairly limited. In particular, very little recent literature exists pertaining to the application of mattering to a career context. Amundson (1993) provided a beginning to this area of research in his application of mattering to career counselling and an extended application to career counsellor training. He proposed that, “through involvement in mattering experiences, people meet their basic needs for relationship and meaning in life” (p. 147) that ultimately influences job satisfaction.

This concept has huge implications for those in the workforce. If the work place itself provides opportunities for mattering experiences, it may improve employee satisfaction, reduce burnout, and even reduce early attrition rates. Indeed, initial evidence does suggest a positive correlation between mattering and job satisfaction (Connolly & Myers, 2003; Rayle, 2006). Individuals who feel they matter to others at work, tend to be more satisfied with their job.

In the case of teachers, their own perceived success or failure is often based largely on the strength of their relationships with students, and their ability to guide students though the learning process. Perception of mattering likely affects a teacher's assessment of the strength of their relationships with students, and thus likely affects their perception of success. When teachers feel they matter to their school or to their students they feel that their relationships are successful; when their relationships are successful then they too are successful.

Mattering in the School Context

To this researcher’s knowledge mattering experiences of teachers has yet to be investigated in the literature. More research has been done, however, concerning the impact of mattering on students. Dixon and Kurpius's (2008) used correlational analysis to investigate the perceived
mattering of 455 undergraduate students at a southwestern university in the United States. They found a positive correlation between students perceived mattering and self-esteem. Additionally, perceived mattering was negatively correlated to the participants' symptoms of depression. Similar results were found in a correlational study of 177 middle school students in a southwestern US city (Dixon, Scheidegger, & McWhirter, 2009). More specifically, secondary school students with higher perceptions of mattering exhibit lower anxiety and depression scores. Overall, students who perceive that they matter to others are less depressed, less anxious, and more confident.

A connection between mattering and the need for relatedness has been demonstrated in the literature. In a correlational study of 532 adolescents in British Columbia, Canada, Marshall (2001) found that when adolescents felt they mattered to the adults in their lives, they also experienced a sense of relatedness. This is important given the significance of the basic human need for relatedness discussed here in previous sections. Participants in a focus group consisting of 9 African American adolescent males indicated that mattering experiences acted as a buffer against their internal pressure to succeed and that mattering experiences with adults at school made them want to do well (Tucker, Dixon, & Griddine, 2010).

In response to the growing data suggesting that mattering does indeed matter, Charles and Alexander (2014) proposed that it is important that helping professionals create mattering experiences for youth. They suggested that these experiences may restructure unhealthy attachment schemas which initially lead to the youth's belief that they do not matter. Similarly, Dixon (2008) advocated for the use of mattering in schools as a mechanism through which school climates could be improved and positive learning environments created.

School counsellors do play a large role in the creation of positive learning environments.
They have the ability to make a big difference though their creation of mattering experiences. Thus far overlooked, however, is the impact that mattering may have for teachers as well. Teachers spend more time with students than any other adult in the school. This creates the opportunity to forge meaningful mattering experiences for their students. If teachers are to produce these mattering experiences for their students, it is valuable to first understand the way in which teachers themselves experience mattering. Charles and Alexander (2014) proposed that when helpers create mattering experiences they too experience the perception of mattering. These mutual mattering experiences are of particular interest in the present study.

Although the perception of mattering in teachers has not yet been investigated in the literature, Curry and Bickmore (2012) provided an interesting account of the mattering experience of school counsellors. Through a qualitative study embedded in interpretivism they investigated the ways in which 7 school counsellors experienced mattering. They found that school counsellors experienced mattering though interactions with administrators, connections with students, and collaboration with colleagues. This is in line with the relationship research outlined in previous sections. Curry and Bickmore's (2012) study provides a valuable outline as to aspects of the job that allow school counsellors to experience mattering. Absent from the literature, however, is an account of the way in which mattering is experienced and how it is experienced subjectively by teachers.
Chapter 3

Research Methodology

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of the lived experience of mattering among teachers. It gave preliminary insight into how teachers make sense of the experience of mattering in the workplace. Though a research design grounded in interpretative phenomenological analysis this study explored the question; What is the meaning of teachers’ lived experiences of mattering in the workplace? Given that this is a relatively unexplored area in the literature, a phenomenological approach supported the exploratory nature of the present study and allowed for a rich, in-depth understanding of the research topic.

Phenomenology is a qualitative research method originally introduced by Edmond Husserl in an effort to place more emphasis on first person experience in psychological research (Wertz, 2005). Phenomenological approaches seek to suspend all previous scientific theory and allow the researcher to interact with the data of lived experience as it is. In doing so these methods can provide a layered and in-depth understanding of human experience.

Interpretative phenomenology is a branch of phenomenology concerned with both developing an understanding of a phenomenon and disclosing its essential meanings (Smith & Osborn, 2003). It is a double hermeneutic process in that it involves both the participants attempt to make sense of their own experiences and the researcher’s attempt to interpret that sense-making. During this process the researcher has two aims. First, they approach with open-minded curiosity in order to take the perspective of the participants and provide an accurate account of the participants’ experiences. Second, they analyze and interpret the information provided in an attempt to deepen understanding of the experience, disclose meaning, and bring
into consciousness what may have been unconsciously suggested.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis was chosen for this study for several reasons. Firstly, while the construct of mattering is not new in the literature there continues to be an effort toward creating a comprehensive definition though questions revolving around the inclusion and exclusion of the components of mattering (Elliot & Kao, 2004). The bottom-up nature of phenomenological methodology allows for an open exploration of this expanding construct.

Additionally, to date the literature on mattering in the workplace and in schools has been grounded primarily in quantitative methodology. This literature has provided preliminary evidence of the importance of mattering in terms of its correlation to other constructs such as job satisfaction and negative psychological symptoms. The outcome focus of quantitative methods, however, limits participants’ ability to provide a broader understanding of the experience. Usually, quantitative research methods are subject to the themes of interest to the researcher rather than those of interest to the participants. An interpretative phenomenological approach allowed the teachers interviewed to touch on aspects of their personal mattering experiences that they deemed important. Additionally, it allowed the researcher to interpret meaning from these experiences. The topic of mattering experiences among teachers is currently an unexplored area in the literature, and thus warrants further investigation.

**Role of the Researcher**

In interpretative phenomenological studies researchers do not seek to fully remove themselves from the study, but rather, as a result of their interpretative role, are deeply connected to the research. As such it is important to note here my own background and the personal bias’s that I hold regarding this topic of interest.

I am a counselling psychology student and a secondary school teacher. I have been
working full time as a teacher in the private sector for five years. In that time I have worked exclusively in alternative education programs, and primarily with students who have learning differences. Mattering, or my own perceived significance in the lives of others, has been a powerful factor both in my decision to become a teacher and my decision to continue teaching. I have noticed that I experience mattering, or lack of mattering, with my students, colleagues, and administrative staff in different ways. The perception of mattering to my students has always come easier to me than the perception of mattering to my administrative staff. For me mattering in the workplace serves as a sign of my contribution to society, and contribution is a career value I hold dear to my heart.

This brief background outlines my potential bias as a researcher. I bring awareness to this with the main purpose of making the reader aware of how my own lived experience may have guided my interviews and influenced my interpretation. This research should be read and interpreted with an understanding of my own, personal lens. Throughout this research, as I interacted with the participants and the data, I continued to tap into this awareness to better inform my research.

**Participants**

Participants for this study were teachers recruited though convenience and snowball sampling methods. I actively recruited via word of mouth, posters distributed on campus, and sharing study information on social media networks. Teachers interested in the study were given my contact information, and invited to share study information with others who may be interested.

Most interpretative phenomenological studies include five to ten participants (Smith, 2004). This study included the perspectives of six participants.
Given the nature of phenomenological study and its intention to disclose essential underlying meaning, a heterogeneous sample was selected. Individuals teaching in both the private and public sectors were invited to participate. Additionally, both male and female participants were included. For more detailed information on participant demographics please refer to Table 1 below.

Participants were screened before being admitted into this study. To insure that teachers had enough opportunity to experience mattering in the workplace, participants selected had all been teaching for a minimum of two years and were currently teaching in a full-time capacity.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number of Years Teaching</th>
<th>Highest Degree Obtained</th>
<th>Type of School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willow</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. All interviews took place in a quiet, private, and mutually agreed upon space of the participant’s choosing. Interviews took place in a quiet room in Neville Scarfe at UBC as well as in participants’ classrooms. All interviews were conducted in person; coffee and a light snack were provided.

All interviews were conducted by myself, a third year master’s level counselling student at the University of British Columbia. My research supervisor was available for consultation throughout this process.

The interviews began with the collection of demographic data in the form of a brief questionnaire (see Appendix A). This provided context that allowed for more meaningful
interpretation of each participant’s lived experiences. For details on the results of this survey please see Table 1. Following this, participants were made aware of the recording apparatus, any ethical concerns, and the limits to confidentiality. Participants were then invited to sign an informed consent contract (see Appendix B) that included detailed information about the storage and use of the recording file and transcript, as well as how they may be able to access the results of the study. They were invited to ask any questions that they had. Once these questions were answered and consent obtained, the tape recorder was turned on and the semi-structured interview began.

Most interpretative phenomenological studies have been conducted through the use of semi-structured interviews (Smith, 2004). This form of interviewing is helpful when searching to understand a construct which is the aim of this research, understanding the lived experience of mattering in teachers. This open-ended interviewing format allows the researcher to follow the leads of the participants.

Each semi-structured interview began with the following question: Can you tell me about your mattering experience as a teacher? The resultant interview varied depending on the participants understanding of the question, and their own experiences. I used value neutral language, reflections, basic empathetic responding, paraphrasing, and open-ended questions to encourage detailed expansion of the subject.

Curry and Bickmore’s (2012) study of mattering among school counsellors suggested that mattering manifested itself in relation to administration, students, and colleagues. In exploring the lived experience of mattering these experiences were kept in mind. In line with this, further probes included the following questions: Can you tell me about a time when you felt you mattered at work? (Probe: To your administration? To your students? With your Colleagues?)
Can you tell me about a time when you felt you didn't matter at work? (Probe: To your administration? To your students? With your Colleagues?) Participants were also asked to share a metaphor that they felt represented their mattering experience. Although the researcher was informed by these probes, participants were encouraged to share detailed accounts of what seemed important to them. The researcher probed them on topics which arose throughout the interview.

Interviews took between 33 and 68 minutes. At the end of the interview participants were provided with a $25 gift certificate to Starbucks as a token of appreciation for their time commitment and participation in the study.

Data Analysis

Following the interviews each recording was manually transcribed. These transcripts served as the raw data for this study. To protect participant confidentiality, the participants’ names have been replaced with pseudonyms and the transcripts were stored in a password protected document on a USB drive. The original recordings, USB drive, consent forms, and demographic questionnaires are stored in a locked box at the researcher’s home office.

I analyzed the data according to the four-stage process of interpretative phenomenological analysis outlined by Smith and Osborn (2003). First I familiarized myself with the transcript. I read it several times making notes in one margin of anything interesting or significant that answers the research questions. There is no requirement in IPA to divide the text into meaning units so this process closely resembles free textual analysis. It is assumed that some passages are more rich than others. Smith (2004) suggests that this analysis can take into account interpretation at the surface, metaphorical, and theoretical level. The caveat Smith (2004) outlines is that the farther from the text the analysis gets the more speculative the tone of the
write up must be.

Second, I reread the text making notes in the other margin on emerging themes (Smith & Osborn, 2003). At this stage I kept notes on the participants’ actual words and the themes evoked in order to ensure that this analysis stays as true to the text as possible. Next I clustered the emerging themes into meaningful units. These were given representative names, and serve as the superordinate themes. I will then repeat these steps with each transcript. The superordinate themes from the first case were used to inform the analysis of the rest of the cases. This allowed me to more easily identify similarities and differences between the cases.

Lastly I completed a cross-case analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The similarities and differences were analyzed in the context of the demographic data collected. The results were represented in a thematic analysis with participant quotes attached.

**Rigor and Validity**

To ensure that the data was representative of the participants’ experience a member check was completed. The participants had the opportunity to review the analyzed product of their transcripts by reading the themes. They were asked the following three questions:

1. *How well do the results resonate with your experience of mattering?*
2. *Are the main themes comprehensive?*
3. *What, if any, pragmatic value do these results have for other teachers?*

In keeping with the phenomenological approach, this helped to ensure that the analysis stayed true to the original text.

When these member checks were complete the analyzed data was sent to an expert for peer review, and the same three questions were asked. The reviewer was both an experienced teacher and a researcher with experience in the topic of mattering.
Finally, the completed thesis was presented to the research committee who had experience in either the topic or the research methodology. Their approval was given for both the study methodology and the results found.

**Ethical Considerations**

Before proceeding with this study I sought approval from the UBC ethics board. This study was not anticipated to be distressing for the participants however precautions were taken in order to ensure that safety was maintained. The informed consent form was thoroughly reviewed with each participant. It gave a brief description of the study and listed any reasonably foreseeable risks and benefits to participation. It described the extent to which confidentiality will be maintained and informed participants of their right to decline to participate. Participants were made aware that they could choose what information to disclose and were free to stop the interview at any time. I also provided participants with the crisis line and contact information for local sliding scale counselling services in the event that participants felt triggered after leaving their interview. My supervisor agreed to be available to consult with a participant if necessary.
Chapter 4  
Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to answer the question; what is the meaning of teachers’ lived experience of mattering? This chapter outlines the results of this study in terms of the metaphors shared by participants as well as an overall thematic structure. The essential themes indicated elements of the phenomenon of teacher mattering that were discussed by all six participants. The non-essential theme outlines a potentially important pattern in the data that was not discussed by all six participants. To maintain participant and student confidentiality pseudonyms have been used.

Metaphors that Matter

Metaphors can be an excellent way to understand the essential meaning of a phenomenon. At times they can provide a more holistic view of a concept than words alone. At other times they may provide insights that are difficult to speak to directly. Additionally, some participants may find metaphors to be a more accessible way to explain their own experience. As a result, each participant was asked to share a metaphor that they felt represented their experience of mattering as a teacher. Although this came more easily to some than others, each of the six participants shared a unique metaphor. They are included here for several reasons. First, they serve as a nice introduction to the character of each participant. Second, they give some insight into the way in which each participant uniquely defines and experiences mattering as a teacher. It should be noted here that the researcher’s interpretations of these metaphors and the themes that follow are just that, interpretations. As such they must be read with an understanding of this researcher’s particular lens, as outlined in Chapter 3.
Bob—the bridge builder.

Bob related his experience of mattering as a teacher to, “building bridges.” He highlighted the importance of having a team of people who work with him to build the bridge and who share the same goal: “you’re building towards the right thing together then you’re going to end up meeting at the middle and that kind of links people together and has that mutual understanding.” Although the work is done in a team it was important to Bob that he have some autonomy over his own job:

I think teachers really find their worth and that they matter when they have control of certain aspects of it. So they can build in one direction and know that the people that they decided to work with are understanding… are building in that same direction.

Bob really brings to light the importance of having a sense of belonging when working on a team. He wants to feel that he is able to make a unique contribution to the work, and has autonomy over some aspects of his own work. It is also important to him that the whole team is working towards a unified goal, so that although bridge builders are coming from opposite sides of the water they will eventually meet in the middle. When he describes where he is at in his current job he shares, “I’m hoping there’s someone on the other side coming… but I’m kind of still building in the fog,” highlighting that it can be difficult to perceive mattering in the present moment.

Sarah—the seaweed in the moving tides.

Sarah struggled to share a metaphor that she felt adequately described her experience of mattering. She shared this:

The closest image I can put with it would be like the tides. As in, that, the environment would be shifting all of the time. So if I were a piece of seaweed then I would be stuck to the sand underneath the water but the water would be changing. And I would be effected by that.
Sarah experiences her educational environment as unstable and constantly changing. In Sarah’s experience, her perception of mattering is constantly impacted by many factors outside of her control.

**Laura—the lifter of heavy rocks.**

When Laura considered the concept of mattering she compared it to lifting a heavy rock, “I have this image of a rock, a heavy rock, and me lifting it up and then some light coming out from under it.” Laura’s description of the rock being heavy indicates the effort required for her to experience mattering. She went on to describe what the lifting of the rock symbolizes for her:

So just being able to facilitate, um facilitate learning, but really allow kids to come to it on their own. I feel like… and to allow them to have that like, ‘I figured it out myself.’ To be more like that facilitator than the teacher, is important. And I feel… is how I would like to matter.

In lifting the rock and letting some light in, Laura hopes to help her students gain confidence in their abilities. Although initially Laura pictured herself lifting the rock all alone, when asked if there was anyone present with her she shared, “In my mind it was just me, but now that you mention it, yeah definitely… Parents and support teachers and whoever else.” Laura’s metaphor indicates that she experienced mattering through the impact she had on her students and in the context of a supportive team.

**Willow—the water in a wave.**

Willow’s metaphor touched on mattering as a reciprocal experience of belonging. She described it as, “like being water in a wave.” She went on to explain:

The water is a part of the wave, and the wave is part of the water right? They’re really not separate… That I’m part of the school community and the school community is part of me. That we’re neither either or.”
For Willow this results in a feeling of, “mutual inclusion.” She feels she matters when she feels she is an integral part of the school community, and that the school community is an integral part of her.

**Tom—the tinker.**

Tom’s metaphor for his mattering experience centered around his contributions to solving problems:

I’m the guy that rides into town and if your pot’s broken I can probably do something with it. And if your little oil lantern doesn’t work I might have a new lens for that. Or your horse is lame, I have some ointment that this guy gave me from down near the… I know a guy.

Tom perceives he matters when he is able to identify a problem and do something about it, “I’m a tinker, that’s what I do, I fix things.” The focus of his effort is, “usually around kids,” but it also, “kind of works for the whole school.” Contributing by solving problems helps Tom feel useful and in turn helps him feel that he matters.

**Tina—the tango dancer.**

Tina struggled to think of a metaphor that would describe her experience of mattering as a teacher. When the question was initially posed she replied, “I’m always happy to be given the opportunity. I don’t know how I can put that into a metaphor.” Tina feels privileged to be given the opportunity to matter though her work. As she continued to think about a metaphor she added, “I know it’s something about, it’s now for me. And it’s always today.” She experiences mattering as a present moment experience. For her it is less about the outcome, and more about what is happening in that moment. This offers her some relief when she feels she has made a mistake, “Even if I think well you know, I wish I hadn’t said that yesterday, but today I can say it this way.” This also provides her with opportunities to grow and learn each day:
I’m into tango… one of my friends was uh posting something. And it was, how does it go now? Umm, they asked… an elderly much respected dancer why he was still practicing how to do the basic walk and he said because I think I’m getting the hang of it. And that’s how I feel… I think I’m getting the hang of it.

**Overall Theme Structure**

Three super-ordinate themes which begin to answer the research question emerged though the interpretive phenomenological analysis. These themes are: Impact on Students, Being Seen, and Belonging to a Community. Each of these themes have subthemes which are outlined in Table 1, below. In addition to these themes a non-essential theme emerged, Motivation. Each theme is discussed in further detail below.

**Table 1: Theme Structure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1: Impact on Students</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and Emotional Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Journey or a Destination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence of Impact</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme 2: Being Seen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being Known</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being Heard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Having Value</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher Identity</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Theme 3: Belonging to a Community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shared Priorities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effective Communication</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Essential Theme: Motivation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 1: Impact on Students**

*This is the value of the teacher, who looks at a face and says there’s something behind that and I want to reach that person, I want to influence that person, I want to encourage that person, I want to enrich, I want to call out that person who is behind that face, behind that color, behind that language, behind that tradition, behind that culture. I believe you can do it. I know what was done for me.*

~Maya Angelou
Far and above the concept that came to all participants’ minds most frequently and most immediately when asked about their mattering experience as a teacher was the impact that they have on their students. When teachers are asked the question, *how do you matter as a teacher?* I suspect that many hear the question, “*How do you impact your students?*” Teachers seem to define their teaching identity as who they are in relation to their students, and questions about being a teacher are answered in that context. All six participants spoke to having an effect on students as a major component of their mattering experience. This theme is broken down into four subthemes further outlined below: academic impact, social and emotional impact, a journey or a destination, and evidence of impact.

**Academic impact.**

One of the most transparent ways that teachers have an effect on their students is through academics. It almost goes without saying that teachers play a vital role in helping students improve in the academic subjects that they instruct. Four participants spoke to the ways in which they feel they impact their students academically.

Teacher’s impact may be a direct result of the projects and lessons they plan. Laura spoke about the valedictorian speech delivered by one of her eighth grade student’s:

> She talked about all these projects that we did and how she felt like it was, it really flexed her creative muscle. And she felt like she was just doing her thing in my classes. And then to validate that.

Hearing that her lessons had been effective had a positive impact on Laura, “It made me feel kind of… important. And like I was doing good work.” She felt that the time she had invested in planning her lessons was worthwhile because the lessons impacted at least one student.

At other times students’ academic success might be impacted by simple encouragement. Tina strongly believed in the power of encouragement: “I always feel people excel when they’re
encouraged, and people have faith in them. When people believe that they’re going to do well and you keep saying you’re making steady progress… They do. They do.” Laura also shared a story of impacting a student through encouragement:

I had a mom write me a card last year that said, uh something along the lines of, ‘Thank-you for really opening my kid’s eyes to French and tapping into his…French ability or inspiring him to be really good at French. And here’s a kid who’s not that into school. He’s not that academic. But he is really good at languages, and I can see that, and he... I encourage him, and he goes “yeah yeah yeah yeah” and then he gets really excited. And he was doing really well because of his… the encouragement. And him knowing that he’s good…

Laura identified that her encouragement increased her student’s confidence in his subject specific abilities. This resulted in his academic improvement in that subject.

Students’ academic success is also impacted by teachers who create a safe space for them to learn. Sarah spoke to the notable improvement in one student’s guitar skills simply because she created a consistent and relatively pressure free learning environment:

He had his head down, he might have a guitar in his lap or he might have not even gone to take one out of the back room. Just, just nothing. Ummm… and every once in a while, ‘Hey how about you put your fingers on the guitar and maybe try this?’ He’d be like… And I would just have to go run and put out some other fire. In Grade 10 he’s back (laughs). It’s like what the hell are you doing here? …This kid, back then, I didn’t get it at all. And he came back and that year he actually played a little bit of guitar. And then the year after that he came back again, and he performed!

Allowing her student to go at his own readiness pace produced increased ability in his guitar playing.

Tom sees his willingness to give students the freedom to choose what they want to learn as one of the key drivers to their academic success.

Because if one kid comes in wants to be an electrician then I’m going to teach them that, and one kid comes in wants to be a mechanic then I’m going to work with that. And we’re going to run different projects depending on what they need.
Tom notes that this results in his students taking on increased responsibility for their own success, “If they’re invested they don’t need you to hold their hand. They just need you to open the door and get out of the way.”

It would be remiss not to mention here that much of the time teachers do not know exactly what they did that impacted their student’s academic success. This is often the case when student experience a light bulb moment. Tina describes this experience:

Oh just watershed moments where you think, what did I do so I can do it again. And you feel like you have a little magic wand. And, umm, I often, you know, come home and think, what did I say? What did I do that got though? But you never really know what it was. You know? It could have just been exactly the same thing that you’ve said a hundred times before but that person heard it differently. But it feels good.

Seeing a breakthrough in her students “feels good” and she searches for the exact reason why what she did helped so that she can extend the experience. Unfortunately, as she notes, she may never really know what it is that made the impact.

**Social and emotional impact.**

Although still not at the forefront of the public’s mind, more and more teachers are being recognised for the social and emotional impacts they have on their students. This subtheme refers to the ways in which participants perceived their impact on students social and emotional well-being. Four participants spoke to this. Specifically, participants spoke to the impact they had on students’ physical safety, interpersonal skills, and confidence levels.

In addition to carrying part of the responsibility for their students’ academic success, teachers sometimes find themselves in a position where they are inclined to help their students in their personal lives as well. Tom described one such situation:

I can make a difference. I can make a difference. Umm… Sandra was with a single parent who’s totally good when she was a little girl, was not so totally good when she became a woman… Umm again stories you don’t need to have. But I can pull her out of
that house and have her rooming with somebody else in my program. Got hold of their parents and they looked after her for a while and she [finished school].

Tom was able to take actions which resulted in greater safety and comfort for his student, and probably also a greater likelihood for success.

Other times teachers take on the responsibility for helping their students understand how their actions are received by the world around them. In doing so they help students function in the world outside of school. Tom articulated this well, “They can change. No they can’t change. How they get perceived can change. And the interface that they have changes. And… and then they come back. And they visit and they tell me how they’re doing.” Laura spoke to this impact and highlighted the use of academics as a medium through which she can have an effect on who students become and ultimately the way they are received, “allowing them to become better people through the projects and through the interactions that they have with their classmates while doing the projects, while being in class. Becoming well rounded and thoughtful people.”

Three participants spoke to their impact on students’ confidence. Tom, Tina, and Bob all noted instances in which they felt they has potential to positively impact their students’ confidence. For Tom, providing students with an opportunity to succeed can, in and of itself, help build self-worth and self-confidence. He shared a story of a student who he helped find employment as a tradeswoman:

[She] is claimed to be the most talented [trades] apprentice he has ever had. She got a shot. She’s since been fired. Because patterns are patterns and they’re really hard to break. But she got a shot. She got a shot, and… Is it going to make a difference in her world? At some level. She knows she could, right? She knows it’s still open out there somewhere if she can dial it in.

Through encouragement and evidence-based feedback Tina seeks to build confidence in her students:
A lot of my students say, ‘but I’m not creative’. And I say, ‘yes you are look at this story you made up for me’. ‘Oh well I just looked at the pictures.’ And I say, ‘yeah but you, your story is different than Dan’s story’. ‘Oh but I haven’t made any improvement’. ‘Yes you have look at this’. So I think they have to feel genuine progress, even if it’s small. They have to feel that step by step. And that’s what I can do. You know? I can tell them every little bit matters.

Bob sees his role in helping students overcome challenges to build confidences in their own ability to cope. He describes, “seeing someone break down and then being able to overcome what they were afraid of and the reason why they broke down.” Those are the things that he, “thrive on.” When teachers are able to give students the gift of confidence, they are giving a gift that lasts. Students may one day forget the details of the lessons they learned, but they won’t forget how it felt to be good at something.

If teachers are able to help increase their students’ confidence, it is also possible that they decrease their students’ confidence. “To be that influential in somebody’s life,” was an aspect of mattering that Tina was very uncomfortable with: “I’m very aware of being so important as far as assessing these people. And it makes me uncomfortable. I don’t want put a number on what I do. I like to teach, but I don’t like to assess.” For Tina placing a number on what her students learned had more potential to do harm than good. She shared, “I always feel uncomfortable doing that. Because that matters for them, big time.”

Evidence of impact.

When working with students it can be very difficult to predict the impact that words or actions may have days, weeks, or years down the road. This is true for those events that impact students positively as well as those that impact them negatively. Much like counsellors, teachers are frequently surprised to hear what exactly it was that had the greatest impact on students; what exactly it was that mattered. All six participants spoke to the types of evidence that indicates to them that they impact their students.
One of the main sources of evidence was written and verbal feedback from students or parents. When asked to share how she knew when she was impacting her students Sarah excitedly jumped up and exclaimed, “Oh my god! Pause it! I want to go and get you something! Because I matter! I have a beautiful example of mattering for you!” She left the room and returned with a box full of notes and photos that had been given to her by former students. It was the first time she had attached the meaning of mattering to her box of memories:

I’ve never thought about it this way before! That it still matters, because… I thought I was keeping memories. But some of it is like you’re saying, examples of when I mattered or when I thought maybe I mattered.

She was not alone. Following his interview Tom also shared his own evidence of mattering; a variety of notes and photos that he had kept over the years. Laura spoke about several times when she had, “a mom write [her] a card.” Tina shared that:

Students write things like, ‘I’ve never had such an enthusiastic teacher.’ So I know that I’m giving them a good feeling and I think especially for this kind of learning it’s really important to set up that rapport where they feel comfortable talking to me.

She spoke to receiving more immediate feedback, “when they walk out, they say, ‘Thank-you Ms. T, that was a great lesson,’ almost every day. Yeah. It’s… it’s instant feedback.” Verbal feedback was also important. Bob appreciated hearing, “little success stories from students,” as an indicator that his efforts were making an impact.

Sarah cautioned that not all feedback is meaningful. Sometimes students are unable to fully articulate what it was that impacted them. Other times they don’t mature enough in time to provide feedback before leaving school. After sharing one particular letter that Sarah had received she noted how special this was:

So I mean I think it is really special because I think he meant it. Sometimes uh I was talking before about how they maybe wrote thank-you [notes], or I want to show gratitude but I don’t really know what to say. But that, that is a kid who grew up enough
before he left to go ahead and put into words what he wanted to say. And it was after report cards he’s not sucking up.

In addition to feedback, participants spoke of students who showed care as evidence of their impact. Sometimes that care manifested itself as time invested back in the participant’s program, as it did for Sarah,

He invested time in me and in my program too. So he would do stuff for us, and he would volunteer for music stuff. And he would stick around, he’d wake up early to come to band. So that was really, that was really nice.

Other times it looked more playful, as Bob happily shared:

Somebody got hurt outside, and there was lots of screaming and carrying on so I went running outside to see what happened, to catch a water balloon in the head… They’d stashed super soakers out there and water balloons and just plastered me… They were just showing affection.

Willows student brought her a gift which was a sign of care for her, “today a former student brought in chocolate for me.”

The evidence that participants were impacting their students was not always as clear as direct feedback or care. Students’ desire to be in the participants’ class was also received as a sign of impact. Willow talked about two students who did not want to leave her class:

Two of the students I taught are going this year to their home school which is a block and a half away rather than taking two busses. And their mother was really annoyed because they didn’t want to transfer because of being in my class. So actually the parent was really frustrated with it. But it some ways it was kind of an inverse compliment.

Sarah tried to make sense of a student who seemed to hate every moment of her class but returned the next year, “So clearly that’s like hatred right? No. Nope. She’s back. What the hell is she doing back in guitar? She gave me an entire year of the withering stare of death. Why?”

She wondered if this might be evidence of an impact that she made.
Participants also saw their students coming back to visit when they were no longer their teacher as indicators of impact. Willow noted that she felt she had made an impact when, “they continue to seek [her] out when [she’s] no longer their teacher. Similarly, Sarah shared:

Okay, I think I spend a lot of my career telling myself that I matter because in high school teaching I don’t think you get that sense all the time… that that immediate feedback that the things that you do from day to day actually do matter. And then you’ll get a kid come back and visit a couple years later and say, ‘hey that thing you said that one day really did matter.’ And then we get that, you know, that rush of good feelings, a good memory.

Tina indicated that she knew she mattered when her class was buzzing, “just when everybody’s laughing and talking and interacting… and I’ve said minimal and they’re all talking. That’s success for me. So I see it. I know I matter.”

The journey or the destination.

Though participants discussed a variety of evidence that points to their impact on students, the reality is that a teacher’s impact is rarely immediately visible and often never known. Even the students themselves may not experience the impact for years to come. When they do they may or may not attribute it to past teachers. Several participants grappled with this reality: Viewing their impact on students as either, an immediate moment in life’s journey full of moments or as a driver towards a final destination, had a large impact on the meaning they made out of their mattering experience.

Sarah grappled with the connection between her perceived mattering and the unpredictability of her long term impact on students. She shared the story of a former student, Jacob, who struggled with the symptoms of ADHD and drug use. Sarah invested in his wellbeing. She provided her classroom to him as a safe place during lunch, and both he and his friends would eat there. She gave him opportunity to be himself, and to experience acceptance. Three years into their working relationship, she received feedback from Jacob’s mother that, “If
it hadn’t been for you he’d be done for already.” At that time Sarah felt like she mattered to
Jacob, “He was in Grade 10 by that point so we’d had almost three years together. And we were
super tight. So I think it was easier to feel like I mattered there.” Jacob was improving, and this
helped create a feeling of mattering. However, by the time he was in grade 11, four years after
they began working together, he was really struggling:

One day, instead of coming on time to guitar class, I go outside and there he is walking
over the hill with a pot, bag of pot, in his hands. So I was really upset so took him to the
principal and I was crying, he was embarrassed but he was too high to notice. That sort
of stuff is, you know, it leaves a mark… More than watching a kid improve their
pronunciation.

This instance created doubt for Sarah. The outcome she had hoped for Jacob was not
materializing and she wondered how much she really impacted him:

In that example with that kid, we, it was, it was a road, rocky road. I mean he wasn’t an
easy kid. I mean lots of drug use. So by the time he was in grade 11 I was like, you
know, did I really save him?

Over the years Sarah continued to track Jacob’s success. Recently she discovered that, in fact,
he is doing quite well:

I found him, and he’s not dead. And he’s performing in his niche, music niche… He’s
like a, this really type of music that nobody knows about… but he’s there performing in it
and receiving accolades from his community.

Sarah may never know the specifics of what she said or did that may have had an impact on
Jacob. In the moments when she is uncertain if she matters to her students some days she relies
on faith:

I remember one of my teachers, I never went back and told them that one day they said
that one thing that changed how I thought about stuff. But I have that, and most people
do when you talk to them. So some days I think about that. When I’m encouraging some
other depressed young teacher… that ‘Oh you can’t see it today the kids being a total jerk
but they’re in the middle of their storm, and later on something, the thing you didn’t
mean, is going to affect them, don’t worry.’ Right?
Other days as she experiences the many emotional ups and downs of her students’ successes and failures she wonders if mattering is really worth the ride:

I’m sorry because mattering is less important to me than it used to be. I think as an early, earlier in my career I think it was really important to me but then I would be sort of… Like I’d get some emotional highs but then when I felt like I didn’t matter then I’d be lower than ever.

Having little control over the ultimate outcome of her investment makes it difficult for Sarah to experience a perceived impact on students.

Tina has managed this lack of control by focusing on mattering in the moment and letting go of any future outcomes. This was a driving force in her love for the teaching profession:

And I can’t think if my life had turned out differently what else would have given me that feeling of, ‘Yeah I have to get up and go and do it because I matter. And if I’m not there who’s going to teach the present perfect today?’ I mean (laughs) somebody else could teach it, but to this group of people, my little writing group, there’s 14 of them and they count on me. I matter to them, today. They might forget about me tomorrow, but right now I matter a lot.

It’s not that Tina wanted to be forgotten. In fact, she later expressed a desire to be remembered by her students. Rather she seemed to believe that although her impact on her students might be time-limited, or come without later recognition, it was still meaningful:

No you hope that students think, ‘Ahhh yeah I remember that day that Ms. T taught us this or that.’ And I know that some do. But others might just remember their happy time in [this city]. Or that great summer that they spent at [school]. And that’s good enough for me.

Tom also faces a lack of control over future outcomes and highlighted that, for him, providing the opportunity for success mattered. He shared a story of one of his students:

In February, if everything works, she will leave high school with her graduation and enroll in [a college] in a [trades] program. Is she going to be successful? I don’t know. I don’t have an answer for that. Umm but she’ll get a shot. She’ll get a shot, as opposed to not. And it wasn’t going to work for her here.

Tom’s student’s success was not predictable, but as a result of his investment, she got, “a shot.”
Tom hadn’t always made sense of his mattering experience in this way. He shared the powerful story of how he came to terms with his in the moment, rather than outcome driven, impact on students through the story of Liam. His impact on, and connection with, Liam began the first time they met with the setting of behavioral boundaries:

[His mother] basically dragged this little red headed hellion child into the school for some greet the teacher night… parent teacher night, sorry. Anyway so I bumped into Liam, this little screaming nightmare of a child, um, and basically went, ‘Yeah, not on my shift mate.’ Right? ‘You have a couple of choices, but that one is not it.’ Ummm. And Liam and I hit it of pretty good.

As their connection grew Tom continued to impact Liam though offering him opportunity to explain himself and to apologise:

And um so Liam, oh God. He didn’t have turrets. But it kind of looked like that, and he would just do the most insane things. He’d walk past somebody… and he’d just wind up and punch me in the shoulder. And then his eyes would get really big with the,

‘Oh Mr. T, I’m really really sorry Mr. T. I didn’t mean that all. I was just saying hi, Mr. T.’
[I would say] ‘Liam, zip it.’
‘Yes Mr. T.’
‘Okay, you all good?’
‘Yeah.’
‘You can’t punch me.’
‘Yeah, I know Mr. T.’
‘Stop now.’
‘Okay, okay I’m good, thanks.’
‘K.’
‘See you Mr. T!’

And away he’d go.

Tom gave Liam opportunities to make mistakes, to recover, and to learn from those mistakes. He shared a story of a time when he had been bringing a CD to school for students to listen to while they worked. One day it went missing and he addressed the class:

‘Okay, where’s my CD?’
‘I stole it.’
‘Liam what are you doing? Give me my CD back.’
‘Yeah yeah yeah okay.’

Tom kept the CD:

And I’ve kept it because he took a sharpie and he wrote on my CD ‘Property of Mr. B, Do Not Steal’ and brought it back.

Tom also made efforts to open doors in Liam’s career when the time came for Liam to leave the school:

I got him a job. I had him all the way up to grade 12. Had him all the way to grade 12 and I got him a job with a carpenter… I kind of vetted it from a distance to make sure that it was actually… that they were actually building something instead of something weird was going on. And it was all legit, it was all above board.

Tom played a protective role even after Liam ceased being his student. He had developed a strong connection with him and felt that he could make a difference in Liam’s life. Then, several years after Liam had left the classroom he passed away suddenly and unexpectedly:

[Liam] somehow got a licence to have a rifle. God knows how he did that. And Liam’s a boy of bad choices, stunningly bad choices. And umm, and he always regrets it, almost immediately. In here, with me, I kind of buffered him to the other people. He could always say he was sorry and it could get fixed.

Anyway so he saw his sparkly mirror on his car and opened up his bedroom window and hid behind the curtain and started shooting the mirror on his car. In the city. Cops didn’t like that very much. And so they did what they were doing, I’m not questioning what they did. And this is all on [Student]. And um so they went and um he shut off his cell phone. And umm they tried talking to him and they surrounded the place, and umm he didn’t have anybody he could say he was sorry to and he knew it was going to go sideways. So he blew his brains out.

Tom, who had positioned himself in a protective role over Liam, described feeling guilt, “And I felt really bad. I felt really bad.” Tom was faced with the challenge of making meaning out of his own impact on students. He had emotionally invested a lot into Liam, and when Liam passed away Tom wondered about the real impact he had made on his student. A conversation with Liam’s family guided Tom’s own meaning-making experience: “One of [Liam’s] people
came up and said, ‘Why are you upset? Why are you crying?’ Right? ‘That’s like... you gave him five years he never would have had.” Right? Umm... And that was important. That mattered.”

Tom’s experience caused him to reshape the meaning of his impact on students. The result was a letting go of the final outcome. Life could be viewed as the culmination of many moments. Each individual moment has the potential to impact the next. Tom found meaning in creating opportunity for Liam to experience moments of belonging, acceptance, and success over the five years he knew and worked with him. And, as he put it, “That was important. That mattered.”

**Theme 2: Being Seen**

Being seen is a way of describing a sense of being heard, understood, and accepted just as you are at the root of your being. It’s not to be confused with the colloquial use of the verb ‘to see’ as in; ‘I see you’re wearing new blue jeans.’ Nor should it be confused with its other more passive aggressive uses: ‘I see you haven’t gotten around to the laundry yet.’ No. Being seen, in this sense, is about having someone reflect that they understand the deepest root of who you are in the same way that you do and then having them say, ‘Yup, good enough.’ Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013) describes this concept well:

> Seeing and being seen complete a mysterious circuit of reciprocity, a reciprocity of presence that Thich Nhat Hanh calls “interbeing.” That presence holds us and reassures us and lets us know that our inclination to be who we actually are and to show ourselves in our fullness is a healthy impulse, because who we actually are has been seen, recognized, and accepted, our core sovereignty-of-being embraced.

In short, being seen sends a strong message: It’s okay to be you. You have value. You matter.

All six participants spoke to this theme as a part of their mattering experience in some way. One participant, Willow, broke down her experience of being seen when she initially defined mattering as:
A feeling of being seen for who I am, a feeling of being able to be heard especially or when I express a dissonant opinion. Channels or opportunities to facilitate, to innovate… there would probably always be in the kernel of having value, that who I am makes this particular place or situation richer and better.

This description inspired the four subcategories this theme is broken down into: Being known, Being heard, Having value, and Teacher identity.

**Being known.**

Being known means having people understand your uniqueness of character, your complex perspectives, and what’s going on in your life both outside and inside of the workplace. Five participants spoke to being known by administration, colleagues, parents, or students.

When speaking about the ways she knows she matters to her students, Willow described, “…a kind of casualness in our relationships that indicates that I matter to them…” That she felt an ease in her relationships with students was an indicator of mattering to her. She later shared an experience in which she felt known by her principal:

> Our principal thought he was introducing me to our new vice principal who actually I’d met but he didn’t know that. And he said something and I said well actually you made that decision to placate the counsellors. And the principal turned to the vice principal and said, ‘yeah that’s Willow she… there’s just… now what did he say? ‘Yeah she gives it to you straight there’s no bullshit with Willow. And I knew I mattered. Like that was really a compliment to me.

Having her principal see, name, and accept a component of her personality was validating for her. The precision with which she attempted to remember his exact words is noteworthy. It may suggest that he articulated an aspect of her being that she had not previously verbalized, or that is particularly important to her. In doing so he may have not only been able to see her but also allowed her to better see herself.

Laura described receiving feedback from a parent who noticed the degree to which she had come to understand her child, “So receiving this card that really showed, um, like that she
noticed that I notice, and that the kid, obviously it meant something to him to feel recognised in 
that way.” Mattering as a result of being noticed for noticing is indicative of the reciprocity of 
the mattering experience. Laura was seen for seeing her student.

Bob touched on the reciprocity of the experience of knowing and being known by his 
colleagues:

And I think from that I was able to get to know [my colleagues] kind of on a professional 
and personal level because you have that outlet, you talk about things that are going on in 
each other’s lives...

He notes that part of sharing in experiences with his colleagues is being able to, “understand 
each other’s perspectives and care for each other kind of on a peer level.” This sentiment is 
reflected again by Sarah who shared a positive mattering experience she had with her colleague:

There’s a teacher here who a couple years after working here my divorce was finalized. 
So that teacher found out about the divorce paperwork part of it, so she decided she 
would get her class to write me little valentines letters right? And that was so sweet! 
And that felt really nice…

Sarah’s experience of being known, and then cared for, felt good to her. Having others show 
care guides teachers towards the perception that they are important in another’s life. The caveat 
is that being seen requires vulnerability. Sarah’s mattering experience was prefaced by her first 
permitting a colleague to know her, and then allowing her colleague to care for her. In 
embracing her vulnerability, she was met with an experience of mattering.

This vulnerability also allows for an experience of validation that is distinct from action-
based compliments. Bob spoke to this difference:

It’s nice to be able to hear someone genuinely appreciate your character I think, more so 
than an action that you did… it’s rewarding. It kind of makes you feel like that could be 
like a skill or something. Something that you can transfer into other situations… [It] 
could help get ahead, and help with new things that happen, or help get though tough 
situations that you have tools to be able to deal with those situations that are more innate 
I guess, than something that’s learned.
Having his character seen and understood, a key aspect of being known, provided a longer lasting effect for Bob.

In some cases, school specific limitations might make it more difficult for teachers to feel known by their colleagues. Tina described the way in which the size of her school has impacted her ability to experience mattering though being known:

In the academic community, within our school, people would know ‘Oh Tina’s been here for a long time.’ But would they know I’ve been teaching for 33 years? I don’t know. So I think there’s a lot of anonymity. Because [this school] is so big, you know it’s like a small city. So… there’s no feeling of mattering in that sense.

Bob highlighted the ways in which the culture of different school systems has impacted his ability to be seen:

For me I think of coming though, because when I started I kind of came though ESL schools and, kind of, there you’re more of a number… If you’re like a newbie basically there’s enough people out there right now, especially in Canada, that are people that are looking for teaching jobs… that you are a number at that point. You don’t really… the person doesn’t matter as much as the person is there to do a job.

His description of being “a number,” indicates a sense of feeling unseen and replaceable; an absence of mattering.

A feeling of being known to others in the school community is a component of participants’ mattering experiences. At least for some, feedback that carries with it an intrinsic sense of knowing the receiver may produce a greater impact than feedback targeted at specific behaviours. Communicating a sense of knowing each other and particular attention to school culture and size was important in increasing teachers’ perceptions of mattering.

Being heard.

Much like being seen, being heard is not to be confused with its root word, to hear. Individuals feel most heard when openly listened to. Being heard means having people choose to listen and engage in a process of understanding. When describing experiences in which they
felt they mattered, or didn’t matter, three participants spoke about being heard as a component of being seen.

Willow described the importance of having, “places where [she] can disagree safely.” She highlighted the importance that, “the opinions [she has] are considered,” and, “that initiatives that are important to [her] are acknowledged and funded and incorporated into the school ethos.”

The other two participants spoke to times when they didn’t feel they mattered because they didn’t feel heard. Tina described a big change in her school that was communicated by the administrative staff without first consulting the teachers:

I know that umm sometimes I’ve felt, well… Why don’t they ask me? I felt like I didn’t matter. Where, you know… we have administration that, that shows up with power. You know? I’ve been working there 20 years already, and you suddenly appear and change the curriculum. In not being asked for her opinion she felt that her experience as an educator was not being valued:

You know, people come from high above with administrative power, and they forget to ask those of us, who’ve been doing it for a couple of decades, what we might think about these administrative changes.

Her description of administration as coming, “from high above,” indicates a feeling of disconnect and a strong power differential between her and the administration. A similar sentiment was expressed by Bob when he described a stressful time earlier in the academic year:

It was extremely stressful. It was very stressful. It felt like I wasn’t heard. I felt like I had a lot of needs that weren’t being listened to. I had a tough time getting in communication with people from the top. Umm… and when I would communicate with them it would be almost a, ‘Don’t worry about it, things are okay,’ type feeling. Rather than, ‘Okay how can we help with the problem.’
Unlike Tina, Bob was able to communicate his concerns to the administrative staff. Their lack of empathy and action-based response, however, triggered a similar feeling of not being heard. In both cases the result was a perceived lack of mattering.

Overall, participants highlighted the value of being asked for their opinion, and being actively listened to particularly by their administrative staff. Being heard had an important impact on their perception of mattering. Experiences of feeling like they were not heard resulted in perceived lack of mattering.

**Having value.**

The subtheme, having value, is best illustrated by Willow when she describes mattering as knowing, “that who I am makes this particular place or situation richer and better.” Her choice of words here is important. The underlying message is clear; it’s not what she does but rather who she is that plays a key role in impacting her surroundings.

Five participants spoke to having value as a component of mattering. Tom talks about being known by his colleagues and administrative staff for what he does for the school community: “They know who I am, I’ve been in this building for 15 years. Um yeah that’s what they do they come, I fix stuff. Don’t really care what it is. The lights in the gym for the scoreboard.” He is able to articulate the specific value he adds to his school community.

Tina and Sarah both shared stories of being known for their own unique contributions. Tina joyously described being referred to as an expert in her field:

I could tell you one thing that made me really really happy. That made me, I was so surprised. Is a couple of the younger students, I heard them talking about a pronunciation problem, and one of my colleagues said, 'oh well ask the pronunciation queen, talk to Tina about that?’ That was… that was… I was like ‘While thank-you very much.’ Yes! Go talk to Tina. So that, that was a kind of… out of the blue. I had never heard anybody refer to me as the pronunciation queen before and that, that made me feel really good… to know that, you know, some of my colleagues, would refer a younger person to me to answer that question.
In being referred to as a pronunciation expert Tina was able to identify the specific value she adds to her community. Likewise, Sarah had me read aloud a note that one of her students left for her:

Keep pushing Mrs. S. You are doing amazing things. Many have carried on with music because of you. A gift you showed them. Every song I make, every performance, whenever I present music, it is a product from your teaching. Love you to bits.

Participants’ experiences indicated to them that who they are makes a unique impact that cannot be replicated. Contrarily, Bob’s experience in ESL schools where he described feeling like, “just a number,” may well have resulting in him feeling that his unique contribution was not being seen or valued.

**Teacher identity.**

The complexity of human identity is partially influenced by the multiple roles that individuals hold and the various identities that they carry into those roles. One participant referred to her workplace identity as her, “teacher image.” All six participants spoke to the way that teachers are seen by a greater community. The degree to which participants perceived that teachers were known, heard, and valued by the public impacted their mattering experiences.

Three participants spoke about experiences of not feeling understood by the public; experiences in which they felt they did not matter. Willow was surprised to be so affected by an article she read in the newspaper about Justin Trudeau:

Did you read the long article on Justin Trudeau in the Globe this week? It’s about five pages and it’s a biographical thing. And one of the things they said that there was a lot of criticism about him being a political and an intellectual light weight because he was only a teacher. And I found myself really reacting to that. Only a teacher. Implying intellectual lassitude or lack of rigor. That surprised me. One, it surprised me it was said, two, the annoyance I felt also surprised me.
That public opinion of the intelligence of teachers misaligned with her own view of teachers was upsetting for her. Perhaps more upsetting was that Trudeau was being criticized for the profession she values:

> What shocked me was that people would devalue him because he’d been a teacher. That’s the part of it that I found. I hadn’t heard that, wouldn’t have expected that actually I thought that was one of his strengths

Willow identifies as belonging to the group, teachers. When Trudeau was devalued for being a teacher, Willow also felt devalued as a member of that group.

Willow was not the only participant to speak about times when she felt that teachers in general were misunderstood. Sarah, whose interview was conducted several months after a province wide B.C. teachers’ strike, discussed the effects that the public had on her: “Well we went on strike and got totally bashed. So that was a little bit sad.” She went on to explain that the debates about teacher salary in particular had created an opportunity that, “people would sort of jump off of to generalize teacher bashing.” Sarah was particularly affected by the discourse around measuring teacher effectiveness. For her this indicated that the public had very little understanding of the true effect of teachers and it made it difficult for her to feel supported in her work:

> The thought of being measured, it kills me. I’m so scared by it. So umm any of these articles that came out in the strike that would basically attempt to measure effectiveness, or measure what a good teacher is, they hurt my heart because I have faith that you don’t always see in the moment that what you’re doing is actually having a positive effect on the kid. And that it can take years and decades to get the positive feedback back.

That the work she values most cannot be easily or immediately measured makes Sarah wary of attempts to measure her effectiveness. Additionally, her overall concern that her daily choices might be judged negatively made it more difficult for her to engage in aspects of her job that lead to less measureable impacts:
All of a sudden anytime that you, you know, sit down at your desk to take attendance instead of circulating the room, you know you’re not spending the tax payers’ money properly. Or um anytime you relax and have fun with the kids instead of really do something that somebody decides is the definition of good teaching… So I think the strike brought out all these criticisms and definitions.

In a similar vein, Laura found herself frustrated by the public’s perception of how hard teachers work:

It’s frustrating to hear that the public doesn’t maybe understand how much work teaching is. And even to hear my husband says things like, ‘oh you have so many holidays.’ Yeah it’s true we do have a lot of holidays, but during the year we work so much!

Much like Sarah she spoke to the fact that not everything she does to make an impact can be seen by the public:

I feel like a lot of the general public sees is, ‘oh you’re at school from 8:30 to 3:30 then you do... what do you do? You go run, you go for a walk, you go… But it’s not so much like that. We carry a lot of our work with us.

A teacher’s work might not always look like work to others. For Laura this resulted in her sense that teachers were not being seen by the public, which negatively impacted her perception of mattering.

Participants’ also spoke to times when they felt teachers were seen, and this resulted in a stronger perception of mattering for them. Laura felt that the parent community at her school had a better understanding of the effectiveness of the teachers there, “I get that feeling that the parents think that the teachers are, you know, really doing well by their kids, and want to invite them to different things with them.” Bob also felt understood by the parents in his school community, “It was a feeling of them understanding that you knew how to best… that you were caring for their kid as much as you possibly could.”

Sarah spoke to feeling supported by some of the positive stories that came out during the teachers’ strike:
There’s a lot of teachers matter stories. They all got pulled out during the strike. You know if it weren’t for this teacher my kid would have never developed a positive attitude towards reading. Those sorts of things… I think I needed them. So I would seek them out and I followed support for BC teachers on Facebook. Because they would post… They’d post issues and feel good stories, but they wouldn’t post like crazy people, crazy people stuff.

She found that stories about teachers mattering reassured her that some people do understand the role that teachers have in the community.

Bob also had a positive impression of the perception of teachers in the community. He took on more of an advocacy role, “I feel if you have kind of respect for your profession and what you do then other people feed off of that and see kind of where you’re coming from.” He spends time explaining what it is that he does and, for him, this results in feeling understood and respected:

My [work’s] very much something that hasn’t been done so it does take a lot of explaining. But I think for the most part based on what I’m doing now, people really seem to… I don’t know… they’re happy for me. They congratulate me on certain things, they seem to respect the role that I’m doing and providing.

Instead of advocacy for teachers, Tom separated his own identity from teachers, “I was a mechanic, I wasn’t a teacher.” He felt most connected to his students when taking on a role that was different from how teachers are perceived. When faced with a difficult class he said, “I did a whole pile of things that teachers aren’t allowed to do.” In removing himself from the identity of a teacher he may have been removing himself from the effects of the public perception of teachers.

The ways in which community members perceive the impact of teachers has an effect on their perceived mattering. Participants felt hurt and frustrated when public perception of their role and daily activities did not match their own perception. When community members were
able to communicate understanding of the role of teachers, participants felt understood which lead to an experience of mattering.

**Theme 3: Belonging to a Community**

Classrooms are in no way isolated islands; they operate in the context of a greater school community. On any given day a teacher may find themselves working closely with fellow teachers, administrative staff, parents, and support staff. It’s an interdisciplinary team of sorts. All six participants discussed belonging to the school community as a component of their mattering or non-mattering experience. This theme has three subthemes: support, shared priorities, and effective communication.

**Support.**

In the school community individuals sometimes need to be supported in different ways. Participants felt like they mattered to the community when they experience reciprocal support. That is to say that they experienced mattering both when supporting others in their work and when being supported in their own work.

Being asked for support allowed participants to feel they could contribute to the community, which created mattering experiences for them. That support might look like sharing resources as Willow shared, “I mean my teaching neighbour came today to get, in the middle of class, to get resources for a student who was at a different level then her class.” It might mean being asked to sit on committees in the school, as it did for Tom, “I’m not on a single committee in the school, and I get posted on every single one of them.” It might mean strategically choosing to sit on committees that will be most appreciated, as it did for Sarah:

I seek approval. So I suck up to admin. Umm… but uhhhh…. Strategically. So I try to find the thing that matters to them and uhhhh contribute there. So I try not to take leadership positions in the school. I just try to be super helpful.
Supporting others and the resulting validation was produced a similar mattering experience for Bob:

> When I left my teaching partner kind of said that I’d helped her grow as a teacher within the short period of time that we were working together. And she feels like she’s going to be more prepared and I guess more at ease on her daily life and not as stressed because of the little lessons that I taught her.

This feedback increased Bob’s perception of mattering to his colleague.

> When teachers feel a sense of belonging in their school community, mattering experiences for the entire school community can be felt. Tina described being asked for support as a school, “as a [school] we are asked if someone or another would give workshops, or do this or do that. So we know that we matter as far as the [school’s] reputation.”

> Not every instance of being asked for support creates a mattering experience for teachers. Willow made an important distinction between dependence and choice when it comes to being asked for support. She differentiated between those who ask for support because they have no other choice, and those who specifically seek her out:

> Dependence usually means you don’t have a choice. Umm that’s the one source of information or power or access… to me that’s a dependency. Mattering means that the person has choices and they choose me.

When community members choose to seek her out because she offers something unique or important she feels she matters to the community.

> In addition to giving support, participants experienced mattering when community members were willing to support them as well. Bob articulated that being supported helped him to be more effective, which in turn caused others to care for him, an indicator of mattering:

> When you start teaching, when you’re like going through school… umm… I think at that point there’s a lot on you. And there’s a lot of other people involved in your process that… umm… You can really get the best out of people in those situations. Umm… Which in turn can lead them to caring for you and spending more time with you.
That support can come in a variety of different ways. For Laura it meant receiving resources from other teachers, “she gave me so many resources and if I don’t know anything she’ll help me.” She also appreciated having other professions who could support her class in different ways:

Our counsellor, she’ll also come in if there’s interpersonal problems and... that are beyond the teacher’s ability to manage or if we’re feeling a bit nervous about managing it, she’ll come in and help guide that sort of conflict resolution activities.

At times, not feeling supported can have the opposite effect. When teachers’ needs are not being attended to the result can be higher levels of stress, as Bob reported, “I was extremely stressed out and really not feeling supported.” In some school cultures teachers may find it more difficult to ask for support. They may fear judgement, or micromanagement. Bob described one such environment:

[Administration has] the assumption that everything’s going well. And that kind of, I feel creates a culture where you can’t really step up and be heard. Or tell the truth about things. Because you’re always just trying to say what the management wants to hear for them to stay off your back almost.

This is in stark contrast to the environment described by Laura. She described her principals approach and the effect it has on her:

Our principal, he’s just a normal guy and he makes mistakes all of the time… So in realizing that he knows that he makes mistakes, so it makes him more, just humble and normal and approachable. So it takes the edge off. Because principals can be very authoritarian and very breathing fire down your neck. But he’s not like that, like we relate to him. Like oh it’s that normal guy.

Her principal’s humble vulnerability puts her at ease, and allows room for making mistakes. This likely also increases her willingness to ask for support when needed. She speaks to her principal’s willingness to support as well, “he’ll come into our classes if we need help with anything… It’s just really nice.”
Participants are more likely to feel they matter in the workplace when they are able to both give and receive support. Factors such as leadership style and shared priorities may impact teacher’s ability to engage in reciprocal supportive relationships. It may be that, as Laura indicated, mutual report helps to focus the team on a single priority, the importance of which will be discussed in the next section:

It’s a really supportive environment. Yeah. So I feel like I’m spoiled being in that environment because I know that not all environments are like that. But it definitely helps everybody focus more on what they need to do, and to be there for the kids, when you know that the staff is... has your back.

**Shared priorities.**

The role of teachers and teacher assistants requires that they spend the most contact time with students when compared to other members of the school community. As a result, they tend to consider students’ success their first priority at work. Teachers, however, don’t work alone and may or may not share this priority with their colleagues. Four participants spoke to the impact of having perceived shared priorities with other community members on their mattering experiences. Participants’ were more likely to feel they mattered when they felt that others in the community also prioritized students.

Having shared priorities with administrative staff seemed to be particularly important. Laura felt that her entire school community shared the same priority, “I think everybody’s focused on the kids and them being, doing the best they can and feeling the best they can.” This helped her to feel part of the community.

Both Tom and Lisa, however, perceived their administrative staff to have different priorities than them. As a result, Tom found it difficult at times to gain support for his initiatives in the school:
I want them to do stuff off the side of their desk. And by definition administration’s default answer has to be no. Okay? And again I’m not slamming them for what they do, but it has to be no. Because they have a career to think of and if they say yes, now they have to take responsibility for its success. If they say no, they can continue on with their job.

Toms priorities differed from those he perceived his administration to have. Tom highlights the role differential in his use of the phrasing, “I’m not slamming them for what they do.” It may be that he does not think it possible, given the role of administration, to share the same workplace priorities. Lisa also suggested that due to the difference in the administrators’ roles, they are forced to prioritize budget over what she thinks would be best for the students:

But administration very often has a mandate. They’ve got to save some money they’ve got to cut some corners. They see they can do it this way. And I think a lot of times they think, ‘well you know the teachers, they’re just going to say no’. Whereas we would say no, because it’s not a good thing to do.

Sharing similar priorities with other member of the school community was also important. Bob really appreciated working with other teachers who had similar priorities. It allowed him the opportunity to understand others, and to be understood. He remarked it’s important, “to be able to share the good things and the bad things and understand each other’s perspectives.” It creates, “mutual excitement for, kind of, what’s going on.” Celebrating with others increases and elongates the celebration. When teachers share a common priority they can also celebrate common successes and struggle though common failures. For Laura, sharing a common priority with learning support teachers helped her feel supported and effective. “Knowing that we’re on the same path with this one kid makes us both feel like, well, we’re working in the right direction with this kid.”

It can also be important to be on the same page with parents, in terms of priorities for their child’s learning. Bob shared an example of this:
Parents can talk to you for ten seconds and they know if you know their kid or not. And if you don’t there’s always going to be a level of mistrust almost, or skepticism on whether you’re doing your job properly… I think people can disagree with what you’re doing but they can respect the angle that you’re taking and where you’re coming from with the job.

When teachers make their priorities known to parents, and parents agree, the details of daily teaching become less of a factor.

Every individual in the school community works very hard. When teachers invest in their school community they are more likely to feel that investment is worthwhile if others are investing in the same direction.

**Effective communication.**

Rather than talk about instances of effective communication that increased their connections to the community, participants highlighted instances of poor communication that reduced their connection to the community and, in turn, their perceived mattering. It cannot necessarily be asserted that effective communication would have created mattering experiences for these participants, however it seems that ineffective communication did have an effect on at least two of the participants.

Laura spoke to her frustration when events at her school were organized by administration and teachers were not informed until the last minute:

> It just feels a bit disrespectful almost. I know that’s not the place that it’s coming from but they’re… last year I remember within a week maybe three separate unplanned things just coming up. And all the teachers just look at each other like “What the heck? How hard is it to send an email?”

She expresses an understanding that the administration is not intentionally being disrespectful but also indicates that their actions resulted in her feeling disrespected. She is particularly frustrated because she feels that the communication required would not be difficult or time-consuming, “and just… it’s not hard. It’s not like a big deal to send. Do you know what I mean?
Like just send an email. It’ll take you five seconds. Send it.” This seems to indicate that the lack of communication resulted in her feeling like an afterthought, that she didn’t matter.

Tom indicated that it is not just a lack of communication that can have this effect. He spoke to the need for the communication to be clear, concise, and to the point. He didn’t want to feel his time was being wasted, “Just before you showed up I actually had a meeting with my administrator because they were expecting me to jump through certain hoops, right? I’m not big on hoops. I’m not going to attend a meeting for no reason.”

Tina echoed the desire to make sure that communication did not waste her time. She spoke to being asked the same questions in multiple meetings and yet feeling like her responses were not taken into consideration:

Very often we feel like we’re just spinning our tires and then a lot of it’s redundant, ‘We’ve done this before… read the last minutes…’ Yes… So it’s good if they listen, and it’s not good if we feel that we’ve done it 10 times and we’ve already told you. Now you want us to do it again.

She indicated that having her time wasted makes her feel that she does not matter, “Don’t waste my time basically. And that makes you feel like you don’t matter. When you’re asked to do the same thing over and over again.”

Non-Essential Themes

Several important concepts were brought up by some, but not all participants. These concepts may add value to the potential practical implications of this study and, as such, are included here.

Motivation.

Being seen, making an impact on students and feeling like part of a community all require investment on the part of the teacher. That might mean an investment of time, resources, or emotional energy. As such what motivates a teacher to want to invest is of particular interest
in this study. It is for this reason that motivation has been included as a theme although not all participants discussed motivation in relation to their mattering experience. Three participants did indicate that mattering served as a motivational factor for them.

When asked what mattering means to him, Tom responded in no uncertain terms, “Other than everything? I wouldn’t do this if I didn’t matter.” His primary motivation to teach stems from a desire to matter. This has been true for Tom since the beginning of his teaching career. Tom’s career as a teachers started out in a small community where a teaching designation was not required. He found that his students did not respond to didactic instruction, and so he adjusted his methods, “I moved the classroom into the mechanic’s shop, and I taught math in there, and they were allowed to wear their hats, and we had a coffee pot and we had music.” The result was that he formed a strong connection with the students who showed a great amount of affection for him including buying him gifts and making him coffee:

   It ended on the last day of school with me not being allowed in my seminar room, the little classroom part of the shop… That’s where the coffee pot was. ‘We’ll get your coffee Mr. T; We’ll get your coffee.’ And so they wouldn’t let me in my classroom...

Throughout the telling of his experience Tom expresses what it felt like to matter saying things like, “It was amazing. It was amazing,” and, “It was a good year. It was a good year.” He described an emptiness that filled him when the year was over, “I invested everything I had in that semester, and umm, and then it was over. It was like someone pulled the plug. It was bizarre. I still get it now. But not nearly as extreme.” Tom’s experienced made him realise that he could make a difference as a teacher. When describing his first year of working with students he stated, “They had a really good year, and I had the most amazing year of my life.”

   This experience of mattering motivated Tom to enrol in a teacher training program despite obstacles he met along the way:
Yeah went to [a university], demanded to be let into the teacher training program… Which was already full and a years waiting list. Um, met [an administrator] and um he helped me get in. Umm did two year’s worth of [school] in 1 year, did two year’s worth of [another school] in 1 year, umm. And umm lived in basically a garden shed in [a suburb] with cold water and a two burner stove. And that’s what I did for two years… And um and now I’m here… umm best job I’ve ever had.

Tom’s mattering experience motivated him to enter the teaching profession, and now it is the reason he continues to teach.

For Sarah mattering was also a factor in motivating her to continue teaching. She described receiving a note from a student that indicated that she had had an impact on him:

Oh it was fantastic! (laughs). It landed on a wonderful day. So I just sat on my desk for quite a while quietly because I though well this is very special, and I cleaned everything up and I couldn’t put it away so I left it in the middle of a completely empty drawer all summer so that when I came back it would be one of the first thing I read so that I would feel positive emotions towards starting my school year…

The letter provided motivation for her as she started the next school year. She still has the letter.

Validation and accolades indicative of mattering provided motivation to invest time and energy into teaching for both Sarah and Laura. Sarah felt motivated to invest more when receiving positive feedback for her current investments, “So people would say wow Sarah you’re doing a good job at S School. So good I’ll go plan another concert like I’ll keep doing this another year.” Likewise, Laura also felt motivated to invest more when validated for her current investments:

I hope I’m not making it seem like every day I have this amazing validating experience but when it does happen it’s… yeah it’s really… it makes me want to continue, and it makes me feel like all this time I’m putting in at home… you know… all the time at home and on the weekends like it’s worth it.

It seems that, for at least some participants, mattering was a powerful motivator to begin teaching, continue teaching, and invest time and energy into their work.
Shame.

One participant spoke to experiencing a shame in having her needs met by students. Sarah described being concerned and embarrassed at times when her needs were met by interactions with students:

Yeah… or if I was actually acting in their best interest. Or if I was doing something to fulfill my own need and then I feel embarrassed that I looped that kid into my own neediness. Right? Need for approval… or need to be… I don’t know what would be an example? I can’t think of a real life example. But I know I must, I’ve done it. You know, like getting kids to perform to make me look good.

Having her needs met by students felt uncomfortable for her. Although only one participant spoke directly to this experience I felt it important to include here for several reasons. First, shame is a difficult emotion to discuss and for that reason it may have been present in other participants who chose not to speak of it. Second, helping professionals get into their line of work to help others. It is not uncommon in these professionals to put their own well-being behind that of those they care for. As such this might be an important area for future research.
Chapter 5

Discussion

This chapter outlines the present findings in the context of available literature. It should be noted that due to the relative lack of literature linking the topics of mattering and career, this study was highly exploratory in nature. That said, the findings do provide valuable preliminary insight into the mattering experience of teachers.

Factors of Mattering

Findings are partially consistent with the four factors of interpersonal mattering outlined by Scholossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1985). The four factors, importance, ego-extension, awareness, and reliance, help situate several of the themes uncovered by this study in the context of interpersonal mattering as it is presently defined.

Importance, or the degree to which others care what you think, feel, say, and do (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981), was indicated in several ways by participants’ experiences. First, they highlighted the importance of being heard, a subtheme of Being Seen. Participants found mattering in being asked for input and having spaces to express their ideas and opinions. That is to say that their experience of having people take interest in what they think, feel, and say was important to their mattering experience. Additionally, importance may be evidenced when others invest time and energy into you. Participants in this study highlighted receiving support, a subtheme of belonging to a community, as another aspect of their mattering experience. Lastly, participants spoke to the importance of effective communication with other school community members. When administration failed to communicate effectively several participants found this frustrating. At the crux of this frustration is likely the disappointment that their time and feelings were not being considered.
The factor of ego-extension was described by Rosenberg and McCullough (1985) as having others experience an individual’s emotions with them. In doing so others become invested in that individual’s successes and failures. An ability to share in the successes and failures of colleagues was highlighted in the present study, by participants. This is outlined in the theme, being part of a community. Participants felt they mattered when they had shared priorities and goals with their colleagues. They experienced lack of mattering when they felt that their priorities did not align. As one participant put it, those shared priorities allowed them, “to be able to share the good things and the bad things and understand each other’s perspectives.” For these teachers having common priorities with colleagues created an experience of ego-extension.

Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) describe the next factor, awareness, as commanding the attention of others. On the most superficial level this means being noticed. For participants in this study being noticed was not enough. They felt they mattered when others had a deeper understanding of who they truly were, as discussed in the theme being seen. For these teachers, awareness of their inner self resulted in a perception of interpersonal mattering. They felt they mattered when the core of who they are was noticed.

The factor of reliance, which refers to feeling needed, and having others depend on you (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981), was partially demonstrated in the present study. The theme impacting students and the subtheme having value both speak to participants’ experiences of reliance. For teachers, impacting students may serve as evidence that their students need them. Likewise, having value, or in other words making a unique contribution, indicates that each teacher is offering something that cannot be replaced: Their specific character is needed. Being able to offer support to others, as described in detail in support, a subtheme of belonging to a
community, was also important to these teachers.

Where the current results diverge from Rosenberg and McCullough’s (1981) original concept of reliance is in the motivation behind being asked for support. There was a difference, for at least one participant, between being needed and being chosen. She distinguished between the two ultimately stating that, “mattering means that the person has choices, and they chose me.” Though more research is needed to further distinguish between the perceived interpersonal mattering that results from these two scenarios, this preliminary finding suggests that the factor of reliance may be more about being wanted than about being needed.

**Supporting Literature**

As discussed in previous chapters, the literature on mattering in the teaching population is extremely limited. This researcher could only find one such study. Gaudreault (2014) investigated the mattering experience of 400 physical education teachers in the United States. Though her results focused primarily on the degree to which physical education itself mattered to individuals in the school community she also found that the teachers perceived they mattered due to the personal relationships they developed with other staff, as well as their involvement in school activities. The results from the present study support this finding. Personal relationships, for these participants, evidenced being seen while being involved in the school community was a component of belonging to a community.

The findings also support the current literature on mattering in other populations. Studies investigating the mattering experience of students are present in the literature, and discussed in Chapter 3. Marshall (2001) found that students felt they mattered in the lives of adults when they experienced a sense of relatedness. The present study indicates that teachers may also feel they matter to their students when they experience a sense of relatedness. Recall that Willow
indicated that she knew she mattered to her students due to a certain, “casualness of relationships,” as described in the theme impacting students.

The mattering experience of school counsellors has also been investigated. Curry and Bickmore (2012) found that school counsellors experienced mattering though interactions with administration, collaboration with colleagues, and connections with students. These findings are substantiated in the current study as well. More specifically, Curry and Bickmore (2012) found that both formal and informal interactions with administration lead to mattering. In the present study, participants felt they mattered when they felt seen and heard, experiences which sometimes occurred in both formal and informal interactions with administration. In terms of interactions with colleagues, Curry and Bickmore (2012) found that counsellors experienced mattering when colleagues expressed gratitude for their contributions and when they had personal relationships with other stakeholders in the school. In the present study participants highlighted the importance of both of these experiences in the theme being part of a community. It is perhaps the sense of belonging that comes with this community that produces the perceived mattering experience. As for connections with students, Curry and Bickmore (2012) found that counsellors felt they mattered when they were sought out by students and when they believed their actions impacted students’ academic, social, and/or emotional success. This mirrors the findings of the current study. Impact on students was one of the major themes in the data. It seems that the mattering experience of teachers may share a lot of similarities to the matter experience of school counsellors.

Self-Determination Theory and Mattering

Findings suggest that mattering may be a motivational factor for teachers. Several participants indicated that mattering motivated them to invest energy into teaching, begin
teaching, and continue teaching, as detailed in the non-essential theme, motivation. Mattering in terms of having an impact on students, being seen, and belonging to a community, may be an important motivational factor for teachers. This can be better understood in the context of Deci and Ryan’s (2002) Self-Determination Theory, a motivational theory outlined in more detail in Chapter 3. This study indicates that mattering may have a connection to the meeting of teachers’ need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Indeed, when asked about their experience of mattering, participants spoke to the meeting of their basic needs. The meeting of the need for competence came up in terms of teachers’ perceived effectiveness. Participants described feeling “important” when they felt effective, and feeling worried about the implementation of measures of effectiveness, as described under the theme impacting students. Additionally, participants described being supported and sharing common priorities with colleagues as aspects of mattering that helped them feel more effective. When the basic need of competence, or effectiveness, was met for participants, they felt they mattered.

Satisfaction of the need for autonomy may also be important to participants. They spoke to the importance of having their own choices in curriculum implementation and the way they do their job as outlined under the theme, impacting students. The meeting of the need for autonomy may serve as a precursor for having an impact on students. The more control teachers have over their ability to work with their students, the greater the impact they can have.

Satisfaction of the need for relatedness was important to participants as well. This need was satisfied not only by students, but also by relationships with colleagues and administration, as outlined in the theme belonging to a community. Being seen was an important aspect of relating. When participants felt that others truly understood their character, their need for
relatedness was likely met: They felt they mattered.

Notably, recent evidence in the literature suggests that participants desire to have shared priorities with colleagues and administration might stem for the need for relatedness. In Wolf, Launay and Dunbar’s (2015) study on the effects of joint attention on social bonding, they found that joint attention increased social bonding. That is to say, when they asked their 64 participants to attend to the same stimuli in a cognitive task, they later reported higher social bonding on a social bonding scale. Sharing a focus may result in increased meeting of the need for relatedness in teachers.

Study’s Unique Findings

Due to the present day scarcity of literature on this topic, many of the present study’s findings were unique. Future research is needed to substantiate these findings.

A journey or a destination.

As described in the subtheme of impacting students, a journey or a destination, participants mattering experiences varied between being dependent on outcome and being simple in the moment experiences. If teachers seek mattering experiences, at least partially, though impacting students then what happens when the students are not successful in the long run? It seems that valuing the outcome over the present moment can at times lead to rejecting the mattering experience as a necessary part of career. This act of personal protection in the face of perceived failure makes a lot of sense. After all, teachers are only a piece of each student’s puzzle. They cannot control what the other pieces will look like, and therefore cannot, and I would argue should not, take complete responsibility for the outcome.

Participants who embraced the present moment experience and let go of the future outcome tended to also embrace the mattering experience as meaningful and important. They recognized
themselves as one stopping point along a long road for students. The more positive stopping points the students have the more likely they will be successful in their endeavors. Yet still nothing is guaranteed. Those participants that sought to matter in the present moment saw their mattering as drops in a bucket that would hopefully be filled over the years to come.

What it means to feel seen.

Participants provided an insight not only in to the importance of being seen, but also into potential factors of that experience. Participants wanted to know that their character was clearly understood and valued for its unique contribution. Either understanding character, or valuing actions did not have the same effect. This seems to be a case of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

Additionally, participants wanted different parts of their self to be seen. If they identified as being a teacher, then they had built a personal narrative around who a teacher is, and therefore who their teacher self was. They had an internal list of characteristics that connect to being a teacher. This created turmoil when they perceived that others did not understand the character of a teacher. If others didn’t understand teachers, participants perceived that they were not being seen as an individual either. This resulted in a decrease in their perceived mattering.

Study Limitations

Although the intention of a phenomenological approach is to get at the essence of the human experience of mattering, the sample size was small and, as with all phenomenological studies, not generalizable. The results provided meaningful information about the meaning of the lived experience of the teachers interviewed, but cannot be generalized to teachers as a whole. That said, the results may have pragmatic value insofar as they may provide insight into a phenomenon that could increase job satisfaction for teachers.
Implications for Future Research

This exploratory study has set groundwork for future research on the impact of interpersonal mattering on teachers. Part of this study’s purpose was to investigate one factor that may prevent teacher burnout. Future correlational studies investigating the relationship between mattering, burnout, and job satisfaction are needed.

Teacher impact was an important component of mattering for participants. Further studies investigating the specific ways in which teachers perceive they make an impact on students are needed to help flush out the details of this theme. Additionally, participants reported finding it difficult to know if and how they mattered to students. Studies investigating the student perspective of their teacher’s impact might offer a beneficial perspective.

Lastly, the theme being seen offers an interesting new perspective. Further research investigating the factors of the experience of being seen would allow teachers and administrators to create more targeted interventions and professional development with this in mind.

Implications for Teachers and Administrators

The present study has some practical implications for both teachers and administrators. It offers teachers both insight into, and vocabulary for, experiences they may not yet have named. In doing so it has potential to increase their self-understanding. As one participant suggested in response to the member check questions, “Sometimes we just need a name for a feeling to know what’s going on with ourselves.” Additionally, it offers a way of understanding both satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the workplace. This gives teachers a starting point if they want to increase their perceived mattering in the workplace. One participant suggested:

I could say, for example, that "if I'm seen I have a better chance of feeling like I matter, and thus happier in my job" and then put more focus on doing what it takes to be seen. Or, "If I impact students I will feel better about my work"...and so on and so forth. In that sense I feel there is a pragmatic value.
In this sense, the results outlined here have the potential to empower teachers to take control of their own mattering experience.

I think that the results also serve to normalize what may be a common experience for teachers. These results and their accompanying literature review can offer an understanding of universal needs, and normalize the desire to have them met. This is particularly important in a helping profession where teachers are often heavily focused on meeting the needs of others.

This study has practical implications for school administrators as well. The participants in this study have illustrated the value of being seen. From an administrative perspective creating spaces which allow for this could be very important for staff morale. A lot of the impacts teachers make on students are not measurable. As such administrators who take the time to notice and validate the unique impacts that teachers have could have a big impact on their teaching staff’s perception of mattering. Likewise, it is advisable for administrators to take time to get to know teachers on a personal level as well as set up opportunities for them to get to know each other.

Participants illustrated the importance of being heard. Involving the teaching staff in school-wide decisions throughout the decision making process may help teachers feel included and heard. In a similar vein establishing clear priorities and making them transparent to teaching staff would likely serve to create a more unified front.

Conclusion

The high job demands placed on teachers require sustained emotional and physical effort throughout the school year. Teachers are not only asked, but often expected, to give generously of themselves with relatively little public recognition for their investment. When this results in fatigue or withdrawal this can be particularly concerning because the energy that teachers bring
to the classroom can have a direct effect on the students they teach. If asked most of us can recall the teacher who once inspired us and the energy they brought to the classroom. Likewise, we can usually sum up the memory of that teacher who invested little in us and for whom we, therefore, invested little in return. Who teachers are in the classroom matters, whether they perceive it or not.

Teachers’ perceptions of the ways in which they matter may help provide and understanding of what drives them. The findings of this study help illuminate the meaning of mattering from the point of view of teachers, and suggest that mattering might provide a useful lens through which to understand how they are able to maintain the motivation required to invest in their students, schools, and communities. Participants’ accounts of their experiences of mattering provide useful information for both teachers who seek to better understand their experience and administrators in search of ways to best support their staff.
References


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Appendices

Demographic Survey

Please complete the following information:

1. Please indicate how many years you have been teaching: ______ years.

2. Please indicate with an X, the highest degree you have attained:
   
   Bachelor’s _____  Master’s _____  Doctorate _____

3. Please indicate, with an X, your gender:  Male _____ Female _____ Other _____

4. Please indicate, with an X, to which age group you belong:
   
   21 – 30 years old _____  41 – 50 years old _____
   31 – 40 years old _____  51 and older _____

5. Please list the subjects you are currently teaching, or most recently taught:

6. Please indicate the school board for which you are currently teaching:
Consent Form

Study Title: The Lived Experience of Mattering in Teachers: A Phenomenological Inquiry

Principal Investigator: Dr. Marla Buchanan, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology and Special Education, UBC, 604-822-4625, marla.buchanan@ubc.ca.

Co-Investigator: Jodi Campbell, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology and Special Education, UBC, 778-988-4573, jcampbe5@lakeheadu.ca. This research is being conducted as part of the thesis requirement for a Master’s degree in Counselling Psychology. Upon completion, the thesis will be a public document that can be viewed through the UBC library.

Purpose: The purpose of the study is to explore teachers' experiences of mattering in the schools where they work. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of this experience to inform policy and practice on a school based level, and provide insight into the impact of mattering experiences for working professionals.

Study Procedures: If you choose to participate in the study, you will be asked to describe and reflect on times in which you've felt you mattered at work. If you feel comfortable doing so, you will be asked to give some basic demographic information. You will participate in a 1-hour interview where you will be asked to speak about your experience of mattering. The interview will be in-person, or over Skype if you live outside of the Lower Mainland in British Columbia. Once your interview has been transcribed and analyzed you will be asked to review the themes and the degree to which they reflect your personal experience. The time commitment is approximately 1.5 hours in total.

Potential Risks: There is minimal risk involved in this study. However, you may find that sharing your experiences elicits strong emotions or memories. You are free to decline to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer, and may stop your participation in the interview at any time. In addition to encouraging you to seek out your regular resources, you will be provided with a list of counselling services that you might want to use in the event that our interview triggers a need to further process or explore arising issues with a trained mental health professional (please see Community Resources sheet).

Potential Benefits: You may find that sharing your experiences of mattering in the workplace is rewarding and beneficial. You may gain new insights through articulating your own experiences and reviewing the themes elicited at the conclusion of the study. Your participation will be contributing valuable information and understanding about a construct that is relatively unexplored in the teaching community.

Confidentiality: The interview and follow-up contact is confidential, and steps will be
taken to protect your identity. Only my supervisor and I will review interview data, transcripts, and audio recordings. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. To protect your identity, pseudonyms will be used when reporting findings. All audio recordings, transcripts, and summaries will be given codes and stored separately from any names or other direct identifying information of participants. Research information will be kept in a lockbox in the researcher’s home at all times. After the study is completed and all data has been transcribed from the audio recordings, the audio recordings will be held for five years and then destroyed.

There are three exceptional circumstances under which confidentiality cannot be maintained, including if a participant discloses:

1. Legitimate concern of, or actual harm being done to a child or vulnerable person
2. Serious and imminent risk of harm to yourself
3. Clear and imminent threat of harm to someone else.

If at any point a participant’s self-disclosure includes any of these three situations, the researchers are required to take steps to ensure the safety of the participant and those in danger. This might include and is not limited to: contacting emergency services, the Ministry of Child and Family Development, and counselling support services. If confidentiality needs to be broken in these ways, the participant will be informed at every stage and will be given every opportunity to engage in accessing these services him or herself, with the support of the investigator.

**Remuneration:** You will receive compensation for your participation in this study in the form of a $25 gift card to Starbucks.

**Contact for information about the study:** At any time during the study, if you have any questions with respect to the study, you may contact Jodi Campbell at 778-988-4573 or Jcampbe5@lakeheadu.ca. You may also contact Dr. Marla Buchanan at 604-822-4625 or marla.buchanan@ubc.ca.

**Contact for concerns about the rights of research participants:** If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or RSIL@ors.ubc.ca.

**Consent:** Your participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. You may decline to participate in this study or withdraw your participation at any time without negative consequences. Your signature indicates that you have read, understand, and agree to this information and consent to participate in this study. Your signature also indicates that you consent to be audio-taped during the interview. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep, for your records.